

# STOPPED COLD

GAIL PALLOTTA

Their freshman year at Meriwether Christian  
just took a dangerous turn

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**Gail Pallotta**

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## *Dedication*

Dedicated to Patti Wilder, who worked tirelessly for twenty-plus years to build and uphold a nurturing summer-league swim program, which led to explosive growth in high school and U.S. Swimming in Cobb County, Georgia.

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# 1

My first day as a Freshman at Meriwether Christian High School in Mistville, North Carolina, the sun shone on a small plant with pink blossoms on the window sill and gave Mrs. Hornsby's English class a cheerful look. She stood in front of pine straight back chairs scrunched together in the middle of the room, the tables shoved up against the wall at the end of it.

"Today we'll form a circle and get acquainted."

Her voice sounded bubbly and kind, but I wanted to escape to the pool or a beach. She directed us with her hands as we scraped chairs across the laminated floor and took our seats. That's when I noticed Jimmy Willmore staring at me. As self-conscious as a possum in a dog show, I peered at my lap. Was he checking me out? I raised my head and glanced at him.

He shifted his gaze to the blackboard.

Mrs. Hornsby ran her hand through her short, salt-and-pepper-colored hair then twirled around. "Let's start with you." She gestured toward a pretty girl with dainty features and long, blonde hair.

"I'm Sally Dumont, a transfer student from North Wilkes."

The other kids gave their names, but I let them fade into the background while I thought about Jimmy Willmore. Then it was my turn. "I'm Margaret

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McWhorter, and I entered Meriwether in middle school."

Four students later we finished introducing ourselves.

Mrs. Hornsby said, "We'll study some of America's great poets and authors this year."

Book covers blown up as posters filled the wall behind her desk. I squinted and scanned them for authors' names as she picked up two books and held them high. "I ordered these with the others, but for some reason they arrived late. They're at the campus bookstore now. I'll let you leave early, so you can swing by and pick them up." She started handing out the syllabus. "Be sure to have your books by tomorrow. I have an assignment to give you based on one of them."

Jimmy grasped the papers when Mrs. Hornsby walked by him. Then he stood and trekked across the floor, but he lingered at the front of the room.

Moments later I headed out.

Jimmy opened the door for me then fell into step beside me. "How's it goin'?"

My heart thumped against my chest. "Good." I tried to think of something else to say, but my brain locked. We walked stride for stride in silence on the sidewalk lined with bright green foliage. We passed underneath the branches of the huge, old oak tree and strolled beside the yellow ironweed on the way to the science building.

Then Jimmy turned to the left. "See ya'," he said.

Being so close to him took away my breath. All I could do was wave.

~\*~

Six weeks later Jimmy still stared at me in English class, but he didn't hold the door for me.

I was deep into my third novel, and Dad was deep into my brother, Sean's, football games. This Saturday Dad perched in the rust and green-checked easy chair with his feet propped on the matching footstool. Wrinkles creased his forehead like rivers on a map, his grayish blue eyes cold. He glared at Sean who stood in front of him like a page having an audience with the king.

The urge to rush in the den and tell Dad to stop upsetting Sean filled every fiber of my being, but I dared not interfere. I stood outside the door and waited in the lonely hall with its cold parquet floor and empty beige wall.

Sean shook his head. "Coach is taking me out, sir. I'm not winning enough games."

Sunshine seeped through the mini blinds creating a peaceful glow that seemed out of place.

"Son, you'll have to reclaim that position. To clench your college football career, you need to be the number one quarterback for Meriwether Christian High."

Sean sidled around, probably to move out of Dad's line of view. "I had a meeting with Coach Rogers."

Dad turned up his large palm and gestured. "Good. That's a start."

Sean ranked at the top of his class, but he struggled with sports. He may have looked like Dad, but he inherited our mom, Kelly's, mediocre athletic ability.



“No, I mean I met with him when he told me he was replacing me as first-string quarterback.” Sean glanced at me.

I nodded to give him support.

Sean shifted his weight. “A new guy, Harold Gravitts, will start. He moved here two weeks ago from Greenstown, North Carolina. You were there the last two games. You know we lost because I threw bad passes in the end zone.”

Dad bounded out of the chair as though he’d been shot from a cannon and knocked the coffee cup off the walnut occasional table. “What can this guy do that you can’t?”

“He’s no better than I am in scrimmages.”

Dad lowered himself into the seat and tapped his lips. “Hmm. Maybe he’s a jock who holds back in practice, but Coach Rogers sees his special talent.”

“I don’t know what it is, but—”

“Of course, you don’t. You’re not a coach.”

Sean wrung his hands. “He wouldn’t have to be Super Bowl quality to have something on me.”

Sean’s quivering voice pierced my heart.

“I’m not a great quarterback like you were.”

Six-foot-three, Dad earned the nickname Bullet when he broke the passing records at the university in the 1980s. Often when he introduced himself as Randolph Sean McWhorter, he’d grin and add, “AKA Bullet. I played quarterback in college.”

“Maybe you need more strength in your throwing arm. Lift more weights. Do whatever it takes to get back that position.”

Dad’s humiliating words had to hurt Sean. Was Sean’s heart falling to his toes like mine did when I confessed something less than perfect? Seeing that

disappointed look on Dad's face always hit me in the gut. Sometimes, Dad teased me and cheered me up if I was sad. Mom said he worked hard to give us a good home, but he could make me feel as little as a worm. Did Sean feel that way now? Fury raged inside me and fists formed involuntarily at my sides.

Dad picked up the coffee cup and peered at the spot on the rust-colored carpet. "Just look at that mess." He rubbed his shoe across it.

What about the stain Dad put on Sean's heart?

With the vocal explosion in the den over, the house grew as quiet as a cave. The sadness in Sean's eyes when he walked toward me could have made a stone cry.

"Thanks for being there for me, Margaret. At least my failure to qualify for first string quarterback isn't a stinger."

"What's a stinger? That feeling you sometimes get when you pull a muscle overdoing in sports?"

"That too, but I meant a bad personality trait like a temper or a big ego. Something that can upset other people. For instance, I can't throw great passes, but that doesn't degrade anyone else. It's a shortcoming, not a stinger."

I hugged him around the neck. "You make people happy. You're the best whether you ever play first string quarterback again or not." We had each other.

"I'll deal with it." Sean lifted his chin and marched up the oak staircase.

He seemed upset, and all the talk about stingers wasn't like him, but he'd take Dad's outburst with a stiff upper lip. He always did. After all, both of us knew excellence brought praise from Dad. Failure or mediocrity brought about one of Dad's stingers, his

wrath.

Sean would be fine by the time he changed clothes, left the house, and saw his friends at practice. If I bummed a ride with him, he might rush to bring me home. He needed to hang out with the guys after the scrimmage, not chauffer around a tag-along. The best thing I could do for him was take myself to swim practice.

The scene lingered in my mind as I proceeded to the garage. I took hold of my shiny blue bicycle, hopped on, and rode away. At least Dad let me choose my sport. He bought the bike for me when I qualified for the state swimming championship this past summer. Swimming refreshed me, relieved stress, and lifted my spirits, but would I even have a bike if I didn't compete in the sport? That thought made me nauseous as I rode down the winding, mountain road.

Bright orange, red, and yellow leaves blended over the hills like splotches on an artist's canvas. Tourists who flocked here in October said Mistville, North Carolina, was such a peaceful place with breath-taking sights. For me, the landscape was a mirage. A voice constantly screamed inside my head, *you have to be the best.*

A granite entryway with a bronze nameplate marked Meriwether. I whizzed past it onto a street lined with oak and maple trees, whipped around the curve that led to a steep incline and pedaled up it. The brick gym sat at the top amid a huge grassy lawn with a circular drive. I parked my bike in the remaining spot in the bike stand then scanned the football players on the practice field across the street.

I'd told myself Sean was fine, but doubt nagged me. If I saw him having fun with the guys, I'd breathe

easier. He wasn't there. A few steps took me closer. I shielded my eyes and squinted, surveying the numbers on the players' jerseys. Nope. A sinking sensation hit me. It wasn't like Sean to run late, but maybe he had today. No wonder, after all that had happened at the house.

Dad's muscled arm knocking over his coffee was all I could think about as I opened the glass doors to the lobby filled with trophy cases. How could I practice with my insides coiled as tight as a spring? I slung open the locker room door and strolled in. The clock on the wall stared me in the face—five after nine. No wonder no one else was in here. I was late.

My chest tightened as I pulled off my blouse and yanked on my black practice suit. I hurried out.

My teammates who already swam splashed water all over the deck. Would Coach Lohrens make me do push-ups for not being on time? I stiffened in dread. Thank goodness, he talked to one of the parents and had his back to me.

Relief coursed through my veins as I dove in the water behind Tammy Morris. Whether I practiced freestyle or my favorite stroke, butterfly, an image of Sean's unhappy face pressed on my mind like a vice. It seemed I pulled through gelatin instead of water. Was Sean all right? Why wasn't he at the football field? Needing a breather, I stopped at the wall. Churned up water sloshed around me as the swimmers flew past.

Tammy came in right behind me. "What's happening? How are ya?"

Great teammates, Tammy and I weren't close enough for me to discuss Sean and Dad. "I'm good." I pushed off the wall and swam away.

Thinking of nothing but Sean as I pulled and

kicked through the endless water, I lost all sense of time. Finally, I paused again at the wall.

Tammy touched my shoulder. "Maggie Butterfly, it's over. We can leave." Her black cap squeaked as she rubbed it together when she yanked it off. Tiny rivulets of water dripped from her long brown hair as she ran her hands through it. She was my only friend who called me Maggie and then added the name of the stroke I was known for.

"I couldn't concentrate." I pulled up on the bars on the starting block and hoisted out of the pool.

She gently flipped her towel across my shoulder. "I have days like that too. Forget it."

She may have had a day when she couldn't concentrate, but I doubted she'd had a day start off like mine.

Chatter from the rest of the team faded into the background as Tammy opened the door to the lobby. A cool draft blew in as someone entered from outside, and we scurried to the locker room.

Tammy picked up her swim bag. "Some of us are going to lunch at the Steak House. Wanna come?"

Getting attention from a junior made me feel grown-up and sophisticated. At meets we swam with our own age groups, but we worked out according to our skill levels. Thanks to Sean, who insisted I learn to swim at age three, I practiced with the upperclassmen. I hardly felt like talking to a bunch of people after the events at the house, and I'd already planned to meet Emily Daven, my best friend.

"Thanks. I wish I could, but I can't." Tammy's invitation meant a lot. I hoped she wouldn't be offended.

Tammy smiled, and her eyes looked kind. "OK,

see you later.”

I pulled on my blue jeans and put on the green blouse Mom liked for me to wear. She said it matched my eyes and made them sparkle. I closed the door to the locker room, shut my mind to swimming times and competitions, and left the chlorinated world behind. Only Sean remained in my thoughts as I walked outdoors.

I scanned the football field. It was empty. I hopped on my bike and pedaled up the tree-lined road toward The Grill. Why did Coach Rogers have to replace Sean with Harold Gravitts? Why couldn't Sean still be the starting quarterback?

Plenty of vacant spaces waited for me at the restaurant bicycle stand. I parked in front of the brick building then went inside. The football players seated at a round table close to the door talked about missed tackles, end-arounds, and flea flickers. Sean wasn't with them. Where was he?

The smell of cheeseburgers wafting from the kitchen made my stomach growl as I meandered by the swimmers who hadn't gone to the Steak House.

Jay Arnold, the captain of the boys' team, pulled a chair up to their table. “Hi, Margaret, have a seat.”

“Thanks, but I promised Emily I'd meet her.” Emily played no sports.

He winked. “Gotcha. Catch you later.”

The noise from the front of the room turned to meaningless chatter as I walked to the back where Emily waited. I dropped down into a chair across from her.

“Hi, when did you get here?”

She brushed her long black hair behind her ears. “I just sat down, but I can't wait to tell you about Owen!”

Her dark eyes twinkled.

Ray Jones, a tall lanky redhead on a work scholarship at Meriwether, arrived to take our orders.

"I'd like fruit salad and a grilled cheese sandwich." Emily gazed up at him.

Ray wrote on his pad then glanced at me.

"A chili cheeseburger."

"You got it." Ray put his pencil behind his ear.

I halfway followed the conversation with an image of the players on the football field without Sean flashing in my head. Had he gone to football practice? It wasn't like him not to. I'd eat as fast as I could and go see if he was home. I leaned across the table. "So, Owen's cool?"

Emily's eyes lit up. "Oh, yeah."

Emily was pretty hot too. A sophomore, she was five-feet-three inches and must've weighed only ninety-eight pounds. She had her mother's long eyelashes and her father's small nose.

"Owen's so cute. Last night after the movie, we went to the Steak House. I was so hungry. I offered to pay my part. You know what he said?"

"No, what?"

"He said, 'I asked because I wanted to see you. It's my treat.'" Emily's voice rose as she bounced in her seat. "Sincere, or fake?"

I sat back and smiled. "Sounds sincere."

Emily and I met when she first moved to Mistville. As her new student buddies, Sean and I showed her around the Meriwether campus. She and I started hanging out then and never stopped.

Ray brought our food. "Here ya go."

"Thanks, Ray," I said.

Starving, I devoured large bites of my chili

cheeseburger and fries while Emily munched dainty nibbles of grapefruit and orange wedges. So like her.

"Thanks for listening about Owen." She spoke in a soft, lyrical voice.

"It's cool you're going out with him." No psychologist, I'd only guessed at Owen's sincerity, a small part of a person's character, but I was glad I'd finally heard about Emily's new boyfriend. I'd never mentioned my fascination with Jimmy to her. What would I tell her? He stared at me. How long could we discuss that? Anyway, today wasn't the time to talk about him with the problems between Dad and Sean pressing on my mind.

She sipped her soda. "How'd you do on your lit test?"

"OK."

Emily's thin lips parted into a grin. "Yeah, right. You did better than that. Like literature's not your best subject."

"Margaret, you have a call." Ray called out and pointed to the receiver on the counter in front of the cash register. "You can take it there."

Surprise ran through me as I yanked my cell phone out of my purse. It was off. With all that was going on between Dad and Sean, apparently I'd forgotten to turn it on. Who would call me here? I bounded out of my seat with Emily on my heels.

"Margaret!" Mom's voice sounded upset, strained.

I'd never heard her so choked up. My palms grew sweaty.

"Something's happened to Sean."

Everything around me blurred. The room swayed as Emily helped me to a chair.

"Sit down. What's wrong? Who was that?" she



asked.

“It was Mom. Sean’s at Mistville General Hospital. Can you take me?”

“Definitely. What about your bike?”

“Leave it. Dad can get it later. Can we go?”

“Yeah, we’re leaving.”

The concern written on Emily’s face barely registered with me as I stood, and we rushed to a scene I didn’t want to face.

## 2

With every step I took I swayed back and forth. Emily held onto my arm as we plodded through the crowded restaurant winding our way between tables of our co-eds laughing and sipping soft drinks. Finally, we reached Emily's car. She opened the passenger door and guided me into the front seat. Venting to Emily about the coach replacing Sean as first-string quarterback, letting someone know how upset he was would help me. But the words stuck in my throat.

As brothers go, Sean was the best. Last fall he went with Dad, Mom, and me to Charlotte, North Carolina, to a mid-level championship swim meet. Sean joined me as I climbed out of the pool after winning the hundred-yard butterfly event.

"How'd you do that?" He had balled his large hands into fists and pounded them on his chest as swimmers milled around us. "Me, Margaret. I have broad shoulders and strong muscles to make me swim fast. Way to go." Pride had rung in his voice.

He knew firsthand what it felt like to live up to someone's expectations, or not. In the dark moments of competition, when I dove in too slow, missed my flip turn, or lagged behind my opponent, Sean cheered me up.

Not long ago, Dad had gotten lost on the way to a meet at Apple Valley State College. We arrived too late

for warm-up, but just in time for my fifty-yard freestyle event. The starter's whistle blew as I sprang onto the starting block. I dove in and swam with all my might, kicking my feet as hard as I could.

The bottom and sides of the pool matched the water. Where were the black tiles? The black timing pads? I estimated the location of the wall and went into my flip-turn. My heart sank. There was nothing to push off on. I'd be disqualified.

No whistle sounded. I finished my swim, grabbed hold of the bars on the starting block and pulled out. The official missed my goof-up, but I could only imagine what Dad would say. Tears filled my eyes as Sean darted to me.

"Margaret, you hold the forty-nine-yard freestyle record at this pool." Of course, there wasn't any such event. I had laughed so hard.

If Sean wasn't going to be OK, I couldn't bear it. Rolling down the window, I took deep breaths of fresh mountain air and swallowed the urge to tell Emily to go faster. It seemed hours passed, but it probably only took twenty minutes to arrive at the hospital.

Emily glanced at me with sympathetic, dark eyes. "Go ahead. I'll park and then come in."

I entered the huge lobby.

A dark-haired woman sat at the receptionist's desk situated in the middle of a room filled with stuffed chairs and sofas.

"Sean McWhorter, I'm his sister. Where can I find him?"

She peered at her computer. "He'll be in 101. Take a left. It's on the right."

I walked so fast I almost broke into a run. The antiseptic smell mixed with the stale odor of sickness

nearly suffocated me as I proceeded to Sean's room.

Dad slumped in a black vinyl chair in the corner.

Mom sat beside him, nearly all the color drained from her olive complexion. "Mom?"

She dabbed a tissue at the corners of her sad eyes. "Sean's—" Her voice cracked.

Emily entered gasping for air as though she'd sprinted inside.

"Sean's had a stroke." Dad spoke in a monotone.

Every fiber of my being weakened as I doubled over to keep from falling. I sank onto the edge of the bed, grasped the light blue spread, and squeezed it hard. He was fine earlier this morning. "He's only eighteen. How could that happen?"

Dad gestured with his large hand. "He came down the steps and collapsed in the foyer."

My stomach churned like a washing machine.

"We brought him to the emergency room. That's the last we've seen of him." Dad's blank grayish blue eyes stared into space.

A man wearing a white jacket entered. "Hello, I'm Dr. Salis." He shook my parents' hands then talked about Sean as though he delivered a speech or gave a weather report. "Sean's stroke was a mild one. I don't believe he'll have permanent damage, but he may need therapy for his left arm."

Anger, sorrow, and disbelief over Sean's illness swirled in my head like a tornado. How could this happen?

"Sean's never had a health problem. He's an athlete. What caused this?" Mom asked.

"I'm sorry to tell you, but we found stanozolol in Sean's system." A hint of compassion rang in Dr. Salis's official-sounding tone.

Mom's gaze grew distant. "What's that?"

"It's an anabolic steroid that carries many adverse side effects, including kidney and liver dysfunction. In some people there's a risk of heart attack or stroke. It was originally used in veterinary medicine and is currently banned by the International Association of Athletics Federations and other sporting bodies." Dr. Salis spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Why would anyone take it?" Mom's questioning voice trailed off.

Dr. Salis took a deep sigh. "It enhances athletic performance."

"In what way? I can't imagine Sean taking something like that." Mom spoke softly.

Dr. Salis raised his gray eyebrows. "Steroids build muscle mass and shorten the recovery time needed after strenuous workouts. Jocks who use them grow stronger and can practice more often."

Mom's eyes snapped open.

Was she thinking of the pressure Dad put on Sean?

"I don't feel well. Margaret, would you bring me some water?" Dad asked.

He was as white as Mistville's winter snow. So fit, so strong, he rarely grew sick, weak, or pale.

I bounded off the bed, grabbed one of the paper cups out of the dispenser beside the sink, and filled it.

He took a sip, collected drops from the side of the container, and wiped his forehead. Some color returned to his face.

"Where would Sean get steroids?" Dad gazed helplessly at Mom.

Nothing made any sense to me. Not the questions. Not the answers.

Two uniformed policemen came in. The older man