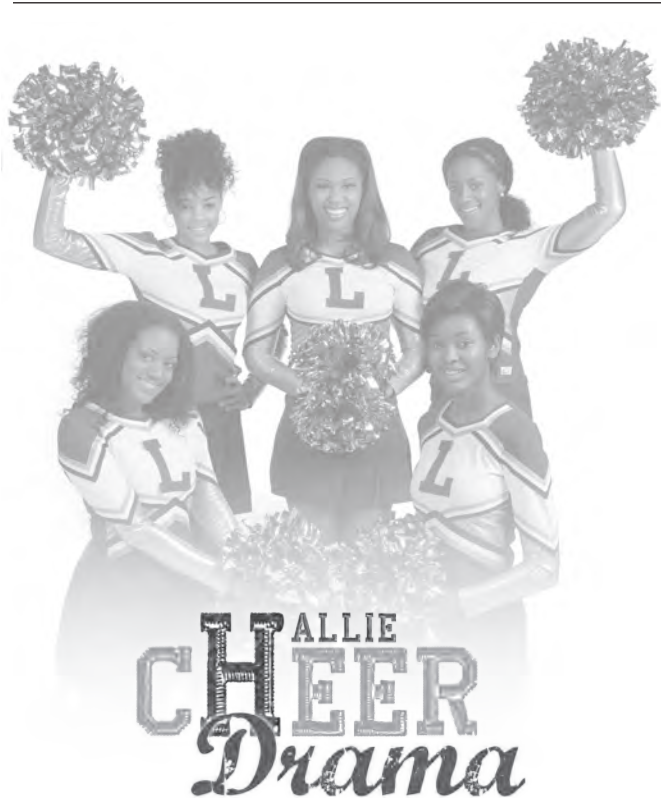




The Lockwood High cheer squad has it *all*—sass, looks, and all the right moves. But everything isn't always as perfect as it seems. Because where there's cheer, there's drama. And then there's the ballers—hot, tough, and on point. But what's going to win out—life's pressures or their NFL dreams?



Hallie Ray is jealous of her BFFs.
And sometimes jealousy can ruin everything ...

CHAPTER 1

Looking In

Have you ever felt like your world was perfect? Like it could not get any better? Like you were right where you needed to be, and you hoped nothing would change? You know that feeling of excitement when your heart starts racing and your insides get all gushy because you can't even believe you're experiencing sheer happiness? For some the excitement might come from getting straight As. Others might get a thrill behind the wheel of a new car. Some hearts might race in the arms of a new boyfriend. Well, for me it was being a cheerleader.

Yep, I had longed to sport the precious white uniform with purple and gold accents. I had dreamed of becoming a cheerleader and yelling on the sidelines for

my school for years. I had no words to describe what it felt like living my dream.

We cheered, “Go Lions! Go Lions! Beat the Bulldogs! Beat the Bulldogs! Come on, you can do it! Let’s go, put your mind to it! Go Lions! Go Lions! Beat the Bulldogs! Beat the Bulldogs! Yay!”

“Hallie Ray, you got this, girl!” Charli came over to me and said. She gave me a big hug between cheers to motivate me.

Charli Black was one of my best friends and the team captain. When Charli tells you you’re good, well, that’s major. She was the best cheerleader I knew. I mean, if you looked up the definition of cheerleader in the dictionary, her picture would be right there.

“You think I did okay?” I said to her. I was anxious to do a super job.

“Don’t get that head all blown up,” said feisty Eva. She was my one girlfriend who had no problem speaking out without thinking first. “Just playing. You know you’re showing out. Don’t slack in the second half.”

Eva was a sassy something, but I loved the fact that she said what was in her heart and

on her mind. She never tried to sugarcoat her opinion or make the medicine of her words go down easier. She just said whatever came to her. You had to deal with it. Even though her coarse joking got on my nerves sometimes, I really appreciated that she thought I was doing well.

Eva had a twin sister, Ella, who was also on the cheerleading squad. Though they looked exactly alike, their personalities were completely different. Ella was a sweetheart. Though she also said what she felt, she took time making sure that she never hurt anyone's feelings. She really cared about pleasing everyone, whereas her sister couldn't care less if she didn't please a soul.

The last of our crew was Randal. She simply gave me a high-five. She was really shy, but when it was time to cheer, she turned on the magic.

We were all juniors at Lockwood High School, and at this very moment we were performing at our first home football game. Our team was supposed to be dynamic, and as I looked up at the probably ten thousand fans at our sold-out game, I felt pressured to hold my own.

I went up to Charli and said, "Could you please just call the cheers we've been practicing a

lot and not the ones you just taught us this week? Please, because I don't want to look stupid."

"I got you, girl," she said to me, as she went on to call out the next cheer.

Charli was on cloud nine. She had gone through a lot of boy drama. Blake Strong, the hottest stud in our school and the quarterback of the team, was her man for the last two years. However, he started tripping and ended up getting with this other girl who gave it up. It broke Charli's heart. She's so beautiful and sweet. Incredibly, Blake's cousin Brenton, who is also a football player, showed up to wipe away her tears.

If being a cheerleader was measured by the heart you had for the sport, then I would have all that I needed. However, that was not the case; you also needed skills. In addition to wanting it really bad, I had a big mouth. That was a good thing when it came to cheering. My problem was that my jumps were lousy. I also had difficulty remembering new cheers and dance routines. Worse than anything, I could not tumble at all.

It was halftime and the score was 14-0. Unfortunately, the score was not in our favor. The crowd booed the team when they went into the

locker room. Now it was time to go to the middle of the field and pump up the crowd. With our dance number, we did just that. We were not just a squad who cheered for the football team. No, we were competition cheerleaders too, getting ready to compete for the state championship.

When it was time to announce the individuals on our squad, I wanted to go run and hide. Everyone ran and performed two round-offs, a back handspring, and a tuck. Well, everyone but me. I could barely do a cartwheel much less any major tumbling.

There were twenty girls on our team and watching one after the other after the other tumble on the turf, I was embarrassed. I wished I had their skills. I wished I had their poise. I wished I could do what they could do, but I could not. When my name was called, I did a pitiful cartwheel.

I heard someone out in the crowd yell, "Flip!"

I dashed off the field. There were still a couple more cheers that we were going to do, but I fled. I saw our cheer coach, Coach Woods, give me an unhappy glare. I defied that hard look and went over to the concession stand to get

away from the feelings of inadequacy. I bumped into my father.

“You did good, girl. Why did you leave the field? The other cheerleaders aren’t finished,” he remarked.

I wanted to say, “Isn’t it obvious, Dad? I really don’t have what it takes to be a level four cheerleader.” Level four was reserved for a cheerleader with an amazing tumbling ability that I just did not have.

“Well, are you going to spend the night at Charli’s?” he asked. I nodded yes. “All right, well, I’m going to go on home. I just wanted to come out and see my baby girl perform at her first game. You’re amazing. No need to rush home tomorrow. Just be smart. Again, baby girl, great job.”

I knew he was supposed to say that. I let him kiss my forehead, slip a few dollars in my hand, and feel proud. How the day went from my happiest moment to my most embarrassing one, I will never know. But it happened, and I was dejected. The last thing I wanted to do was get back out on the field and cheer.

I was hungry, so I took the money my dad gave me and stayed in line to get some fries. I

didn't want to eat too much and get sick, but since I was not bouncing and flipping all over the place, what difference would it make?

Then a masculine voice that I did not recognize said from behind me, "You really shouldn't be so hard on yourself. They're not doing anything you can't do."

I turned around and my eyes met a guy I had never seen before. My high school was pretty big, but this guy was cute enough that he should have stood out in the crowd. He gave a whole new meaning to the term tall, black, and handsome. His chocolate skin was smooth like a Hershey bar, and he had muscles that I wanted to touch. He looked so built that it seemed like he should be out there on the football field. I quickly turned around, trying to gain my composure.

I knew deep in my soul that I was a talk person. I was taking this test with my friends a few days ago out of a book called *The Five Love Languages of Friendship*, and I realized that I was what the book described as "words of affirmation." That meant words made me feel love, but words could also dramatically tear me down.

Hearing this guy tell me that I could do it was super special and lifted me somewhat. Though he did not know me, he told me what my heart longed to hear. It made me smile, but when I turned back to face him, he was gone.

Did I imagine him? Did I want to hear someone tell me I could do the impossible? After scouting the crowd, looking all over for him, and being unsuccessful, I realized I was dreaming. I needed to wake up because halftime was over and Charli was calling. Whether I liked it or not, I had to cheer.

Strolling into the after party with my girls meant all eyes were on us. Though we were only juniors, we were mad popular. We were five varsity cheerleaders who hung out, and in more than one way, we were thicker than the juiciest steak. We got called meat and a whole bunch of other names when we passed by clusters of guys.

I did not realize my face was glum until Eva said, “Girl, don’t be frowning. Ain’t nobody going to ask you to dance looking all ugly and stuff. Smile, relax, work your body. Don’t let your body work against you. Loosen up.”



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?



Amir Knight has swag, guts, and pure ability.

But ballin' may not be the future

intended for him ...

CHAPTER 1

True Outsider

Amir, where the heck do you think you're going?" my father said angrily. I was just grabbing my keys and heading to work. Dang!

I was a month away from seventeen years old. I loved my pops, for real, but I was sick of him riding me like I was a donkey. I was not an ass. I did what I had to do. I took care of my responsibilities. I had a little side job so I would not have to get spending money from him. Why did he care where I was going? He was a surgeon. He was always gone.

Being a little truthful and a lot sarcastic I said, "What is it now: my room, the dishes, the trash? Done, done, and done. I'm going to work, Dad, that's all."

“Anna, you better do something with this boy because he’s getting way too mouthy and trying me way too much.”

“Amir, respect your father, honey,” my mom said. She never defended me.

I did not hate him, but I wondered what was up his butt because he treated me like dirt. I liked athletics more than academics, and I figured that was his problem. I did not look like him. I did not act like him. I certainly did not think like him. Picture a nerdy black man with glasses, dressed in khakis, a white shirt, and loafers. That was him. I had muscles and swag.

It might have taken me longer than what came to him naturally when it came to the books, but I buckled down and had a 3.75 GPA. So what was his problem? Why was he always riding me? Why did he push me all the time? He wanted my respect, but he had not respected me for most of my life.

Kids I hung around always said they envied what I had—a dad who was a doctor, a dad who was involved in my life, and a dad who lived in my same home. That was just it. The structure I lived in had not much to it. There was some

Sheetrock with some bricks on the outside. However, there certainly was not much love shared on the inside.

As for dreams and goals and stuff that I was supposed to aspire to, I had not really given it much thought. Yeah, I was a junior in high school, and I was almost out of my parents' door. But when I was in middle school, my dad laughed at everything I wanted to be and told me to choose something else. I got tired of trying to come up with something that interested me and that my father didn't think was pointless. He said everything I was looking into did not have an opportunity to bring in six figures. I was a rapper in my elementary school talent show and won. Last time I looked, Jay-Z, Diddy, Kanye West, and other players in the game were holding down big loot. My dad said over his dead body would I get out on stage and make money as a stupid entertainer. Then in the seventh grade, when I got all the awards in football, I wanted to be a professional baller, but of course my father protested. He felt that men banging their heads around was beneath his son's dignity. Then I started looking at more practical jobs, like being

a dentist or a veterinarian, but he still thought that paled in comparison to being a surgeon.

I've never been able to measure up. Somewhere between the eighth and ninth grade, I stopped putting myself on his scale. Our relationship was so strained: like a wet paper towel holding a bunch of raw potatoes. Any moment it was going to bust.

"What's going on with you, Amir? You giving me attitude? You're a big boy, but you are not grown. Do I need to remind you of that?" my dad got in my face and asked.

I picked up my left hand to look at my watch, but my dad swatted my hand down real hard. Instinctively, I flexed my muscles and came at him. I was almost six foot one, and he was barely five foot nine. He was the parent, but his body made him look like a kid.

"Honey, just let the boy go on. You're on call tonight, and you might have to go back to the hospital. No stress," my mom said, giving my dad wise advice. "Amir, get on out of here."

"Working at a gym," my dad snorted. "I can get him a job as an orderly at the hospital. At least he'd be around the environment he needs

in order to learn something. He needs all the extra help that he can get with his intellect,” my dad said, throwing the only jab he could.

I threw my hands up at that moment, walked out the door, and slammed it shut. I did not care if he came out and told me to never come back. It did not matter because for some reason it felt like I did not belong there anyway. What was the good in having a dad who every day made you feel like you were inadequate compared to him? I knew fathers were supposed to have high expectations, but weren't they supposed to love you unconditionally? Goodness gracious, if I would have been born with cerebral palsy or Down syndrome, he would not have been able to take it even though he was a doctor.

When I got to the gym, I was fifteen minutes late. I went to my locker to put up my stuff. I knew I had a class that had already begun, but it was what it was, and I was here now.

“No need to change,” said Mr. Wan. He was the small but super strong owner of Cheertowne, the gym where I worked.

“I'm ready, sir. I was just gonna put away my things. I don't have to change, and I'm sorry

for being late,” I added. Mr. Wan still looked annoyed.

“Sorry is not gonna cut it this time, young man. Head out the door, I don’t need you,” Mr. Wan said.

Mr. Wan was Asian, and I did not know if he was no nonsense because of his culture, or if he felt the pressure of running a business in a down economy. For years Cheertowne had been known as the gym that trained the best competition squads in the metro Atlanta area, but due to the recession, people could not afford to pay three grand a year for their child to cheer. Many still wanted to come for lessons so when they were finally able to cheer for their school, they would also be able to tumble.

I could get that Mr. Wan had to be tough, but I was not the kind of guy to plead for anything. I was not so cool that I thought I was all that. However, I was not weak either.

“Can I talk to you, sir?” I said in a truly respectful way.

“In my office ... in my office now,” he huffed.

Seeing his impatience, I got to the point quickly. “I apologize for being late.”

“You have a cell, but you no call. Young people call and text for everything else. You late for work, and you no call,” Mr. Wan vented.

Coming clean I said, “Sir, it was my dad.”

“Always your dad. Always him not wanting you to be here. He came to my gym angry a couple of times. Maybe you not work here, and Dad won’t blow up. I can’t let your problem be my problem, Amir. Son, you are growing up, and you must understand you have to handle business.”

“You’re right, sir,” I said to him, owning up to my mistakes.

I knew my dad tripped sometimes. I knew he was home today. I should’ve planned extra time for him to give me strife.

“But look out your window,” I said. We looked through the glass onto the gym floor. “Look at all those little kids. They aren’t learning a thing because their favorite coach isn’t out there with them. They look bored. They look like they might quit and take their money with them. You need to keep me here. Let me coach. Let me teach. Let me stay.”

I guess when he saw what I was talking about he said, “One more time.”

I reached out my hand to give him dap, but he didn't know what to do with that.

I couldn't really explain why I liked tumbling. My mom put me in gymnastics after watching the Olympics one year. She felt like I could get a gold medal. My dad approved of the Olympics because it was an elite-type pursuit. I went to the gym, and the tumbling stuff came naturally. To this day, I find it a thrill to help others do spirals and aerials.

Before I could get out there, Lexus, this girl who I used to really kick it with and who worked at the gym, came up to me. "Where have you been?" she whined.

I looked at her like she was insane. What business was it of hers? She was acting way too over the top. It was like she had no life other than me. She'd call me every five minutes, and then she even got a job at the gym to be closer to me. This girl needed to move on.

It started when I met up with her at the movies a few months back. Our hormones started rising, and we made each other feel good. I told her I did not want anything serious, and at first

she said she could handle it. But she couldn't. She always wanted more attention from me. I tried breaking up with her three times before school started, but she just wasn't leaving me alone. I wanted to be the one to do the chasing, and I definitely didn't need a girl who wouldn't cut a brother a break.

Thankfully, another co-worker, Carlen, who also went to my high school, saw that I was hemmed up. I gave him a signal. He picked up on it and called me over to my class.

When I walked away, Lexus said, "So it's like that? You just gonna use me up and throw me out with the trash?"

I kept walking. There was no need for me to respond. I definitely did not want her to feel like garbage, but we had no connection. The crazy chick then ran up to me and slapped me hard.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she cried when I looked at her in a disappointed way.

"These kids in the gym did not see what you did. You better hope Mr. Wan didn't either, or you might lose your job. I was never trying to hurt you, and I never led you on."

She ran out of the gym, and I ran over to the kids. I hoped we stayed in opposite corners because things could only get worse between us.

“Man, these cats ain’t gonna go to state,” Carlen muttered. We were in the stands waiting for the opening kickoff of the Lockwood Lions. Lexus had tagged along.

“Yeah, ’cause you aren’t on the team, right?” I teased and jabbed him lightly on the arm.

“You should be out there,” he said, trying to hit me below the belt since he knew I had skills from our days in the little league football.

Carlen got me. I had no words to defend why I was not out there. I was frustrated just being a spectator because I knew I had more athletic ability than most of the boys out on the field. I actually got a little salty with him. I was angry he called me out. Even with a crowded stadium full of packed fans, I wanted to stay to myself.

What was really going on? What was keeping me from going after what I really wanted? Did I really want to play ball?

I noticed Lexus sliding closer and closer to me. I did not want to come to the game with her,