



Jackson McCullen comes to the Scrub Oak Ocelots with the hope, desire, and ability to turn their football program around. Will Conrad Williamson, Jr., prevent Jackson's goal? Or can the Ocelots savor the success of Playoff Fever?

Playoff Fever
By Marilyn Anderson

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TOUCHDOWN FOOTBALL

PLAYOFF FEVER

MARILYN ANDERSON

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Chapter One

Jackson Richard McCullen tightened his grip on the steering wheel of his silver three-quarter ton extended cab Chevy pickup before he bounced down the chug hole-filled road leading to the bare, almost naked, practice field of the Scrub Oak Ocelots. Barely catching his play book before it slid off the seat, he stopped in the middle of the road, fumbling for his sunglasses and cap, never taking his eyes off the dusty, uneven yards stretching beyond the goal posts. Single bleachers faced each other from opposite sides of the field...each sporting a sagging row of seats, knocked down by years of sun, wind, and rain, telling its story of desperation and disappointment. Pulling on his cap, Jackson hopped across the ditch covered with goat heads and careless weeds, kicking rocks to each side as he went.

Sliding his hand down the splintered upright, he counted fourteen woodpecker holes across the crossbar, hearing the rhythm of the stubborn birds shattering the solitude in his mind. Nestled at the base of each goal post were black mounds of pulsating ants, scurrying in different directions, venturing away from the safety of the colony, fighting their competition on the pockmarked playing field. Shaking his head slightly as he let out a deep sigh, Jackson walked back to his truck with long, determined steps. Reaching under the front seat and pushing the roll of shop rags to the side, he found the handle on the black and white container of fire ant killer and jerked it out. He hated ants, and he was on a mission to clear them out before his boys took the field the first day of practice. Watching the sleek, black Tahoe with a gray leather interior slow down as it approached him, Jackson debated about moving his truck, leaving it where it was, or letting the Tahoe go around him.

“You’ll need more than ant killer to fix what ails this team,” the stocky, broad shouldered man with black hair flecked with gray playing across his temples said, slamming on his brakes, covering Jackson with a thin layer of dust. Dressed in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up halfway, he eyed Jackson intently. Steely blue eyes raked him from head to toe, never missing a detail...from his maroon Texas A&M cap

to his class ring across his faded jeans and down to his size fifteen black, red, and white running shoes. “You must be McCullen, the new Head Coach. I’ve been waiting for you at the locker room for half an hour.”

“I didn’t know we had an appointment. And you are?” Jackson asked, shifting the ant killer from his right hand to his left before he extended it to the driver of the Tahoe. Waiting patiently with no response from him, Jackson finally dropped his hand, returning his gaze.

“I’m Conrad Williamson Jr., Superintendent of Scrub Oak ISD. My great grandfather’s name was Jeremiah Walker. My son is the star running back, and he’s a senior this year. Get the picture?”

“Loud and clear,” Jackson said, pulling himself to his full height of six feet two inches.

“Then I trust things will remain the same, if you know what I mean. I brought the keys to the locker room for you, and the boys have played with ants for years. Makes them tough. I’ll meet you there, but I don’t have a lot of time,” Williamson said, putting the Tahoe in reverse.

“Sounds good. I’ll finish this later,” Jackson said, pitching the ant killer through the window, but his words were lost, as Williamson drove the vehicle in reverse to the locker room as fast as he had driven it forward to the field.

Williamson jiggled the lock, grunting as he pushed the door open. Jackson stood back and took the keys from him, as the musty smell of moldy walls permeated the air as soon as the door swung back and forth on uneven hinges. Stepping inside, Jackson inwardly sighed, but he wouldn’t let Conrad have the satisfaction of knowing his surprise at the condition of the facility.

“Not much like the hot shot school you came from, is it? We’re a poor school district, McCullen, and you came cheap. That’s why we hired you. Coaches only last one or two seasons here, so it doesn’t make much sense to put any money into the program.”

“It might make sense to the boys; the coaches shouldn’t matter.” Jackson gazed at the paint peeling from the ceiling and the mold creeping up the walls a foot above the floor. He could hardly wait to look in the showers. Thinking about the deeply polished tile floors, the

rows and rows of aluminum benches, and the combination lockers in the Austin Southside dressing rooms, he again tried to feel the excitement he had when he had signed the contract for the head coaching position of this 1A school. He knew their program was not the top of the line, but this facility was barely on the line in Jackson's opinion. "How much is in the budget for maintenance or repairs?"

"Budget? We hope we have enough to pay you. And nothing is bought, or ordered, without my approval," Williamson said. "Nothing."

Jackson nodded, already making plans on how to clean it up on a shoestring budget. He was not going to start the season with his team in a dressing room that looked like this. And no matter what Williamson thought, this was his team. "Where's our equipment?" Jackson asked, moving down the hall to the tiny rooms that resembled offices. He had two assistants...one brand new, like himself, and one who was on his last year before retirement.

"Over there," Williamson said, pointing to a cardboard box of deflated footballs, a whistle hanging on the side, and a stopwatch looped in the corner.

"I mean the outside equipment. Cones, ropes, sleds, tackling dummies. The real stuff," Jackson said, pushing the stopwatch, which didn't start and didn't surprise him. Looking up at Williamson, Jackson made his face a mask, hiding his surprise.

"I told you. We're a poor district. This is it. All of it. The statistics on the team are in the manila envelope on your desk. It's the first one down this aisle. I've got to go. I have other appointments this afternoon. We did win a game last year. Finally broke our losing streak," Williamson said.

"You were one and nine last year. How long was your losing streak?"

"Three years," Williamson said.

"Your son has only won one game in three years of football?" Jackson looked at him in disbelief.

"You got it, whether you like it, or not."

"Well, this year, things are going to change," Jackson said.

"That's what the last three coaches have told me. Why do you think you're any different?" Conrad asked.

“Because I like to win, and I’m going to show your boys what it feels like to win,” Jackson said, slapping the stopwatch against his other palm. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, as he heard the slow ticking clicking off the seconds. “See? This season has already started to change.” Jackson felt Conrad’s discomfort, rather than saw it. He knew this team was going to challenge him, but he hadn’t known how much. A one and nine season and the only way was up.

Waiting until the Tahoe and its owner turned the corner at the end of Scrub Oak High School, Jackson opened the tailgate of his truck and pulled the first plastic carton across the bed liner. He sat it in his chair and rolled it over to the four-shelf oak bookcase that wobbled as soon as he touched it. Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out a penny and slid it under the right corner, balancing it perfectly. *All it takes is a little cents*, he thought, smiling as he remembered the first time his dad told him that phrase. Jackson was five, and they were balancing his mother’s washing machine that walked across her laundry room floor every chance it got.

He still missed him, even though the pain wasn’t quite as sharp as it was the first few years after his accident. A drunken driver on a wet, slippery highway had changed their lives forever, leaving Jackson and his mother, Kathy, closer than they’d ever been. Picking up the photo of the three of them on Senior Night in Last Creek, Texas, home of the Last Creek Lobos, Class 4A State Champions, he caressed the edges of the mahogany frame, wiping away the dust and fingerprints before he placed it in the middle of the top row.

Next to it, he put a five-by-seven of the Four Horsemen, he and the other three Lobo captains, Bobby Surges, Joe Blackfeather, and Nick Hartford. Together, they had made their last season in Last Creek one that wouldn’t be forgotten for generations to come. They were his best friends, and he kept close contact with Joe and Nick, while Bobby remained the brother he always was. Glancing back at the box of deflated footballs, he ached to bring these boys an ounce of what he’d gotten in Last Creek. God willing, maybe he could.

Finally, he placed the photo of himself between Coach Terry Morrison, his mentor, and Coach Michael Burton, who fought him every step of his football career, at the other end. Coach Morrison held

the “Most Spirited Award”, and Coach Burton supported the “Most Valuable Player Award”, both of which Jackson won his senior year. It seemed like yesterday, and it seemed like a lifetime ago. Glancing around the tiny office, he it would look better tomorrow.

Stepping into the bright sunlight, Jackson took a deep breath, escaping the moldy, musty smell of the dressing room. “Hello, there,” he called out to short, wiry boy who was scoping out the contents of his pickup.

“Hey, I didn’t steal anything,” he said before he backed off, holding his hands out in front of him to show Jackson they were empty.

“I didn’t say, or think, you did. I’m Coach McCullen. You play football?”

“Me? Heck no. My family stayed here a couple of years ago when the crops were so bad, we couldn’t go home. They let me play soccer, but never football,” he said, and Jackson heard the longing in his voice.

“Why not football? And where’s home?”

“Close to Brownsville in the Rio Grande Valley. They said I was too little and would be wasting my time, so Mr. Williamson wouldn’t let me try out,” he shrugged.

“Williamson? Not the coach? What’s your name?”

“Jesus Ricardo Montes, but my friends call me Jesse.”

“Well, Jesse, tryouts are a week from Monday. If you play soccer, you can probably kick a football. Good kickers are hard to find and turn many a loss into a win. Why don’t you let me see what you’ve got, and then we’ll decide if you need to stay with soccer or help us turn this team around?” Jackson asked, leaning against his pickup, watching Jesse glance off two or three times before he met his gaze.

“I might. I’m kind of busy, you know. I need to go.”

“Sure, see you in a week,” Jackson smiled at him. “Good to meet you.”

Jesse nodded and jogged down the road. *Good to meet me* Jesse thought. Maybe he’d check it out...just to be sure he wasn’t missing anything. What could it hurt?

#

Jackson slid into the cracked, green vinyl booth and reached for the menu, propped behind the ketchup and steak sauce. Opening it, the lunch specials were hand typed on a manual typewriter and, from the number of grease spots on the page, hadn't changed in years.

"You're new in town, aren't you?" the middle-aged, slightly plump waitress stated, rather than asked. Sprigs of brown hair fringed her face as she pulled a pencil from the side of her bun.

"Yes, ma'am," Jackson said, picking up the faceted, clear plastic glass of cold ice water. It'd been washed so many times that the once sharp edges had smoothed into an almost round surface. "I'm the new coach. My name's Jackson McCullen. How's your chicken fried steak?"

"Mine's wonderful, but Cookie's only rates a B+. You won't go wrong with it, though," she smiled at him. "My name's Sarah."

"Well, Miss Sarah, that's what I'll have with iced tea please," Jackson said, carefully replacing the menu.

"Polite one, aren't you? You could teach some of the boys around here some manners. Anything else?"

"I'd like to teach them some football, too. One and nine. I think they need a little help. Do you know where I might find a couple of kids who need a job for a couple of days? I need help cleaning up the locker rooms at the high school," Jackson told her, noticing the other customers' interest in his and Sarah's conversation.

"Maybe. I'll put your order in and be back in a minute."

Jackson heard her yell his order through the open window to the kitchen. Then she rummaged around in her purse until she found the business card she was looking for. Smiling proudly, she hurried to the table with it and his tea.

"Here's the sheriff's number. He's got a whole pack of boys who need to do some community service since they got stupid and painted targets on Old Man Stringer's cows last week. Tell him I sent you. He's my cousin," Sarah laughed.

"Your cousin? Thanks a bunch. If the food is as good as the information, I think I stopped at the best place in town to eat," Jackson chuckled, stuffing the card in his pocket.

“Coach, you stopped at the only place in town to eat. So, today’s your lucky day.”

Remembering the mold on the walls of the dressing room, Jackson nodded, but said nothing. He finished his meal in silence and stopped at the Texaco station on the corner by the square. Reaching for the nozzle on the unleaded pump, a hand closed over his before he could pull it out.

“I’ll get it for you. This is a full-service station.”

Jackson looked up at the young man who stood half a head taller than he did. Noticing his bulging biceps and thick thighs, he’s got to be a lineman, thought Jackson. “Right or left tackle?” Jackson asked.

“Left for six weeks every year,” he said sadly. “Then I flunk out. I have a hard time with numbers. Sarah called and told me you were in town. She said you were OK. She’s my aunt,” he said. “I’m Cody Judson.”

“I played left tackle. You must be a hard worker to keep that position, but there’s nothing better than watching your running back blow through the hole you just opened up, is there?” Jackson asked.

Cody looked away for a long moment...down the road toward the stadium lights, remembering games, or seasons, in the past, before he answered. “You can say that again, Coach. At least, I have it for six weeks.”

“We’ll tutor you to help you in math. Be at the school a week from Monday for practice.”

“I don’t have any money for tutoring, Coach. But I’ll be there anyway,” Cody said, pulling the nozzle out of Jackson’s gas tank.

“Didn’t say you needed money. You just need help in math. Here’s twenty. Keep the change for you, and I’ll see you next week. Glad to meet you, Cody,” Jackson said, starting the engine.

“Me too, Coach,” Cody said, as he watched him turn the corner toward his rent house.

Chapter Two

Jackson bounced over the broken concrete in his driveway, stopping his truck by the front steps of the white frame house with green shutters. He'd always liked houses with front porches, and this tiny two-bedroom fit his needs perfectly. He used the other bedroom as an office, complete with television, VCR, computer, and printer. Tomorrow, he'd find the game films from last year and bring them home to watch.

Pulling his mail out of the mailbox on the front porch, he smiled when he saw her letter. Neatly printed letters on the long white envelope and two stamps, Kathy was still sending him the headlines from Last Creek. Scott, her best friend, was the head sports editor for the Last Creek Tribune, and his son, Corey, had played center when the Lobos won the State Championship. Jackson was glad his mom had Scott; they needed each other.

Reading her news from home, he suddenly felt very lonely. In Austin, the town swarmed, and the coaches demanded every minute of his time. Eventually, maybe this town would need him, too. Jackson was uneasy about the way Conrad Williamson, Jr. controlled the team, but not as uneasy as the way the town let him. Unfolding the enclosed clipping from Thursday's sports page, he smiled when he saw Seth Carlson and Coach Morrison.

Seth, the stuttering, self-conscious back-up quarterback of the Lobos, had developed a software company that made him a leader in the industry and a lot of money. And he wanted to give something back to his alma mater's football program. Jackson still remembered the indecision in Seth's eyes every time they asked him to take the football. But he played the Lobos right into the final game when Bobby and the first stringers were delayed and never took the field. "Just like practice," Jackson told him repeatedly. And now, he was a leader.

Scott had taken the photograph of Seth and Coach Morrison beside the shining new tackling dummy. How many hours had Jackson spent in his career crashing his body against one of those? Sighing, he slumped into the maroon leather couch and stretched his legs out on the

oak coffee table. Coach Morrison. The one who believed Jackson could do anything, his buffer against Coach Burton. Reading Scott's article made him feel at home again, and Morrison was still winning, still inspiring young football players, still being himself.

Seth had bought brand new equipment for Last Creek High, everything from footballs, to sleds, to cones, to ropes, everything a football team needed. And all he asked was to find a good home for the used stuff and let it help someone else make a difference. Make a difference. Suddenly, Jackson grabbed the phone and dialed his mom's number.

Kathy had already turned off the lights in her office when the phone rang. She was going to a movie with Scott, closing her accounting office at five o'clock for once. With her hand on the door, she saw line two blinking on her desk. Line two? Only Scott and Jackson used line two during business hours, and five o'clock was still business hours on normal days for Kathy. Sitting her purse down by the door, she picked up the receiver.

Jackson loved to hear the excitement in her voice when she realized it was him. "Hey, sweetheart, how'd your first day go?" Kathy asked, as he told her about the poor condition of the facilities, but surprised when he asked if she thought Morrison would donate his used equipment to his program at Scrub Oak. Jackson had never let any odds defeat him when he was in high school, and he'd done a great job as the offensive line coordinator at Austin Southside, so Kathy knew what a letdown his first day as a head coach had been. He'd build a team without much talent, but he couldn't build a team without equipment, and then he asked her to call Morrison for him. Was he afraid of getting turned down, or of letting Morrison know where he was?

"Jackson, Coach Morrison needs to hear from you, not me. It never hurts to let somebody know you need help, and you know he'd do anything in the world for you. He asks me how you are every time I see him, and there's still a big soft spot in his heart for the inspiration behind his best season of his lifetime. Don't wait; call him as soon as we get off the phone. He'll still be at his office. I love you, and I'm proud of you. Your boys will be, too, three months down the road. Win a few games and watch the difference you'll make. Let him help you,"

Kathy said, closing the blinds against the late afternoon sun. The sweltering heat of Last Creek hadn't changed in the ten years; but now, she was in her office and not on the practice field watching him play.

"Athletic Department, Coach Morrison. Jackson? The Jackson? How are you, son?"

"Great, Coach. I've got a team with a lot of potential. In fact, all we have is potential. No records, no equipment, no wins, a few players, and no budget. And I saw your picture with Seth and wanted to know if you had found a home for the old Last Creek equipment. I'll take anything you still have because all I have is a box of flat footballs, a whistle, a stopwatch that only works when it wants to, and a superintendent named Williamson with an ironclad grip on the football program," said Jackson.

"Williamson. Conrad Williamson? Then you've got more problems than you thought you had. There's only one person more stubborn than he is, and you've already beaten him," Morrison chuckled.

"Who?" Jackson asked.

"Burton. They were cast from the same mold, only you turned Burton around. He's scouting for the Big 12 Conference now. Doing a good job from what I hear."

"Good, I'm glad for him, but that was a long time ago, Coach," Jackson sighed.

"Remember how you felt when you came from behind and won a game, or how your "flock" looked to you to tell them what to do, or where to go, or how to survive the heat, the rain, the exasperation, the fatigue, the anticipation, or the excitement? That's all you need, Jackson, to bring the game of football to those kids of yours. Nobody can do that like you can. I've seen thousands of football players in my career. None of them can make a game come alive like you can. Find the best in each one of your players, whether it was where he was last year or not, and give them all you can, but give them a piece of you."

"Bring a flatbed trailer down here as soon as you can, and I'll help you load up everything we have left. You'll make Seth's day when he finds out he's finally helping Jackson McCullen. He said you gave him the courage to try his software. That's the difference you make, son. Call me when you get the trailer lined up, and it'll be good to see you

again,” Morrison said, leaning back in his chair, looking at the picture of the Four Horsemen on the corner of his desk. What a season.

Jackson leaned over the arm of the couch to hang up the phone and felt the card Sarah had given him cut into his chest. Pulling it out, he turned it over in his hands two or three times. *Well, I've got the guts and equipment; now all I need is manpower* thought Jackson. “Sheriff Raush, please. This is Jackson McCullen.”

“Coach McCullen, pleased to hear from you. You certainly charmed my cousin, Sarah, today. She called and told me to help you out. I understand you need help kicking the football season off,” Sheriff Raush said.

“I need help scrubbing mold and mildew off walls and showers. I need elbow grease, buckets of Clorox, and a lot of time. That’s what I need,” Jackson said.

“I’ve got five boys that need about a hundred hours of community service. I could get them for you in my office tomorrow afternoon if you want to start that early.”

“That’ll work for me. It’ll take a hundred hours to clean up that place. How about one o’clock? Oh, by the way, do you know where I could rent a flatbed trailer? I need to go to Last Creek to move some stuff of mine.”

“Rent, no. But Old Man Stringer might let you borrow one for a couple of tickets to a home game. He loved football a long time ago.”

“The same guy with the cows with targets?”

“You learn fast, Coach. You’re will do just fine here. Sarah was right,” Sheriff Raush said, “but then, she usually is. With her on your side, you can’t lose.”

“How about Williamson? Which side is he on?” Jackson asked.

“Now he’s a different story. Watch your back, but you didn’t hear that from me,” the sheriff volunteered.

“Hear what?”

“See you at one tomorrow.”

Jackson stacked six maroon five-gallon buckets, six toilet brushes, three gallons of Clorox, a spray nozzle, and a hundred-foot water hose on the oak counter in Roberts’ Hardware and Feed Store. Pulling a brown stiff-bristled warehouse broom out of the stack hung neatly on

silver hooks on the wall and picking up a box of plastic disposable gloves, he looked at Dan Roberts before he said, "I think that'll do it."

Dan Roberts was in his mid-fifties with gray flecked hair sticking out from under his University of Colorado cap. His face was deeply tanned with laugh wrinkles lining his eyes, cutting along the corners of his face, and he'd watched Jackson with amusement as he hunted for his treasures. "Going to clean showers, Coach? Good muggy day for it," Dan chuckled.

"About as good as it's going to get. It's almost as humid here as it is back home," Jackson smiled, pulling his money out of his jeans.

"At least it's not as cold as the last time I saw you," Dan said, ringing up the items without looking at them.

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember meeting you before."

"You were too busy kicking butt all over Kyle field in the State Championship game. I told your line coach that if he were smart, he'd recruit you in a minute. I left at mid-term that year, but I've kept up with you. It's good to have you with us," Dan said.

"You saw me play?"

"I saw you whip ass that day. You made me wish I hadn't signed with the University of Colorado, but your buddy, Joe Blackfeather, kept me up to date. Do you ever see him anymore? He talked about you like you were his blood brother or something," Dan said.

"He's a third-year resident at Brackenridge Hospital in Austin. He's going back to Last Creek and set up his practice so he can take care of his reservation. I hope Williamson's boy is as good as Joe was," Jackson said.

"He's good, but Blackfeather could've run rings around him. That'll be \$50.22."

"Better add it again. Something's not right."

"I don't need to add it again. I'm throwing the buckets in free. Always had a soft spot in my heart for maroon...and football."

Jackson smiled. "Thanks. With our budget, or lack of, we need all the help we can get. Give us a couple of weeks and come watch practice. I'd love to have your input...off the record, of course."

"Off the record. This town has a lot more talent than what's been on the football field the last three years I've been here. You've got

round pegs in square holes, and they don't fit too well. Keep your eyes and ears open, and you'll see what I mean."

"Thanks, Mr. Roberts, for the buckets," Jackson smiled.

"Good luck, Jackson. And it's Dan from now on. I'll see you in a couple of weeks."

#

Jackson never stopped for lunch. He propped the doors open to air the dressing room out as much as possible while he tightened the hinges to keep them from scraping the floor. Glancing at the clock, he debated about locking the office, or leaving it open. All he would lose was his photographs, but they were a big part of him. Sticking the key in the lock, he saw Williamson barreling down the bumpy road by the practice field.

"I told you no purchases without my authorization. What do you think you're doing? Going behind my back this morning in Roberts' place? Buying buckets, brooms, hoses. We're not made of money down here, McCullen. I told Dan you'd be back this afternoon with the stuff, and you know what he did. He laughed at me and said, 'I don't think so.'" You need to learn real fast who's running this program," Williamson said with his hands clinched on the steering wheel and beads of sweat forming across his forehead.

"Who is running this program, sir? Usually, the head coach does, and that is what you hired me for...head coach, wasn't it?" Jackson asked, pulling his cap down on his forehead.

"But I control the money," Williamson said.

"Not my money. I bought this stuff with cash out of my pocket, and I don't think the fine print of my contract had any provisions on how I had to spend my personal funds. Did it, sir?" Jackson asked, folding his arms across his chest.

"Don't get cocky with me, McCullen," Williamson warned.

"I'm not getting cocky with you, Mr. Williamson. I'm stating facts," Jackson said, wanting desperately to add that he might check them out next time before he jumped to conclusions.

"You didn't charge that stuff to the school?"

Jackson slowly shook his head, never taking his eyes from Conrad.

“Who fixed the hinges?”

Jackson held up his red-handled Phillips screwdriver, twirling it in his right hand. “And I’m using boys who need community service hours through the sheriff’s department to help me clean it up unless you don’t have anything to do this afternoon, and I’m late picking them up now. Is there anything else you want to ask me?” Jackson asked, pulling a sprig of grass to chew on.

“Not today, but I’m still watching you. You can’t slide anything by me.”

“I’m not trying to. I’m trying to get us ready to start practice; that’s all.”

Williamson stared at Jackson for a long moment, but Jackson returned his gaze, never flinching, never wavering, and never backing down. *I don’t like standoffs* Williamson thought. *And I’ll get you, just like I got the rest of them.* Finally, he threw the Tahoe in reverse and backed out without another word, throwing gravel as he spun out.

Jackson spat his grass out and threw the screwdriver in his silver toolbox. He’d fought his way through his senior year of high school against Coach Burton, and Morrison said he’d won. Was this fight going to be as hard, or harder? And had he really won? Right now, he didn’t think so.

He was still thinking about that year, as he parked his truck in front of the sheriff’s office, listening to the faded wooden sign creak on its metal chain as it swung in the wind. What he really wanted was to give these boys a taste of winning. That’s all he wanted this first year. Stepping from the humid afternoon sun into the air-conditioned office made Jackson shiver slightly, or was it from the hard stares of his “help” for the afternoon?

Sprawled against the wall, they sized him up, each one of them wanting to be anywhere but here with him. Only the shortest one stood up as Jackson nodded to them. Standing eye level with Jackson, he introduced himself. “I’m Deion Barber.” Sticking his hand out to Jackson, Jackson shook it without hesitation. “These guys play basketball with me. There’s Derik, Julius, Roderick, and Reginald.”

Jackson almost felt overwhelmed when the other four boys stood, towering over him. He’d been up against some tall black athletes, but

the four who stood before him now could've held their own against any of them. But if you cut off the dreadlocks and stashed the gold jewelry and earrings, they were like any other boys in trouble. Wanting to act tough in front of each other, none of them would give an inch.

"Well, I see you met your crew," the sheriff said, chuckling at Jackson, centered among the athletes. "Now, you do what he says if you want these hours to count. They're down for five hours, so they're yours until six. Call me if you have any trouble, but they're pretty tame."

"Great. Come on, guys, the football dressing room has been looking forward to your visit," Jackson said, opening the door for them. Zapping the alarm on his truck, he said, "Hop in. Up front or in the back."

Deion hesitated before he climbed into the front seat, rubbing his hand over the dash. "No low rider for this fine machine, right, Coach McCullen?"

"Not a chance," Jackson said, watching a slow smile spread over Deion's face. His attitude was different from the others. Jackson couldn't put his finger on it, but he was different. "How'd you know my name?"

"No secrets in this town, Coach. I've heard the football team's showers grow mold five feet high. Is that what we're looking at?" Deion asked.

"Three feet at least. You're not on the team?"

"Naw, none of us are. Basketball is the only choice we were given," Deion said, turning around to look back at the other four in the bed of the truck.

"Says who...your only choice, I mean," Jackson asked, waiting patiently for the light to turn green by Cody's station. Waving to him, Jackson saw him standing in the garage, wiping his hands on a red rag, the common emblem among mechanics anywhere.

"Williamson, of course," Deion said nonchalantly. "He calls the shots."

"Not this year. If you want to play, come try out. We need everybody who even thinks he can hold a football to try out. Going both ways is hard," Jackson said.

“You should know,” Deion said, looking sideways at Jackson, but not quite meeting him in the eye.

“Why do you say that?”

“You went both ways for Last Creek. I saw you in the championship game when I was eight. My dad took me as my birthday present. I’ll never forget that last play. I knew we’d lost it, but my dad kept telling me it wasn’t over until the last gun fired,” Deion said, his eyes lighting up as he talked about it.

“Your dad’s a smart man. And I’m glad he was right that day,” Jackson laughed.

“Now I get to watch you right here in Scrub Oak. I always wanted to see Last Creek. I wanted to see where the Four Horsemen came from. Maybe I will someday,” Deion said, watching the others play in the back in the side mirrors.

“That might be arranged...seeing Last Creek, I mean. And you could probably play for me, if you wanted to. All of you could. Where, I don’t know yet, but I’d be willing to try if you’re willing to work.”

“Yeah, right Coach. Look at us. We’re black. Black guys don’t play football in Scrub Oak. Not in high school,” Deion said, stubbornly, rubbing his hands over his shaved head.

“Why not? Native Americans played for Last Creek.”

“This isn’t Last Creek. And you’ve never gone up against anybody like Supt. Williamson.”

“You’ve never gone up against anyone like Coach Burton. I’d like all of you to try out. Why’d you paint targets on Old Man Stringer’s cows?” Jackson asked.

“Something to do on Friday night. Not a whole lot of action going on. We didn’t hurt them or anything, but Old Man Stringer got hopping mad. He’s got all of them named, like pets. And he didn’t like us painting Flopsie, Mopsie, and Cottontail, or whatever their names are,” Deion said seriously.

Jackson laughed out loud. “If you want something to do on Friday nights that leaves you exhausted, exhilarated, and out of trouble for about three months, play football for me. And leave Flopsie, Mopsie, and Cottontail alone.”

“I can’t speak for the rest of them, but I might. Just to see what it feels like again.”

“Again? You’ve played before?”

“Sure, in middle school.”

“What position?” Jackson asked, slowing as he approached the practice field. He watched Deion stare at the field and noticed Julius, Reginald, Roderick, and Derek doing the same thing from their places. Jackson saw the yearning in their eyes, as only a person who has experienced it could recognize.

“Running back,” Deion said quietly.

Of course, thought Jackson. The deck was quickly stacking against him, just as it had against these boys riding with him. “Don’t let me forget to get some grass seed when I take you back this afternoon.”

“Grass seed, for what? Your yard?”

“Nope, your playing field.”

“Never had any grass on a playing field before,” Deion said.

“You’ve never played for me before either. But things change, Deion. And I hope the weather brings those showers in tonight after I get the field seeded. Or Williamson will eat my lunch for the water bill,” Jackson said.

“He wants to eat your lunch right now. I don’t think he likes you much,” Deion said.

“How would you know?” Jackson asked, pulling his cap down, as he switched off the engine.

“Because my dad’s the middle school principal, and he said Williamson didn’t like anybody, even himself.”

“Your dad’s smart. Too bad he’s right. I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

Deion looked at Jackson before he said, “You know, Coach, I really think you are.”

#

Sheriff Griffin was standing outside his office when Jackson brought “his crew” back at five-thirty. They were wet from head to toe, laughing like kindergartners. “Did you wash the walls or them?”

“They had fun, and we have a very clean dressing room. They did an excellent job,” Jackson said, watching the boys hop over the sides of his pickup. “Their only worry was if the Clorox was going to bleach them, like Reginald did his hair, but I assured them they’d be fine. I need to buy grass seed and get it in before the showers come in tomorrow. Deion, I’ll see you around ten in the morning. He’s going to help me, Sheriff, and I wanted to know if he can leave the county and go with me to Last Creek to pick up some equipment Thursday.”

“Sure, they have no restrictions like that.”

“Good. Thanks guys and remember the tryouts,” Jackson said, jumping under the wheel.

“Equipment? Williamson is going to have a cow,” Sheriff Griffin said.

“Better him than us. Will the hours I help Coach count toward my community service?” Deion asked.

“Is that the only reason you’re helping him?” Sheriff Griffin asked, squinting as the powerful rays of sunlight filtered below the sign, flashing into his eyes.

“Nope, I’m helping him because he needs it, and I like him. He treats me like...” Deion struggled to find the right words. “Like a person,” he finally said, meeting the sheriff’s eyes for a fleeting second before he looked down the road.

“Then, yes, your hours will count. Let me know how long you work,” Sheriff Griffin replied, watching a grin spread across Deion’s face, revealing even white teeth.

“Painting those cows may have been the best thing I’ve done in a long time. Flopsie, Mopsie, and Cottontail did me a favor, and I need to keep that white boy out of trouble with Williamson. I’m going to learn to be a farmer tomorrow,” Deion said. “Yep, me and Coach McCullen are growing grass. To play on, Sheriff, not to smoke. See you, Sheriff.”

“Later, Deion.”



Jackson McCullen comes to the Scrub Oak Ocelots with the hope, desire, and ability to turn their football program around. Will Conrad Williamson, Jr., prevent Jackson's goal? Or can the Ocelots savor the success of Playoff Fever?

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