

CHAPTER ONE

The harsh ring tone startles the fragile images of my dream and chases them into oblivion. Although I am used to getting late-night phone calls from a long list of fellow hoop-o-maniacs, before I reach out and lift the receiver, even before I open my eyes, I know who the caller is.

“Earl, what time is it, and what do you want?”

“Almost two thirty, Rob, and what I want is to switch jobs with you. I’ll be the scout and you’ll be the general manager.”

“No fucking way. But how about we switch paychecks instead?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Whatever . . . So how was he? What do you think? I saw that he scored forty-nine points.”

“Mostly lay-ups against what looked like a team of ninth-grade nerds. I mean, they won by forty points, and Johnson played the whole game. The coach wanted to sit him after the third quarter, but the kid told the guy to go fuck himself. Tell Weiss the kid’s a total asshole. Maybe that’ll change his mind.”

“Are you kidding, Rob? We just got an advance copy of next week’s *Sports Illustrated* and the kid’s on the cover. Listen to this: ‘DeLeon “The Lion” Johnson Is Primed to Be King of the NBA Beasts.’ Weiss is creaming in his pants. The idiot told me he’d be happy if we lost all the rest of our games just so’s we’d have the best shot at the number-one pick. Just to make sure we screw up, he told me to fire Greg and replace him with that shit-for-brains Joe Brownley. But, hey, if that does happen, I’m sure I can convince Weiss to replace Brownley on the bench with you.”

“Forget it, Earl. Haven’t I told you a million times that I’m done with coaching?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Anyhow, I can’t sleep and I can’t wait for you to file your report. Tell me . . .”

“Well, there’s no question that Johnson is a legit six-eight, two-fifty. He’s also an amazing combination of speed, quickness, size, and strength. He reminds me of Magic except the kid’s a better athlete. More like LeBron, only he doesn’t see the court like either of

them. But who does? I must say, though, that the kid goes to the hoop like a locomotive. Plus he's got a terrific left hand and he's a great finisher."

"What else? What else? He's only eighteen, so there's got to be some serious holes in his game."

"I don't like his stroke. His release point is so low that he has to lean back when he shoots to keep from falling on his ass. Also, when he pulls up left, he has to bring the ball across his body and it never winds up in the same place, so his release point is always slightly different. Which means he's just as likely to shoot an air ball as a bull's-eye."

"That's what I want to hear. Give me some more good news."

"He does look to pass, but only if he can deliver a home run, so he tends to force the ball through heavy traffic."

"What else?"

"Let's see . . . His right-to-left crossover needs work because the ball gets too far away from his body before he can corral it. And his defense is awful. His weight is too far forward, and he makes a few half-assed stabs at ripping his man, then he starts to fade downcourt looking for a long pass and a breakaway dunk. But I'm gonna see him again in a couple of weeks when they play Chicago's top-rated high school team. That should be more of a test. But tell me this, Earl. Why did you send me to Fuckbutt, Mississippi, to see him play against these little boys?"

"It was strictly Weiss's idea. He insisted that—"

"Oh, there's something else. I hung around after the game just to see what I could see. Right? So it turns out that while the rest of the team boarded the bus, the kid hooked up with a pimpy-looking black guy in a fur coat and went off with him in a chauffeured Rolls-Royce."

"Big deal. There's a million guys sucking around the kid. I'll bet it was an agent. . . . Anyway, did you speak to his coach?"

"Sure did. The guy's a pussy and the kid does whatever he wants. If we do wind up drafting him, we're gonna need a stronger coach than Greg to control him. Somebody like PJ or Pop or Sloan."

"Fat chance of Weiss spending large for anybody who'll get more

publicity than the kid.”

“That’ll be *your* problem Earl.”

“Fuck you, Rob.”

“Can I go back to sleep now? I’ve got an early flight to Philly.”

“Yeah. Yeah. But you know something, Rob? It was much more fun playing for you in the Crazy Basketball League. Not much money, but a lot more fun. Now it’s the other way around.”

“Don’t complain. When you were playing in Peoria, you would’ve given your left nut to get called back up to the NBA. Enjoy it, Earl, you’re a big-leaguer again.”

“Yeah, and wading in the same old big-league bullshit. How the fuck did all this happen, Rob?”

“Say good night, Earl.”

“Good night, Earl.”