

Chapter One

“You mean to say that you found only one girl this morning who is good enough to play on your team, but one hundred and four more that are better suited to Walden?”

Secured under Mr. McAllister’s arm against his suit was a glossy navy blue folder with the school crest on the front. “Yes, sir.”

“You can invite up to twelve girls to interview, and you have room for five juniors on the team.”

“There aren’t twelve girls worth interviewing. There weren’t even five at the level required to play for Walden.”

“But there was one.”

“Barely.”

The Headmaster stared back at him. “This isn’t the first time a girl with her demographic has applied to Walden, surely.”

“Demographic is an understatement, sir. She comes from one of the roughest council estates in the country.”

McAllister had been the girls’ football coach and a Walden teacher for seven years, whilst Mr. Sutherland had currently been headmaster for three, but they were both former pupils. The workings of Walden were not unfamiliar to either of them.

“Even with our standards I must say I find that hard to believe,” the Headmaster said with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m only stating a fact of the school’s history as I know it, sir. Walden has repeatedly rejected applications from students west of the county because the only candidates there are gypsies and dropouts with no interest in Walden. I don’t think the council even visits their own estate.”

“Labelling an entire portion of the county hardly sounds fair, Mr. McAllister.”

“Don’t mistake me for labelling, sir, but in my experience that is exactly how it plays out. Some applications in the past have been filled out for pure amusement to mock us. They don’t seem to like our world and to be quite frank, I’m not very keen on theirs.”

The Headmaster sat forward in the chair. “I’d like to see the results of Samantha’s trial this morning.”

McAllister relinquished the folder and the study went quiet as the Headmaster looked through the Walden-branded pages of handwritten notes and analysed the score sheet.

The Headmaster looked up. “You gave her all tens: skill, ability, game comprehension, participation, effort.”

“Samantha is talented, sir, but she has a wretched chip on her shoulder. The prefects came to me separately with their notes and most of it doesn’t even cover what I observed of her. Judging from that, I know I can’t spend practice time just getting her to do as she’s told.”

“You have a strap and permission to use it,” the Headmaster remarked as he returned his eyes to the pages before him without further concern.

McAllister laced his hands together as he prepared to rephrase. “I foresee she will be a handful for reasons far beyond what is typical of any girl I’ve had in the last seven years, and I’ve had my fair share of feisty footballers. What is more, we’ve had some very dire

circumstances with family and acquaintances of pupils from dire demographics. St. Andrews is a lot worse. That is my point.”

“You rated her number one of 105. According to this, she’s your top choice.” The Headmaster looked up at McAllister whilst turning the page to show the large box at the top of the page; each one had a ranking and she had a bold *one* handwritten on the skills page.

“Turn the page, sir.”

The Headmaster did, where a bold ranking of 105 out of 105 on the *personal observations* page was present. So she was the worst on that one. “That may be, but it would be a shame to deny a talented player the opportunity to grow with us.”

“I’m only expressing that I see Samantha Holloway being slightly beyond what I’m prepared to take on.”

“Did she cause disruption this morning?” He was still reading McAllister’s notes. There were quite a few.

“She wasn’t shy about openly challenging my authority.”

“Perhaps the girl needs Walden.”

“I would certainly say she needs a great deal of what we provide,” McAllister said without hesitation. It was clear he was referring more to the discipline Walden provided, than the spirit and community life of the school. Mr. Sutherland raised an eyebrow and returned the pages to the file folder.

“I understand your concern, Mr. McAllister, and based on circumstances with which I’ve become familiar in education I think it would be unwise to reject her application over a hypothetical lump of teenage brashness. Whilst I also can’t tell you who to put on your team, I must make it clear that it’s far more important that you build the most elite group of athletes you can. We have bottom lines and expectations, which you well know.”

McAllister looked back at the Headmaster who was only two years elder, but four years less experienced as a member of staff. They were both former pupils (at different times), but McAllister had been faculty since graduating from university.

“This will be my eighth year, sir, and I’ve never had this issue before. At the moment, there aren’t five of those girls applying as juniors who could keep up with my seniors, but the one girl who would make the cut is someone I am not entirely certain would enjoy her time here. She didn’t even complete.”

“I shan’t tell you who is good enough to play on your football team, Mr. McAllister. I simply cannot make that decision for you, but as headmaster, I make the final decision on a pupil’s ability to fit in.”

“You want me to take Samantha.”

“It would seem premature to make that decision without seeing her for myself. What does Hadley make of her?”



“You wanted to see me, sir.”

“Hadley, come in.” The headmaster gestured to the beautiful cherry wood oval dining table just a short walk away from his desk. A glossy navy blue file folder with the school crest on it was placed on the table as he claimed the chair at the head. Hadley subsequently chose the one adjacent.

“How did you find the trial?”

Straight to the point. “It was good for my team to put their training to work, sir.”

“What about the girls?”

Hadley’s mind instantly gravitated to the girl he encountered at the end. “Oh, well, there were a few who stood out to me.”

“Anyone in particular? In terms of attitude rather than ability.”

“Samantha Holloway.”

“That’s the one,” the Headmaster said as he opened the file folder and removed her Walden application and a copy of McAllister’s notes as he’d done earlier when inspecting them for the first time. Hadley was a little surprised with the speed of his reply. Clearly, the staff was on the fence about her. He could hardly blame them.

“What do you make of her?”

Hadley was flattered to be asked for an opinion, but he really shouldn’t have been surprised. He was right up there on the ladder of hierarchy. Prefects were always considered, but Head Boy was very near the top.

“What do I make of her?”

Hadley recalled the observations he’d made earlier that morning. It wasn’t difficult because Samantha Holloway stood out. She had a painted scowl over her face during most of the drills, which Hadley could only assume was put down to intense concentration because when she was playing, there was no doubting her talent. The girl was like a different person when a football was close-by, but off the pitch and behind the sideline, the scowl returned as she’d repeatedly challenged Mr. McAllister (albeit mostly through body language and non-verbal communication). Hadley’s personal interaction with her was limited to yet another observation when at break time she pushed her way between two other applicants to get a bottle of water from the table, which he and Sebastian had been supervising. Granted, the two girls had indeed been – as Sam accused – flirting. Of course, neither Hadley nor Sebastian entertained it and were nothing but polite to the applicants. Sam’s remark to the girls, *if you’re going to flirt, maybe save it for your interview. You might get further. These boys are just here for decoration*, was amusing because she had no idea who she was speaking about. The prefects had been told to remove their name badges before the trial so as not to divulge hierarchy amongst them during the trial or audition process. Only pupils who knew of Walden, had parents or siblings who were alumni, or were just aware of the fact that prefects wore striped blazers would have known that Sam’s comment was ignorant. Even for pupils who knew any pupil in a striped blazer was a prefect, no one knew who was Head Boy or Girl – and thenceforth, who would actually be making significant calls about whether or not they may be admitted. Walden very much valued integrity and genuineness, and part of that process was expecting applicants to behave properly regardless of who was around and that was one way Walden vetted them.

Hadley’s final experience of Samantha Holloway was a brief but direct conversation they had, which was just before she left school property. “*A bit of advice, number 95. If you’re given an interview, mind how you speak to those of us in striped blazers. Contrary to what you said earlier, we are not here just for decoration.*” Samantha then asked if he was a senior, which he corrected by revealing he was Head Boy.

His attention returned to the Headmaster. “I make her out to be a very gifted and passionate footballer with a wretched attitude, sir.”

The Headmaster slid a page of Walden-branded paper with handwritten notes over to the Head Boy. “It seems you and Mr. McAllister are quite in agreement.”

Hadley raised an eyebrow after reading the first line and kept it there until he'd digested all of the cursive handwriting.

"I can't disagree with what Mr. McAllister has observed, sir, although I disagree with his recommendation to bypass her."

"You do."

"Yes, sir."

The Headmaster sat back in his chair. "Tell me."

"Walden exists for the purpose of taking pupils with a gift in academics, athletics or art and developing their craft whilst also moulding their character. Samantha is one of those pupils who could be easily overlooked because quite frankly, she seems unmoldable."

"Did you speak to her at the trial?"

"Just briefly, sir. Before she left."

"Taking into consideration your interactions, you still conclude from those exchanges that she would be worth not only possibly being accepted, but also a two-year scholarship?"

Hadley thought only for a moment before replying, "Yes, sir. I do."

"That's £170,000 of alumni donations pouring into a girl whom Mr. McAllister suspects isn't worth pouring into."

Granted, the position of Head Boy was respected and trusted, but now Hadley wondered if this conversation was out of his depth. He was asked for his opinion and it was being challenged. Devil's advocate, perhaps.

"If I may say, sir, I feel that she is." Hadley could feel the Headmaster watching him intently now. "I don't disagree with what was written, but I also think it would be a mistake to deny her the opportunity when she stood out as the best player. Perhaps even one of the most impressive I've seen, and as you know, I've seen a lot of Walden football. She has a very natural gift for the game."

Hadley paused, and then he frowned gently. "I remember thinking it was strange how she seemed like two different applicants – when she was on the pitch, it was hard to look away – because I could see she loved being out there. But when I observed her interactions from a distance, I wasn't impressed in the least."

"Mr. McAllister mentioned something of the kind." The Headmaster brought his slender fingers to his chin and it appeared that he was considering the situation carefully. The Headmaster replaced the score-sheet in the file folder. "You do realise if she were accepted, you will ultimately be one of the closest to her since behaviour is something of a concern. Faye doesn't run defaulters – the Head Boy does. I don't want to take on an applicant with known concerns that will cause you a great deal of grief."

Walden prefects went through preparation mentally acquainted with army basic training. It shook them to their core and challenged them beyond what the package made it out to be. Beyond that, prefects were eighteen turning nineteen years old, and being Walden pupils meant that they were far and above more determined and talented than their age. Prefects were swiftly moving into adulthood and so were treated as such by being involved heavily in the life of the school. After all, they were the ones really managing it on a day-to-day basis.

"I appreciate that, sir, and if it helps, I'm not personally concerned about Samantha Holloway. The training has been extensive enough to cover pupils from all manner of backgrounds and tendencies including the ones who are slow to respond to rules. From what I experienced as a junior, even my class had one or two like Samantha. They were sorted out within the first week."

Hadley felt a delayed ache in his chest to hear the Headmaster being concerned for him. It was appreciated, but he wouldn't sleep at night thinking how a gifted athlete might be turned away because no one wanted to take a chance on her. Samantha certainly wasn't as well mannered as most applicants, but it wasn't as if she'd turned a table over or started a fight.

The Headmaster nodded and closed the file. "Unfortunately, Mr. McAllister didn't find anyone else so our scouts are getting ready to disperse to the clubs across the country who have games on this weekend."

"It was a bit of a disappointment, if I may say, sir."

"You certainly may. We like talent, not fabrication."