

Abbie had no clue where the excitement inside of her began and the nerves ended. Maybe they were just so deeply entangled there was no beginning or ending; maybe they'd turned into a single emotion.

The first day of school had never caused this much turbulence. Abbie wouldn't ever say she was the best student or the most outgoing person in her class, but, like, she wasn't ever nervous to start a new school year.

Still, though, as she stared up at the legit *giant* ivy-covered building in front of her, she was more than a little apprehensive about walking inside.

"It's a lot different when you're planning on walking in for class than when you take a tour, I guess," she muttered, either to herself or her mom and Caroline; it didn't matter who heard it.

Abbie had toured Elliston Prep – twice – before making the decision to switch schools and come here for her last two years of high school.

She'd liked her last school... as much as anyone *likes school*, anyway. But it was part of the same public high school network that all of her friends from middle school went to, and she'd played on *their* soccer team for the last two years, which opened the door for her to make a ton of other friends.

But while the team she'd played on was a decent team, they didn't even rank first in the state. Elliston Prep's girl's team was ranked in the top five in the *country*. And they'd scouted *her* out.

Ultimately, it was too hard to turn down.

She was second-guessing that choice right now, though, as handfuls of students milled around them, walking by them and into the large, heavy doors into the main hall.

She frowned, "This *is* the main hall... right?"

She turned to face her mom and Caroline, needing to double check that she was in the right place. But she saw the same nerves she was feeling mirrored on her mom's face, so she instead focused on Caroline.

Caroline never wavered, and she didn't look like she was now, either.

"Yep, this is it. The main office is right in those front doors, then to the left. Right where we came last week to pick up everything you need," Caroline reassured, giving Abbie a smile that reflected certainty.

She had *no* clue how Caroline always seemed so certain, but she always had, to Abbie. Certain and steady, and there was something about her in that way that Abbie had always responded to.

It worked even now, as she nodded. "Right. Got everything I need."

"You have your class schedule?" Her mom asked, breathing out a deep breath as she commanded Abbie's attention. Her mom's gray eyes were also steady. Nervous for Abbie, but steady in that she knew that if she wanted to go back to her old school right now, she'd

bring her. “Extra uniform? Locker combination? Gym clothes? Soccer bag? School map? All of your school supplies?”

“I brought my soccer bag and gym clothes last week, when I did some drills with the team at the first practice,” Abbie confirmed, before running through her mom’s checklist in her head. “Other than that... yeah. Got it.”

She still didn’t walk forward, though, reaching up with the hand that wasn’t holding her soccer ball – the one thing she hadn’t put in her gym locker, because this was her lucky ball, signed by the National team, and she’d needed it for a final impromptu game with her old teammates two days ago – to grab onto her backpack strap.

“The uniforms are strange,” she felt the need to say, and she didn’t know if it was because she still just wasn’t used to them or because she was stalling for a little more time to feel *ready*.

But... she didn’t really like the uniforms, so that was true. She frowned down at it.

A blue blazer with a crisp white shirt underneath, tie, and the option of wearing tailored khaki or gray pants or a skirt. Not her style.

“You look good, honey,” her mom said, reaching out a smoothing a hand over Abbie’s shoulder.

She shrugged. “It’s not *that*. It’s like... why can’t we just wear normal clothing?” She fidgeted with her backpack, rolling her neck. “I know I’ll get used to it. *You* wear a suit, like, every day,” she nodded at Caroline.

“I do. And if you are also wanting to be a high-powered attorney, then this uniform is a great choice for you to get used to is,” Caroline joked.

Abbie rolled her eyes, but found herself laughing, anyway.

The sound of a bell ringing inside echoed through the main hallway and out to them, and for some reason the sound of it settled her.

This was happening. This was her new, fancy, gigantic school, where she was going to kick ass as a goalie. And she had English first period, which was great, because the only thing worse than starting at a new school, would be starting it with math first period, probably.

She turned back to look at Caroline and her mom, bolstered by the very clear pride they both wore. “It’s kind of crazy that this is a boarding school,” she said, “Like, that a lot of these other guys barely see their parents.”

Seventy percent of the students lived on campus. Which... even though her mom and Caroline – okay, usually not Caroline – could drive her nuts sometimes, she’d really miss them if she didn’t see them all the time. Especially if it started when she was fourteen!

“It’s perfect, you step a toe out of line and we know exactly what we’re doing with you,” Caroline wiggled her eyebrows.

“As if. You’d miss me too much,” she shot back with a cheeky smile.

When the second bell rang, she nodded to her mom and Caroline. She knew from her meeting with the headmaster and from reading the handbook, which Caroline had made them do together, that by the third bell, she would have to be in her first period.

“I’ll see one of you after practice, this afternoon?” She asked, sliding her gaze between them.

And it didn’t surprise her at all when her mom reached out and pulled her into a hug. A little too tight, but... Abbie loved her mom’s hugs, and it felt nice, and she wrapped her arms around her.

When her mom squeezed for a little too long, she tried to tug herself back. “Mom, I’m just going to a different high school. Sure, it’s a high school where everyone has more money than god,” Elliston was one of the most elite private schools in the country; children of celebrities and politicians from all over the world sent their kids here. “But, just a school.”

It was also a reminder to herself.

“I know. I know,” her mom murmured, before pulling back. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, mom.” She heaved a dramatic sigh. “It takes bravery to enlist like this, but someone’s gotta do it.”

She knew, though, that her mom wanted everything for her. Every opportunity, every chance, and she knew her mom wanted Abbie to never have any reason to look back and have regrets over her choices. It was a reason why Abbie had ended up making the choice to come here; what if she didn’t and then she kicked herself for it?

Caroline chuckled, reaching out and carefully tucking Abbie’s hair back. “Kick this prep school’s ass, Abbacado.”

The nickname brought a swirl of good, warm memories flooding through her.

After her final goodbyes, she turned and walked up the stone steps... before she looked back as she hit the main entrance.

Unsurprisingly, they were still watching her. Caroline in her tailored charcoal suit, arm around her mom’s waist. Her mom in dark jeans with a white button up tucked loosely in, leaning closely into Caroline’s side.

With a final wave – which they immediately returned – she walked into the school. Shiny, mahogany floors that were perfectly polished under her feet, soaring arched ceilings above her head. Her locker should only be a minute walk away from what she’d memorized on the map, and then her English class was right in an adjacent building from that, and she should still have four minutes before the final bell –

Before she could even really process what was happening, a girl walked by, reaching out and knocking Abbie’s soccer ball out of where it was nestled in the crook of her arm, sending it bouncing down the hallway.

Thankfully, the main hall only had a few straggling students left, her ball lodging under a bench fifteen feet away, but *still*.

Abbie spun around to face the perpetrator. And she wanted to believe it had been an accident somehow – she really, really did.

But the girl hadn't stopped walking. A long, graceful strut, really, with long dark hair done into a French braid that fell halfway down her back, and a bag slung over her shoulder. She didn't pause at all, after bumping into Abbie.

Shocked and annoyed and baffled, she called out, "Hey! What the hell was that for?"

The girl turned around, then. She had perfectly shaped dark eyebrows, set over equally dark eyes, with a small beauty mark under her eye that looked so... movie-star-esque, Abbie *had* to wonder if this girl had drawn it on. She'd, like Abbie, opted for the fitted pants for the uniform, and was holding an iced coffee.

Her full lips pulled into a frown as she raised her eyebrows at Abbie. "Oh, crap; I didn't think you actually wanted to be holding onto your dirty soccer ball. So sorry, Lemon."

*Lemon?* What the fuck did that mean?!

Either way, Abbie's mouth fell open in offense as she stormed down the hall and bent down to grab her treasured ball. It *was* well loved, when Greer Kingston – the best goalkeeper in the *world* as proven by the last World Cup – told Abbie to not let this ball sit on her shelf and to keep using it to get better, Abbie was not going to disagree.

"Screw you," she muttered darkly, as she grunted and tugged the ball out of where it was wedged between the wall and a leg of the very sturdy bench.

By the time she picked her ball up, stood, and brushed herself off, though, the girl was gone. As was *everyone*, leaving Abbie entirely alone in the large hallway... creepy.

Then, the third bell rang, and Abbie swore under her breath, taking off at a run in the direction she *thought* her English class would be in.

It turned out, she realized nearly ten minutes later, panting slightly as she finally found the classroom, that Elliston Prep was even better than she'd remembered on her tour. And the humanities building was actually to the *right* of the main hall, not the left.

Anxious, she took in a deep breath and slowly nudged open the closed door.

The teacher – a tall woman who was definitely older than Abbie's mom and her Caroline but younger than her grandmother, with severe features and her hair pulled into a bun – paused whatever she was saying, turning to look at Abbie. "Hello? Can I help you?"

Nerves tangled in the pit of her stomach, as she pushed the door the remainder of the way open, but stayed standing in the doorway. "Hi. Sorry, about being late. I'm, um – this is my first day," she offered with a grimace, "I got a little lost."

And she hadn't had any free time to consult her map, but that seemed neither here nor there.

"Ahhh, you must be Abigail Dalton," the teacher surmised as she nodded at her. Still not giving away whether or not Abbie was in trouble, though.

She shifted from foot to foot in her new shoes. She'd always just worn sneakers or maybe a pair of boots to school, before. Here, she had to wear the regulation oxfords. "Abbie," she automatically corrected, then cleared her throat, "But, yeah. Yes. I am."

The woman smiled, then, her severe features still severe but not scary, as she gestured for Abbie to enter the classroom. "Well, don't just stand there; come on in. I'm Ms. Belanger, I teach upperclassmen honors literature."

Ms. Belanger, right. Her name had been on Abbie's class schedule. Cautiously relieved, she quickly walked in, shutting the door behind her, "I wasn't sure if I'd get into trouble or anything, so..."

She trailed off as she turned and faced the rest of her class.

There were only eleven other kids – the average class size here was fourteen students – but they were all staring at her. Obviously.

Self-conscious, she felt herself blush and turned back to the teacher. Who then handed her a small stack of papers from her desk, stapled together.

"Elliston makes quite the large footprint; it can take a little while to gather your bearings. Today, you get a tardiness pass," she said quietly, lightly patting Abbie's shoulder comfortingly with her other hand as Abbie took the papers from her.

Still embarrassed, relief trickled through her. "Thank you."

"We were just going over the syllabus. I trust you have your laptop, with Elliston's information downloaded?"

Abbie nodded quickly; she'd set up her account on the school site last week, carefully following the instructions provided in her welcome packet.

Ms. Belanger smiled. "Wonderful. As a dinosaur, I prefer to go over the paper syllabus," she gestured at what was now in Abbie's hand, "Which we were just starting to do. So why don't you take your seat, and we'll get going."

Abbie hopped to, turning around, and even though she was nervous, she deliberately made eye contact with everyone who was trying to make eye contact with her.

If her first fifteen minutes was anything to go by, some of these kids were already ready to go for the jugular.

She'd once, a couple of years ago, when Caroline was practicing to go to court over a really nasty divorce and custody case, asked how she walked into a meeting full of people who were getting paid thousands of dollars to challenge and argue and debate everything Caroline said and did.

Caroline had answered thoughtfully, which she always did for Abbie, and Abbie always appreciated that about her. "When you walk into a room full of sharks, Ab, the only way to survive with all of your limbs intact is to prove you're a bigger shark with sharper teeth."

So even though a part of her wanted to rush to her seat and make herself unnoticeable, she took every step deliberately, breathing in slowly, and held onto every bit of confidence she had.

Especially when she locked eyes with the person sitting at the desk behind her.

The girl with the movie star beauty mark and nice lips. Who was somehow both smirking and glaring.

Abbie glared back.

“Nice of you to make it, Lemon,” she said, haughty.

The confusing nickname – which was also *stupid*, she decided – ate at her. She slid her backpack down and hung it off the back of her chair, and held the girl’s gaze, sarcastically shooting back, “Thanks, so much.”

When the bell rang to end the class forty minutes later, Abbie carefully retrieved her soccer ball from where she’d stashed it under her desk, holding it still with her feet to ensure that it wouldn’t roll away.

She jumped in surprise as Ms. Belanger cleared her throat, standing in front of Abbie’s desk as the other kids started to file out.

“As I understand it, Abbie, you’re a new addition to our prodigious soccer team?” She arched an eyebrow down at the ball now on Abbie’s seat as she loaded her laptop into her backpack.

She brushed her hair out of her face, placing her hand on the ball. “Yes.”

“Wonderful,” Ms. Belanger smiled softly, “However, bringing the ball to class is not something I would appreciate in the future.”

Which Abbie felt herself blush. “Of course. Yeah, I, um, I wasn’t intending to do it, now, either. I just – I didn’t really have time to find my locker, before class.”

Ms. Belanger nodded, sympathy written over her face. “I understand. Where is your next class?”

Abbie scrunched up her face, trying to recall exactly. “In the... Cochran building? Chemistry, with Dr. Snyder,” she clarified. She’d double checked that, secretly, on her laptop during class.

“And what is your locker number?”

“2231 – C.”

“Rose,” Ms. Belanger said, looking behind Abbie, at the girl who called her *Lemon*. “Where is your next class?”

Rose, apparently, looked up from packing her own bag. Her big, brown eyes looking annoyingly innocent, as if she hadn’t been eavesdropping. She looked between Abbie and Ms. Belanger, before grudgingly admitting, “I have chemistry, with Dr. Snyder, ma’am.”

Ms. Belanger nodded, decisively, “Perfect. I trust that you, of all people, can guide Abbie to both her locker *and* your class in a timely manner; I’ll send a note for the both of you in the system to Dr. Snyder, alerting him that you might be a couple of minutes late.”

Rose’s lips twitched into a smile that was obviously forced. “Of course.”

Ms. Belanger looked back at Abbie. “Rose is also on the soccer team; one of our star players, in fact. I’m sure that will give you some good conversation.”

The smile she gave Abbie was nice and encouraging, and Abbie weakly returned it. This woman at least *thought* she was doing something nice.

As Ms. Belanger returned to her desk at the front of the room, Rose slid her bag over her shoulder. “Well, let’s go, Lemon.”

She didn’t wait for Abbie, before she moved past her and out into the hallway.

Abbie quickly followed, soccer ball and backpack in hand. Annoyance sparked through her, pushing her to ask, “What’s your problem with me? I’ve never even *met* you.” She frowned, dodging several of the students walking in the other direction. They seemed to part for Rose, but that courtesy didn’t extend to her. “And, if you’re some *star player*, why weren’t you at the pre-season drill practice last week?”

She’d known that a few of the players had excused absences from the practice Abbie had gone to, and she hadn’t had much time to sit and talk to anyone, beyond some introductions and basic chit-chat.

Rose shot her a look out of the corner of her eye. “That’s really none of your business.”

She came to a short stop in front of some random lockers, giving Abbie an exasperated, impatient look. But Abbie only stared back at her in confusion, before she realized they were at locker number 2231–C.

“Oh! Wow. You actually brought me to my locker,” she muttered, genuinely surprised as she dug out her combination code from her pocket.

“Obviously,” Rose shot back, her tone screaming *duh*.

Abbie scoffed as she opened the locker, giving Rose an incredulous look. “Seriously? You think it’s dumb for me to have doubted that you were actually going to make a pit stop here, when *you’re* the one who hated me at first sight an hour ago?”

Rose rolled her eyes, hard, before she crossed her arms and admitted, “Ms. Belanger is the kind of teacher who would follow up with Snyder and make sure that I brought you to your locker to store that... ball,” she eyed it with a grimace as Abbie placed it at the bottom of her locker.

She gave it a loving pat for good measure, smiling to herself when she heard Rose sigh.

Still, though, she also didn’t want to be too late to *both* of her classes today, and she straightened up, shutting the door after she slid one of the literature books Ms. Belanger had handed out into her locker – “In case anyone still prefers to read hard copies,” she’d explained.

Abbie *did* prefer to read hard copies.

Rose took off down the hall, which was now nearly entirely cleared out as the late bell rang, and Abbie hustled to keep up. No way was she going to let Rose think she wasn't just as quick or as capable as she was. No freaking way.

"How long have you played soccer?" She asked.

"Long enough," Rose sort-of answered, her tone short, as they turned down another hallway, then started up a set of stairs.

Irritated, Abbie repeated, "You never answered what your problem was with me. Honestly, I would love to know."

Rose huffed out a breath, before she answered, "My *problem* with you, is that you're coming here, probably thinking you're some fucking golden child for our team, when – newsflash – we've won nationals for years, without you. We don't *need* you on this team, I certainly didn't ask for you to be on it, and you come flouncing in here, complaining about having to wear a uniform – a uniform, I might add, that's been worn at Elliston since it was founded in 1853. A uniform, *I might add*, that was the first in the country that designed and allowed female students to wear pants. Talking about how *crazy* it is that people actually live here, away from their parents, when parents send their children here to get one of the best high school educations in the world."

Abbie stumbled over her own feet at the heat in Rose's tone, her mind racing with the fact that Rose was, actually, citing things Abbie had said, outside, to her parents. She felt a little sheepish, but also still so *irked*, because, "You're totally taking what I said out of context! As for the stuff about the team, I didn't ask to come here; I was *asked* to come here."

"Exactly. Because you're so *special*," Rose snapped, spinning around and facing Abbie.

And Abbie ran right into her, not expecting Rose's abrupt stop in the least. She knew as soon as she slammed into Rose, still having been walking at an exacting speed, that they were going down.

Rose's wide, shocked eyes met hers, her hands coming to grasp frantically at Abbie, as if Abbie had any more control over their momentum than she did.

They fell, both of them yelping, as Abbie reached out and tried to brace the impact on the floor – or at least brace the impact of landing entirely on Rose, who took the brunt of it.

The classroom door to the left of them opened immediately, a tall older man in thick glasses staring down at them in surprise. "What in the world is going on out here?" He adjusted his glasses, bumbling over his words, "A *fight*, on the first day?"

Abbie's heart was racing in her chest as she panted, still irritated at Rose, and shocked from the fall, and embarrassed – so, so embarrassed – on top of it all, as she looked past the teacher and into the classroom.

Where all of the students inside were now out of their seats at the word "fight" and gathered behind the teacher to see what was going on.



“No, Dr. Snyder,” Rose bit out from under Abbie. She reached up and shoved at Abbie’s shoulder, “We’re not in a fight.”

Abbie quickly pushed herself up, stomach dipping low, as her nerves tied together. All of the possible excitement she’d had when her mom and Caroline had dropped her off was long forgotten now, as she tangled her fingers together in front of her, staring up at the man who was apparently her chemistry teacher.

She looked down at Rose, whose face was flushed as she pushed herself up from where she’d been totally laid out, and...

Regardless of what had gotten them into this predicament, she felt *bad*. She’d knocked her down, maybe hurt her, and Rose *had* taken Abbie’s statements outside out of context, but clearly she hadn’t disliked Abbie out of nowhere; she’d had a misguided reason. Maybe she was just... sensitive.

Still embarrassed, she avoided looking at her classmates this time, and reached a hand down to Rose.

Who shot her a glare and ignored it, choosing to push herself up, instead.

“Abbie here had no idea where we were supposed to go, and ran into me. Ms. Belanger sent you a note that we’d be a little late,” Rose informed the teacher imperiously, as she reached down and snatched her backpack from the floor.

Dr. Snyder lifted his eyebrows, nodding to himself as he stepped back into the classroom and cleared his throat. “Ah, all right, then.” He turned and saw the other students still on their feet, watching, and made a *shoo* gesture. “Get back in your seats, everyone. We’re still in the middle of attendance.”

Rose brushed past her, chin tilted up, as she settled into a seat in the front of the class. Abbie bent down and grabbed her own backpack reluctantly, dreading what the rest of her day – the rest of her *year* – was going to look like, if this was only how the first couple of hours was going.

She paused, perking up the slightest bit when she saw Amaya, one of the girls she’d met from the team last week, waving at her with a friendly smile, gesturing to the seat next to hers. She hurried to slide into it.

“Hey!” Amaya whispered, “I wondered when I’d be seeing you around.”

Abbie breathed out a sigh, sinking deeper into her seat, as she tossed Dr. Snyder a look – he seemed very pre-occupied with checking his computer, presumably for the message from Ms. Belanger – as she didn’t want to get into any more trouble or run into any more issues, today. She honestly couldn’t handle it.

“Well... you’re seeing me,” she muttered, trying to smile.

Amaya frowned, leaning across the aisle a bit as she spoke, “What were you doing out there with Rose?”

Abbie shot Rose a look out of the corner of her eye. Rose appeared very focused on situating her laptop, notebook, and pens up in a dedicated order, deliberately not looking at anyone. Seemingly above it.

“Uh...” She quickly averted her gaze when Rose sent a look over her shoulder. “She was showing me to class,” she muttered.

Because apparently, Rose was a star player on the team, which meant she’d known Amaya and they’d played together on the team for a couple of years. And she definitely didn’t need to make *more* enemies than she apparently already accidentally had.

Amaya scoffed out a laugh, though. “Was it court ordered?”

Abbie’s lips pulled into a grin at the question, cautiously optimistic as she looked back at Amaya. “Basically.”

Amaya shot her a sympathetic look. “Are you already regretting coming here?”

Abbie paused, before she shrugged and told the truth, “Basically.”

Amaya’s hand reached out and patted Abbie on the knee, “Don’t give up on us just yet. Rose Elliston isn’t necessarily the *niciest* person this place has to offer. One hell of a striker, though.”

“At least she has something going fo—” Amaya’s words caught up with Abbie, then, and she cut herself off, whipping her head to stare at Amaya. Then to Rose. Then back to Amaya. “Did you say Rose *Elliston*? Like... is that some sort of strange coincidence?”

Amaya shook her head. “Definitely not. Elliston as in, her family founded this school like a hundred and seventy years ago.”

Abbie blew out a deep breath, containing her groan. Great. Not only did she *have* an enemy on day one, but it was the princess of the school. That was amazing.

“Look, though, Rose isn’t all that bad. She’s, uh, prickly.”

Abbie locked eyes with Amaya, and they shared a laugh at her choice in words. Which, honestly, really did made her feel better.

Amaya shook her head. “Sometimes, she’s pricklier than other times. But on the field, she will always have your back. And off the field, you don’t have to be friends. Easy as that.”

“I guess,” Abbie allowed. But what other choice did she have?

She wasn’t just going to quit Elliston after one weird, shitty day. Sure, her mom and Caroline would probably let her go back to her school if she told them she really, truly thought she would be miserable here, but she didn’t want to do that.

She wasn’t a quitter. And she definitely wasn’t going to be run off by Rose Elliston, she decided.

“Cool. And, hey – I’ll bring you to your next class,” Amaya offered with a playful smile, “I won’t run you into the ground, either. You can consider *that* a favor. Follow for more.”

An unexpected laugh escaped her throat, and she clapped her hand over her mouth when a few heads turned her way. Not Rose's, though she did narrow her eyes at her laptop screen.

"I actually ran her into the ground," Abbie corrected in a whisper.

Amaya giggled, "Right. Oh, man. Practice today is going to be so fun." She nudged Abbie's shoulder. "Welcome to Elliston."