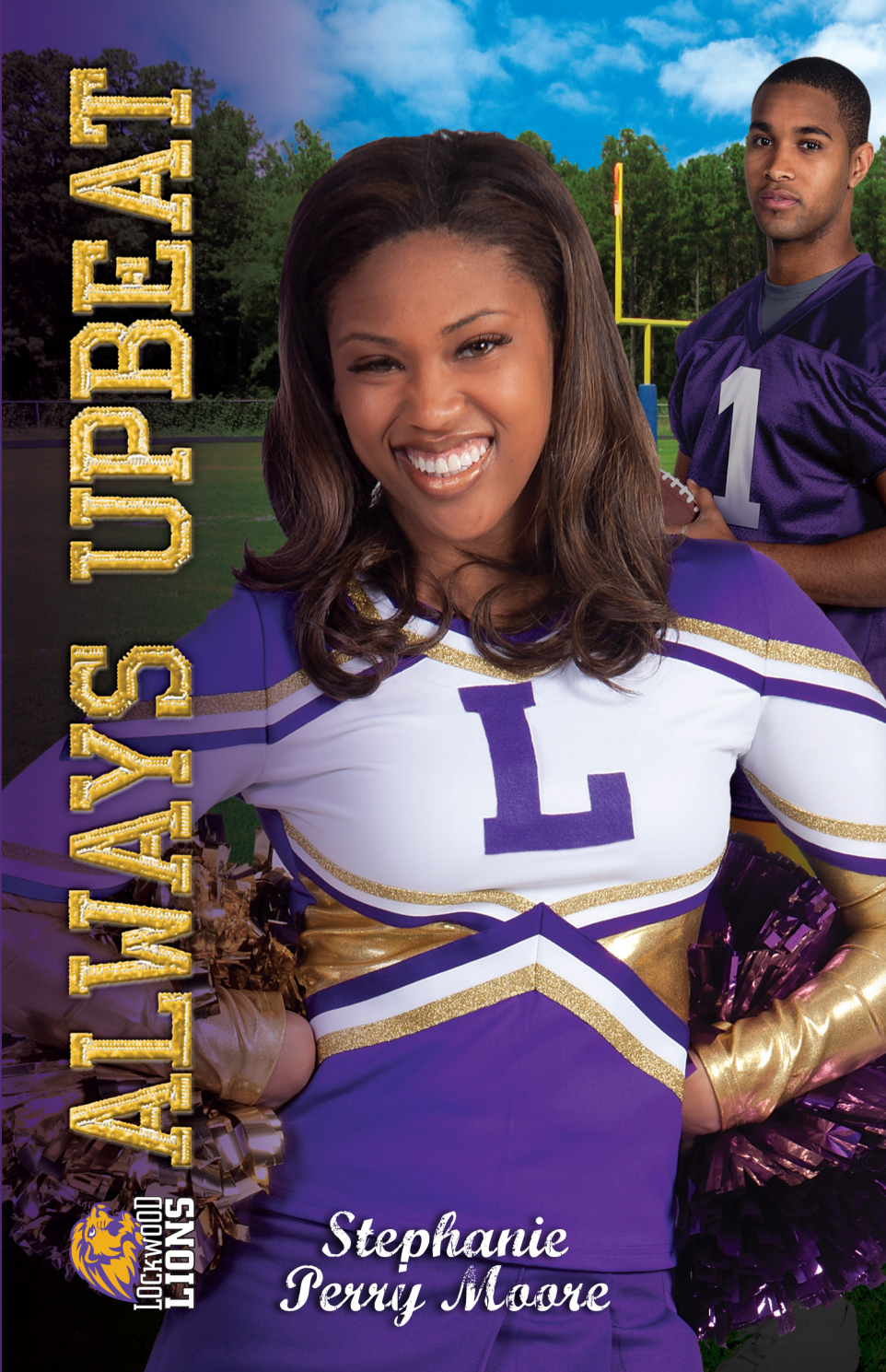


ALWAYS UPBEAT

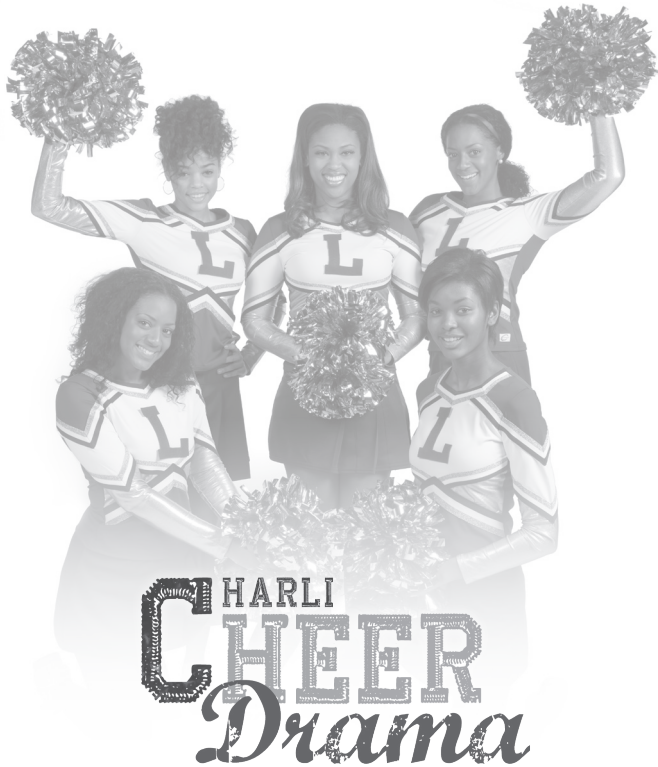


*Stephanie
Perry Moore*





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.



ALWAYS UPBEAT

Stephanie Perry Moore



CHEER DRAMA

Always Upeat

Keep Jumping

Yell Out

Settle Down

Shake It



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To Tammy Garnes

*We know drama, don't we lady?
I just wanted to say that your belief in my work
touched my soul. Though we're still climbing
toward our goals, know that I wish you the best.
May every reader be as strong of a leader as you.*

Stay upbeat and go get your dreams ...

I love you!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is hard to stay positive when things don't seem to be going your way. You don't have to tell me. All I've wanted to do since I was in the 7th grade was write for film and television. I'm many years from those days, and I still have not had my heart's desire realized. I am so close, and I hope it works out as I am daily trying to making my dream a reality. However, I get frustrated when doors don't open. When people who can, don't help. When it seems like it will never work out. Shoot, life gets tough.

Nonetheless, I have learned to be thankful for what I have. In the midst of writing this first book in the Cheer Drama series, I was blessed to get another deal for another series. I also received a contract to be the co-editor of a new bible. Even though I don't have a deal yet, one of my scripts is in the hands of a major studio. I know those great opportunities only came my way because I stayed upbeat. Point to you, reader, don't waste time whining. Forge ahead and before you know it, all will work out the way it is supposed to.

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Here is a big thank you to the ones who are helping me stay pumped up and productive.

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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.”

I had done too much work with Blake since freshman year—to get him to be the right boyfriend—for some girl to come along junior year and think she was going to take him. It was not going to happen.

“Okay, you need to handle that,” Eva said. “Because when you let go of the dog leash, they run all over the place. Chain him back up, girl.”

“For real, or put him on the phone; I’ll give him an earful. He knows he wrong for that, being all up in the mall flirting with some other girl,” Hallie said.

I hung up the phone and went over to the two of them. I wasn’t imagining everything I had seen from a distance. The two of them were clearly into each other. And as much as I wanted to tell myself it was all her, Blake was acting like he didn’t have a girlfriend.

“Ugh,” I said, stepping between them. “Excuse me.”

Caught, my idiot boyfriend said, “Oh, oh, Charli. You know Jackie from school, right?”

“No, I’ve seen her, but I don’t know her. You don’t need to know her either.” I rolled my eyes at both of them.

“I have enough girlfriends, Blake,” Jackie said, licking her fingertip suggestively. “I want something else,” she said.

I snatched him away really fast. “Okay, so what’s *that* all about?”

“Nothing, you didn’t have to be all rude to the girl.”

“Whatever! She was rude to me. I know you’re not going to defend her. Blake, I’m with you at the mall, and this is how you act when you step away. How do you act when I’m not even around? Am I really the girl you want or what?”

Then I walked away. He came up behind me, put his arms around my waist, and said, “You know you the girl for me. You ain’t got to worry ’bout nobody.”

I took a deep breath and felt better after he reassured me. Thankfully we were good, but I knew I was going to have to do whatever was needed for things to stay that way.

I had been rambling on and on about Blake when I heard Eva say, “Like she thinks we’re supposed to sit here and listen to her talk about Blake all day.”

I said, “Sorry, Eva. I didn’t know coming to my girls for advice was selfish.”

“Ignore her,” Ella said, as she stroked my shoulder.

“I’m just saying,” Eva replied. “We already know he was checking out someone else, and that person was checking out him. But who was it? You said you thought you knew her. Does she go to our school? We can’t help you understand any of it and break it down unless you divulge all.”

Frustrated, I uttered, “A girl named Jackie. I think she’s on the dance team.”

“Jackie ... ooh Jackie?” Randal said, using her hands to make curvy body motions.

Reluctantly, I nodded. Hallie looked at Ella. Ella looked at Randal. Randal looked at Eva. And Eva looked at me like they all knew something I did not.

Eva just busted out and said, “Okay, words out ... she really likes Blake. Just so you know, we were hoping it was anybody but her.”

“What? What do you mean?” I asked in a desperate tone.

“Well, last year she was in my language arts class and so was Blake and ...”

“And what? You never told me anything about that,” I said

Nonchalantly, Eva said, “I didn’t think there was anything to tell. Guys are going to be guys.”

I stepped to Eva and said, “What do you mean? He’s my boyfriend, Eva! Darn, I thought you had my back.”

“I do, but I can’t tell your man what to do. If he’s looking at somebody else, and I brought that to you, you would just dismiss it. We been here and done that already, so don’t play. We already got into it in ninth grade about Blake. I tried to tell you then he was a player, and you didn’t listen. So, I mean, you know, don’t blame me.” Eva gave me a cold, coy grin.

Opening up her bedroom door and peeking out, Randal said, “You guys, calm down before my mom comes in here and wonders what in the world is going on.”

“Y’all need to get Charli up out of my face,” Eva said.

I thought back to ninth grade. She and I really did go at it about Blake. Every day she was telling me about this girl and that girl. When I talked to him about it, he told me what was really

up. Apparently, Eva tried to get with him, and then he chose me over her. She was salty. It had been two years since all that drama, and I really thought we were past that, but maybe deep down a part of her didn't care if Blake ditched me. My friendship with Eva was sometimey, and I just needed her to care.

"So what did Blake say when you confronted him for talking to jack-butt Jackie?" Hallie asked. Randal and Ella laughed at her shrewd choice of nickname.

"He told me it was nothing. He told me he didn't like her, and that I didn't have to worry."

Ella put her arm around me. "So what are you tripping about?" she asked.

"You're beautiful. He's crazy about you. He's probably the most popular guy in school, even as a junior. But still, everybody knows he's yours," Randal said.

"Yeah, don't let him see you sweat," Hallie said, smiling. I knew she wanted something, so I let her ramble on. "So now that you're feeling better, Miss Best Cheerleader in America, can you please help teach me some moves? All them three been doing is eating Randal's mom's food."

Eva added, “Whatever. We can’t help that she’s a caterer and kept asking us to sample.”

Shaking my head to try and get it together, I said, “You’re right. I need to get my mind off of Blake. Let’s go. Let’s do the cheer. Which one do you want to learn?”

Hallie jumped up and down. “Teach me ‘Who Dat?’”

“You ain’t said nothing but a word,” Eva said. Then she came over and stood beside me, and the two of us threw down—cheering squashed the drama.

Grooving, I chanted, “Who dat? Who dat? Who dat think they bad? Who dat? Who dat? We’re going to kick them in their ... Clap, clap, clap. Step up, step back, shake, shake, shake. Arms up, arms down, your fist all around and come by your waist. Clap, clap, clap. Kick ball change, step up—”

“Wait, wait, wait, I can’t,” Hallie said, cutting us off. “That’s too hard.”

Eva gave Hallie a stern glare. “Girl, you got to be able to step in and pick it up. We ain’t even doing the precision cheers. This is just *feel the beat* with a little soul. Come on now.”

Randal and Ella joined us, and then we started making up new steps. Eva followed me. I followed her. The four of us were jamming, but Hallie looked lost. Upset, she ran out of Randal's room.

"I got her, y'all," I said to my friends.

Hallie went into the bathroom. I did not like her to be down on herself. She could get this.

I knocked on the door. "It's me, Charli. Let me in, please."

"No, just go."

"Hallie, come on, girl. Let me in. Please, girl."

Finally, when she opened up the door, I said, "Talk to me. Why are you crying? You're on the squad. You'll get all this."

"I need to have it now. I don't want to be the laughing stock of the varsity cheerleading team. Word's out. The only reason I made it was because they needed to have an even number, and they didn't want to give it to another sophomore."

I said, "People are always making up stuff. I never heard that."

"Yes, you did, Charli. You just didn't want to hurt my feelings."

“Look,” I said, taking both of Hallie’s hands. “I’ll work with you day and night to make sure you learn all the cheers. I’ll stand beside you in practice. You have rhythm, and you have the biggest mouth out of anyone I know. Take that the right way. For cheerleading, it’s perfect. You just gotta project, be confident, get excited, and do the moves.”

“Yeah, but it’s like when you stand in front of me and teach me ... I get all the moves twisted and backwards, and I can’t do it.”

“Well, that’s all you had to say. If that’s more confusing, then I’m going to stand right beside you. Watch me. Who dat? And we step up. Who dat? And we step back. Who dat think they bad? And we shake our hips. Who dat? We put our arms down. Who dat? We put our arms up. Then we do the kick ball change as much as we can because we’re in the bathroom,” I said, as Hallie laughed. “We’re going to kick them in their ... turn and give three claps. That’s all it is, and you just do it faster. Let’s go.”

After about twenty times, Hallie had it. She gave me the biggest hug ever. She screamed. Randal’s mom came running down the hall.

The blue-eyed-blond Mrs. Raines said, “Is everything okay?”

Randal came running into the bathroom, “I told y’all not to jump and all that stuff when she’s baking. She gets freaked out,” Randal sighed. Poking her head out the door, she declared “Everything’s fine, Mom. We’re going back to my room.”

Randal shooed her mom down the hall. “You girls be careful,” Mrs. Raines said, looking glum.

Bragging on my girl, I said, “Do it, Hallie. Show them the cheer.”

“We know she doesn’t have it,” Eva said under her breath.

“Eva, goodness gracious, girl. Dang. Why do you have to be so negative?” I finally just said to her because I was tired of her always having something smart to say.

Classic Eva vented, “Cause Hallie wants to be a cheerleader so bad, but then she starts crying like a kindergartner when she can’t get the moves. We’re on varsity. Honestly, maybe she should have made JV, if anything. All of us were wondering why she made the team. Let’s just be honest.”

Tears started welling up in Hallie's eyes. I just looked at Eva and rolled mine. Eva needed to learn to hush up sometimes.

Believing in my girl, I said, "Don't even let her affect you. She doesn't speak for all of us. Do the doggone cheer. You have it. Do it!"

I started doing it when Hallie wouldn't. And just doing what I do, I didn't even realize Hallie joined in, and we were in unison throwing down.

Eva said, "My bad, girl. That's it. And you know I was teasing. I needed to motivate you to do the doggone thing."

I smiled at Eva like, *You got me again, dang it*. I couldn't figure her out, but under all the layers there was love in Eva's heart. We hugged.

"You know we pick captains tomorrow," Ella said. "And, Charli. It needs to be you."

"Like they're going to elect me captain. It's just five of us juniors, five sophomores, and ten seniors on this squad. No way they're going to choose me."

"Well, you're the best. You got what it takes. We're going to find a way to get you to be captain," Eva said, surprising me because she cared.

“You’re the best, and you got a way of pulling out the best in everybody. When the five of us put our minds to it, we can do it,” Hallie said.

“I just love y’all,” I said to them. “Drama and all.”

Eva winked, and then I thought, “Me, *captain*? ... That would be amazing.”

“Charli, do you need me to take you to practice, honey. I’m going that way,” my mother said, as I was about to head out the door.

However, Blake was honking. I could not keep him waiting. I certainly was not going to tell him to leave so she could take me.

“No, Mom. Blake’s here. Thanks though. Smooches!” I said, rushing out the door.

“Be—”

Before she could say careful, I was gone. I was not trying to be rude, but she was getting on my nerves. She had been telling my dad that I did not need to drive. She wanted me to wait until my senior year. He wanted to buy me a car. I needed a car, and I deserved one. If she was going to stand in the way of that, then I was going to hate on her a little bit.

“Hey, baby!” I said when I got into his car.

With a slight ‘tude, Blake said, “What took you so long? You know my dad is going to kill me if I’m late for practice.”

“I’m sorry,” I purred, still wanting a kiss.

Then his cell phone started vibrating. As soon as I grabbed it, he snatched it out of my hands.

“You know you don’t read my messages. Wassup with that?”

“What? You trying to hide something from me?” I asked, truly unsure.

Frowning, he sped down the street. “Why you always do that?”

“What?” I put on my seat belt.

“Starting beef with me. Shoot, I came all the way over here to pick you up so I could see my girl before practice. You know it’s going to be hot as heck out there. My dad’s going to run and work us hard. I’m just trying to chill and relax. You stressin’ a brother and stuff.”

At that point I looked out the window. Blake and I were growing apart, and there was nothing I could really do about it. As much as I wanted to make him happy, to say the right things so that our relationship stayed good, things kept

messing up. I really didn't know where we were headed. Particularly when his phone vibrated again, and he didn't answer it.

"We're probably going to have an extra long practice today, so don't wait around. Get a ride from one of your girls or something," he said when we got to the school parking lot.

"No problem," I said, as I got out of the car.

We were the Lockwood Lions. The purple and gold. This was supposed to be our year. Blake, the quarterback of the football team, doing his thing, running the ball in, throwing the long bombs that get caught for touchdowns, just being a stud. And me, his girl on the sideline, wowing the crowd with my moves, and making all girls in the stands wish they were in my shoes. But something wasn't right. And when the senior cheerleaders and their pack waved at my man and didn't even speak to me, and he got all goo-gooed like he was a baby, I knew there was trouble in paradise.

When some football players rolled up beside him, he tried to act like we were all cool.

"What, you not going to give me no love, no kiss, no smooch? Wassup, Charli?"

Trying to keep him whichever way I could, I went over to him and obliged his request. A few of the players gave him dap. He jogged off without even looking back at me. So caught up in being the man, he didn't even realize he was breaking my heart.

But then his cousin Brenton, a real sweetheart and way more laid back than show-off Blake, said, "Cheer up, Charli."

"I'm cool, Brenton. I'm not down."

"No smile on that cute face of yours. Something's up."

"No flirting with your cousin's girlfriend," I said.

"Maybe my cousin's girlfriend should want a real man versus a little boy who craves attention. But who am I to give advice, right? See you later."

My girls came out of nowhere. They were jammed in Hallie's ride, which was on its last legs but still kicking. "Ugh, did we just hear what we thought we heard?" Hallie said.

"Somebody likes you," Randal said.

"Nah, he was just being nice," I replied.

Coach Woods was standing by the door. "You girls better get in here. I know you're new to my

varsity squad, but I *will* make you run when you're late. I don't have time for prima donnas. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go."

"Dang, I didn't know we were joining the army," Eva said.

"Yeah, consider this boot camp," Coach Woods said, hearing her.

The rest of us just laughed. Coach Woods was really cute, fly actually. She made the boys' heads turn, and she was in her thirties or something. I know compared to my mom that wasn't old, but to us it was, and she was still holding it down. I hoped when I got older I would look like her. But she wasn't just one of them cute, ditsy ladies. Nah, she was smart—unlike our coach from last year who Eva walked all over. Eva made up stupid stories when she was late or missed practice, saying she was with this guy and that guy, and coach just believed whatever she said ... gullible. But it didn't look like Eva was going to get away with that stuff this year.

"Look who decided to join us," Whitney Alexander, the baddest girl in our school, said to us when we walked in.

Word was she was so bad when she was a freshman that she had all the senior girls hating her because she was holding down their men. She was also up for valedictorian, which was impressive to me. Anybody could look cute—perm, weave, wearing a flattering color, padded bra, stylish clothes, makeup, and the right shoes—and anybody’s head could turn, but not everybody could be a scholar. However, there was one characteristic Whitney had that I detested, disliked, and couldn’t stand. She was a snob, and she prided herself on it.

“Like you own this squad,” Eva said, trying her.

“For real,” Hallie said even louder.

“It must not be true because if I owned it, you wouldn’t be on it with your lack of skills,” Whitney said to Hallie.

“All right, girls, calm down. I don’t want to hear all that,” Coach Woods said immediately, spotting the mounting drama. “All you guys sit down right now.”

The sophomores sat with each other. Whitney had a select group of seniors with her, and some other seniors were clustered together. And

of course me and my girls were seated beside each other.

“I’m not having this cliquish squad,” Coach Woods said. “Yeah, it’s great and fun, and we cheer for the Lions on Friday night. But our ultimate goal is to be state cheerleading champs for Class 5A. Everybody on this squad except one has a back handspring. Most of you guys have higher skills than that, but whatever area you’re weak in, you need to work on it,” she continued. “You’re on the squad because I knew you could do it. Do not slack up on me, and do not give each other drama! We must be a team, and every team needs leadership. Right now we’re going to vote for captain, so at this time I want to take nominations.”

Whitney jumped up. “I nominate myself, Whitney Tia Alexander.”

Coach looked unimpressed. “Is there anybody else?”

No one said a word. I wanted it, but I didn’t feel like nominating myself. Because I thought I could do it, didn’t mean I really could. This was going to be my first year on the varsity squad. Although I have been a competition cheerleader