

The rest of our team wasn't far behind me as they exited the same door in twos and threes jogging to the field. Afternoon games were played on our practice field which was still in decent shape for the middle of the season. There were a few areas in the center of the field and in front of the goals where the grass was fading and the dirt was winning over.

The night games were played on the football field in the stadium. I loved playing under the lights because you didn't get to see every one watching you. It was louder since it became more of a social occasion than a sporting event. But I was good at blocking out the noise. It was too bad we only had two night games. I knew it was because the football coach hated to share the field and complained that we tear it up and ruin it for his guys. The thought of soccer doing more damage than football where most of the game was played on the ground made me laugh. Guys were so territorial.

Our captains, Lauren, Veronica and Heather yelled for the team to line up behind them. In unison, we ran two warm up laps around the field while the girls did the ritualistic chants about winning and being the best. I wasn't much of a chanter. I was focusing on the game in my head. Running through the potential dodges and break aways. I had tucked all the uneasy emotions away and was back in my familiar world where I was in control of my thoughts and movements. I was ready to play.

After our synchronized stretching, Coach called us over to run through the key strategies for the game. The head ref blew his whistle for all the starting players to take the field. Sara jogged out to the other side of the field beside me.

“Ready?” She winked.

“Of course,” I smiled.

This was it and I was completely in the moment. Nothing was distracting me once the whistle blew. Home team started with the ball, no problem. My heart was beating in anticipation of the first kick – and then it began.

Breathing, yelling, cheering, whistles, groans – just focus and watch the ball. The ball was kicked across the field slightly ahead of me. I accelerated to intercept it. Easily controlling the ball with my feet, I sprinted up field, not giving the ball much lead. It became an extension of me, without much effort. I dribbled around the fullback and passed back to Sara as I heard her exclaim she was open. She drove the ball ahead of me noticing I beat the defender. I passed the ball back and forth between my feet, drawing the sweeper toward me. I flipped the ball with my toe, sending it over her feet as she went to steal it. I sprinted to the ball before she could recover. Just me and the goalie – I entered the upper right corner of the keepers box, measuring her angle of commitment. I could see her body already veering left, as I sent the ball sailing into the upper left corner of net. The whistle blew in declaration of my goal.

Sara was there to celebrate with a leap, grabbing my shoulders. I felt the reminder of my bruises in her grasp, but my adrenaline was surging and it barely made me flinch. She remembered a little too late, and looked at me with apologetically. I smiled to let her know I was fine and ran back to the center of the field, slapping the hands of my teammates along the way.

My prediction held true. It was a good game. The opposing team had an effective front line scoring three goals. But our line and defense proved to be better with a victorious four goals, three of which were mine. One was a result of a break away that left my team behind me and their defense drawn too far forward and unable to recover in time to prevent my one on one with their goalie that resulted in the winning fourth goal. Two minutes later, the ref blew a long whistle indicating the end of the game.

We jumped and cheered as we gathered in a circle with our arms connecting, singing our victory chant. I received the hand slapping recognition for my contribution to our win. This was exactly where I needed to be, completely past this afternoon's mess.

“Nice game, Emma,” Coach Pena praised. He was walking over to the bench where I was squirting water into my mouth.

“Thanks Coach.”

He squatted in front of me and lowered his voice. “I’m not sure if you noticed, but there were some scouts here today watching the game. I’m pretty sure they were here to see you.”

My heart skipped a beat. They were here to watch me? How come I didn’t notice – once again?

“I didn’t want to distract you, so I asked them not to say anything to you until after the game. But it looks like they’ve already taken off.”

“Do you know which colleges they were from?” I asked my heart racing as I was searching the faces in the crowd.

“I’m pretty sure they were St. John, Rutgers, USC and Stanford,” he confirmed. Four colleges – I couldn’t believe it. “I think you’ll be hearing from them. You gave them quite an impressive performance today. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” I still couldn’t believe they were here to watch me.

Coach stood up, patted me on the back and headed to where the varsity girls had collected on the grass, clapping his hands, “Great game, ladies.”

Sara skipped over to me and gave me a hug. “I just heard, Em. That is so exciting! Your first scouting game!” She could barely contain her excitement. I think she was more excited than me. Then again, Sara was always more excited than me.

I still felt dazed by the news. “They had to have been scouting some of the seniors as well. They couldn’t have all been here for just me.”

“I don’t think so. I think it was just for you,” she beamed. In the background the junior varsity girls were counting their stretches in unison, preparing for their turn.

As we walked towards the rest of our team, I looked around to find the sidelines were pretty crowded with spectators. The football and soccer teams had interrupted their practices to cheer us on, and were now making their way back to their fields.

“Pretty good showing for the game, huh?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t hear the guys yelling when you broke away. It was so loud! Seriously, I have no idea how you tune everything out around you. It’s kinda freaky you know.”

“Thanks,” I said, trying to sound offended as I pushed her.

“I guess you are pretty good.”

His voice again – really, again?! Go away! He was standing on the side line with a camera in his hands. I looked at him speechless. He let out a half laugh that crept into a huge smile and then turned toward the guy’s soccer field. To my dismay, my heart skipped a beat.

The sun danced off the glints of gold in his tousled chestnut hair as he got further away. I could see the shape of his tight, lean muscles in his back through his overworn t-shirt. Why did he have to look like he just stepped off of an Abercrombie bag? He’s not supposed to be noticing me and I was trying without success not to notice him. But he was getting to me, and I think he knew it – and I think that amused him. This of course frustrated me. How could this guy unravel my constant universe in just one day?

“Nice,” Sara exhaled looking after the same image. I didn’t realize she was standing next to me and it caught me off guard. Heat spread across my cheeks afraid she could read my thoughts.

“Stop it - he’s hot. It’s just taken you way too long to notice him.”

I ignored her and walked to the bench where I proceeded to watch the JV game.

“Do you want to tell coach you have to pick up your cousins so that you can come over to my house and take a shower and grab something to eat? I know you won’t be able to eat when you get home.”

“Sure.” I looked over at her and she still had a stupid grin on her face. “Just because I am coming over, we are not talking about him - so you can get that look off of your face. I could honestly care less.” Or at least I was trying to.

Coach was understood my expectations at home, even though he didn't know the half of it, so he allowed us to leave. On our way to the school, a man dressed in a blue polo shirt and khakis carrying a portfolio was exiting the back of the building.

"Emily Thomas?" he inquired.

Sara and I looked at each other confused.

"Yes?" I replied.

"I'm Jeff Brown. I'm a scout representing Stanford. I watched you play today." I was breathless and couldn't bring myself to respond. He reached out his hand and I shook it, trying to remain standing. "You have some serious abilities on the soccer field, and off actually. I just came from the office looking at your recent transcript. If you keep it up, you would be an ideal candidate to attend our program."

"Thank you." I still couldn't bring myself to accept that this was really happening.

"I'd love it if you could send me this tri-mester's transcript when it's over and perhaps we can arrange for you to come out and see the college and what we have to offer."

"That would be great." My delivery fell flat and sounded pathetic – I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. This was everything I was hoping for and instead of being confident and enthusiastic, I was stunned and inept. I hope this guy didn't have second thoughts after meeting me. I'm sure this interaction wasn't impressing him.

"So I'll give you a call in January, and we'll make arrangements for you to fly out to California over your spring break." He shook my hand again, smiling warmly and handed me his card. I tried to return the smile and nodded. I couldn't say anything in fear that I might throw up. He headed towards the parking lot and I stood there with Sara, completely dumbfounded.

"Omigod!" Sara screamed, jumping up and down. "Stanford! Em, this is so amazing!"

She stopped to look at me. "What's wrong? Why aren't you jumping with me?" I sat on the ground with my legs crossed, my hands were shaking. I put my face in my palms and started to cry.

Sara was silent for a moment, but then she sat next to me and placed her arm around my shoulder and spoke quietly in my ear, “You deserve this you know. It’s finally all going to happen just like you planned.”

I took a deep breath and wiped my eyes. I took another deep breath and reeled the emotion back in and tucked it away. I looked over at Sara and whispered, “Thanks.” I smiled brightly at her, trying to break the awkward vulnerable moment. This set her off again. She jumped up and pulled me from the ground, and proceeded to jump around in excitement. I was genuinely able to smile. I couldn’t celebrate yet. I reminded myself that I had to not screw this up for the next five hundred forty-two days.

Sara and I were in her kitchen putting a plate of leftover chicken and baked potatoes together when she asked, “Could you please tell me what happened?”

I couldn’t meet her eyes, so I kept myself busy with heating the food in the microwave as I responded, “You know how she is. She’s insane.”

“Honestly, Em, when you freaked yesterday morning about forgetting to take out the trash, I knew she was going to give you a hard time, but I had no idea.”

“Neither did I,” I confessed. “I never know how she’s going to react or what’s going to set her off. That’s why I freak when I *know* I did something wrong. She reacts ten times worse when I obviously screw up. Listen, Sara, I don’t tell you when she overreacts because I don’t want to upset you.”

“But that’s what I’m here for.” Sara stopped what she was doing to look at me, “I’m here for you, to be your friend and I want to know about all of the insanity, even if it does piss me off.

“I wish you could just live with me. Why can’t I say something to my parents? You know they would understand and love you as much as I do. Besides, I think my mom suspects how hard it is for you without me even saying anything.”

I looked at Sara panicked, “Sara you can’t say anything to anyone. It will only make it worse. Besides, she’s not like this at all with Leyla and Jack. I know she really loves them and they love her. If anyone found out, they may take them away from her and George, and I couldn’t do that to them.

“Actually, I think it may be best if I didn’t tell you the details. I’ll tell you that I got in trouble, but I won’t tell you anything else. I don’t want you to ever have to lie for me, especially to your mom. I can tell too that she knows I don’t have it easy, but I don’t want her to know more than that. For all anyone knows, my aunt and uncle are just really strict. Okay?”

My eyes pleaded for her cooperation.

“Okay,” she conceded reluctantly.