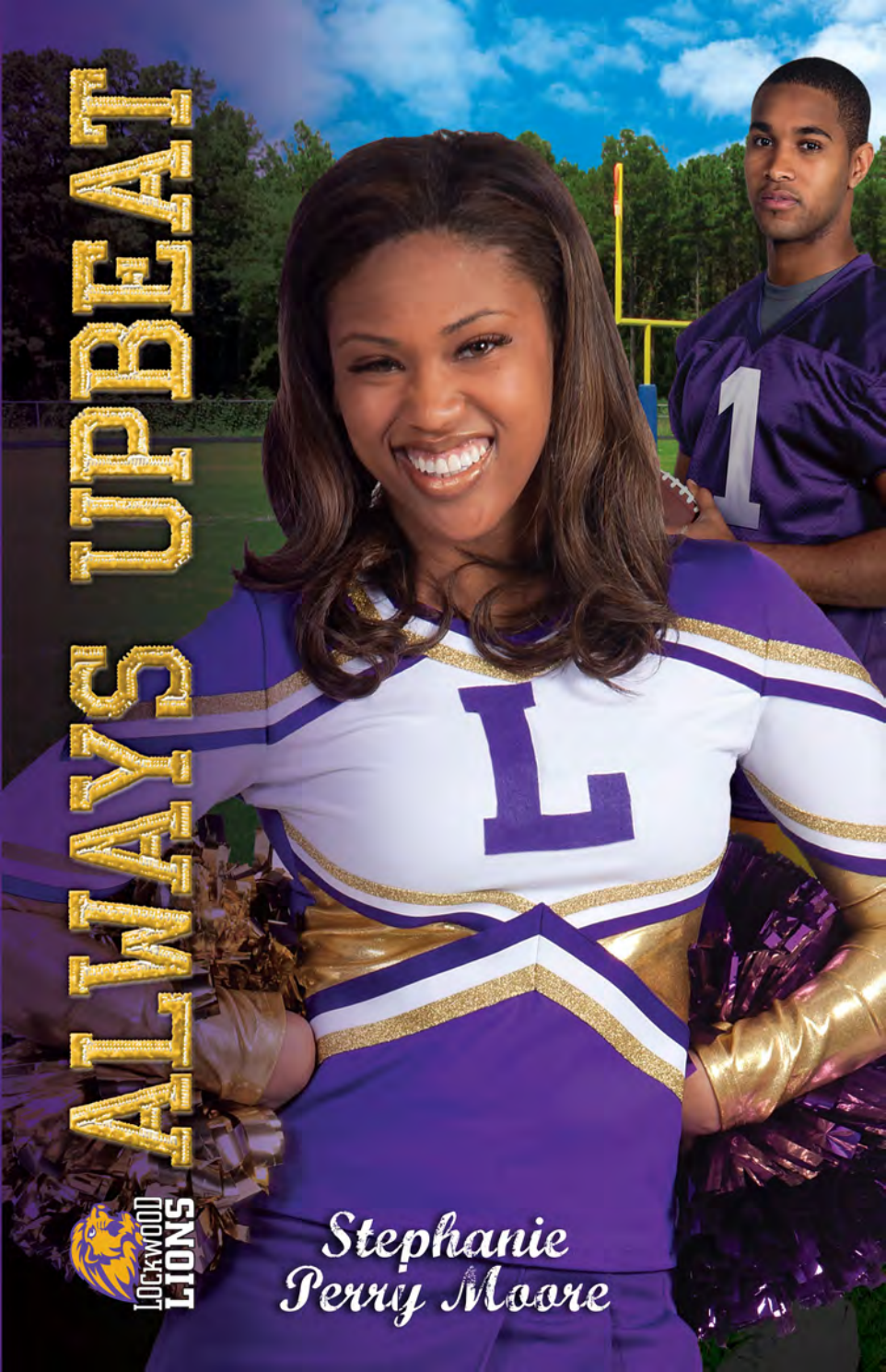


ALWAYS UPBEAT

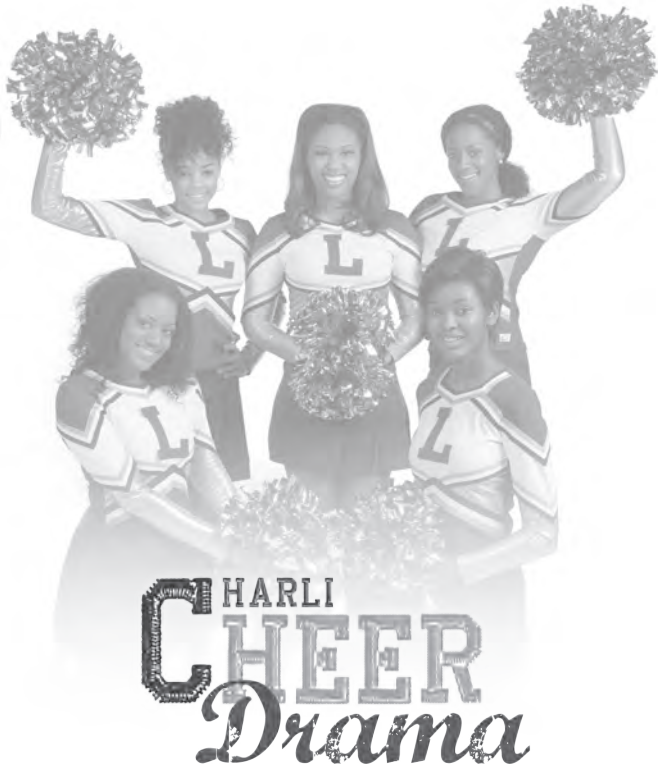


*Stephanie
Perry Moore*





The Lockwood High cheer squad has it *all*—sass, looks, and all the right moves. But everything isn't always as perfect as it seems. Because where there's cheer, there's drama. And then there's the ballers—hot, tough, and on point. But what's going to win out—life's pressures or their NFL dreams?



Savvy Charli Black seems to have the perfect life ...
but perfect isn't always what it seems.

CHAPTER 1

Picked Me

You are so beautiful, Charli,” my boyfriend, Blake, whispered in my ear. He was six foot one and two hundred pounds of handsome. We sat at the food court in the happening Southlake Mall, enjoying each other.

I blushed. He had my heart. Blake Strong was every girl’s dream. He was gorgeous and smart. Plus he was the starting quarterback at our upscale and predominantly African American Lockwood High School near the Atlanta airport. Though his dad was the football coach and a tough PE teacher, who scared us all, Blake was the complete opposite: just a teddy bear, and he was mine.

My life was fantastic. People said I was spoiled. I was an only child. My father was a state judge. So a princess's lifestyle was pretty much my story.

While my mom was busy with clubs, luncheons, and charities, I knew she loved me. She was there for everything I needed. There was not a ballet recital, tennis match, or cheerleading competition that she ever missed. My father and I were truly blessed to have her attend to all our needs.

Though I probably wouldn't win *America's Next Top Model*, when I walked in the room, dudes were eyeing me. At five foot six, size 8 shoe, and size 4 clothes ... okay, really a size 6, my curves were in the right places. I didn't have any eating disorder issues. But keeping it real, I was not going to put anything too fattening in my mouth. Like most teen girls, I was conscious of my appearance. So when Blake told me I was beautiful, he had me melting.

"Nobody's at my house, Charli Black," Blake said, laughing. "You know your name should be Charlie Brown."

I just hit him, even though I get that all the

time. His smile was perfect, and his hair was naturally wavy like mine. If my mother knew my thoughts, she'd kill me, but we'd have some pur-tee babies. Course we would actually have to do something for that to be an issue, and my mom would be pleased to know my legs had never been opened in that manner.

As he leaned in and kissed me on my neck, Blake continued, "Football camp starts tomorrow. You'll be going to cheerleading practice every day the next few weeks. Today is our day, babe. Let's really be together."

He took my hand and motioned for us to leave. While I wanted to make him happy, I was not ready to commit myself. I knew a couple of my girls were out there having fun. And though I knew I loved Blake, something inside of me was saying to hold off giving it all up. I could not let him push me, so I tugged away.

"Oh, so it's like that?" he asked, getting a little frustrated that I told him no in a subtle way.

"Soon. Okay, baby?" I asked, sliding my hand up his chest.

"Don't play. Don't get me all excited and then tell me no. I'm going to get some ice cream."

Blake got up and shoved his chair hard under the table.

When he walked away, I could not stop keeping my eyes centered below his waist. The brown, luscious brother was fine. What was I thinking? What was I doing? What was I risking?

I needed to talk to my girls. Problem was, they were probably all together. And if one knew my business, they all would know. I had four great girlfriends. We had challenges, and we were not alike. But we all agreed how exciting it was to be the juniors on the cheerleading squad.

Everybody called me the most confident, but they did not know I really had my own issues. My mom taught me how to walk with my head up high, however, I always felt like I was not measuring up to her high standards.

Hallie was the loudest out of our group. You always knew when she was coming. She was not the best cheerleader. Honestly, we did not know if she was going to make the team. She had been trying for the past two years. The third time was the charm.

There were twins Ella and Eva. Though they looked identical, they were nothing alike.

Ella was a sweetheart, and Eva was sneaky, salty, and snappy. When you put the two of them together, it was like the perfect glass of Kool-Aid, but split them up and you got too much sugar or too much salt.

And Randal was my girl. She was so shy, but the better part of us all in my opinion. She did not give herself enough credit. She was always down on herself, and I did not like that. I loved that she had my same values of wanting to wait for sex. That was her goal, too, though it was easier for her because she did not have a man.

It was not so easy trying to stay pure when you had somebody stand in front of you looking all good, nibbling on your ear, and putting his hands everywhere they did not belong. I needed encouragement to stay strong so I would not go find Blake, jump in his car, and let him have his way with me.

Answering Randal's phone, Eva said, "Was-sup, Charli? Girl, thought you'd be too busy with Blake to call."

With little enthusiasm, I replied, "Hey, Eva."

"Don't sound like you ain't excited to talk to me. Whatever ... Here, Randal. It's your girl.

She's acting funky," Eva said. "I don't have time for the attitude."

"I don't have an attitude," I said, hoping Eva would hear me before Randal got the cell.

In a kinder tone, Randal said, "Hey, Charli. How are you?"

"Hanging," I replied, taking a deep breath. "What are y'all doing?"

"They're over, and we are trying to teach Hallie some cheers," Randal answered.

Snatching the phone, Hallie said, "I don't want to look like a complete idiot at practice tomorrow, not knowing nothing. I wish you were here."

"It's not knowing anything," I thought to myself, not nothing. However, I knew I couldn't correct Hallie, because I'd never hear the end of it. In our group, Ella was the smartest one of us, although I wasn't far behind in the scholastic department. But the other three, for the life of me, stressed me out with the ghetto talk all the time.

"But you're with Blake," Hallie said loudly into the phone.

Hearing them laugh and tease me, I said, "Well, y'all are busy. I'll let you go."

I could sense Randal wrestling Hallie for the phone. “I’ve always got time to talk to you. Wassup?” Randal asked.

“Nothing, it’s fine. Go practice.”

Eva said, “Charli, I just pushed her intercom button. You’re on speaker. Spill it, dang.”

Feeling forced, I said, “Hey, you guys.”

“Hey, Charli. Miss you, girl,” Ella said in a warmer tone, making me feel loved.

“I miss you too,” I said, sending smooches through the phone. “How was New York?”

“Oh, so you can talk to my sister, but you ain’t wanna talk to me?” Eva said with more attitude than a girl being upset with her hairdresser for giving her a tore-up weave job.

Getting passionate because she was so wrong, I said, “Girl, don’t even trip. You know I missed you too. You were at your grandma’s for a whole month. I was about to get on a plane and fly to New York myself to hang out with you guys. Tell them, Hallie. We looked up tickets.”

Hallie had my back. “Yeah, we did.”

“We’re straight. But for real, Charli. You’re with your man. Why are you calling us?” Eva asked. “Where is he?”

I looked over at the Dairy Queen. He said he was getting some ice cream, but I didn't see him standing there. My eyes started searching frantically. Where was my fine beau? My eyes widened when I spotted him laughing with some chick I recognized from our school.

“Who is that he's talking to? Why does she have her hand all over him like that? He's smiling at her!”

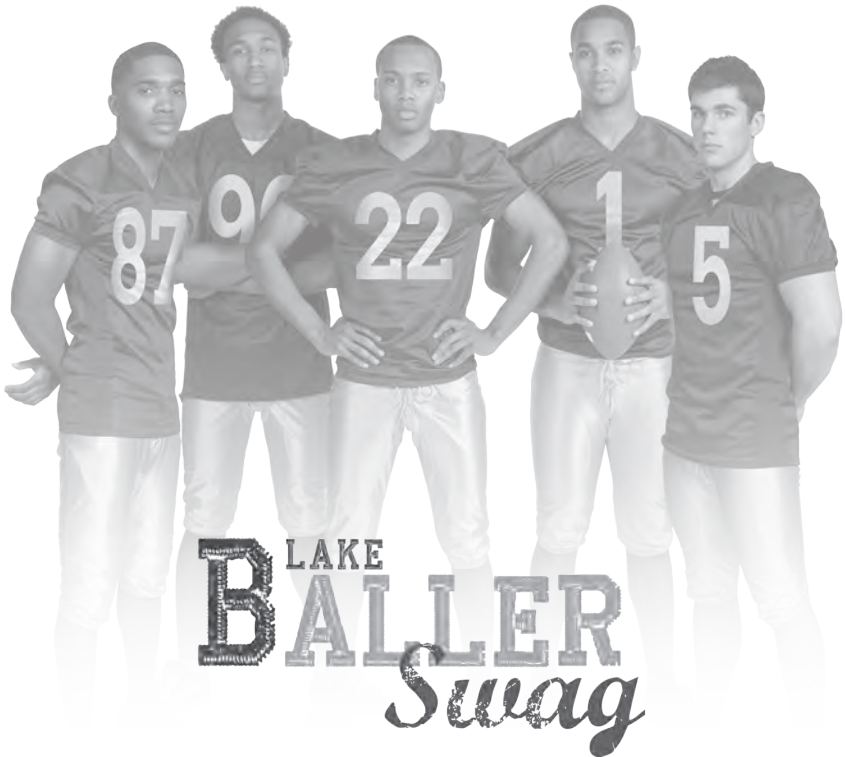
There were lots of oohs and ahhs going on in the background. Then I realized I was telling my friends *way* too much. All four of them started speaking to me at once, and it wasn't that I was ever dishonest with them, but I did not want them to know there was trouble in paradise. I was supposed to be the one who had it together.

Why was my boyfriend standing over there talking to some fast-looking girl? If her skirt was any higher, she would not have one on. Her shirt might as well have been a bikini top that was two sizes too small because everything was showing.

Truly upset and keeping it real, I yelled, “Oh heck nah. Y'all, I got to go.”



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Cocky quarterback Blake Strong's
number one goal is to stay in the game.

*Will he realize there is more to life
than football?*

CHAPTER 1

High Expectations

Son, why are you out here on my practice field if you're not going to really work? Blake Strong, live up to your name. Out here looking weak, giving half effort, and leading like a sissy," my dad said all up in my grill.

It was the beginning of July, the first practice of the summer. Football was all that I had been training for. It was my junior year—supposedly my time to step up and show college scouts I could play. However, with my dad, Coach Bradley Strong, former NFL player with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, pushing me so hard, I wanted to quit.

"Did you drink the gallon of water last night so you won't cramp up? You know you can't come

out in this heat and not be pre-hydrated. Did you drink the shake this morning? If I don't stay on you, like people have to do with pee-wee players, who knows what you'll end up being. I expect you to come out here and give me one hundred ten percent. It's like you're giving me fifty percent effort. Absolutely unacceptable ... go run."

That was all I wanted him to say. I wanted to be dismissed so I could get away from him. I did love my dad, but he was overboard. Not only was he a fanatic football father, but he also was an obsessed coach. Put those two together, and one could see my world was miserable.

"Defense, huddle up," he said when I made it to the track.

Going into the season, our team was ranked one of the top in our region in the state. We were stacked with talent on both sides of the ball. All of our talent was coming back. Most of us were juniors. We had one of the best wide receivers in the country, Landon King, the best middle linebacker, my cousin Brenton Strong, and the most ferocious defensive end, Leo Steele. I was one of the top quarterbacks. With great players on both

sides of the ball, my dad could smell a state title, and he was pushing super hard.

Landon was my boy, and he ran up beside me. “Don’t let him get to you like that.”

Venting, I said, “You don’t understand. He’s getting on my nerves. He pushes, and I push back, giving him all I got. Then he pushes harder, like he wants me to break. Nothing I do is good enough. Having a dad like him is excruciating.”

Making jokes, Landon said, “Uh-oh, look at you, partna, using big words *excursiate* ... *excr* ... What?”

“Don’t play, and don’t try to make me laugh,” I said, smiling anyway. “You know I’ve been studying for the SAT. I better be, too, because you just can’t have skills on the field and not be able to do well on those tests. You feelin’ me, son?”

Landon picked up the pace, as I did, and said, “I know. I know. You said it to me tons and tons of times. The lower GPA I have, the higher SAT score I’m required to have.”

Being real, I breathed, “Exactly, but it’s all good because you’re pulling a three-point-o. But

opening up those books and learning those large words would not hurt.”

Landon stopped running. “Well, I see my job’s done here,” he said, not wanting me to get on him.

I jogged back over to him and said, “What do you mean?”

“You can’t be upset at your dad anymore. You’re back in rare Blake form.”

“What does that mean?” I questioned, frustrated with Landon’s attempts to cheer me up.

“You know ... pushing people and tryna get the best outta your team. Don’t stop. You’re really a clone of your dad,” Landon said, being my best buddy.

I was tired, exhausted, and beat, but I looked over at the football field and saw the almost hundred athletes and pondered on my duty. I realized that though I had the reputation for being all that, I worked for it. I needed to keep on working for it because I was playing for them. Though I wanted to grab my dad by the collar and absolutely go off on him for being a jerk, I figured I would show him I had what it took.

When the time came for drills, as the quarterback of the team, I had everybody hustling. My energy was high, and the team was feeding off that as if I were fuel for our engine. Personally, I was doing my thing as well. For ten balls straight, my passes were executed and caught right on point. I had the short passes down, the long bombs tight, and all the middle deep throws were accurate too.

After practice my dad called me to his office. “Sorry, I got on you pretty hard out there earlier today, but what I just saw, that’s what’s gonna get you a D1 scholarship. You wanna be a Florida Gator? Keep ballin’ like that and you’ll be wearing the blue and orange, baby.”

I did not want to fuss with my father, but he knew I wanted to go to Notre Dame. Yeah, it was not in the powerhouse Southeastern Conference. It was not close to home, but it was my dream school.

Truthfully, I did not want to live in his shadow. He’d wanted me to be a wide receiver. He said African American quarterbacks had it harder and did not really have a chance in the NFL. However, when I told him I wanted to play

that position, and he saw that I was smart, determined, and talented, he helped me learn the game. Now that it was almost time for Friday night lights, I was ready.

Pushing more, he asked, "So what time you going to the gym?"

"I just thought I'd chill out for a minute, Dad. I went to the gym yesterday and the day before that. I was watching film last night. I just wanted to hang out and take Charli to the mall. She wants to pick up something for her mom's birthday," I uttered, knowing that probably wasn't the truth, but wanting to explain every detail so he would cut me slack.

Getting no slack cut, he voiced, "Take her out to the mall? You aren't no chauffeur, and this isn't the weekend."

Completely frustrated, I said, "Dang, Dad. It's the summer. Everything you've asked me to do, I've done. Why you on me so much? Ease up some."

"Oh? You think I'm on you?" my dad said, as he stood behind his desk just inches away from me. "Dang, boy, you make me so angry."

I got spankings until I was almost in high school. These days I could sometimes see in my dad's eyes that he wanted to take off his belt and use it. However, I was coming into my own.

Being clear, I was not the baddest thing at Lockwood High School because I was his son. I had earned my stripes. I was not arrogant, but I was confident. Fellas admired me, and ladies wanted to get with this. However, I had a girl who was model material. Charli Black was da bomb, and I was super ready to really set off fireworks with her.

I moved to Georgia when my parents' jobs got relocated here in the ninth grade. So much changed that year. The biggest changes were that the whippings stopped and my strength grew. He could not come at me any way he wanted and think I was going to take it. I had respect for him, but he was close to losing it. He was almost schizophrenic. His ways mirrored the disease. One day he was sweet; the next day he was a maniac.

Our relationship was hanging on by a thread, and he definitely didn't strengthen it when he said, "Why don't you act like Brenton?"

He's never a smart aleck. He always works harder than I ask, and he wants my help."

I just looked at my dad. I was not about to answer his idiotic question, and I certainly was not going to feel bad that I did not try to compare myself or be like my precious cousin. Brenton is his sister's son. We were born a week apart. He was the oldest, and he would not let me forget. I truly believed if my dad could have his way, he would have switched us at birth.

Like stabbing my heart with a knife and twisting it, my dad said, "Brenton's over there struggling with my sister. The boy don't have nothing. Here you got everything you want, and you just take it for granted, son."

Dad took pity on his nephew. It was not my fault Brenton's dad got my aunt knocked up, and he had not been seen or heard from since. It *is* my problem that my dad tries to overcompensate. He tries to not only be my cousin's uncle, but his absent father as well. When my dad took me to the zoo, he had to take Brenton too. When my dad bought me a pair of shoes, he had to buy Brenton a pair as well. We were not twins. We were not even brothers, and it truly got under my skin that he

thought Brenton was superior to me. Yeah, I knew my dad loved Brenton's toughness. My dad was a linebacker, but I wanted the prima donna spot. So what that I didn't like getting hit? Last time I checked, no team can win without the quarterback.

"Make sure you take Brenton home first, and don't be out long with *that* girl," my dad said, realizing that I deserved a break. "But just so you know, I will have my foot on your throat till the day you leave here. So accept it."

I could only nod. He flung his hand in the air, dismissing me. At that moment I wished for the day I was outta there. It could not come soon enough.

As I stepped out of my dad's office, my cousin was in my face.

It wasn't Brenton's fault that my dad wanted him as a son instead of me. But I wanted to knock his pearly whites out of his mouth when he said, "Ready?"

In all honesty, Brenton had not done anything to me but have my back, so with no beef I said, "Yeah, man. Let's roll."

I looked back in my dad's office, and I could only hope that I would make him proud. I was

trying. Eventually he was going to see it because I set the bar even higher for myself than he did. Booyah.

“Hey, baby, can’t wait to see ya. What time should I be ready?” my girlfriend, Charli, said.

Just hearing her voice got me all excited. I so wanted to be with her. Her image would not leave my mind. I would be lifting weights, and I would imagine her standing in front of me. I would be asleep, and I would think of her lying next to me. Sometimes I would be driving, and I would imagine her sitting straight on top of me. It was our time.

However, my girl was a little too good, and though she knew I was not a bad boy, she thought I was pretty good too. I had yet to fully experience all of my manhood. However, this was my junior year, my time to come into my own in a lot of ways. Honestly, I only thought it was fair that we’d take our relationship to the next level. I’d done things her way for two years, but now it was time for her to show me and not just tell me how much she truly cared.

YELL OUT TO THEY

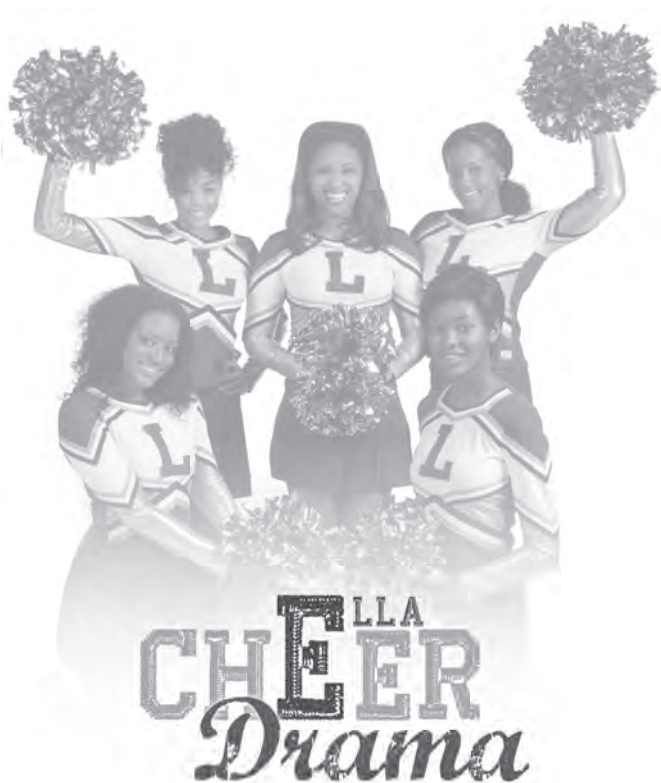


*Stephanie
Perry Moore*





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Sweetheart Ella Blount will do anything
to keep her girls together ...
anything.

CHAPTER 1

Caught Up

Okay, Ella, so here's the deal. You've got to help us cheat," my sassy, overbearing twin sister, Eva, said to me. Randal stood by silently, as usual. "I know you're all sweet and innocent, but we're failing US History."

I squinted, and Randal said, "Don't look like that. I know it's bad that we're asking—"

"Whatever!" Eva cut in. "She's got a ninety-eight average in US History. You and I are flunking. We don't have time to study. We can do better on the next nine weeks. We need her to carry out our plan. Shoot, it ain't like I have never helped Ella out on stuff."

I wasn't sure what my sister thought I *owed* her for, but I would be risking a lot. They were both serious. I was in a sour-pickle mess.

“I don't even know how to cheat, y'all, even if I wanted to, okay? I can help you study for it though. Eva, you're right, I know the material pretty well. It is not too late for you to get it.”

My sister looked at me like what I was saying was stupid. She had already stated her case, and I was just supposed to do what she said. We were identical twins, but we certainly were opposites. She was brash and sassy. I was patient and sweet.

It was not that I had a problem bending over backwards for her. What she was asking me to do could prove fatal for both of us. If we were caught, we could be suspended, and that meant being dropped from the cheer squad we both loved.

My problem with Eva was that she did not take responsibility for the predicaments she found herself in. Okay, so we did not have the perfect home life. Our father left us when we were five. We never got any specific reason, but looking back at the pictures, my mom used to be a brick house, sort of like Eva and me. We

had bodies that would make any guy's head turn. Eva liked to show hers off. I was more on the conservative side. My mom had put on some weight. I did not want to think my dad was that shallow, but looking at pictures of his new woman, who was skinnier than a stick, I could come to no other conclusion.

Eva loved playing the "poor me" card because our dad was not present in our lives. Now he had another family he called his own, and he was about to get married in a few weeks. He had a three-year-old son and another baby boy was on the way. Since she did not get the love from my dad, she gave it up to almost every guy who gave her attention. I was not calling my sister a garden tool, but if she ever got married, she certainly would be the last person wearing a white gown.

"Don't say no," Randal said. (But I was definitely going to tell them to forget it.) "Just go think about it."

There were five of us who were tighter than tight. Our crew consisted of Charli, Hallie, Randal, Eva, and me. We were all cheerleaders on the varsity football and competition squad. We

would be cheering basketball too. Our main goal was to make it to state and win the title of best cheerleaders in Class 5A.

We had just come from winning a football game. We were having a sleepover at Charli Black's house so that we'd all pump each other up for our first big cheer competition the next morning. Charli was our captain and an extremely savvy cheerleader. She had the looks, the personality, the charm, and the skills. Her father was a big-time judge. We loved coming over to the Black's house because Charli had her own wing, and there were no siblings to bother us when we gathered together since she was an only child.

Charli was with Hallie in the kitchen making us snacks. As outgoing as Charli was, Hallie was even more boisterous. Ever since I had known her, she had always been so positive. She had come through a lot and was raised by her father because her mother left them when she turned into a crackhead. Charli's life was not as glamorous as we all thought, however. Her parents were trying to reconnect again. Her dad had been caught tipping out. Charli and Hallie

had been hanging out together all night. They were both in love. They were both dating football players. Most ballers were jerks, but the two they had were sweetie pies.

“So what’s there to think about, Ella?” my sister asked with attitude.

I said, “Well, I just can’t take the test for y’all.”

Eva replied coldly, “We were gonna talk about the details in a little while, but you’re acting all apprehensive and stuff. One of your best friends and your sister need help.”

“Smoothies and sandwiches,” Hallie came in and said, holding the delicious offerings. “Come try some, Eva. Leave your sister alone. Let’s eat.”

“Stay out of this, Hallie. I’m talking to Ella,” Eva huffed back.

“Wait, what’s going on in here?” Charli said, clearly not liking Eva’s tone.

“We’re trying not to get kicked out of the mansion,” Hallie joked.

“Settle down everybody. This is slumber party time. Ella, what’s going on?” Charli asked me.

“I’m talking to her,” Eva said, and she stepped in front of Charli. “That’s what’s going

on. If you give us some space and get out of our business, we can finish.”

“Eva, I’m not talking to you. I’m asking Ella,” Charli responded. She seemed to be the only one out of the five of us who could stand up to my sister.

“Okay, I’ll tell you,” Randal cut in to avoid a standoff.

“Hush, girl,” Eva snapped. Then she gave Randal a little push.

My sister’s rude actions were a red flag to me. If Eva did not want to tell her plan to Hallie and Charli, then my apprehensions were right on. If it was no big deal, then what was the big deal in telling them?

“They just want me to help them with the test,” I said, wanting Eva to put her claws away.

“What’s the big deal in that?” Hallie said. “We all need to study. First quarter exams are here. We can help each other.”

Eva and Randal were silent. I looked at my sister like, *Are you going to tell her, or do I need to?* Thinking Randal was going to step out of her shy box and take ownership of what she wanted me to do was a joke.

“Not that it’s any of y’all’s business,” Eva finally said to them when she saw that they were not going to leave well enough alone. “Randal and I need her to help us with US History, and not just studying. Heck, it’s too late to get the stuff down now. We have a little plan for her to help us. She’s got the class before us. She’s going to fill out two copies of her answer sheet and leave one behind for us to find when we come into class after her.”

“Huh? You want her to cheat? Oh heck nah. Stupid plan. It ain’t happening,” Charli uttered.

“She is not your sister. You can’t tell her what to do. Dang, you think you can boss everyone around,” Eva said to our hostess. “She’s my sister and I need her. What I don’t need is y’all clouding up her mind with this guilty-conscience junk that helping me is wrong.”

Eva truly thought her comments were righteous. Charli did not even look at her to cosign. Instead Charli looked at me, pulled me over to a corner, and called Hallie over to us.

Charli said, “Don’t let anybody make you feel like if you don’t help them do something horrible that it’s your fault if they fail. You have

too much to lose, and you're much too sweet of a person to fall for intimidation. Tell her, Hallie."

Hallie said, "Ella, you know your sister. She wants what she wants, but everything she wants isn't good for her. That's why we're friends. That's why we're sisters: to help keep each other in line so we won't fall for the okey doke."

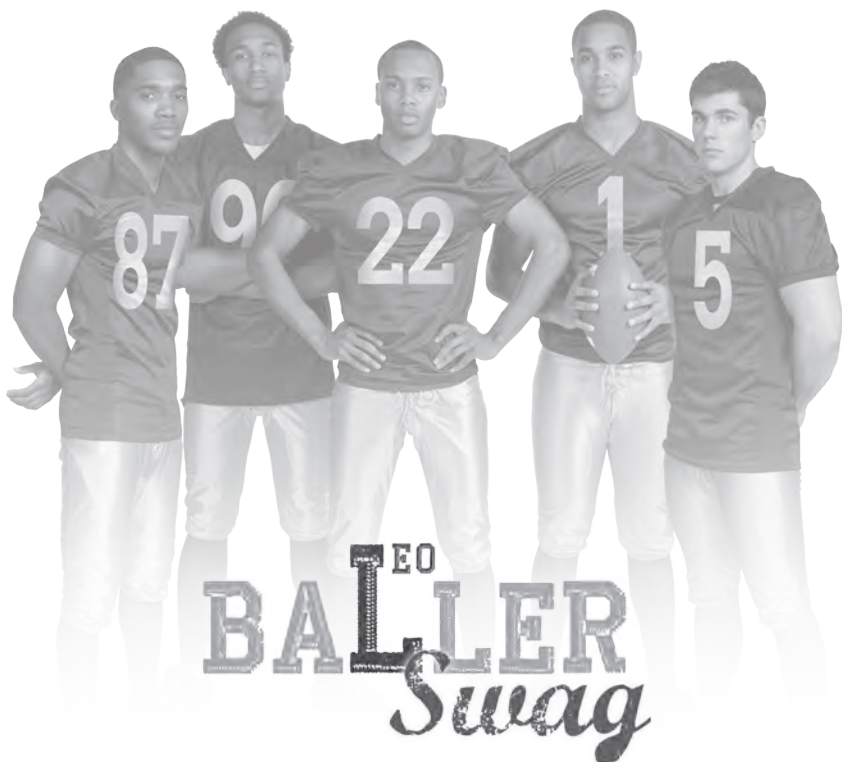
The slumber party we were supposed to be having was completely shot. Hallie and Charli were balled up together, talking about their guys. Eva and Randal were cornered, hoping and praying I would go against my better judgment and help them. I was stuck in between, pretending like I was asleep so that no one would bother me. All the while, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do. What was right and what could I not forgive myself for if I did not do it?

"Get up everybody. Time to go win our first competition," Charli said Saturday morning as if all hearts and minds were clear.

We were going to a meet in Loganville, Georgia. It was about forty-five minutes away, and there were four teams scheduled to compete



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Leo Steele is the toughest
thug in school—and football is his life.
But when life gets tough, will football win?



*Stephanie Perry Moore
& Derrick Moore*



CHAPTER 1

Move On

Lions we're 3-0," Coach Strong said to us in the locker room after the football game. "And I'm so proud of each and every one of you. You've been digging deep. You've been stepping up. Individually, you've been covering your assignments. And collectively, we've been stellar. I'm proud of your effort."

"So, Coach, do we get tomorrow off? No film, right?" Waxton, our star running back yelled out.

"We wanna make it 4-0, don't we?" Coach yelled back. "I'll see you all tomorrow at eleven. Head on out to the buses so we can get back to the school. Steele, I need to see you real quick."

"Yes, sir, Coach," I said immediately, going to see the man I admired.

I had no clue what Coach wanted from me. I had a pretty good game. Two sacks, a forced fumble, six tackles, two for a loss, and seven assists. Heck, he should have been giving me the defensive player of the game award. I would have thought there was something positive he wanted to talk to me about, except the way he called my name with irritation let me know he was not pleased with Leo Steele.

“You wanted to see me, Coach?” I asked.

“You played a tremendous game tonight, son.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

“But I got a problem.”

“Yeah, Coach?”

“I’ve been checking in with all the teachers, asking them to let me know if any of my players are failing. Right now you are failing math and history. Boy, what are you doing? Sleeping in class?” he lectured. “Midterms are coming up. Unless you want to be sitting on the sidelines and cheering like the girls with pom-poms, you’d better get it together. Am I making myself clear? If you need a tutor, open your mouth. No, no, I take that back. There’s gonna be mandatory

tutoring for the next couple of Saturdays in the school library. You be there.”

Not wanting to go, I asked, “Tomorrow? We got practice, Coach.”

“We’re watching film at eleven. Tutoring is at ten. Go there for an hour and then come on to practice. I just don’t get it with you, Steele. You’re one of my most aggressive players. You go get it on the field. You know what you want to do, and you handle your business. Aren’t you trying to play D1 ball?”

“Yes, sir, Coach.”

“Well, they don’t take idiots. So if that’s your goal, if that’s what you’re trying to do, then I suggest you get on your work. It’s like when you double team. You get down low, and you put more into it and make sure you quickly get off your blocks. If the subject is hard, then you got to put more into it as well. No excuses. If the grades don’t come up, you’re off the team.”

On the bus ride back to Lockwood High School, my teammates were fired up. Inwardly, I, too, was excited we were 3–0. We knew we had a great team. We were good on offense and

defense. However, since I got lectured, I was not as excited as they were. How was I going to get *me* together? Being taken out of the starting line—that was not an option.

“So you gonna hang out with us or what, man?” Landon asked when we got back to his car in the school parking lot.

“Nah, dude, just take me home.”

“Why? There are a couple of sets we need to fly by.”

“Man, I need to go study.”

“On a Friday night, Leo, really? You’re talking to me.”

“Coach just told me if I don’t handle my business, I am going to be watching y’all play. So, uh, take me home.”

“Dang, I didn’t know it was like that. Let me get you there quick. We need you on defense.”

On the ride to my place, it was a little quiet in Landon’s car. For a preacher’s kid, he tried hard to be a bad boy. He’d have his music blaring, and it was not gospel. It was hardcore nasty rap, but now the music was off.

“What’s up with you, man? I haven’t seen Pastor King at any of the games.”

“I know, right? He says he’s my number-one fan, and he wants me to get out there and do my thing. Yet every Friday night, he’s out of town speaking somewhere trying to save some soul but forgetting about his own son. You know what I’m saying?” Landon disdained.

Finally, we reached my apartment and I got out. “Man, just talk to him. Go home tonight.”

Landon’s dad was not the only parent who had not come to our games this year. My mom was absent as well. Ever since she found the wrong dude to whisper the right things in her ear over the summer, she had been wanting to be with him more than me. When I opened the front door and walked inside, I did not know how interested in him she was until I saw both of them there packing everything.

“Mom, what’s going on?” I hollered.

“Calm down, Leo, let me explain,” she said, rising from wrapping glass in newspaper.

I asked, “What are you guys doing? Tell me we’re not moving in with him.”

“Leo, this is my boyfriend, Frankie. Well, he’s wanted to meet you lots of times, but with your football schedule it’s just been impossible.”

Frankie stuck out his hand trying to impress my mom, but I would not shake it. I looked at it as if it had cyanide on it. I felt if I touched it, my hand would dissolve away or something. I mean, here was this man helping my mom pack up our place, and I didn't know anything about it.

“Mom, what's going on?”

She said, “The little job I have here is not going to advance me forward. Frankie feels—”

Cutting her off, I huffed, “Frankie feels? Who cares what *he* feels?”

Frankie stepped to me and said, “Hey, watch your mouth with your mom, son.”

“I'm not your son,” I scoffed.

My dad died when I was in elementary school. I was actually with him. We were in a bad car accident, and he did not make it. At the time, I did not know much about adult things. I kept hearing my mom cry at night, saying she did not know how we were going to make it. I always respected the fact that she did not get with any old joker to help her pay bills. So now I was surprised this Frankie guy had influence over her.

“Leo, calm down and step back.”

The little shrimp my mom was with might have thought he was tough, but I could take him. I was six three and a half, two hundred twenty-five pounds. He looked to be about five eight, one sixty-five tops. I could snap him.

“Mom, I’m not moving in with this guy. Where does he live anyway? I gotta stay in this school zone so that I can play for the Lions. We’re going to win state.”

“Y’all have only won three games. I think it’s pretty premature of you to talk about how y’all gonna win state,” Frankie offered.

“Come on, this is insulting,” I said to my mom. I’ll bet that jerk probably wished he played back in the day. I completely ignored him.

Frankie got in my mom’s face. “He is not coming with me. No way. I’m not taking care of any grown man. No way.”

“Frankie, let me talk to him,” my mom said, trying to calm the guy down.

“Mom, what is he talking about? You can’t go somewhere without me.”

The look on Frankie’s face spoke volumes. The sly way he held his lips and the chuckle he had in his voice told me I was wrong. My mom

was planning to move in with some man she had not even known for six months and leave her son. I looked at her like, *You gotta explain this.*

Her eyes were watering as she said, “Okay, I know you probably think this doesn’t make a lot of sense, but I just need a fresh start. I need to get away, and you’re eighteen. You have so much invested here. I’m going to move to New York with Frankie. I’m going to be able to send some money back to you. I just got to get away, Leo. You’ll be okay.”

I shook my head and walked down the hall to my room and slammed the door. My bed was gone. I did not understand this, but with the long away game, an equally long ride home, tough talk with the coach, and now finding out that my world was turning upside down, I didn’t care. I was exhausted. I curled up on the floor. My plan was to deal with all of this the next day.

Coach was going over film in the team meeting. I was so glad that I had a good game the night before because whatever he was saying was going in one ear and coming out the other. It was not that I was not trying to figure out how

I could be better because I did miss a couple of assignments. However, I took his criticism like a man; but honestly, I had bigger fish to contend with. At the moment I was drowning in uncertainty and letting the worry get the best of me. How was I going to take care of myself? Yeah, I heard my mom talk a good game about sending some money back to me. However, our apartment was \$650 a month. While the government paid for half of that, I could not even afford \$325.

“Steele, are you listening?” Coach Strong called me out.

“Yes, sir.”

He asked, “What’d I just say, man?”

And the whole team laughed at me because I could not repeat his critique. Coach Grey was a sweet older gentleman and our defensive coordinator. Though he was a white dude, he could keep the brothers in line. When Coach Grey called me out of the team meeting, I immediately went into defense mode.

“I’m sorry, Coach, I just got a lot on my mind. I know it seemed like I was asleep, like I wasn’t paying attention. I was in it. You know I wanna get better.”