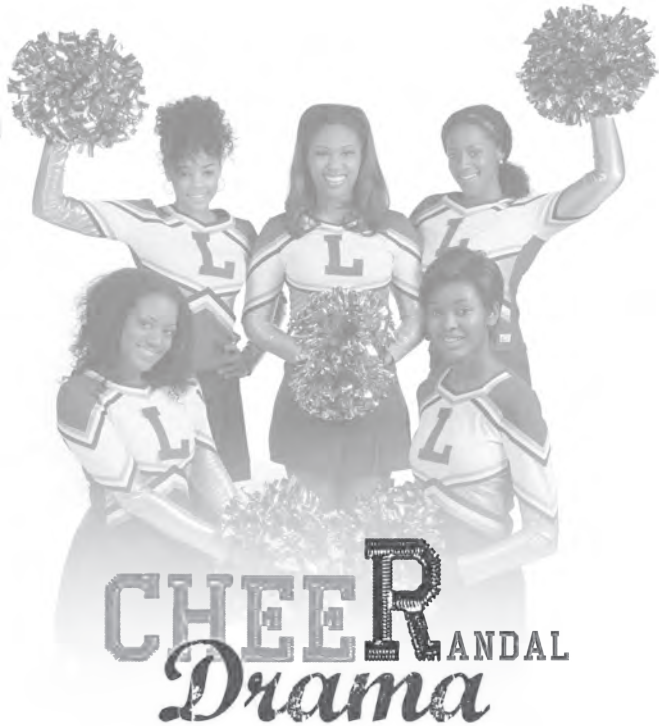




The Lockwood High cheer squad has it *all*—sass, looks, and all the right moves. But everything isn't always as perfect as it seems. Because where there's cheer, there's drama. And then there are the ballers—hot, tough, and on point. But what's going to win out—life's pressures or their NFL dreams?



Randal Raines might be the shyest girl on the squad, but the guys think she is fly ...
What will happen when she risks it all?

CHAPTER 1

Move Closer

I was truly happy for my girlfriend Eva Blount when she walked out on the field as the eleventh-grade homecoming attendant. Eva was the exact opposite of me. She was boisterous and bold. I was subdued and shy.

I always thought of Eva as a remarkable young woman. She really deserved the honor to offset all that she had just gone through. She was raped and her assaulter made a video that was seen by everyone we knew.

Our football team was winning for the ninth time in a row. As a cheerleader, I should have been psyched, pumped, or thrilled. However, I went through the motions and was a bit melancholy. I

had not gone through anything severe like Eva. I had not caught my dad cheating on my mom like Charli. I did not get shot like Ella. My mother did not need to go into rehab like Hallie's. Yeah, my girls had serious issues, but they all seemed very giddy.

All my girls had a man to escort them to the homecoming dance. Though Charli had been dumped by our starting quarterback, Blake Strong, she had a new boyfriend, his cousin Brenton. Everyone knew Blake wanted her back, and she was even entertaining it. But Charli's date to homecoming was Brenton. Hallie had Amir Knight, a guy who'd watched her from afar and wanted her desperately. So Hallie had a date. Ella fell for Leo Steele and made it her personal mission to help him when he was homeless. While I still think he is having a hard time, his days are brighter because he knows he has a girlfriend who cares. So there was Ella's date. Even Eva, who never wanted to settle down, in my opinion, had found her soul mate, Landon King. Landon was our star wide receiver, who had a similar scandal rock his world. The news hit around the same time as Eva's. Landon had

been molested as a kid, and the man who did it returned to wreak more havoc. Thankfully, Landon faced his demons, and the molester was probably going to spend decades in prison. Yeah, Eva and Landon were both survivors. As their friendship grew, he asked her out to the homecoming dance a few days ago.

Everyone had someone but me. While that in and of itself made me feel horrible, watching the four of them talk about what was to come made me realize how different I was from them. I felt that way at my old school. I was biracial. My mother was white. My dad was black. At my old school, the majority of kids were white, and I didn't think I fit in. I always heard if you had a drop of chocolate in you, you were considered black. When my dad gave me the opportunity to come to this new school, which was the opposite, my mom was not for it but she reluctantly agreed.

For the last few years, the five of us girls have been inseparable. However, my girls were always the ones doing the talking. Words didn't come to me naturally, but it was probably because I just did not have my own voice yet. I had been in school with mostly white folks all my

life. While I didn't fit in there, here I did not feel black either. I did not feel as authentic as them. I know it was crazy, but it was how I felt.

I am sure if you talked to different mixed people, they could all give you different explanations about who they thought they were. Some would say they were white. Some would say they were black. Some would say they truly were mixed. Some would say they were neither. Some would be offended you asked. Some would avoid the question. Those like me wished they had an answer.

I wanted to be excited for my friends. That was who I was. I was never a jealous person. I did envy the fact that they were confident in their own skin. I felt like my body was not really mine. If I looked in the mirror, I felt like I did not know where I belonged. I was a junior in high school for goodness' sake. It was time for me to step up, be happy, and get excited about my future. The problem was that I never really had a past to hold on to. The holidays were coming up, and my parents were arguing where we were going to spend them. Even though we were in the twenty-first century, it seemed ludicrous

to me that my grandparents were still not fine with their union. Who shared the brunt of my folks' anguish? Their offspring—me.

I was actually surprised when Eva came over to me and said, “Look, I don’t have to go to this dance. Landon just asked me at the last minute, but you and I can hang out. You know this getting dressed-up stuff ... I could really leave it.”

“No, you deserve to be Cinderella. Out of the wicked stuff that has happened to you, I would never take this moment away. Mr. King is real excited. He gave you the ball after making a touchdown tonight, didn’t he? Come on, Eva, Landon likes you. It’s so obvious.”

“Please, Landon King is just like his boy, Leo Steele, always trying to have all the women. He can’t settle down.”

“Ella tamed Leo.”

“Well, I’m nobody’s ringmaster and this isn’t the circus. He’s definitely not going to make a fool out of me. I’m sure I’m going to get certain looks just because he’s taking me to the dance. You know how the chicks in this school are about these ballers.”

“Yeah, particularly since they’ve been winning,” I said, agreeing to the drama we’d been through this year with girls. “But seriously, I love you for caring. I just got a lot of stuff on my mind. My parents are here, and I’m going to go with them. You guys have a good time.”

“I thought you were going to come with us,” Hallie said loudly when she heard I was jetting. “You were going to help us get dressed. Just because you’re not going doesn’t mean—”

“Shhh!” Eva said to her. “She doesn’t want the whole world knowing her business.”

The four of them were happy, and I did not want them at it over me. I quickly gave them all hugs.

I said, “Calm down. Y’all have fun. And I don’t want to hear about no cheer drama.”

I went from one arguing group to another. As I got in the car, I heard my parents going at it. I was baffled, so I listened in to make out their beef.

“I just don’t understand why you wanted her to come to this school,” my mom whined. “These kids are running around here like animals. People fighting. Gang kids talking about

shooting. Shucks, I had to watch my purse because this one boy looked like he was going to grab it,” she vented.

“And where is all of this coming from, Dana?” my dad asked. “You’re acting like you have issues with black people now. It’s just a high school game, homecoming at that. A lot of alumni came back, the band was hyped, and fans were drinking, so they got a little loud. We can’t let our children have a problem with black people.”

“I know,” my mom agreed. “I’m sensitive. My daughter is one. My son in college is one, and my husband is one.”

Hot, I cut in and said, “So I’m not white?”

“Yes, you’re white, honey, but you’re black too. See, Kenny, look at what you’re doing. You’re getting her all upset.”

“She ain’t upset with me,” my dad shouted.

Not needing anyone to speak for me, I said, “I’m not upset at anyone, Mom. I’m just asking. Are you saying I’m not white even in your eyes?”

“Where is this coming from, Randal?” my dad asked in an upset tone.

“Never mind, Dad,” I said quickly, shutting down.

My dad softened. “Pumpkin, did someone ask you something like that today? You have a problem being black?”

“So you don’t think I’m white either,” I said, shaking.

“You’re not answering the question.”

“Neither are you,” I said back to him, actually surprised I had gumption.

My parents grumbled at my response. They started talking to one another. I was in a daze.

When one of them called my name, I said, “I’m sorry, guys, I just have a headache. Let’s just not talk on the way home.”

They obliged my request. I saw my parents looking at each other, worried that their daughter was going through a serious identity crisis. No one wanted to tell me what they thought I really was. Maybe I needed to go deeper and find out what I wanted to be. Did I need to let others define me? I surely was not lying. I just wanted to be normal, but I felt so far from that.

“Oh my goodness, last night was the best night of my life,” Ella said with sheer excitement. Anyone could see her joy.



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ER Stone has all the scouts jocking him.

*It's when ER loses it all that he realizes
he wants it all.*

CHAPTER 1

Heated Exchange

Boom! Clash! Bang! I turned quickly as I heard someone hitting and kicking one of the gym locker doors. Turns out it was mine. Then it was slammed shut.

Finally, I was eligible after transferring from Grovehill High School in East Cobb after the first game of the year to Lockwood High School. Tonight was going to be my time to shine, kick the ball through the uprights, get the field goal *and* the extra points. Whatever my team needed, I was ready to suit up and play. All I wanted to do was concentrate, listen to a little music, and loosen up,

but the former kicker, Brick Bailey, got in my face and wouldn't let me.

"Why are you doing that to my locker?" I snapped. "I'm real tired of people trying me."

I was the white dude at a black school. There were only a few white guys on the team. Most days someone at the school did not let me forget the color of my skin.

"Coach just told me I'm not playing. Said he's giving my spot to the cracker. I may have missed kicks, but I was getting it. Dang," Brick snarled, as if I was the one making the decisions.

I just threw my hands up in the air and stepped back. I didn't want no beef. Brick needed to take up his frustration with Coach. However, he didn't leave me alone. He stepped toward me.

Brick huffed, "Being the kicker is *my* job. We've won every game this season. I'm not gonna let you come in here and take it."

While I appreciated Brick knowing what he wanted in life, he really needed to look in the mirror and be objective. Coach Strong would not make me the starting kicker, after missing most of the season, if there wasn't a significant need for change. Our school was undefeated; that was

true, but it certainly wasn't because Brick did anything to make it that way. He missed field goals and extra points. We had the craziest scores this season because of his bad execution. The last team we played made fun of our kicking game on the Internet by posting a message that said, "We may have problems, but a kicker is not one of them."

Besides, if Coach allowed Brick to play, did the jerk think he would be better than what he had been? I was cutting him slack because I knew it had to be hard getting pulled from the starting line and watching your job get taken by someone else. However, this wasn't the first time this happened on the team this year. Coach had already switched out our underperforming defensive back for Amir Knight, a guy who quite possibly could play in the NFL *right now*. He was that good.

Coach was trying to win the state title. He was doing whatever was necessary to make that happen. This was a big boy's game, not pee-wee football, and since the program was so highly thought of by college coaches, my dad got me in this school.

Having someone go off on me was not my cup of tea, and frankly, I wasn't a tea drinker at all. I mean, I was starting to fit in. I had a few dudes on the team I was bonding with, and now that I was getting comfortable, I refused to let anyone make me shiver.

Brick just had to try me. He put his hand on my chest. That was it. I took his hand and bent it backward. I was ready to pop it out of its socket and crush his fingers. I wasn't an angry kid, but at seventeen, I had gone through some things. Brick and every other teammate of mine needed to know the white boy had backbone.

"Ouch, ER. Dang! Stone, man, that hurt," Brick yelped. "Let up my hand. Let go or you're gonna break it."

"Think about that before you get in my face next time," I threatened.

Landon and Leo, two guys on defense who I had started hanging out with, stepped in. It was cool they wanted to stop the altercation. They broke us apart.

"C'mon, man," Landon got in my face and said. "He ain't worth it. You got to go out there and do this. You know Coach Strong's crazy, and

he will kick both of you off the team. Then what we gonna do?”

“Yeah, what we gonna do? I sure can’t get out there and kick,” Leo said, trying to make me laugh, but none of this was funny.

Landon turned to Leo and said, “Talk to Brick, man. Tell him what’s up.”

“Yeah, dude, you can’t be mad at ER. You gotta be mad at Coach. He’s the one who made the change. And Brick, be real, dude, you know you ain’t kicking like you need to be out there. But if you really think you deserve to start, then make the argument with the coach. But I don’t know.”

Brick kept blowing off steam and said, “Why you taking up for the white boy, Leo? He don’t understand our world. He should have stayed on the other side of Atlanta.”

Tired of the bull and pampering, I yelled, “Why does this have to be about race? You weren’t handling yours. If I am the better kicker, then that’s just the way it is. I could be purple and gold, like the school colors. I get the job done and the job is mine.”

“Well, you’re talking a good game. You been making some kicks in practice, but wait till you

get out there. I been watching you, thinking you're the one who's gonna have the job. You over analyze. What will be the strength of your kicks when you get out there tonight? With the crowd going wild, I bet you won't be able to relax in your lil' honky tonk beats and drown out the world. Your kicks won't be no better than mine," Brick predicted. I let his criticism seep into my brain.

"C'mon, man. C'mon," Landon said. It was time for us to head out on the field and warm up for the game.

We won the toss and decided to defer. On the opening kickoff, I ran, geared up to kick the ball to the opposing team. As I ran to the ball, all the stuff Brick had said to me came rushing back. I remembered him saying, "When you're out there and the crowd's going wild, you're going to freeze up."

I felt my leg swing back to swing forward, and I could feel that I actually touched the pigskin. The problem wasn't the power, it was that the execution was off. The ball rolled out of bounds on our thirty-five-yard line, and because it went out of bounds, we got a penalty. The team got the

ball on our forty-five. Coach was livid when I got over to the benches.

“Told y’all. What did I say? He ain’t no better than me,” Brick screamed.

My teammates were ticked too. Brick wasn’t the only one talking about me, but for some reason, his voice rang loud and clear. He’d messed up all season. I was due one error.

Coach grabbed my helmet and said, “Stone, where is your head? What the heck kind of kick was that?”

At that moment, I felt like a failure. This was homecoming. The stadium was so full there were no places for fans to sit. Tons of alumni were there, and so was the press because we were doing so well. The game was even being televised on Georgia Public Broadcast, and on the opening play, I failed to deliver for my team.

Things intensified on the very next play. The opposing team’s quarterback threw the ball to their wide receiver, but Amir stepped in the way and ran for the touchdown. Just like that, I was called to go back out on the field and get the extra point.

“You’re gonna miss it,” Brick whispered to me. Then he pushed past me, hitting my shoulder hard.

I had to jog about forty yards to where I needed to stand to make the point. However, I felt like I was running for miles. In the back of my head, I didn’t want to reach my position. I didn’t want to get in place for that kick.

The center hiked the ball to the holder, who placed it on the tee—turned just right so the strings wouldn’t be facing me. I gave it a solid shot, but the ball didn’t go through the uprights. I dropped to my knees, angry at myself. Landon picked me up and helped me jog off to the sidelines. Hearing roars of boos, Coach Strong came up and got in my face.

Coach hollered, “Look, you are *the Man*.”

“No, Coach, take me out.”

“You are our kicker, Stone. I don’t know what’s going on with you. You came out a little timid, but I know what you can do. Dang it, lose the goose bumps and shake off the cobwebs. It’s time to play ball!”

“Put in Bailey, Coach. Put in Bailey.”

“No, you’re my kicker. Stop the nonsense and let’s play. You can do this, son,” he said. He looked me square in the eyes.

He didn’t know it, but that conversation helped me. The next three kicks I was sent out for, I made. His belief in me turned me around.

We won the game. Again, the Lions came out victorious. This time the kicker contributed. I was overjoyed.

On the ride home, my dad took out some of the joy. “I’m just trying to figure out what happened to you in the beginning of the game.”

Of all the things for my father to focus on, he was talking about my bad kicking, not the extra points I made or the good field position my kicks ended up putting us in. No, he was on me and I resented him. I just looked out the window, wishing I would have driven my own car.

“No need to sit over there and get all wimpy. It’s time to play now, son. We don’t have time for nerves or mistakes. It practically took all semester to get your tail out there to perform. I was sitting next to three scouts, one guy from Georgia, one

guy from Georgia Tech, and one from Auburn. I think a Clemson man might have been there too. There are so many great athletes on this team; you have to make plays, not mistakes.”

“Okay, Dad, got you,” I said, hoping he would understand that I needed him to hush.

I knew what was at stake. He told me time and time again that he didn’t have money to send me to college. My grades were good but not good enough with the higher restrictions on the Hope Scholarship.

“When you missed that extra point, they all were writing down notes and shaking their heads,” he nagged.

“Dad, they could have been writing down anything.”

“You’re missing the point, son. They weren’t writing down this is the boy we need to bring into our program, trust me. Don’t be an idiot. The best thing you got going is that you stick out like a sore thumb being one of the only white boys on this team. You did make three extra points to redeem yourself.”

“Did you see them writing down something then?” I asked sarcastically.