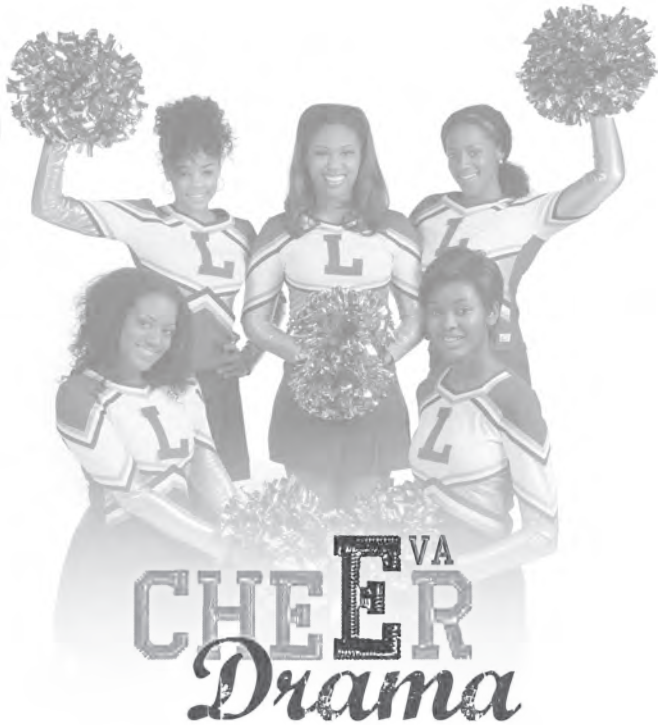




The Lockwood High cheer squad has it *all*—sass, looks, and all the right moves. But everything isn't always as perfect as it seems. Because where there's cheer, there's drama. And then there are the ballers—hot, tough, and on point. But what's going to win out—life's pressures or their NFL dreams?



Eva Blount is a salty girl
with a bad rep and attitude to spare.
Will one bad night ruin her life forever?

CHAPTER 1

Lower Standards

Eva, you did so good, girl,” my mom cheered. We had just placed second out of eight teams in our cheerleading competition.

My father came to my other side, kissed my cheek, and said, “Yeah, Eva, you were amazing.”

“Eva, you were the best!” my twin sister, Ella, screamed.

Having the three of them say something great about me at the same moment made me feel better than I had felt in a long time. See, I was known as take-no-prisoners Eva Blount, a salty, sassy, and forward junior at Lockwood High School. Everyone knew not to mess with me. I spoke my mind. I did my thing. I held my own.

At that moment, I was feeling tough, but I realized there were things in my life that truly mattered to me. One thing high on the list was my family. We had been estranged for years. Though my dad lived with us until I was five, he and my mother were never married. As a little girl, I did not know why he left us, and now that I am practically a woman, I realize he was trapped by my mom early on.

He came to Clark Atlanta University to get an education. Like most young men, he was also looking for a good time. He found that and more with my mom. She was looking for a meal ticket, and at the time he was perfect. They were both young, and the consequences of their affair were not just one baby but two. While he stuck around initially, trying to make life work, he wanted more than the projects could offer. As soon as we were not toddlers, he was out.

Like a fisherman throwing a line in the water looking for a catch, I said, "Let's all go get something to eat." They went for it. "Time to celebrate."

"Your dad probably has to get back to Samantha," my mom said, giving my dad an out.

“No, I can get something to eat. Let’s do it,” my dad replied, really making me happy.

Samantha was my dad’s pregnant wife-to-be. Supposedly, she was more my dad’s type than my mom: an educated woman with style. My mom had a little weight on her. I vowed to never let myself go like that because back in the day her body was slamming like mine. Now, while still attractive, she herself wanted to shed some pounds.

I told my folks I needed to go get my bag. My twin, Ella, came with me. We were thrilled at the thought of eating with both of our folks.

“I wanted to be out there with you guys so bad,” she said.

“Please, I was just glad you were here to watch it.”

“I gotta get better by regional and state,” Ella declared.

I defended, “Only if you’re stronger.”

“I go back to the doctor on Monday,” she said.

My sister gave me a hug with the arm that wasn’t bandaged up. A few days back, we were at a party after a football game, and a bullet grazed her arm. As horrible as that was, she

was very lucky. She instinctively pushed her boyfriend out of the way—dumbest crap in the world. Though Ella and I looked identical, we were total opposites in personality. In my opinion, she was a pushover. If she could please the world, she would.

I had backbone, and while my sister and a couple other of my close girlfriends thought they were all in love, I loved myself. I figured out a long time ago when I did not have my dad there to hold me through my nightmares that I was going to have to be there for me. Guys, in my opinion, were good for just a few things: a free meal, some quick cash, and a good feeling. They liked my body, wanted to hit it and be gone. If I liked them, two could play at that game.

Later at dinner, we were actually having a good time. Realizing that life was precious and that we were blessed to have Ella still alive softened all our hearts.

Without thinking about distractions, a distraction came. My dad's cell phone vibrated. He was so in to talking to my mom that he was not paying attention. I just picked it up and noticed it was Samantha.

“When are you coming home?” the text read. Instinctively, I typed, “Out with my family, not sure.”

Quickly she texted back, “What do you mean, your family???”

Before anyone noticed, I texted back, “Evan and our unborn child are not my only kids. I’ll be there when I get there.”

I smiled slyly as I erased the series of texts. I wondered how mad Samantha probably was as she read each word. She was *not* going to ruin my family dinner. Ha!

My dad could do better than Samantha. She might have a nice career and look all cute and stuff, but she was a selfish witch. My dad wanted to try to get to know us. At first I did not want to bond, but my sister did. She actually moved in with them. Samantha was threatened so much that she told my sister it would be better if she moved out, and sweet little Ella complied.

When I saw my dad touch my mom’s hand, I gasped. I know it probably didn’t mean anything, but it could. Samantha just had to be dealt with.

I said, “Hey, Dad, you talked about wanting to get to know me some. This weekend I know

Mom wants Ella to rest up. Maybe I could get away and come and hang out with you guys. Would that be okay?"

He turned and looked at me and said, "Eva, you want to hang out with me? Spend some time with Evan and Samantha? Really?"

The way he was saying it was like he thought I detested his other family. Actually, I did. They were a bother to me, but I had a plan.

So I put on a smiling face and said, "Yeah, I want to come."

"That would be great," he said. I could not stop smiling.

Later, he took me by my mom's to get my overnight bag. Ella looked like she did not want me to go. My mom looked like she wanted me to be tough since I was feisty, like her.

My mom hugged me tight and said, "Please, don't get into it with that lady. I know she can't push you around like she does Ella, but don't start World War III."

"I gotcha, Mom. I can handle this."

As soon as we stepped into my dad's place, Samantha looked furious. But, I knew how to play her game. The key was, I knew how to play *her*.

“Samantha, hey, thanks for letting me come over,” I crowed.

She was the one making my dad mad. Watching her frowning and rolling her eyes had me laughing on the inside. Yup, I had his wife-to-be just the way I wanted her. She made Ella look like the bad one. Now she had met her match.

While the two of them argued, my little brother tugged on my jacket. He was so cute, but he was the enemy. I could not like him. I wanted my dad back. He called me Ella.

“No, Evan, I’m Eva.”

“Ella, Ella,” he repeated.

As much as I did not want to like the little boy, hating that my dad had another kid, I was not a bad person. So I picked him up and explained that I was his other big sister. I guess I did not twirl him around the way Ella did because he looked a little disappointed. That was fine with me because I was not trying to baby-sit.

Later that evening when my dad was putting Evan to sleep, I walked in on Samantha addressing some wedding invitations. She was too happy for my taste. I was the pin ready to burst her bubble.

I startled her when I said, “You might be wasting your time doing all that. Once my dad sees who you *really* are, all this wedding planning and marriage stuff is probably going to be over.”

“Why are you even here?” she stood up and said, looking like she could drop her baby any minute.

Messing with her, I re-quoted the text she thought was from my dad and said, “Evan and our unborn child are not my only kids.”

“You’re not planning to stay, are you?” Samantha asked, looking pretty desperate.

“If I do decide to, you’re not going to run me away like you did my sister.”

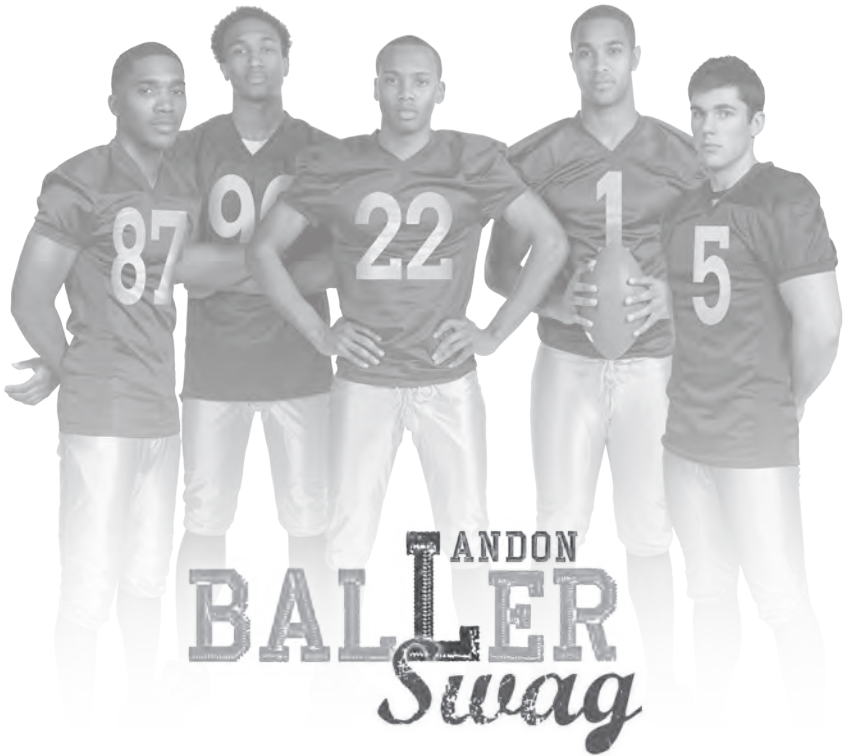
“I didn’t mean for it—”

“You know what? Just save it,” I said, cutting her off. “No need to pretend we like each other. No need to think we want the same things, and certainly no need for you to get it twisted. I am *not* Ella.”

I turned and walked away with her tongue. I knew how to deal with women like her. Heck, I was *one* of them. Now that I realized I loved



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Landon King has talent, smarts, and looks to spare, *so why does the star wide receiver feel the desperate need to fit in with gangbangers and lowlifes?*

CHAPTER 1

Remain True

Why do I have to take Logan to football practice?" I asked my father in an angry tone. "He's *your* son. Dang!"

"Boy, because I doggone said so. That's why you got a car, to help me and your mom out," my dad, the infamous Pastor Lawrence King, boldly said to me. "So slow your roll and quit being selfish. Logan looks up to you. Spend time with him."

Whatever he said was law. I understood he was the parent, but he never acted like it. As the Southeast's biggest mega-pastor with a growing congregation, he always claimed he had something to do for the Lord. It was not that I doubted him. I was certain that he was speaking at different

churches, meeting with publishers for his many inspirational books, working with a movie studio on an upcoming film, being with our choirs in the music studio to get ready for their upcoming album, and many other things. Oh yeah, he was busy. He was doing a ton of things, but he was *not* being a father.

It was almost the end of the football season, and my dad had not come to any of the Lockwood Lions' games. But his congregation would think he deserved an award for being the best parent of the year because he would talk about me in his sermons. What was hard about all of this was that I had to watch him do the same thing to my little brother, Logan. Logan was a fifth grader, excited to play little league football. My mom took him everywhere, but sometimes he wanted the males to go out there and support him. When that was the case, my dad passed the buck to me. Heck, I was more of a dad to Logan than my dad was, and that was just ridiculous.

I really was sick and tired of the big-time pastor hiding behind the cloth. "I got this to do for the Lord. I got that to do for God," he'd say over and over. I was so over his holier-than-thou

attitude. However, I knew I could not try my dad. I was set up pretty sweet. I was riding in a new, black Cadillac Escalade with fat rims and a tight sound system. I had a debit card with unlimited funds. On top of that, there was not a day that passed where my dad did not leave cash on my dresser. I always sported the latest cologne, kicks, and clothes, but what I really wanted was my parents.

Though my mom did way more for us than my dad, she could do lots more. She enjoyed being the first lady, and I could not blame her for sticking close to him, because over the years I'd grown up seeing many ladies do whatever they could to get their pastor to give them a little extra special prayer, if you know what I mean. With many people's marriages not making it, I did not want that to be the fate for my folks. So when they took trips here and there, part of me was happy she was with him. In those times, we had trusted church members who watched over us.

My dad's mom came around a lot too. She was the only one who could really get him straight. Last year she told me I needed to just tell him how much I wanted him to be more in my life. I

did what she said, but it didn't do any good; what I said went in one ear and out the other.

I pleaded with him to spend time with his boys. Showing me we weren't important, the next thing I knew he was dialing a number on his cell. Giving me a thin smile, my mom kissed me on the forehead. She looked me in the eye, and said, "Please, just take care of your brother for us. Get him to practice, stay there, get him something to eat after, and y'all come on back home. We'll be back later on."

"Yeah, whatever, Mom. Whatever y'all need me to do. Forget if I am tired from practice or have homework to do," I grumbled.

"Boy, please," my dad snapped. "All you gotta do is look at the book and you know the material. You're so smart, and the way that y'all are winning, I know Coach Strong isn't working you boys too hard. I'm coming to your game Friday."

I chuckled at his comment. I knew it would be snowing in Georgia in July before he took time to come to Lockwood's game. However, he seemed to feel good saying it, so I waved at them both as they headed out the door and waited for Logan to come so we could leave.

When I got into the car with my brother, I realized he was really growing up. He had always been the little baby of the family. All the church members would pass him around, talking about how cute he was. There he sat, looking back at me like a little man.

Logan said, “You didn’t want to hang out with me, huh?”

“Huh?” I questioned.

He wanted to have big-boy talk. I did not know if I was ready for that. Logan wasn’t looking away, though. He wanted the truth. Obviously, he’d overheard.

“Nah, it’s not that I didn’t want to hang with you; it’s just that uh—”

“Don’t try to clean it up. You ain’t gotta lie to me. I know you got a life. Shoot, in my eyes you’re more important than Dad. You the man in high school. That’s all my friends talk about; the Lions football team and y’all winning the state championship. I just really wanted you to come to practice so you can see I got skills too.”

“Okay,” I thought, “who are you, and what have you done with my corny brother?” The dude had turned cool overnight. At that moment, I felt

really bad for wanting to push him off. Of all the folks in his life, he wanted to hang with me. He was excited about me. He wanted to show me he could ball.

“I owe you an apology, Logan,” I confessed.

“You’re saying sorry to me? Why?”

“For being too busy. You are my brother. I don’t want you to think that you’re a burden.”

“Yeah, but I heard what you said to Mama and ’nem.”

“Mama and ’nem? When you talking like this? When’d you become so cool?” I wondered out loud. Then I lightly shoved him in the arm.

“I’ve been watching you. I see you, Leo, and Blake hanging. I wanted to be like y’all for a long time. I’m tryna get my man card and hold it down like y’all.”

“Boy, you ain’t even out of elementary school,” I said, popping him in the back of his head. “You better get your safety patrol belt.”

“Ha-ha-ha, Landon got jokes,” Logan stated sarcastically.

“Wow, Logan, you’re growing up for real.”

“Yep, so I know you got better stuff to do than hang with me at football practice. It’s cool if you

just want to drop me off and come back and get me. We'll be out here for an hour and a half."

Knowing that I wanted to invest in Mini-Me, I said, "No, I'm staying. I'll be sitting in the bleachers, watching. You talking junk and saying you got skills, so I wanna see."

"That's what's up," my brother declared, putting his fist out for me to hit it, and when I did, he hit mine.

Logan grabbed his helmet and jogged onto the field with his peers. Though he might have acted like he was a big boy, seeing all the youngsters out there was very comical. He was still very young and so impressionable.

He was doing his thing. My brother was leading the way. The team was following his lead with warm ups. He really was following in my footsteps. He took the position on the far right as a wide receiver. I did not even know that. I thought he was playing quarterback. Then when he took off, he was super fast. Poor little corner could not even cover him.

I was proud, but still a little salty knowing if my dad could see this, he would be excited too. At that moment, I knew I was going to have to

make sure that my brother was there to watch me play. I did not realize that he was watching me and my boys. If I was his role model, I was going to take the job seriously.

With that in mind, I looked around the park and saw that there were a few jokers older than me watching the youngsters like they were trying to get in their ear. They seemed like they wanted to get them to sell dope and stuff. That was not going to be the case with Logan; he was already confident, and he was a King. But I still had to make sure nobody led him astray.

When Coach Brown called them all in to say they did a good job in practice, I walked over and started talking to the other parents who knew I played ball at Lockwood High. I guess my letterman's jacket was a dead giveaway.

I really appreciated that they were excited our team was doing so well. One lady, who was the mother of the quarterback, said, "I know Logan has got to be excited that he's got his big brother out here. He's never had his family members come to practice; this is great."

That got me down. That was going to change. It was not going to be like that anymore. However,

when I looked up and saw Logan's coach introducing a man who looked familiar, my heart stopped.

Coach Brown said, "This is Mr. Gunn. He used to coach football here some years ago, and he has now moved back to the area. He's going to be assisting me here this year. His team won a lot of tournaments, and I'm blessed to have him on the staff."

Coach Gunn waved, looked at my brother, extended his hand, and pulled my brother to him. At that moment, something inside of me snapped. I could not pretend or suppress past memories any more. That was the man who molested me, and he was not going to do the same to my little brother.

As hard as I tried to suppress the truth of what happened to me in fifth grade, now that I had come face to face with Mr. Gunn again, I was unable to do so. I lay in my bed with night sweats. Tossing and turning, I tried to tell myself what happened to me was not real. It was real, though. A man who was in a position to oversee me, to be a mentor to me, to help me, to be there for me ... took advantage of me.

I wanted to go and wake my brother up and ask him questions. Has anybody ever touched him inappropriately? Had he ever had scary sessions in the field house? Did he ever take showers with grown-ups? Did horseplay ever lead to acts of abuse?

I did not do that for two reasons: one, because it was two in the morning; and two, because I felt like I would have known if something crazy had happened to Logan. When life changed for me back then, I became withdrawn. I was angry. I was drastically different. He was such a happy kid. I could not let him go back to practice with that Coach Gunn being around. I could not let what happened to me happen to my brother, or any other kid for that matter.

Here in the silent house, alone in my room, I remembered everything clearly. After winning our last game of the season, Coach Gunn was supposed to take me home. It rained that day, and we were filthy. When everyone else was gone, he told me I was the hero, and I deserved a surprise. However, he said before he could take me anywhere special, we needed to clean up. He turned on the water and told me to hop in the shower