

Four friends, four coaches, a football team, and a vendetta. Coach Burton thinks Jackson McCullen is second string, but no one else does. Follow the Lobos all season to find out why.

Second String
By Marilyn Anderson

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SECOND STRING



MARILYN ANDERSON

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Chapter One

Katherine Alexandria McCullen, better known as Kathy, climbed to the top of the rough, splintered one-by-twelve piece of lumber that formed the bleachers and settled down to wait. Pulling her blue denim visor across her perspiration-beaded forehead, she sat her water bottle down, watching droplets form on the plastic, running down the sides, soaking the front label. Sitting alone, she waited...just as she had for the last six years. They would come; she would just have to be patient.

Peering into the fog floating lazily in front of her, she listened to night sounds transform into day. One solitary cricket chirped, not wanting to give up, while gnats swarmed in small circles out of the grass. Last Creek, Texas was the only place Kathy had lived where it could be foggy and sweltering at the same time. Checking her watch, golden fingers of early morning light peeked through towering pines while she waited for the first one to emerge from the darkness.

She always sensed them before she heard them. Chills ran up her arms while she waited. Today, they would come...full of hope, anxiety, anticipation, taller, heavier, stronger, faster, and luckier this year. Squinting, she stared at the most familiar Last Creek fighting Lobo proudly sliding out of the fog, ready to fight, defending his goal line, and opening holes for his teammates.

Jackson Richard McCullen, senior offensive and defensive lineman, led the pack as he had for the last three years of high school. Size fifteen black and white cleats left a steady trail of footsteps to the practice field. Hesitating for a moment at the edge of the freshly chalked fifty-yard line, he looked at the empty bench, sizing up imaginary opponents. This year would be different...he could feel it.

He saw her sitting in her usual place by the end zone where linemen worked out. She'd always been there the first few days of practice. Other mothers wouldn't spend their last vacation days sitting on a practice field bleacher, but his mother wasn't one of them. By mutual

agreement, neither acknowledged the other, but each knew the other was there.

Stepping onto the field, Jackson took his place for warm-ups and waited. He heard them coming...laughing, joking, jabbing at each other, griping about early morning workouts. Two-a-days. Every football player's nightmare while they all tried to beat him to the field. It was a game, but no one succeeded. No one wanted to play more than he did. He loved every part of it. Every lousy stinking, sweating part of it. Jackson Richard McCullen was a Lobo, through and through.

Slowly, the rest of the team strolled in. Fidgeting, swatting gnats, swinging helmets until the last possible moment before they had to put them on, they lined up, varsity in front, junior varsity, and freshmen behind. The sunlight stabbed its way through the trees, sending beams of spotlights across the field, burning away the final wisps of morning fog. The trainers bounced their water trailer to a stop by the sidelines, sloshing water out of the coolers, soaking rows of cups along the sides.

And then the Gods rolled in. The epitome of the teaching staff. The dream of many Friday night onlookers. The Coaches. The All-Knowing. The Perfect Leaders. The Unquestionable Kings of High School Faculty. With playbooks in hand, whistles hanging around their necks, and bullhorns at their sides, the coaches were ready...whether the Lobos were or not.

"Line up. Come on, let's go. We don't have all day," Coach Burton yelled. Michael Thomas Burton was the offensive line coordinator, filling in at times as the assistant defensive line coordinator. If you looked up "jerk" in the dictionary, Burton's face popped out. First class, through and through. "McCullen, where's the sendoff? Get these tubs of lard going. Looks like most of you just vegetated and ate this summer. God, we'll never be ready for the first scrimmage."

Jackson turned around and raised his arms in the air three times, signaling the Lobos to action. "One, two, three, Lobos". Nobody really remembered exactly why his symbol developed, but those who were there remembered how. It happened on the first day of practice during Jackson's freshman year with Coach Terry Morrison, the junior varsity head coach. Lined up on the forty-yard line, Morrison moved down the rows of football hopefuls. Looking for something in their eyes known

only to himself, he watched each one of them. Some moved; some fidgeted; some followed him with their eyes or lowered theirs; some almost closed them, but only one on the whole freshman team kept his eyes straight ahead. Morrison watched him from the back of the team. He never moved a muscle. Was he asleep? Or concentrating? Did he care? Or...was he trying to psyche out an imaginary opponent on the other side of the line? "Does anybody out there have anything he wants to say before we start?" Morrison yelled through his bullhorn. Jackson pumped his arms three times and yelled, "One, two, three, Lobos," as loud as he could.

"What'd you say?" Morrison yelled back. Watching the rest of the team jump, mumble, move, or shrink under his scrutiny, he waited to see if Jackson had the guts to do it again. Three times he lifted his arms in the air and yelled, "Lobos". He started clapping at the end. Bobby Surges, the quarterback, picked up the cadence with Jackson, who smiled as he heard it. More team members joined in until more than three quarters of the players clapped in unison. Morrison moved along the sidelines watching those who were, and those who weren't, following the leadership, spirit, team play, the "whatever" it took to make a bunch of boys a real team. A few slowed as Morrison passed, but Jackson never wavered.

"What'd you say?" Morrison asked again, stopping directly in front of Bobby and Jackson. "One, two, three. Lobos." With most of the team yelling "Lobos" along with him, Morrison smiled. "Jackson, Bobby, front and center." Picking their way to the front of the line, Morrison said, "Turn around."

With their hearts beating wildly and their breath coming in short gasps, Jackson and Bobby faced the other players. "Here are your new captains," Morrison said. Jackson still remembered that day as if it were yesterday, and so did Kathy. And now, the yell echoed across the early morning stillness, scaring the lone chirping cricket into silence, and breathing life into the fighting Lobos of Last Creek High. Morrison smiled every time he heard it; Burton knew they needed it; and both realized Jackson was the one who could pull this team together. That didn't mean Burton was going to play him, but it meant he was going to use him.

“Let’s go, exercises. Neck, arms, front, side, back, side. Come on, hit it,” Burton barked as Kathy swigged her water. Wiping a drop off her leg before it rolled down her knee, she watched Burton through her sunglasses. It made him uneasy, and she knew it. He couldn’t figure out who made him feel that way. No one important was in the stands. Just someone’s mom. Turning, he surveyed the field. Empty, except for the team.

Setting her water bottle on the bleachers, circling its final resting place in its own watery spot, Kathy stretched her legs in front of her, wishing for the thousandth time that her bleacher had a back to lean against. Exercises and conditioning were her least favorite parts of practice, but unfortunately, she had to watch the bad with the good. So, she waited until the offensive God of the Lobo pack blew his whistle and yelled for the linemen to break toward her goal. Now the real work began. Sending the defensive line, backs, quarterbacks, and receivers to their respective spots on the field, Burton started down the sideline.

“Seniors and varsity this side, junior varsity, and freshmen across the line. Let’s see what you lard butts have left if anything at all. Face off.”

Buckling their chinstraps, Jackson, Nick, and Jacob formed the first three lines. Nick Hartford was the pivot for the offensive line; it revolved around him. He pushed, chopped, and drove through the defensive wannabes of the opponents, setting the example for the rest of the square, brawny linemen. Spunky, fast, shooting off the line from his left guard position, he gave Bobby time to fire his bombs from the shotgun. Nick was the fuse of the dynamic varsity line. Starting since his sophomore year, his guard position was sealed and accepted as his.

Jacob Stevenson, known as “Crunch”, owned the right tackle position. Moved up from junior varsity at mid-season his junior year, he mowed his way through the “agitators”, his name for the defense. Standing six four and weighing two hundred seventy-nine pounds, Crunch put opposing lineman on the bench with injuries. Defending him for four quarters equaled running against a six-foot brick wall, over and over, again. But Crunch walked the no pass-no play wire like a tightrope, teetering from side to side because math would not compute in Crunch’s mind.

Jackson fought his way across junior varsity fields, the driving force pulling the JV Lobos into the district championship. Standing six feet and weighing two hundred thirty pounds, he lacked the size that drew immediate attention to his efforts. Cold, searing determination in his hazel eyes escaped fans in rough bleachers outlining dusty, uneven practice fields where the junior varsity played their games. Only the varsity basked in the Last Creek Fighting Lobos stadium floodlights on Friday nights.

Coach Terry Morrison recognized Jackson Richard McCullen's intensity. He played him...every offensive down...watching his shrewd force, controlling the opponent's defense, smashing them into the turf, crushing their hopes, advancing toward the championship. Jackson surrounded his teammates with stability, confidence, and the desire they longed for. Waiting at the beginning of each game, bouncing behind the banner strung across the end zone by sparkling cheerleaders, the team waited for his signal, his cry, his spirit that pulled them together and thrust them forward screaming "Lobos". They crashed across the yard line markers, commanding their fans to their feet, intimidating their opposition.

Jackson was the glue, the force that drove them forward. He grasped a charisma, never realizing he was the inspiration that often belonged to the quarterback, leading rushers, or wide receivers, the wild men of the offense. Finally, after three years of sweat, dirt, aching muscles, and fatigue, Jackson was a snarling Varsity Lobo. Stretching, Jackson charged off the line as Coach Burton signaled, delighting Terry Morrison.

From his first day as a freshman, Jackson intrigued Morrison, who didn't even know why. He wasn't the fastest, heaviest, or most athletic, but a truer Lobo had never graced the hundred yards of playing field. Morrison rode him hard, pulling no punches with him, challenging him ruthlessly. Jackson never gave an inch, complained, or let up.

Morrison liked that in a player, and when practice was over every day, Jackson left his locker meticulously tidy. Watching him from the office, Jackson lovingly hung up his gear, straightening each piece before he left. For three years, Jackson showed up for practice, on time, ready, giving 110%. Sitting in the top ten percent of his senior class, he

smashed the image of big, dumb lineman jocks. Kathy McCullen, his mother, had every right to be proud of him. So was Terry Morrison.

Every time Jackson opened the hole for an illustrious running back, chopped the defensive man before he sacked the quarterback, pushed, shoved, and blocked with strength coming from within him instead of the weight room, Morrison inwardly smiled. Jackson earned respect for himself and his teammates, representing every coach's dream. The field was his as soon as he stepped on it. Terry Morrison knew it, but he wasn't sure he could ever convince Coach Burton he was right.

Squinting into the early morning sun, Kathy jumped when she heard his voice behind her. "I thought you'd be here," Scott Randall Burkholder chuckled as he stood beside her. She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, squinting at Coach Burton, who was oblivious to her intensity.

"I wanted to see if anything was different this year," Kathy sighed. Straightening up, she smiled at the tall, lean man beside her. Scott, her buddy since grade school, her ear when she needed to rant and rave, her best friend, motioned for her to scoot over. "Watch the water spot," she said.

"Thanks, how's Burton doing?" Scott watched scrimmages, practices, and games with her every year Jackson had played. They sweated in heat waves, froze in blinding snowstorms, screamed until neither of them could talk above a whisper, cried over a missed point, suffered losses, and celebrated wins together. They were good. Comfortable.

"Bout the same. They'll break into sleds next. Maybe he'll notice. What are you doing here? No work for thriving journalists?" Kathy patted his knee, removing a white thread from his dark brown pants.

"Still taking care of me, aren't you? I just thought I'd see what the team looked like this year. And to...hedge my bets." Scott smiled at her, but Kathy's eyes followed the linemen moving toward the sleds, tackling dummies, mounted frames on runners, wicked devices.

"Someone has to," Kathy said, stretching her arms behind her back. "Bet on the second string."

"Second string? Jackson will land the left offensive tackle spot this year. How could Burton pass him up the way he played for Morrison

last season?" Scott wanted to erase her doubts as he rubbed her shoulders.

"Bet on the second string. They'll pull out this season. Mark my words and print them if you want." Kathy pulled her sunglasses on top of her head and looked straight into his gray eyes. Scott's eyes always mystified her. Smoky gray, they softened in an instant or turned cold without a moment's hesitation. Kathy had seen them laugh, cry, hurt, light up, and care. Kathy had known Scott Randall Burkholder a lifetime.

"Watch him. There he goes," Scott said.

Coach Burton stood on the tackling sled, yelling at the boys. "Hit it. Good job. Come on. Is that all you've got? My God, Nacho, my mother could hit this thing harder than you did. Jackson, up front."

Jackson pounded the sled, pushing it farther than any other lineman. As he stepped off, he heard, "Again. Hit it again." Burton grinned his silly grin when he thought he got the best of someone. Jackson backed off three feet and slammed the sled squarely in the middle, sliding Burton across the field. "Is that all you have? And you expect to be a starter? Hit it again."

Kathy tensed, cursing under her breath, "You jerk."

"Easy, mama, it's only the first day." Scott stuck his arm through hers to keep her in the stands. As fiercely as Kathy loved Jackson, she would tackle Burton herself if she thought it would help. Kathy Alexandria McCullen lived, loved, and fought fiercely, especially for her son.

Jackson sucked in his breath. He lunged forward, catching Burton off guard, throwing him off the side. The sled flew backwards, landing against the scrub oak tree by the water faucets. Smiling, Jackson glanced at Morrison. "Good one," Morrison winked at him, but Burton only motioned to the next player before he climbed back on the sled.

"You almost landed him in the tree," Nick complimented him as Jackson trotted back to his place in line.

"Think it would help?" Jackson grinned. "I'd like to bust him across the road over there."

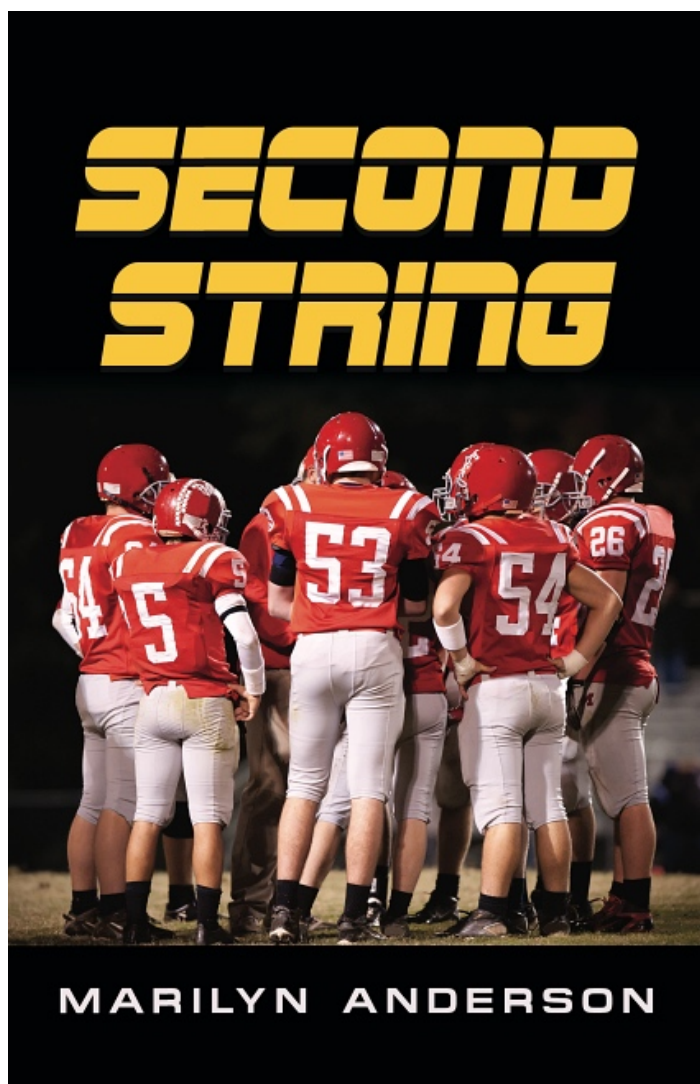
"Don't blame you, but this year will be different. Wait and see."

“Burton makes me wait plenty.” Jackson met Nick’s gaze. “I could make a difference, if I get the chance, but he’ll leave me on the sidelines or on special teams.”

“We’ll talk Bobby into running two-point conversions to give you a little glory. There’s more than one way to play football. We’ll be creative and aggressive this year,” Nick muttered.

“There’s only Burton’s way to play football, and you know it.” Glancing at his mom, he saw her, alone because Scott ambled off to his job as senior sports editor for the Last Creek Tribune. Kathy hated conditioning, even if it was important to building a team. Nodding in her direction, she smiled, unnoticed by the Lord of the Lobos, Coach Burton.

But not unnoticed by Terry Morrison. In three years, she’d never missed a scrimmage, a game, and very few practices. Kathy and Jackson shared a bond almost as rare as the Lobo, the mascot of their team. What had Jackson called her at their final game last spring? The perfect fan.



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