



FOOTBALL
Sweetheart

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Football Sweetheart

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It's been a long process, but after two years of writing, editing, revising, and editing again, my mystery is available for everyone to read. When I started, never did I once think my characters would have even *more* to say, but they do—this once single Young Adult novel is now the first of a series in the works.

I hope you enjoy!

PART ONE
LOST

CHAPTER 1

High school football is *life* in West Texas. Little boys and girls dream of their futures, fantasizing about their high school careers as all-star quarterbacks and head cheerleaders. Families move to different parts of town to ensure their sons will play in the dominant program and their daughters will cheer for the top team. Families fight and deceive to ensure their sons experience this once in a lifetime opportunity of playing football at one of the most prestigious schools in Texas High School football history. Parents also watch their daughters tumble their way through childhood hoping to see their little girls stand on the sidelines and cheer every Friday night in the fall. Regardless of whether or not a household has a child participating in these programs as players, trainers, cheerleaders, band members, or drill team dancers, everyone supports the team. The community practically presents these students with the key to the city. These accommodations generate an entitled atmosphere with these teenagers. Some would even say the football players and those associated with them get away with murder.

“So, what did you think?” Aimee glanced up from her college essay to see a perplexed expression on her best friend’s face. “Ella? Why do you look constipated?”

“Not a bad start for a college essay.” Ella quickly changed the subject. “I don’t look constipated, do I?”

Laughter echoed throughout Aimee’s bedroom.

“You know, we’re not any different from the children in your essay. We were born and raised in Midland, and now we’re members of the football program too.”

“And your point?”

“You make us sound so...,” Ella rolled her blue eyes up toward her brow like she always did when she carefully studied her words, “...pathetic.” Ella ran her fingers through her brown, wavy hair.

“Hey, you said it, not me.”

The sting of a cotton whip slashed across Ella’s arm. “OUCH! Aimee...” Aimee had sparked up another of their famous pillow fights.

“Have you picked up your training gear from Doc yet?” Aimee managed to sneak a hard slap of the pillow smack-dab into Ella’s face when she wasn’t looking.

“No, not yet.” Ella rubbed her cheeks trying to regain feeling from the last hit. “Good one,” she laughed.

“Luckily for you, I’m the best friend ever!” Aimee tossed the pillow across the room and jumped off the bed. She flung open her closet door and disappeared inside. She started tossing maroon and gray shirts out onto the bed. “I picked up your stash too.”

Aimee Freeman and Ella Harrison met in junior high playing basketball and had been inseparable since. They joined the Student Athletic Program in the tenth grade at Lee High where they worked day in and day out with the football players and coaches. Throughout their sophomore and junior years, Aimee’s and Ella’s diligence and perseverance gained the respect of the fellow trainers, as well as the coaches and players. Uncommon to the previous classes of student trainers, the two girls would share the role of “head trainer” this year. The kick-off of the school’s football two-a-day sessions in a couple of days marked the end of the girl’s summer and the beginning of their senior year.

“I’m so excited for our senior year!” Ella picked up one of the shirts and held it up against her chest. “What time are the others coming over?”

“I told Pressley to get here around six. That should give us time to do a quick cleaning downstairs. I’m pretty sure Carly and Sarah are riding with her so there won’t be too many cars outside. We don’t want the cops thinking I’m throwing party!”

Ella glanced down at her watch. “It’s 5:00 P.M. now. We better get to it.” She rolled off the bed toward the door. “Last one down stairs has to do all the work!” And with that, Ella was gone.

Briefly blinded from the shine of Ella’s new silver watch, which stood out against her olive complexion, Aimee was already ten steps behind her friend. She raced after Ella screaming, “Cheater,” but she was too late. Ella won.

Out of breath, Aimee still managed to muster up enough strength to push Ella down onto the sofa. “Why am I not surprised you’re going to use some lame race as an excuse not to help me?”

“You know me better than anyone else.” Ella grinned from ear to ear. She picked up a magazine off the coffee table and flipped through the pages, backwards.

“Where did you get that watch?”

“Oh, um, it was a gift.” Ella continued flipping the pages; only now Aimee could tell she was nervous.

“A gift from?” She sat down next to her best friend and pulled the magazine out of her hands.

“From Eric, who else?” Ella ripped the magazine back from Aimee. “Rude much?”

Ella and Aimee were as different as night and day when it came to their involvement in relationships. Ella had become a habitual dater since ending her three year relationship with Bobby Blakemore, the quarterback for the Rebels. She had dated so many different guys during the summer; even her best friend didn’t know them all. Ella appeared to have settled down over the past month, having dated the same guy for almost four weeks, but still Aimee wasn’t quite sure if this boy was the ideal boyfriend for her best friend.

“So Eric spoils you, huh? Must be nice. I’ve never had a guy cater to me in that way. Oh yeah—not in any way!” Aimee was quite critical of herself, never having had a boyfriend, yet she didn’t fret about it. Her life seemed so much less complicated than Ella’s, and consequently happier.

“This next week should be interesting. You really haven’t seen Bobby since the breakup?”

“Seen? No. Talked to? Unfortunately.”

“Wait, you guys have talked? Since when?”

“Since he started calling last week. He seems to think since football is starting I’ll take him back.”

“Oh, that’s classic. How fun... you’ll be stuck with him at practice for eight hours a day the next seven days. Brutal!” Aimee reveled at the idea that the only involvement she would have within the ex-relationship drama was listening to Ella and Bobby take jabs at one another.

“Bobby’s trouble. I can remember back when he was a nice, sweet boy. Then, he made quarterback of the high and mighty Rebel Football Team.” A sharp prick pierced Aimee as she picked up her father’s letter opener from beside his chair. She looked up to see Ella staring aimlessly, lost in thought. “Are you going to help? This end-of-summer slumber party was your idea too!”

Ella jolted back to reality. “Yeah, but it’s at your house. I don’t want to knock something over, and break it...or misplace anything of value. I mean, the stuff on your dad’s mantle is worth more than either of our lives.”

Not unlike other Midlanders, the Freeman family loved football. Most families decorate their mantles with family photos, meaningful knickknacks, and faith based memorabilia; but not the Freeman family. The Freeman family mantle showcased local and professional sports with an authentic Rebel Football helmet and autographed baseballs from the early New York Yankees. Centered between all of the sport’s world relics, was the Freeman’s most prized possessions, besides their children of course: an autographed football from the State Finalist 1983 Rebel Football team.

“You’re worthless!” Aimee tossed a dust rag into Ella’s lap.

“I love you too.”

“We have all weekend to find anything of my parent’s you happen to misplace, so get to cleaning!” The Freemans trusted Aimee and all of her friends; they agreed to let Aimee host the girls’ slumber party while the couple grabbed one more getaway before school started.

Aimee pulled her long strawberry blonde hair into a bun and started vacuuming. Not many girls had the luxury of being able to tie their hair into a knot the way Aimee could. Ella still hadn’t jumped up to help when the front door flew open.

Pressley Jones rushed into the living room. “I bring party favors,” she exclaimed as she waved a bag of rice-crispy treats in her hand. Pressley’s long streaky blonde hair swung from side to side as she walked. She was the epitome of all teenage girls: smart, ambitious, driven, pure, and most recently elected a beauty pageant queen.

“I know I do!” Carly Holden hollered from behind Pressley, carrying both her and her friend’s overnight bag. She was equally as beautiful, tall and blonde with locks of curls resembling Shirley Temple.

“You can’t eat these; you may lose your perfect body.” Pressley jammed her mouth full of the cereal treats and smiled at Carly to ensure they knew she was joking.

Carly grunted. “Whatever! You’re just jealous.” Carly had previously danced on the school drill team and Aimee believed she had the best legs of any girl in the senior class. Carly was one of the most well balanced girls Aimee had the honor of knowing. They connected during their time serving as class officers, another honor they looked forward to their senior year. Aimee could talk to Carly about certain things she couldn’t talk to Ella about, mostly Ella.

Aimee was about to close the door when she spotted Sarah’s butt sticking out of the passenger car door. “Last but certainly not least,” she laughed.

Sarah turned and flashed her friend a crooked smile. “I heard that!” Sarah Faulk had an exotic appeal that stood out in all crowds with her brown hair and eyes. She loved the girls, but Sarah spent

most of her time with her college boyfriend. Since he was away at school now, Sarah was back to participating in the high school world.

“The crew who ruled the school,” Sarah mimicked in Rizzo’s voice from *Grease* as she joined the rest of the girls inside the house. “Our reign begins now!”

Every single one of the girls let out the popular Texas rally cry, “Yee-Haw!”

Aimee stumbled over her friend’s bags, trying to drag them upstairs all at the same time. As the last bag slipped from her hands and tumbled down the carpeted stairs, she paused. “Wait, where’s the new girl?”

“She should be here any second.” Carly plopped down on the couch next to Pressley, who sat with her finger pointed at the front door. The close group of friends also invited a transfer student from the DFW area, who had recently been accepted on the varsity cheer squad after a brief summer tryout.

“Doorbell! Right on schedule,” Pressley slurred through a mouthful of rice crispy treats.

Jeanie Roberts stood on the other side of the glass door, wiggling both legs back and forth like a nervous child.

“Come on in,” Aimee said as she pushed open the weather door. Behind her, the other girls stood in awe of Jeanie. She too was tall, but her body was leaner and more curvaceous than any of the other teenage girls. Her short blonde hair and piercing blue eyes screamed for attention. Jeanie was a guy magnet.

“The boys in Midland are going to *love you*.” A sharp pain raced through Ella’s side, courtesy of a quick elbow from Carly.

“Your jealousy is rearing its ugly head, Ella.” Carly did her best to whisper her disapproval to Ella, but everyone overheard.

Still gawking at Jeanie, Pressley dropped the rice crispy treat she had picked up to eat.

As Aimee closed the wooden front door, the doorbell chimed again. Confused, Aimee cracked the door and peered outside before smiling. “Pizza!”

After the girls made plates and sat on the living room floor, the friends shared some of their ideas for the upcoming school year with Jeanie.

“We’ve prepared a list of charities the senior class will assist. First, we’ll all volunteer at the Texas-Sized Garage Sale; that’ll get us some good community service hours for college too. Then, we’ll charge two-dollars to allow the student body to wear their choice of hat on one day, and the Student Council will donate all of the proceeds to St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital.” Aimee stopped talking long enough to take a bite of her pizza, tasting a burst of tomato sauce.

“We’ll also ask the school administration to allow the students to wear pajamas one day if they bring two canned, nonperishable food items for the food bank,” Pressley added. “That should wrap up the fall semester’s charitable events.”

“Good, now we can talk about *what really matters...*” Sarah dropped her napkin and threw her arms up into the air. “...Homecoming!”

“It’s only the most important weekend of the year to some,” Pressley joked, kind of.

“The theme for Homecoming is *Jamaican Me Crazy*. What do you think? Are you in? Do you want to help us organize all of this?” All the girls stared at Jeanie waiting for a response, but all Jeanie could do was make eye contact with each girl, one at a time.

“I may be on information overload, but I’m in!”

“So, do you think we should give our pizza time to digest, or is it hot tub time?”

“Aimee, you’re so your mother.” Ella wasn’t far off base. The older Aimee got, the more she did and things she said reminded her of her mother.

“Okay then, go put on your swimsuits and meet me outside!”

“Ooo, hang on. I brought my own version of party favors.” Ella jumped up from the floor and sprinted up the stairs, skipping two at a time. When she returned, she held a bottle of vodka and a bottle of wine. “Who wants some?”

“Where did you get that? My parents will kill me if they find out!” Aimee’s nerves caused her voice to squeak.

“Oh, calm down!” Ella began pouring the liquor into small Styrofoam cups, and handed one to each of the girls. “There’s more where this came from too, so don’t be a prude. Drink up!”

After chugging their shots of vodka, the girls ran to change and then poured out of the back door. One by one they crammed into the six person hot tub. They shared stories with the new girl about all of the guys in their class, including past experiences and future conquests.

As the night sky filled with darkness, Ella reached over the edge of the tub and started digging through her things.

“What are you looking for?” Pressley asked, agitated Ella was dripping water all over her dry towel.

“This!” Ella lifted a joint from her jean shorts’ pocket. “In honor of movie hour!” She watched surprise and astonishment flash over each of the girls’ faces. “We’re watching *Dazed and Confused*, right?”

“Ella...” Aimee didn’t finish her statement. What exactly had her friend gotten into this summer?

“Oh, you goody-two-shoes! I’ll be inside.” Ella disappeared back inside the house, leaving her friends behind.

“You guys dry off and give me a few minutes. I’m going to go talk to her.” Aimee splashed water into her friend’s faces as she pulled herself over the edge of the sauna, trying to lighten the mood.

The kitchen door creaked as Aimee shut it behind her. She slipped on her house shoes and wrapped her towel across her waist.

“Ella?”

She could hear mumbling coming from deeper inside the house, but no direct answer. Slowly, Aimee moseyed through the house until she pinpointed the sound of Ella’s voice—it was coming from her bedroom upstairs. *Who is she talking to?*

Aimee crept up one stair at a time, maneuvering past all of the creaky boards she had so masterfully located in her earlier experiences coming home after curfew.

“I told you it was over and I’m not changing my mind.”

Aimee squatted down, halfway up the steps to listen.

“You are being ridiculous! Your threats are hysterical. They mean nothing to me.”

Voices emerged from downstairs as the girls came back into the kitchen, so Aimee crawled up to the top step to hear more.

“It’s over and I’m not going to change my mind. If you make any kind of scene Monday, I’ll ruin you!”

The sound of the receiver banging into the base of the phone startled Aimee, but not before her angry friend had stumbled upon her—eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Who was that, Ella?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Still seated on the steps, Aimee grabbed Ella’s ankle as she attempted to move past her. “Was it Bobby?”

“Let go!” Ella yanked her leg away from Aimee.

“Ella…” Aimee slapped her hand down on the stair. She loved her best friend, but couldn’t understand why Ella had been keeping so many secrets all summer long. But now wasn’t the time, not with a houseful of girls—she’d pry it out of Ella one way or another at practice.

CHAPTER 2

The piercing sound of Aimee’s alarm startled her at 7:00 A.M. sharp Monday morning. “Rise and shine my little buttercup!”

“It’s too early to be this chipper.” Ella buried her head under the pillows.

“Get up!” Aimee threw the covers back, exposing Ella’s body to the cold morning air.

“You are such a brat!” Ella threw her pillow in Aimee’s general direction but missed by a mile, having not opened her eyes yet.

After climbing out of bed, Ella looked at her reflection in the mirror and flinched. “Well, Aimee, at least we don’t have to look good for these imbeciles.”

“That’s right; now throw on shorts and a t-shirt. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

The girls shared peanut butter toast and a banana for breakfast as they headed off to the training room.

The football facility at Lee High was nicer than most in the state, or country for that matter, due to the financial support from the boosters and the winning legacy of the team. Located north of the main campus, the 3,500 square foot facility was broken down into five main rooms: the coaches’ office, the training room, the varsity locker room, the junior varsity locker room, and the weight room. The varsity lockers were gigantic—five feet high and three feet wide while the junior varsity’s lockers were barely big enough for their shoulder pads and helmet, let alone the rest of their equipment. Also located inside the varsity locker room was the equipment room with a large, heavy, dutch-door. Sitting behind this door, Aimee and Ella counted the inventory and prepared all of the shirts, shorts, socks and shoes into piles for easy distribution.

“I hear voices. The players are here. Are you ready to get to work?”

Ella rolled her eyes. “I guess so.”

When the players began to arrive, Aimee opened the top half of the door and stood prepared for the distribution of uniforms and pads.

“Today, Monday, August 22, 2011, is the first day of our last week of two-a-day practices.” Aimee couldn’t believe it. Their senior year had officially started.

“Yeah, and today’s morning session should be the easiest of the next week since all we have to do is hand out the football equipment. I’m already tired.” Ella yawned. “My summer has been rough on me.”

“Whatever, Ella. Take a vitamin or something. Don’t forget, the boys are supposed to have a light conditioning workout after lunch. We’ll get to see how many of them stayed in decent shape over the summer. If they did, today should be a breeze for us. If not, we’ll be in the training room for hours tonight. Either way, you’ll need more energy.”

“What do you want to bet some of those morons still warrant treatments today because they played and drank too much this summer?”

“You know there will be those,” Aimee agreed. The line was already forming and Aimee had her nose stuck in one of the inventory lists.

“And the Greek God arrives.” Ella snarled at the site of her ex, Bobby Blakemore. Bobby was the star quarterback of the team, and expected to receive multiple scholarship offers from the state colleges. “Look at him, he’s strutting!”

Bobby took one look at Ella and kissed his toned biceps.

“Stroke it!” echoed through the locker room. Bobby turned back to the entrance and watched his partners in crime come through the door: Tony Parkinson, Matt Harper, and Brian Carter. “The Big Men on Campus are here!” All of the jocks bumped chests and slapped high-fives with one another.

Ella clasped her hands together like when in prayer, and dropped to her knees in front of Aimee. “Can we *please* switch teams this year?!?”

“Begging isn’t becoming of a young lady.” Aimee couldn’t help but laugh at herself. She was turning into her mother.

Frustrated, Ella stormed off.

“I bet that little cry baby is asking Doc to change our assignments,” Aimee mumbled under her breath. The girls may have been best friends, but Aimee was secretly annoyed with the fact Ella always got everything she wanted.

It was customary at Lee High to assign trainers to either the offensive or defensive teams each year to help create a rapport between players and trainers, and this year was no different. For the third year in a row, Ella was paired with the offense and the quarterbacks’ coach, Gregg McWilliams, and Aimee was stationed with the defense and head coach, Eddie Miller. As the other trainers handed out shorts, t-shirts, cleats, socks, pads, pants, and jerseys, Ella walked back in to the equipment room and sighed.

“There you are.” Aimee looked at Ella’s pouty face and decided to address the sigh. “Now, what’s wrong?”

“Bobby stopped me in the locker room and made a comment about my “Goth” boyfriend.”

“Ella, are you seriously surprised? You haven’t seen him since the break up and his ego is hurt. That was obvious from the phone call the other night.”

“What?”

“The call at my house. The night of the slumber party.” Aimee lifted her eye brows as if to say “get with the program, dummy.”

“Oh. Right.” Ella turned her back to the door and picked up an inventory list.

“Anyway, why can’t you just ignore him? It’s been three months already. All you need to do is focus on how Eric makes you feel, not about what Bobby thinks of him...or you, for that matter.”

Although Aimee occasionally called Eric “Goth” boy as well, she enjoyed seeing Ella with him. Ella had been all over the place this summer, dating everyone from college freshmen to young professionals in

their mid-twenties. She had dated so many different men, Aimee couldn't keep track. Aimee had no idea how the different dates had gone, or how the guys had treated Ella, because Ella had remained secretive all summer long. Aimee did know Eric treated Ella like a queen, and she had been happy these past few weeks.

As the other trainers called out uniform numbers, Aimee checked them off the list while still listening to Ella's whining. "You know, Ella, Bobby hasn't dated anyone seriously since you two broke up because somewhere inside that demented mind of his, he thinks you will come crawling back to him. He has always been delusional."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll try to not let it bother me."

"Isn't that one of the main reasons why you broke up with Bobby anyway?" Aimee continued, "Bobby showboats; that's what he does. He flaunted other girls in front of you all the time, even when you were officially together."

"Yes, and those other girls would have killed me just so they could have a chance to date him."

"So let them. Let those other girls deal with his childish reactions. Let all the flattery he receives drive them crazy. Stop worrying about him!"

"You're right. I'm rid of him. Let some new girlfriend deal with his arrogance the next time a fresh piece of meat shows interest in him. I'm so glad I don't have to hear one more time how privileged I should feel dating him! Eric never talks to me that way. Here, watch this!" Ella exited the equipment room, walked past Bobby with her shoulders back and head held high. With one smooth glance in his direction, she laughed.

Aimee cracked up. *That's my girl! Your laugh is going to drive him crazy; his ego won't know how to handle it.*

The morning hours flew by and before the girls knew it, the afternoon conditioning session began. Offense was on the practice field in the center of the track east of the football facility, and the defense was behind the training room on the second practice field. *The gang's all here*, Aimee realized as she looked around the large campus.

The cheerleaders and band had all arrived for their first sanctioned practices of the year. The sound of the instruments and the band director's yelling through his megaphone was music to Ella and Aimee's ears. The two friends shot each other a quick smile across the field.

Pressley led the cheerleaders through warm-ups while the sponsor, Sharon McWilliams, sat in the grass with her clipboard. Sharon could have passed as one of the cheerleaders herself, dressed in tiny cotton shorts, a tank top, and white Reebok high-tops. She was married to Coach McWilliams, the quarterbacks' coach, and all of the kids loved them. The couple was in their mid-twenties, barely out of college themselves. The seniors referred to them as "Ken and Barbie," and they were just that—a moniker the McWilliams duo loved.

Football is officially here, Aimee thought as she continued watching the band and cheerleaders from afar.

After practice, Aimee and Ella walked over to the Youth Center for the first Booster Club meeting. Everyone would be there—coaches, players, trainers, cheerleaders, teachers, parents, and others in town without children involved, but who still came out to support the team. Aimee's mom, Elaine Freeman, and senior English teacher, Henry Cole, worked the south entrance, while the Senior Class Sponsor, Jane Kahle, and Student Council Sponsor, June Harmon, worked the west entrance. They had all taught together for years and shared close friendships. Aimee and her friends were on a first name

basis with Henry, Jane, and June, yet the students always exercised the appropriate decorum within the school walls and at school functions by calling the teachers by their proper names.

The coaches sat together at the front of the room, and the players stood lining the outside walls wearing their letter jackets with pride.

“I may be proud to be a part of this team, but the players look like idiots wearing those jackets inside. It must be one-hundred degrees outside!” Aimee continued displaying the football shaped cookies on the table as she walked like a macho football player, making fun of her classmates.

“It serves them right. It’s got to be a million degrees inside those coats! I hope Bobby melts.” Pressley and Carly gave Ella a thumbs-up after her snide comment. The girls then got back to work setting up the refreshments at the back of the Youth Center.

Coach Eddie took the microphone and began speaking as the crowd filled the room. Coach Eddie gave great speeches. Despite his horrible West Texas twang, which made him extremely hard to understand, he always inspired those he addressed and he made everyone hoot and holler by the end of his speeches. He began by introducing the coaching staff, Doc, the head athletic trainer assigned to the high school and its feeder system, and his senior players. The parents sat in the crowd, beaming from ear to ear, and hanging on every word from the coach as if they were in church listening to The Gospel.

Aimee rolled her eyes when she spotted Bobby ignoring his coach, like he did others all the time. She elbowed Ella and motioned toward the quarterback. Bobby couldn’t keep his eyes off the new cheerleader helping Sarah.

Aimee wasn’t surprised when the boys made their way back and offered to help with the refreshments after the coach’s speech. “Go away, Bobby. You’ll just get in the way!” Aimee motioned her hand like she was shooing away a fly.

“Oh, I’m not here to help. I’m here to meet my next girlfriend.” Bobby strolled over to Jeanie and turned on the charm. After a few minutes of talking to the new girl, Aimee noticed his demeanor change. She jerked her head around to see what Bobby was staring at, and laughed when she recognized

the skaters outside on their boards. Tyson Dunlap, Kyle and Andy Tanner, and Eric Stacy skated back and forth past the open doorway oblivious to the important football meeting taking place inside.

“Ella, look.” Aimee pointed out the open double doors. “Look who just rained on Bobby’s parade.”

Ella smiled. “Not only does Eric make me happy, he drives Bobby crazy. Bonus!”

After the Booster Club meeting, all of the girls picked up the trash around the Youth Center. Each of them had their own agenda later that night and was in a hurry to get their evenings started. Ella had bragged about meeting Eric for a “date night” before the first of the gruesome two-a-days’ schedules began the next day. Once practices started, everyone involved lost their “free” time. Aimee, Pressley, and Carly had plans to go see “The Twilight Saga: Eclipse” at the Retro-Dollar Theatre for the second time since its re-release earlier in the summer, preparing for the premiere of “Breaking Dawn – Part 1” in a few months. The girls’ plans, however, didn’t stop them from questioning their new friend, Jeanie, about Bobby and the special attention she received from him earlier in the night.

“What did he want?” Aimee asked.

“Everything he says is a load of crap, Jeanie,” Pressley chimed in.

“He was talking to me, it was no big deal.” She gushed and appeared embarrassed. “He’s nice.”

Ella deemed it necessary to assure Jeanie she was done with the quarterback. “If you want to go down that road with an egomaniac like Bobby after all the stories the other night in the hot tub, I won’t stand in the way.”

“Oh, I’m not interested in getting involved with anyone before the school year even starts,” Jeanie told herself and the others.

“Okay, if you really feel that way. I know it’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking how nice it would be to start the school year with the star quarterback courting you.”

Jeanie grinned at Carly’s remark. “I won’t ignore the things you’ve told me.”

“We all know new students want to fit in quickly. Just watch your back,” Sarah warned.

“Hey, El, are you sure you don’t want to join us at the movies?” Aimee had been around Ella all day, and felt weird not inviting her to their outing.

“No thanks, Eric and I are going to spend the evening together. See you guys later.” Ella walked outside to find Eric and his friends still skating on the outdoor basketball court. Eric waved to the guys and joined Ella at her red, two-door Grand Am. They drove less than a mile away to their secret place. No one, not even Aimee, knew about their spot. Not only would the girls be surprised if they learned about Ella and Eric’s rendezvous location, but they would be appalled by what the two participated in while at the house on Mockingbird Lane. To the outside world, Ella was the All-American Girl; she was beautiful, top of her class, philanthropic, and all other things good. But over the summer, and when with Eric, Ella enjoyed a darker side.

The two walked through the vacant, run-down house to the basement. Eric had been coming to this secret hiding place since before he and Ella started dating. The house, for whatever reason, would not sell and now there wasn’t even a “For Sale” sign in the front yard as if the owners had given up hope. Over the years, vandals had thrown rocks through the windows and the realty company stopped caring for the yard. Even though neighbors lived on both sides of the house, as well as up and down the street, no one ever noticed Eric. It was almost as if he and the house were invisible.

The basement was as warm an area as a family room with a fire burning in the fireplace. Eric had cared for this room as much as he did for Ella. The concrete floor was covered in an array of mix and match rugs, creating a beauty of its own. The only lighting was from an illuminated red Hurricane Oil Lantern and miscellaneous candles. Vintage Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Aerosmith, Jimmy Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, and Grateful Dead posters tastefully hung on the walls, which were lined with a deep red fabric he and Ella purchased at a warehouse. Against the far wall was a mattress Ella had “borrowed”

from the Salvation Army store where she sometimes worked, completing her hours of community service. The bedding was covered with fleece and cotton blankets and throw pillows of all colors. Next to the lantern, strategically placed on an old wooden crate, sat two oversized beanbag chairs.

Ella dropped her body into one of the chairs and kicked off her shoes. Eric turned on the battery operated boom box he had cherished since childhood. “Creep” by Radiohead played through the speakers and Eric turned to join Ella. They sat together in silence as they enjoyed the music and smoked the small amount of marijuana Eric had scored from his friends.

Feeling a good buzz, Ella reached over and cradled Eric’s face in her hands. The two kissed and started undressing one another. Ella stopped long enough to connect eyes with Eric. She smiled, bent down, and turned off the lamp. The evening progressed as they made love and lay together in their secret sex and drug den.

Ella dropped Eric and his skateboard off at his parents’ house minutes after 1:00 A.M. He lived a few streets over from the Harrison’s, making her arrival home in time for her generous curfew. She walked through the front door to see her mom sitting in her light blue Lazy Boy working on the daily crossword.

Mrs. Harrison glanced up at Ella and then back to the old fashioned grandfather clock hanging on the wall. “Hi, dear; did you have a nice evening? “

Ella placed her keys down on the hallway table. “Yes, ma’am. I’m tired though. We have a full day of practice tomorrow, so I’m going to get a glass of warm milk and head on to bed.” Ella proceeded into the kitchen and poured some skim milk into a small four quart sauce pan and placed it on the gas range. After a few minutes, she poured her nightcap into a glass and headed to her room. Along the way,

she stopped and kissed her mom on the forehead. “Good night,” she said as she continued down the hallway.

Once inside her room, Ella closed the door and undressed. She turned on her stereo and turned the volume dial down so she wouldn’t disturb her sleeping father. Aerosmith’s *Get a Grip* album played through the speakers and she started swaying to “Crazy.” She maneuvered her way over to her bed, put her milk down on the nightstand, and opened the top drawer. She dug around while still weaving her hips back and forth. Finally, she pulled out a small, leather bound journal. She turned her body and crawled onto her bed as she continued mouthing the words to the song. Lying on her stomach, Ella pushed the blue ink down on her four color Bic retractable pen, and she started writing.

Today was quiet—I had a nice, uneventful first day of football and spent the evening with my skater dude at our place. I still laugh at the fact my BFF and the other girls have no idea what I do when I’m not with them, or who I am. UH, and I saw Bully Boy for the first time in a long time! He really needs to work on his temper! And what is he trying to do? Make me jealous. That’s funny. I didn’t talk to Cap today. I saw him, but I didn’t stop to chat. He has to stop giving me gifts; it was nice at first, but I’m having a hard time explaining them now. Plus, all the gifts in the world aren’t going to change my mind. I need to get my act together, stop sleeping with him. I’ve told him repeatedly it’s over; it’s not fair to SD. Maybe I should end it with him, too, and be on my own for a while?

Ella closed her journal and held it up to her chest. She lay there, still listening to Aerosmith, and rolled over on her side. “Tomorrow,” she whispered as she reached over and turned on her alarm clock.

CHAPTER 3

Tuesday morning's practice was rough. The football players ran through every drill imaginable so the coaches could evaluate who kept with the program over the summer months and who took it easy. The ropes course was first for the defense while the offense started on the logs. Each exercise forced the players to run with coordination and agility. Many bent over at the waist and regurgitated their breakfast. The smell was horrendous, but Aimee was used to it.

"You guys are idiots. Will you ever learn?" The coarse white towel rubbed Aimee's neck as she pulled it off to hand to a sick player.

Next, the defensive group moved over to the tackling dummies. Aimee loved this drill! Coach Eddie stood on the back of the apparatus and watched the D-line crouch low and move with speed as they pushed up and dropped back to the ground to roll on to the next dummy. The upward extension of the arms against the dummy and the motion of dropping to a roll between the body-sized pads excited the coach. If he wasn't pushed backwards ten yards, they'd have to run through the drill again. He wanted to see power from these boys – "AGAIN!"

Aimee looked across the field to check in on offense. She could see Ella standing behind the quarterback's drills. Aimee knew her friend well, and could tell Ella was working hard to avoid eye contact with Bobby. She agreed that one tiny glance in his direction would mislead him and he'd be back to his old tricks.

Aimee used one of the other trainers to cover for her and she jogged over to check in on Ella and the offense.

"Why wouldn't you switch teams with me? Life would have been so much easier on the other side of this field. Not only do I not want to see Bobby, Coach McWilliams is looking at me funny."

Aimee shrugged her shoulders. "It's just one week, Ella. Hang in there."

"Hang in there? Watch..." Ella faced Coach McWilliams.

“Do you need something, Coach?”

He turned away, not answering her.

“See what I mean?” Ella dropped the water bottle down on the ground, splashing Aimee.

“Thanks a lot!” She started to dry off when the bull horn sounded from the watch tower. She picked up Ella’s bottle and headed into the trainer’s quarters, joining her best friend, already inside.

“What are you doing for lunch?” Aimee asked as she wiped down with a towel and applied fresh deodorant. She had to hurry because the boys would be in shortly. The trainer’s lockers lined the walls of the field house’s foyer and the girls lost all privacy the moment the stampede arrived.

“I’ve got to go run some errands,” Ella answered.

“Okay, then. Well, I’m meeting Pressley and Carly at Burger King if you change your mind. See you back here in a few.” Aimee’s voice faded as she walked farther and farther from the training room door.

“Bye,” Ella said as she pushed her way through the crowds of news crews interviewing Bobby and the coaches outside.

Nancy Rice and Marion Dunn sat enjoying each other’s company at the dispatch center as they did every day. The dispatch center was a small, 750 square foot room inside the Midland Police Department and consisted of computer terminals set up in 6X6 cubicles. Fortunately for Nancy and Marion, the Midland community experienced only a few emergencies on a daily basis, allowing them time to do what many women enjoy the most—gossip. Sometimes they talked about movies, shared recipes, or read books. The ladies loved comparing the officers and firemen to the stereotypical men in uniform most women dream about one day meeting and falling in love with. While most of their days were filled with silliness, they both loved their jobs as 9-1-1 dispatchers and maintained professionalism

once the line rang. The job required extensive training, and both took pride knowing they helped others in their communities when crisis struck.

As she flipped through the pages of PEOPLE magazine, Nancy's phone line beeped and she pressed her headset button as she rotated her chair around to face the computer monitors.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

A blood curdling scream rang out in the background.

"9-1-1, Hello?" Nancy continued, "9-1-1, please state your emergency." She watched her monitor as the computer-assisted dispatch program processed the physical address of the call on a street map.

Nancy squinted her eyes and her brow wrinkled while she tried to capture any sound on the other end of the call. Suddenly, she jumped in her seat. A car door slammed on the other end of the line. A second later, she recognized what appeared to be another car door and squealing tires.

"Hello? 9-1-1, can you hear me?" There was no one there. Dead silence.

Nancy immediately dispatched two detectives she knew to be in the area of the 9-1-1 call.

Detective Kevin Sullivan and his partner, Detective Jeff Alan, were driving around the northwest side of Midland near the Wal-Mart Supercenter drinking their lunch of champions—coffee. When the 9-1-1 call came through the dispatch, they increased their speed and made their way across Midland Drive into the Legends subdivision, where the call originated. Navigating their way through the neighborhood, Detectives Sullivan and Alan arrived at 2200 Pine Lane approximately five minutes after dispatch received the 9-1-1 call.

Pulling up to the curb in this quiet new subdivision, they observed the front door of the home standing wide open. They briefly glanced around; the street was empty except for the Pontiac parked in

front of their car. As they exited the blue Crown Victoria, Detective Sullivan noticed the receiver of a phone hanging lifelessly from a hallway table just inside the front door. He signaled to Alan, and the two men placed their hands on their Glock 22's as they cautiously approached the front door of the residence.

"Police. Did someone call 9-1-1? Hello?" No answer. Detectives Sullivan and Alan opened the glass weather door and entered the house. They continued to walk through the foyer, past the dangling phone, where they split up to search the house room by room. They found no one.

"In here!" Detective Sullivan hollered to his partner. "Someone *was* here. It appears they were making lunch."

Detective Alan walked into the kitchen and Sullivan pointed to the oven timer, still ticking down with ten minutes remaining.

Detective Alan reached over and turned the dial off. "Follow me; you've got to see this." He exited the kitchen and led Sullivan down the hallway. The three bedroom house was dark until they reached what appeared to be a teenage girl's room where music played quietly.

"Someone was recently sitting here," Detective Sullivan commented as he studied the indentation on the canopy bed covered in pink sheets and a white comforter. "But no one is in the house now. Check this out..." The detective touched a glass of ice water with the barrel of his gun. The cup was sweating on the nightstand located next to the bed.

"Someone was here *very* recently." Detective Alan shot a concerned glance over to Sullivan. "Call it in."

Detective Sullivan reached for his radio. "Dispatch, we're at 2200 Pine. Send back up. There are signs of struggle, but no one is here. Possible kidnapping."

Paul Harrison arrived home a few moments later to find police cars surrounding his block. Horror rushed through his body and his blood ran cold once he realized *his* house was the center of all of the commotion. “What’s happening?” he yelled as he ran across his landscaped lawn.

“Sir, please step back.” An officer in uniform squared his shoulders between the house and Mr. Harrison. Paul wasn’t going to get around him without a struggle, so he stopped to compose himself.

“My name is Paul Harrison. This is my house. Can someone please tell me what’s going on?” At that very moment, Detective Sullivan emerged from the front door and walked briskly toward the officer and Mr. Harrison.

“Mr. Harrison. My name is Detective Kevin Sullivan. We received a 9-1-1 call from this house thirty minutes ago.”

“What?! 9-1-1? What’s going on?”

“Mr. Harrison. Please try not to panic. We weren’t able to obtain any information from the caller, but believe the caller might have been your daughter. “

“What?! ELLA!”

“Sir, we’re processing the scene right now. We need your help to determine if this was indeed foul play or if she just left in a hurry.”

“Her car...her car is right here.” Mr. Harrison pointed with a shaking index finger to the Grand Am parked on the curb.

“This is your daughter’s car?”

“Yes. Oh, my God! I need to call my wife.” Mr. Harrison opened his briefcase and removed his cell phone.

“Officer, please stay with Mr. Harrison and wait with him until his wife arrives. I’d like to be notified as soon as that happens. I’ll be inside. Under no circumstances are they to enter the house until we’re done.”

With shaky fingers, Paul Harrison dialed his wife. “Patty, you need to come home right now.”

Detectives Sullivan and Alan rummaged through Ella's room searching for any clues that might help them.

"Ella's schedule only permitted two hours between morning practice, ending at noon, and afternoon practice, starting at 2:00 P.M. Everyone around town knows the two-a-days' schedule, due to the popularity of Rebel football and the constant coverage in the town's newspaper and on the networks, so that's not going to get us anywhere." Detective Sullivan continued to process his deductions out loud. "We need to immediately question her friends to see if maybe this is all a misunderstanding. Maybe she's safe and sound someplace her parents don't know about? Hell, maybe one of her classmates picked her up and drove her back to practice."

"Agreed, but that doesn't explain the open front door, phone off the hook, or the oven left on. Let's finish up here and then head to the field house." Detective Alan instructed a uniformed officer standing nearby to continue canvassing the neighborhood.

Before leaving, Sullivan discovered a piece of trash in the small woven wastebasket sitting at the base of the dresser. He bent at the waist and reached his latex-gloved hand into the receptacle. "I wonder how fresh this is?"

Alan turned from browsing through the nightstand drawers to see Sullivan holding a torn condom wrapper. "Maybe we can get a solid print off that, meanwhile I found some reading material for later." He waved Ella's journal in the air. Detectives Sullivan and Alan sealed the items in evidence bags and grabbed Ella's junior yearbook on their way out the door.

Outside, Sullivan addressed the panicked parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, we know how terribly difficult this must be, but we need you to go with Officer Tuck to the station. We'll get you back home as soon as possible." The Harrisons nodded to Detective Sullivan, confirming they understood.

As Detective Sullivan pulled away, they glanced back at the crumpled couple sitting on the front lawn. “This is a parent’s worst nightmare,” Sullivan said as he turned the corner.

As Doc slowly opened his office door in the treatment room, Aimee noticed two men in suits sitting inside, one of whom she recognized from her parents’ bowling league. “Aimee, can you please come in here?”

Aimee put down the ice cup she had been rubbing against a player’s hamstring muscle and grabbed a towel to dry her hands. “Yes?” she said as she entered the doorway.

“Please close the door. Aimee, this is Detective Sullivan and Detective Alan from the MPD. Do you know where Ella is?”
