

# **TURNING DOWN FIRST STRING**

By Harold J. Fischel

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## CHAPTER ONE

“I’m grateful for the confidence you have in me coach, but I’m not going to play for the team if you make me the first string quarterback.”

“And why is that?”

“Rocco needs the exposure. He’s a great athlete and good quarterback. He and I haven’t had the opportunity to take many snaps while Axel was the quarterback. Axel was really good, and he led the team for three successful seasons, but he’s graduated, and now it’s Rocco’s turn. This is his senior year, and this will be his last chance to attract the attention of college scouts.”

“Same thing counts for you, Roger. During the past three years I’ve watched both of you carefully. In practice and during times I put one of you in to give Axel a breather. You’re both good. But you have the stronger arm. Probably, even stronger than Axel’s. I need you for those long passes that could have helped us win the State Championship last year. Three years in a row runner-up is great but a State Championship for Central is my ultimate goal.”

“Rocco will get you the championship. I won’t compete with him for first string, but I’ll help as wide receiver.”

“But why? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Makes sense to me. Rocco needs to be seen by the college scouts so he can get a football scholarship to a good university. I know he’s good enough, but they have to see him play.”

“And what about you? Don’t you want to play college ball?”

“Sure I do. But Rocco needs a scholarship to be able to go to U of C. He needs a full ride to be able to go there. We’ve been best friends since grade school.

In our sophomore year, we decided we wanted to go to U of C. We want to study aerospace engineering, and U of C has one of the best programs in the nation. Trouble is, it's a private university, and the tuition is sky high. We worked hard to keep our grades up so we can meet the entrance standards. His folks don't have anywhere near enough money to afford the tuition. On the other hand, I don't have that problem. My grandma has enough dough to send me to any school I get accepted to. I'm her only grandchild, and she's said she'll pay my way."

"Your grandma attends nearly every game. She's convinced you're the best. How will you explain it to her? And how will Rocco react? He expects me to play both of you. For me to use a system that alternates between two quarterbacks."

"Don't worry about my grandma. I'll explain it to her. As for Rocco, he knows I love catching the ball. I'll tell him I want to be a wide receiver."

"You're going to tell your grandma you're doing this because Rocco needs a scholarship? Knowing her, she'll offer to pay for both of you. And what about Rocco? He won't believe you; you've never played wide receiver before."

"I know Grandma would be happy to pay Rocco's tuition. But I can't let her do that. He has to pay for school on his own merit. It has to be his own achievement. My family's picked up the bills for his family too often. It's starting to wear on him and affecting his self-confidence. He's proud of his heritage. His family came to this country without a cent. Both his mom and dad paid their own way through college. They're both professionals with good careers, but they'd have a tough time putting all four of their kids through college. Rocco doesn't want to be a burden on them, and he doesn't want a handout either. He wants to go to U of C and do it without help from others. He's good enough to get a football scholarship, but he needs exposure."

"You surprise me. I know you're a gifted athlete, but I've always considered you a spoiled young man. Tooling around in that flashy sports car of yours, with

plenty of pocket money to spend, never made me think you worried about others. I know you and Rocco are close friends, but this surprises me. I'm discovering another dimension in you, and I like it. I'll go along with your plan, but only as far as it doesn't cost us our first State Championship."

## CHAPTER TWO

The football season started with Rocco holding first string quarterback position. Rocco protested; he wanted to share the position with Roger. Coach Burke was firm. He promised that Roger would get plenty of playing time, but he wanted to start the season with Rocco at quarterback and see how things developed.

The first game didn't prove much. Central played Beaverton High, the weakest team in the league. By the middle of the third quarter, Central led by forty-five points, and Roger was sent in to kill time. Coach Burke didn't want to embarrass the Beaverton Coach, and Roger was only allowed to call running plays. He threw one short pass near the end to assure a first down and enable Central to run down the final few minutes to win the game.

The second game proved much tougher. Rocco had a hard time finding open receivers, at one point he had to resort to running the ball himself. Roger urged Coach Burke to put him in as wide receiver to help Rocco. Coach Burke wanted to develop their passing game by giving the receivers more practice in running a route and breaking free. He kept Roger on the side lines. Central barely won the game, squeaking by a mere field goal ahead.

After the game, Coach Burke told Roger he might have to put him in as quarterback for at least half of the next game. "Your grandma is driving me crazy. She's all over me. She insists I let you play, and it's hard to say no to her. She and I both know you're a damn good quarterback, and you probably could have done better at passing than Rocco. She's not just any grandma rooting for her grandson.

As the owner of a large department store chain, she's an influential person in this town. Pretty soon I'll have the school board down my neck."

Roger laughed. "Yup, Grandma is used to getting her way. I told you; you can make your life easier by putting me in as wide receiver."

"You've never practiced with the team as wide receiver. Rocco and you haven't practiced any set plays."

"Coach, we've been playing ball together since eighth grade. When one of us throws the ball, the other has to catch it. I don't need any practice. I can catch any ball he puts in the air. We'll agree on a route, and I'll be there. Defenders won't have a chance; we played together so long that we've got set routines we have run for years."

The third game of the season was against Bridgetown, the defending State Champion. Bridgetown scored on the opening drive of the game. Disaster struck when on the ensuing kickoff a Central player caught the ball on their five yard line and was immediately hit so hard he fumbled the ball. A Bridgetown player picked the ball up and ran it in for a touchdown.

Central struggled to catch up but was held scoreless in the first quarter. Central had several chances to score on accurately placed passes by Rocco, but each time the receivers dropped the ball. At the beginning of the second quarter, Coach Burke sent Roger in to substitute for Jerome McFadden, one of the wide receivers. The previous year Jerome had been the favorite target for Axel, and he considered himself one of the mainstays of the team.

When the coach signaled for the substitution Jerome protested and didn't leave the field in time. Coach Burke quickly called a time out to prevent a penalty for having twelve men on the field. With Coach Burke standing on the field, Jerome continued arguing his case. Coach ordered him off the field. Jerome responded by pulling off his helmet and throwing it on the ground. He ran off the

field and disappeared into the locker room. Benny, the team manager, had to retrieve the helmet.

The referee came over and explained that Central could be assessed a technical penalty due to Jerome's behavior. Bridgetown's coach joined the discussion and persuaded the referee that one young man's temper tantrum should not affect the whole team and, thereby, the players who had nothing to do with the incident. The referee agreed and play resumed.

With Roger in the game Bridgetown expected a trick play. Most probably, a short pass to Roger who would attempt a deep pass. Rocco did drop back to pass, but Roger didn't stop at the line of scrimmage and turn to catch a pass. Instead, he went racing down the sideline with a surprised defender in hot pursuit. At mid-field, he suddenly stopped, and the defender went by him. Roger headed to the middle of the field, two defenders now chasing him. Roger was on his way to the goal line, the defenders ten feet behind him! When he turned the ball was there. With two hands he clutched it to his chest and ran in for the score.

The surprise play changed the momentum of the game. The Central players responded by blocking better and hitting harder. Their defeatist attitude, a hangover from the disappointing first quarter, was gone. They sacked the Bridgetown quarterback twice, and the Central offense was back on the field quickly. Roger signaled and Rocco knew what he meant. When the ball was hiked, Rocco gave it to the running back who tried to round the left corner. Before he got there Rocco called for him to throw it back to him in the backfield. Rocco held the ball long enough for Roger to reach Bridgetown's end zone. Surrounded by two defenders he looked straight up as the ball came over his shoulders into his outstretched arms. The point after was successful, and the score was tied.

Just before halftime, Rocco told Roger he was ready for the trick play everyone had expected when Roger first came into the game. Roger caught the ball

and ran almost to the line of scrimmage. No one was blocking Rocco who raced straight up the field. He was all by himself well past midfield when the ball arrived. Calmly Rocco caught the ball, and untouched, reached the end zone.

The mood in Central's locker room was one of excitement. Coach Burke was ready to give his halftime pep talk. Before he got started the locker room door swung open and Mr. McFadden came bursting in. He went straight for Coach Burke. "How dare you! Jerome has been your star wide receiver for three years. He's always trained hard and he carried your team for the past two years. You have no right benching him."

Coach Burke took a step back. It took him a few seconds to regain his composure. "Warren, please leave the room. After the game I'll discuss my decision to put Roger in; besides, I didn't bench Jerome. He played nearly the entire first half, and if he hadn't acted so stupid I would have put him back in later in the game."

"You pulled him out and put in that rich kid who never played the position before. I've seen his grandmother badgering you. She's a bully, and you're afraid of her."

"Warren, this is not the time or the place to discuss my decision. Please don't make me forcefully remove you from this room. Half time ends shortly, and I want to address my team."

Warren McFadden didn't retreat and Coach Burke grabbed him by the arm and tried to lead him to the door. McFadden pulled his arm loose and hit Coach Burke squarely in the face. Two big linemen jumped up and placed themselves between their coach and McFadden. In doing so they accidentally knocked McFadden over and he fell on the ground. When it became clear that McFadden was having trouble getting up, Dr. Javier Kutner, the attending physician for all home games, went over to check on him. He helped McFadden to his feet and tried

to check if he was hurt. McFadden didn't wait for the doctor to check him out. He shouted something incoherent at the coach and left the locker room. Calmly, as if nothing had happened Coach Burke gave his pep talk.

The second half of the game was all Central. Rocco completed all his passes to Roger, and good blocking allowed the team to establish the ground game. The game was won by Central with a score of thirty-four to twenty-four.

After the game, there were serious repercussions for Jerome and his father. Jerome was thrown off the team and expelled from school for a week because of his disrespectful behavior towards his coach. Warren McFadden was charged with disorderly conduct for breaking into the locker room and causing a disturbance. In addition, he was charged with assault for striking Coach Burke in the face. The latter charge could be dropped if Coach Burke refused to press charges.

McFadden's wife came to see Coach Burke to plead her husband's case. Jaqueline McFadden pleaded with the coach to prevent her husband from spending up to ninety days in jail for assaulting him by hitting him in the face. "Coach, let me give you some background information. It will make you understand Warren better. Hopefully, you'll understand why he exploded when you pulled Jerome out of the game."

The coach nodded and leaned against the wall.

She took a deep breath and stared, "Warren was a rookie playing in the National Foot Ball League when he volunteered for the army. Young men his age were being drafted, and he felt it was his duty to enlist. He didn't see combat; a stupid training accident cost him his right leg and left eye. Several sergeants were held liable for the accident, but Warren's accident didn't receive much public attention. If he had lost his leg and eye in combat, he would have been hailed as a national hero. Instead, he was discharged when he was well enough to leave the hospital and was left to fend for himself. Obviously, football was out of the

question and his college degree in sports management didn't help much either. Warren was ashamed of his handicap and hid his amputated leg by always covering his prostheses with long pants. His thick glasses helped hide the fact that he has one glass eye. He didn't want to return to our home town where he had been a three-sport star in high school, so we moved here where no one would know about his past."

The coach had a look of sympathy and encouraged her to keep going.

"Presently, he's employed by the local car dealership, and he hates it. Cars don't excite him, and he has trouble enthusiastically selling them. I can't make him happy; the one thing in his life is his son. As you know, he attends every practice and every game: home or away. I'm sure you've heard him. His loud comments during practice must be annoying, and his behavior during games can be embarrassing. But Jerome's football career is the only thing that matters to Warren."

Coach Burke was quite aware of McFadden's presence at practice and during games. His comments were not only annoying, but they often interfered with his coaching. But the coach was there for his players, and he didn't hold the kids responsible for their parents' behavior, no matter how irritating their presence at practice was. "Mrs. McFadden, I like Jerome. I consider him to be one of the best players on the team. I pulled him, but not because of his performance; the team as a whole was performing badly. They were intimidated by the two quick scores against them. I had to shake things up and chose to insert Roger to surprise both teams. Jerome would certainly not have sat out the rest of the game."

"I understand that, but Warren's state of mind is too fragile to see it that way. By the way, please call me Jackie."

"If I drop my charge against him, he'll still face a disorderly conduct charge."

“I had coffee with the DA this morning. Warren has a clean record, and he left the locker room of his own accord. The DA agreed that the incident doesn’t call for a charge of disorderly conduct. A stiff warning to stay away from the locker room will close the case.”

“Jackie, you’re amazing. Warren is a lucky man. You stick with him no matter what.”

“I love him. Someday, I don’t know when, he’ll once again become the guy I fell in love with, my high school sweetheart.”

“I wish I had a Jackie to stick up for me.”

“Are you married?”

“Twice divorced. My second wife works in one of the stores old Mrs. Hassett, Roger’s grandma, owns. If those two ever get together, I’m out as coach. Your husband is right; I’m afraid to get Mrs. Hassett mad at me.”

## CHAPTER THREE

After his suspension was over, Jerome didn't show up at school. Even though he had been dropped from the football team, his failure to return to school was discussed among the players. Roger suggested they should check on him. The lineman who had accidentally knocked Warren McFadden over wondered why it should be any of their concern. Roger explained why he was worried. "Look, I like Jerome. He's a good kid. He can't help it that his father is a nut. All of you heard him yell at Jerome during practice. He pushes the kid unmercifully. Besides, if I hadn't asked to go in as wide receiver nothing would have happened so I feel some responsibility."

All the players except Rocco disagreed. They felt the coach had to shake things up. They felt the game was lost, and he had to make a move to wake them up. Rocco told Roger he would go with him to visit Jerome.

Jerome's mom, Jackie, met them at the door. "Hi, fellows. Great of you to come see Jerome. I'll call him; he's in his room." Roger and Rocco could hear Jerome argue with his mother. He refused to come out of his room to greet them. Jackie didn't take no for an answer and practically dragged him down the stairs to meet his friends.

Jerome was surprised that they didn't call him out for stomping off the field. Rocco told him he, too, was stunned by Coach's decision. "I didn't see it coming. I was expecting Coach to instruct me to use my feet more; that I needed to complete a few running plays before he would call for another pass play. Roger and I play catch a lot but this? I don't know how I would have reacted if it happened to me."

Roger chimed in. “None of us hold you responsible for your father’s action, and I wouldn’t put it past my grandma to react in the same way.” Jerome’s mom had been preparing a special dinner, and she asked the boys to come in the kitchen and taste it. After her cooking was declared a huge success, the three guys went outside for a game of catch. When it was time for Roger and Rocco to leave Rocco said, “See you in school tomorrow.”

Jerome demurred. “No way. I can’t show my face around there. I’m the laughing stock of the school.”

That didn’t surprise Roger, and he was ready for Jerome’s reaction. “I’ll be by to pick you up. Tomorrow we’re going to school together. Some kids think that what happened was my fault. That my grandma forced the issue and that you’re mad at me.”

“That’s ridiculous! How could I be mad at you? Your grandma had nothing to do with Coach’s decision.”

“Then it’s all set. I’ll be here at seven-thirty. We’ll pick Rocco up on the way, and that will end this nonsense; everyone will see we are all still friends.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

The first day back at school went better than Jerome expected. Everyone greeted him normally, and a few even added ‘welcome back.’ After school, Roger and Rocco took Jerome to see Coach Burke. Before the coach could say anything Roger and Rocco said in unison, “We want Jerome back on the team.”

Coach Burke had expected as much when the three of them marched into his office. “I bet you do, but I can’t just ignore Jerome’s behavior. What if all my players objected the way he did when I made that substitution?”

Roger decided to be the spokesman for the group. “We agree. You can’t run a team that way. But this is different. Jerome got blindsided. True, he overreacted, I would have, too. We’re not used to you springing things on us like that. We’re used to you keeping us informed and even consulting with us when you change tactics or the line-ups. We trust you to give us fair warning, and this time you didn’t. That’s not your style. After three years of working his ass off, Jerome expected and deserved an explanation as to why he was pulled out of the line-up.”

“Roger, back off! That’s pretty cheeky of you to attack me like that!”

“Sir, I started the whole thing by whining about wanting to move to the wide receiver position. I have some undeserved extra pull on this team, and my friend Jerome became the victim of that. You made a damn good move to shake things up which changed the dynamics of the game. Because of the surprise move you made, we won the game. Can we just celebrate that and forget the rest? Can’t we just go on and fight for an undefeated season and our school’s first State Championship?”

Coach Burke knew that, as a teacher, he had to enforce discipline. Now, he felt a little guilty. In retrospect, he should have protected Jerome from his father’s

often unreasonable demands. Discipline, yes, but maybe protection came first. *Did I allow Jerome's father to push Jerome, so he could benefit from the boy's performance? Did my ambition to capture the State Championship cloud my judgement?*

“I’m going to tell you something I won’t admit to anyone, and the three of you better shut up about it. The three of you are my favorites. It’s been a joy to have you on the team for the past three years. I love you guys, and I’m going to miss you when you graduate this summer. Having said that, Jerome you’re reinstated. Now get out of my office, the three of you, before I regain my senses and punish all three of you for challenging my authority!”

The Central High football team easily won their next three games. The opposing teams couldn’t handle the variety of line-ups and trick plays. Most of the time, Coach Burke used two wide outs on offense. Roger and Jerome made one spectacular catch after another. When the competition managed to defend against Rocco’s accurate passes, he lateralled to Roger who threw to Jerome waiting in the end zone.

Halfway through the game against Burnside Hills, disaster struck. Roger jumped high up to catch a pass. Just as he clasped the ball in his outstretched hands, a defender hit him in the chest. He fell backwards and his head bounced hard against the turf. When Roger failed to get up, Coach Burke, followed closely by Doc Kutner, ran onto the field. When they bent over Roger, Doc Kutner shouted, “Don’t touch him. Don’t move anything.” He grabbed his cell phone and dialed 911. “This is Doctor Kutner. I need a medivac helicopter immediate at Central High Football stadium. Patient with broken neck. I repeat emergency transport needed for patient with suspected broken neck.”

Dr. Kutner waved for the EMS to bring the stretcher with a plank. When the EMS arrived on the scene, Dr. Kutner directed them to place the plank next to

Roger and help him hold Roger's head still. Carefully, they placed a brace around Roger's neck which immobilized his head. Gingerly, they placed the plank under Roger, and they tightly strapped him to it.

When Dr. Kutner called for the EMT's to come on the field. Esther Moore, Roger's girlfriend, raced onto the field. Coach Burke intercepted her just before she reached Roger. She was hysterically screaming "No, no!"

Coach Burke had trouble holding her back and said, "Don't interfere. They know what they're doing. We must stay back, or we could endanger his life." Esther fell to the ground crying and hitting the turf with both fists. Coach Burke turned to the rest of the players and coaches and admonished them to stay clear; to let the EMS take care of Roger. The players of both teams knelt and prayed. Rocco knelt next to Esther. He too was crying, and he urged Esther to join him in prayer.

When the helicopter landed, the medivac crew strapped the plank with Roger on it onto a special gurney which they rolled into the helicopter and secured to the floor. As the helicopter took off, only the roar of the engines could be heard. The entire stadium was huddled in an eerie silence. The school chaplain went into the announcer's booth and asked for the microphone. His voice echoed through the stadium. "God will always find a way. He will not forsake Roger. Please join me in your own words to pray for his speedy and complete recovery."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Mrs. Hassett, Roger's grandma, was out of town on the day of the accident. On her return, she learnt of the accident and went directly to the hospital. In the waiting room of the Intensive Care Unit she encountered Rocco and Esther. The two youngsters were huddled in a corner. Esther was still crying, and Rocco was white as a sheet. Mrs. Hassett went to the nurses' station and informed the nurses on duty that the youngsters were in bad shape and needed attention. She directed the nurses to get hold of a psychiatrist or other person who could help the kids deal with this difficult situation. Next, she informed the nurses she had sent her personal doctor here to check on her grandson's condition. "Please tell Dr. Selbach that I'll be waiting for him in the conference room when he finishes his examination."

Dr. Selbach soon arrived accompanied by two surgeons. Mrs. Hassett cut straight to the chaise. "Is this hospital equipped to handle my grandson's injury? Or do I have to have him moved to a facility that specializes in his condition? The cost won't be a problem."

Dr. Selbach was used to Mrs. Hassett's demands. "He's in excellent hands here. Dr. Pelz and Dr. Tucker, who are taking care of him, both specialize in spinal cord injuries."

For the next month, Rocco and Esther spend most of their after school waking hours at the hospital. After the first week, they were allowed to sit in his room. They were delighted that his memory had not been affected by the concussion and the three days he had been unconscious. When Roger was taken back to the operating room for more surgical repairs to his spine, they waited anxiously in the conference room. Rocco had to miss Tuesday, Wednesday, and

Thursday afternoons because of football practice. On Sundays he gave Roger a blow by blow description of Saturday's game.

Esther didn't miss a day. Each day she stayed until the nurses kicked her out. She was determined to see to it that Roger would graduate with his class. After school, she collected homework from his teachers and brought it to the hospital. At first, Roger was not very cooperative, but she sweet talked him into letting her help him finish the homework. When he didn't understand something, she took his questions back to his teachers and gave him a detailed explanation the next day. Roger remarked that it was pretty ironic that she was now his tutor when he had been the honor student helping her with math.

One day Esther was late. She had to wait for one of the teachers to give her the homework for Roger. When she entered his room Roger was crying. Esther carefully climbed into Roger's bed and cradled him in her arms. She was careful not to disturb the brace around his neck while she rubbed her cheeks against his. After a while she asked. "What's the matter honey? Does your back hurt?"

"Yes but that is not it. The doctors say it's a good sign."

"Than what's bothering you?"

"I've lost everything. I can't move my legs; I'm useless!"

"You've not lost everything. I'm here. Or am I nothing?"

"Why would you want to stay with me? I'm a useless piece of shit. A talking vegetable who can't even have sex and will never play football again."

Esther sat up. She was fuming. "Is that the only thing our relation was about? Do you really think I chased after you because you could catch a football or because your grandma can buy this whole town and have change left over? No! I'm in love with you because of the way you make me feel when I'm with you. I feel incomplete when you're not around. I need you! I chased you for two years until you finally asked me out. Our first date was like magic. I've loved you ever

since, and I love you more each day. I won't let you push me away just because you feel sorry for yourself!"

Roger put out his arms. "Esther I don't want to lose you. Help me through this. I'm having trouble accepting what happened. Please help me."

Esther evaded the neck brace and kissed Roger. "I'll never leave you. We're in this together. We'll make an amazing come back! It's too early for you to realize how much we have going for us. As for the other thing, don't worry. We'll find a way and I'll have your children. As many as we want."

When the nurse came in to check on Roger she found Esther next to him in bed, his arms around her. The two of them were fast asleep. She smiled as she turned the lights off and closed the door. Back at the nurses' station, she consulted the visitor's sign-in sheet and called Esther's parents to tell them she was okay, but not to expect her home that night.

## CHAPTER SIX

Central High's football team kept rolling over the competition. The players had Roger's number painted on their helmets. Each time, before the ball was hiked, they yelled in unison, "For Roger." They won all remaining games and qualified for the playoffs. Rocco broke Axel's passing and rushing records, and Coach Burke was hopeful that this time he had a team that could bring the state title to Central.

The day before the semi-final game, Esther arrived at the hospital with a surprise for Roger. From day one, Roger's room had been filled with flowers from well-wishers, and Esther made Roger guess what the surprise was. "Probably another box of chocolate from your best friend Gibby."

"She's got a mad crush on you, and I always have to remind her that she can't have you. You're mine. But no, it's something even better." With that she opened the door and the entire Central High football team piled in. Many of the players had individually come to visit Roger during the past weeks but the whole team at once was unique. They broke out in a boisterous rendition of the Central High fight song. It was so loud that two nurses came running to ask them to keep it down. Rocco carried the trophy they had won as their divisional championship prize. Proudly he showed Roger the plaque on the base. On it were engraved the names of all the players, including Roger's.

Roger objected. "I was no longer on the team."

Jerome stepped forward. "The hell you weren't. If you hadn't helped win that crucial game against Bridgetown, the defending state champions, we would

have been nowhere. Certainly not in the upcoming finals. This trophy will be displayed in the front hall at school, and we all wanted your name on it.”

The championship game took place in a professional football stadium in Capital City. That impressive ambiance and the noise from the forty-thousand fans rattled the Central players. They played poorly in the first quarter. They settled down in the second quarter, but at half time they were still behind. The score was twenty-eight to three and the Central fans had all but given up. During the half-time break, Rocco gave a rousing pep talk. He screamed so loud he almost lost his voice. It helped, and Central scrambled back. Jerome was the work horse. He caught two touchdown passes and blocked for the fullback to help him make extra yardage on critical third down plays.

Central came roaring back. They were still behind but the score was now thirty-five to thirty. They needed one more touchdown; a field goal would not be enough. But time was running out, and the opposing team had the ball. With ten seconds to go Central got the ball back at mid-field.

Everyone in the stadium expected Rocco to throw a hail-Mary pass. He did but a defender hit his arm and the ball wobbled and missed its mark. Following the agreed upon route, Jerome had been heading for the left corner of the end zone. When he saw the ball head the wrong way he raced to the other end. The ball was beyond his reach and he went horizontal. The ball hit the tips of his fingers and he pulled it into his chest. The roar from the Central fans was deafening as Jerome got up and waved the ball triumphantly above his head.

The governor was on hand to present the championship trophy. Coach Burke proudly received the trophy, and with unanimous consent of the players, dedicated the trophy to Roger, their missing teammate. Jerome was awarded the MVP trophy.

Jerome held his trophy up for the crowd to see and for the photographers to take pictures. Still holding the trophy he stepped down from the podium and headed for the stands. Pushing through the crowd he climbed to one of the top rows. There he handed the trophy to his father and pulled him up to stand next to him. Together, they waved at the crowd and the cheering Central players still standing on the podium. Jerome's father bent down and embraced his wife. He pulled Jackie to her feet and gave her a long kiss. The players down below continued to cheer as Jerome embraced both his parents.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

After three months, Roger was transferred from the hospital to a rehabilitation center. He was still paralyzed from the waist down, but he had regained some feeling in his legs. The main object of his therapy was to make his upper body, and especially his arms, as strong as possible. The therapists would also work on his legs, but they didn't expect wonders. Along with Roger, Esther also moved. Each day after school, she headed with Roger's homework, to the rehab center which was an hour and half drive away. Esther's parents and Roger's folks had long since acquiesced to the fact the two wanted to spend as much time as possible together. One incident that made it abundantly clear was the night Roger panicked...

One night while he was still confined to his hospital bed, Roger woke up in the middle of the night with an anxiety attack. He didn't know why but he was scared. He reached over for his cell phone and called Esther. Rather than try to calm him down over the phone, Esther got dressed and raced down to the hospital. The hospital staff tried to stop her, but she made her way to Roger's room. She climbed in his bed and put her arms around him. The head nurse, aware of the bond between the two kids, told her staff to leave them alone. The next morning, the orderly making the early rounds found Esther fully dressed in Roger's bed. The two of them, still holding on to each other, were fast asleep. The orderly called the nurse who woke Esther and told her to go home and get ready for school. She admonished her not to repeat nightly visits and no more sleep-overs. To which Esther coldly replied, "If he needs me, I have to be here. We haven't fully

recovered from our accident, and we need each other when we lose sight of the good things.”

At the re-hab center, Esther actively participated in Roger’s rehab routine. At first, Roger was reluctant to allow the therapists to exercise his legs. Weight lifting and other power exercises for his upper body and arms were familiar to him. He had spent hours with the conditioning trainer back in his football days. Having someone move his immobile legs made his handicap weigh heavily on him, and he refused to cooperate. Esther didn’t let him get away with it. She got mad and yelled at him, and he gave in. To soften her scolding, she whispered in his ear, “If we’re going to have all those children, a little help from your legs wouldn’t hurt.” With a mischievous smile on her face she added, “I want to do it often and not just to get pregnant.”

Roger had been in rehab for a while when his grandmother asked Esther to come see her at her house. Esther had met Mrs. Hassett a few times, but she had never been to White Oaks, the lady’s estate a few miles out of town. She drove up the long driveway and when she saw the imposing home she became scared. *What does Mrs. Hassett want from me? Will she order me to leave her grandson alone?*

A butler ushered Esther in. Mrs. Hassett was waiting for her in the library. The big smile with which she greeted Esther was reassuring, and Esther felt better. She regained her confidence when Mrs. Hassett offered her a cold drink which she herself went to get for her. She returned with a dish of delicious looking chocolates and said, “They are terrible for me, but I can’t resist chocolate. Have one. With your figure, you don’t have to worry.”

While obviously enjoying her bonbon, Mrs. Hassett started extolling the virtues of her grandson. “Has he ever mentioned how much I love him?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but continued right on, “I’ve watched you two closely. I worried about you and your influence over him. You made an obvious play for

him, and I was sure you were just another pretty face trying to score the popular rich football player. I couldn't figure out what he saw in you. You're cute, but there are a lot prettier girls that chased after him. And they are sexier than you and have great bodies and full chests. You're somewhat skinny and flat chested."

Esther's confidence disappeared and she had trouble holding back her tears. Mrs. Hassett seemed not to notice and continued., "Then the tragic accident occurred, and I saw you step up to the plate. For the first time, I saw the real you. You're the real thing. My grandson hit the jackpot. The accident was a disaster that nearly destroyed him, but he was lucky, he had you. It makes me cry when I think of how you stood by him. Your love for him is so real. I pray I'm talking to my future grand-daughter-in-law. Esther, please come over here so I can give you a big hug."

Esther flew into her arms. "Yes I love him. He's my whole life. He makes me happy. To be around him makes me happy. When he's with me, I feel alive. I forget my fears of the future. You're right, I blatantly chased him. There was something about him that pulled me in like a magnet. He's the best thing that ever happened to me. Please support us. We want to be together for the rest of our lives."

"Dear girl I'll do anything to help make the two of you happy. Before I only had Roger to love. I'm estranged from my daughter and her husband. I didn't like her first husband either. But now, I have two people to love. I'm going to spoil the two of you. Nothing is too good for my grandson and his incredible fiancé. Here is my plan. It's the reason I had you come see me. I don't want Roger to be bound to the house when he comes home. I want to remove all encumbrances that might prevent him from going out and joining his friends. I have ordered a large SUV with a ramp and comfortable accommodations for a person in a wheelchair. It should be ready for delivery in a few weeks. I'm too old and too busy to drive

Roger around in that car. I'll be darned if I let his parents have the use of it. The car will be in your name. The insurance has been arranged. You will be listed as the principal driver. Here is a gas credit card. I don't want the two of you to miss anything because the big vehicle uses too much gas. The dealer will take care of all the preparations. All you have to do is call them. What do you say? Will that help you recapture that precious time in your life, your senior year in high school?"

Ester was overwhelmed. Her biggest fear had been that Roger would become isolated, removed from his friends. Rocco would always be there, but there was the danger that the three of them could retreat into their own little world and lose contact with what was going on outside their little circle. "Mrs. Hassett how did you know? The thing I feared most was Roger getting isolated and sinking into depression. He soaks up his contact with others. It's what makes him such an interesting guy. I don't think he'd do well without it. And you solved the problem!" She got up to give Mrs. Hassett another hug.

Mrs. Hassett held her for a moment and said, "I have to ask you a big favor. It's very important to me. Do you mind calling me Grandma?"

Ester clapped her hands in delight. "Yes, yes, yes! Now I have both a prince charming and a fairytale grandma. I love you!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Esther proved to have been an excellent tutor, and when Roger was finally well enough to return to school, he was not behind in any school work. Rocco had spread the word that Roger would be returning. On the day he arrived the parking lot was filled with his classmates. They formed an impromptu honor guard when Esther drove into the parking lot. They escorted the big van to a handicapped parking spot and cheered loudly when Ester pushed Roger's wheelchair down the ramp. Individually, all the kids stepped forward to welcome Roger. All of them got a chance to admire the luxurious inside of the van. Esther even allowed some of Roger's closest friends to sit behind the wheel, as she explained the function of all the instruments.

The final months of the school year flew by. Roger and Esther were invited and attended every party, and they hosted a senior class picnic on the grounds of White Oaks.

Graduation was planned to be outside, and luckily it fell on a warm and sunny day. The graduates were called up one by one in alphabetical order. An exception was made for Esther and Roger. They were called up together. When Esther pushed Roger to the front to receive their diplomas, all the parents in the audience stood and clapped. The principal handed them their diplomas and stepped back to address the audience. "I'm always sad to say good bye to the students who have been with us for the past three years. But this time I'm especially sad to have to say goodbye to these two exceptional people. Bear with me while I open up my heart. At this high school of ours we encourage young men to engage in a violent sport. Knowing full well of the inherent danger; as the principal I have to condone

it. I would love to ban the sport, but lack the courage to do so. Even if I did, the football team would survive my departure. This town will never give up their pride and joy, the main form of entertainment in the fall, their very own State Champion Central High Football team. Sure minor injuries happen all the time, but I never expected the calamity that befell Roger. It should not happen to any of our kids, but why this kid? The one with the engaging personality, Roger, with that charming smile? Now I can admit it. I went home and cried. I had trouble going back to work. I hated myself, I felt responsible for what happened. I thank the Lord that Roger is back with us to receive his diploma along with his classmates. It didn't come easy. Aided by his incredible girlfriend, he fought his way back. As I watched his recovery, I too recovered. What a guy, what a girl!

“While preparing for this graduation ceremony I leafed through this class's yearbook. The class usually names one student as the person most likely to succeed. I hardly ever agree, but this time the class showed their intuitive instincts by naming not one person but two. Under an adorable picture of a cute guy, with a charming smile, sitting in a wheelchair with a happily smiling girl leaning over his shoulder is the caption ‘Most likely to succeed.’”

The principal took a moment to let the applause die down. “At the end of the graduation ceremony, I traditionally send the graduates off with a few words of wisdom. This time I want you to hear from someone who can do that better.”

A man wearing colorful shorts came forward and took the microphone. “For those who don't know me, I'm Warren McFadden. For those who do know me, yes, I'm not wearing long pants. I am the proud father of Jerome McFadden who is a member of this graduating class and a good friend of Roger. Through Jerome's eyes, I have been able to follow Roger's recovery. His grit and determination taught me that to be ashamed and hide from your disability is weak and an insult to those who love you. You see, I too, had an accident, far less serious than Roger's,

but it left me permanently handicapped. Unlike Roger, I retreated from my surroundings. I was ashamed of my amputated leg and the loss of one eye. I moved to a town where nobody knew me as the high school football standout who was drafted by the local NFL team. I always wore long pants to hide my prosthesis and thick glasses to conceal the fact I had only one good eye. I shut out my wife and unreasonably pushed my son to be the football player I could no longer be. The way Roger fought back and once again took his place among his classmates woke me up. I had no right to wallow in self-pity. I had a wonderful wife who stood by me while I turned inward and sulked. I had a wonderful son who took my abuse and never turned against me. I want to publically thank Esther and Roger for teaching me to be thankful for my blessings and how to overcome adversity. I pledge here and now to follow your example. I have already done it privately, but I also want to do it publically. I want to apologize to you, Jackie. You were my high school sweetheart and became the wife a man could only dream of. Better than I deserved. I love you dearly; you're still my heartthrob. Jerome, I'm ashamed that you had to be the victim of my inferiority complex. I embarrassed you in front of your peers for which I am truly sorry. I'm immensely proud of you, and even if you elect to never play football again, that will never change,"

## CHAPTER NINE

The day after graduation Mrs. Hassett invited Esther's parents to dinner at her house. Esther warned her parents that it would be a pretty formal affair, but that Mrs. Hassett was not showing off. It was just her way to show her respect for Esther's parents and that she considered them her equal. It was her habit never to make people feel she looked down on them. It was painfully obvious that Roger's parents were not invited.

During dinner Mrs. Hassett brought up the subject of college. "I've been able to make some arrangements for our kids when they go to U of C in September."

Mrs. Moore, Esther's mom, interrupted her. "Esther hasn't been accepted yet. It's a problem. Roger and she have been worrying about it. They want to stay together and might have to enroll in a lesser university."

Mrs. Hassett shook her head. "Not a problem. It's all arranged. A member of my board of directors is one of the trustees of U of C. I discussed my granddaughter-in-law with him, and he came up with the following. The planned renovation of the library has not yet been fully funded. If I could help with that, he could see to it that her application was approved."

Esther's dad frowned on that idea. "That's not ethical is it? Don't people get into serious trouble for things like that?"

Mrs. Hassett didn't think so. "If the kid is not qualified it might be. That doesn't apply to Esther. This wasn't a bribe. My contribution will benefit a lot of students now and in the future."

Esther's mom was surprised. "You speak as if it's a done deal. Is it?"

“Yes, I donated a large sum which will be used not only to help renovate the library. Many of the buildings at U of C are not up to code. They are not handicap accessible. My donation will make it possible to make every building handicap accessible. That will include all dormitories. Especially the bathrooms need to conform to the law. But for Roger’s handicap, I would never have thought of it, now I have become anxious to have these updates done as soon as possible.”

Roger pointed to another problem. “Even if we both go to U of C, we still have to live in separate dorms. It’s one of the few universities without co-ed dorms.”

“Honey, that’s not a problem. I’ve gotten permission for you two to live off campus.”

Esther offered that she had looked into the rules for freshmen. “You have to be married to get a waiver. Their rules say freshmen have to live in the dorm. You have to be married to get a waiver to be allowed to live off campus.”

“Esther, you’re jumping the gun. Your marriage is a project your mom and I will have to get started on pretty soon. Don’t worry; she and I will see to it that you have a glorious wedding before you leave for U of C.”

Esther and her mom exchanged wondering glances but said nothing. Mrs. Hassett went right on. “I’ve been able to purchase a nice apartment near the campus. As we speak, it’s being renovated. I had it gutted. The building dates back to the thirties. Don’t worry; the apartment will be modern and suitable for Roger’s handicap. It’s a duplex, and I had them put in an elevator. There will be a few extra rooms, so I asked the contractor to make one of the large upstairs rooms into a gym. That way Roger can continue to strengthen his body. We can move all the equipment from here.”

Esther's father worried about all the money being spent and the reaction from other students and their parents. "Won't it set our kids apart? They'll be looked upon as spoiled brats."

Mrs. Hassett was quick to answer. "Not if they don't act that way! Roger has been able to handle the situation well. Until Esther came into my life, he was all I had. I spoilt him rotten. He tooted around town in an expensive sports car I bought him. Yet, he still managed to be one of the regular guys in his crowd. He made nobody jealous. Esther is well grounded; she won't flaunt it either. It's nobody's business how I spent my money. I earned it all myself. At nineteen I started as a sales girl in a small shop here in town. At twenty, I gambled and took a huge loan to buy the shop. I parlayed my holdings into a billion dollar company, Hassett Department Stores. My business sense has always been excellent. With men, not so much. After three husbands I gave up. As a mother, I failed miserably, and now I have only Roger and Esther left to love. I'm crazy about those two, and I don't care what people think or say. It's my money and I want them to have all the things I didn't have growing up."

After dinner Esther's parents left. Roger and Esther kissed them goodbye; they were staying at the house. When he was discharged from the rehab center Roger had moved in with his grandmother. Before his accident, he had lived with his parents. His mother had a three story house, and he had the third floor all to himself. The house didn't have an elevator, and the three flights of stairs made it impossible to move back home. White Oaks had an elevator, and the obvious solution was for Roger to go there. His grandmother had one of the rooms converted into a gym, complete with the latest equipment needed to continue Roger's therapy. Instead of weekly trips to the rehab center, the therapist came to the house, allowing Roger to be treated at home. Roger's return to school required Esther to get up very early in order to pick up Roger in the van and still be on time

for school. To save time, Mrs. Hassett also invited her to move into White Oaks. Out of modesty and respect for Mrs. Hassett, Roger and Esther chose to sleep in separate rooms. They thought an older woman would be uncomfortable if they slept together in her house.

Mrs. Hassett went to bed early, and Roger and Esther moved into the library. Roger wanted to go over all the arrangements his grandmother had made. “Are you comfortable with all this money she’s spending on us?”

“I’ll quote Jerome’s dad, ‘you have to be grateful for the good things.’ I think we can handle it. I don’t share my dad’s fears that we’ll be ostracized because people are jealous. Hell, everybody in this town knows your grandma is loaded and spoils you. They’re also aware that she’s adopted me and I also am spoiled rotten! Have you ever felt any resentment? I can honestly say I haven’t. I know my parents are uneasy with what she spends on us, and I’m worried about what she will plan for our wedding, but I’ll leave that to my mother to handle. She’s tough as nails and won’t be railroaded into an over-the-top fiasco.”

They had adjoining bedrooms, and when they went to bed, Esther came into Roger’s room to kiss him goodnight. Roger had more on his mind than a simple goodnight kiss. “Darling, we’ll be married pretty soon. Can we go a little further? You know. Can we try to go all the way?”

Esther sat on the side of the bed and took both his hands in hers. “Honey, I love you dearly. But I have always wanted to be a virgin when I marry. That way our first night as a married couple will be very special. Why don’t we stick to what we’ve been doing long before you got injured?” She removed her pajama top and pushed his pants down. Before she crawled in next to him she took off her panties.

The next morning when they came down for breakfast Mrs. Hassett was already on her second cup of coffee. She greeted them with, “For the life of me, I

can't imagine why you two insist on separate bedrooms. I hope you stop that foolishness after you're married." Esther blushed, her face became fire red.

Roger laughed. "Grandma, if you insist, we'll retreat into one room. You don't really need that extra room, but have it your way. After all, it's your house, and you make the rules."

Mrs. Hassett shot back, "Don't be so glib young man. I was once young too. You love each other and don't have to make false pretenses around me. I have a confession to make. Since you two moved in, I've never been happier in my life, and that makes me terribly conflicted. A tragic accident brought the two of you here. And even though I was devastated by what happened to you, Roger, I'm happy it brought the two of you here. Selfishly, I had you two all to myself. I'll miss you terribly when you leave for college."

Esther scooted over and hugged Mrs. Hassett. "You're not the only one who has those mixed feelings. When Roger went down on that field, I wanted the world to end. I was devastated, but that horrible tragedy gave me a grandma who I love and adore."

Roger watched as his grandmother pulled Esther into her arms. "Hold on, ladies. The accident made me a paraplegic. I'm confined to a wheelchair and should be bitter as hell. But I'm not. I'll tell you why. When I lived with my mother, I was just another occupant in the house. Here I've found a home. I've never felt more comfortable than living here with Esther and you, Grandma. I'm more confident about the future than I've ever been. Maybe I should even be proud of the fact that, because of my accident, handicapped kids will be able to attend of the finest universities in the state. Life is ironic. Things happen, and we don't know why, but we have to find the good in it."