

# Changing the Rules

## - Chapter 10[ 1,626 words ]

### CHAPTER TEN

“Porter? A word, please.”

Claire held back as the rest of her homeroom filed out the door.

Mr. Eastman waited until they were alone. “You’ve been with us for almost two weeks.”

“Yeah, so?”

“I understand you’ve been sent to Mr. Green’s office at least twice for using profanity.”

“Yeah, so?” Her tone alone would have gotten her in serious trouble in her high school.

He held her gaze. “I also understand that your teachers all think there’s a lot of intelligence under that attitude you carry around.”

“A lot of smart people cuss.”

Eastman didn’t miss a beat. “In fact, the only staff on campus that don’t have an issue with this attitude seem to be your coaches.”

Claire shrugged. “That’s because they want something out of me.”

He paused, took a breath. “Maybe. But if you want to continue running track, you’re going to have to leave the profanity off campus.”

Claire blinked a few times and put a mental checkmark next to Eastman’s name as a possible good guy. She doubted teachers correcting her desire to cuss would be the same ones pulling kids into the sex trade. But was he the mole? “I’m going to be late for Shakespeare. We both know how much I’ll be using iambic pentameter in my future. So if you don’t mind . . .”

Eastman cracked a smile and nodded toward the door.

As Claire made her way out of his classroom, she texted Cooper. Find a reason to get Eastman out of his classroom after the last bell and before track.

Cooper’s reply was a check.

In fact, all of Cooper's responses were just like that. One word. One graphic. One something.

It had been four days since the lip stare, and it didn't appear either one of them was going to bring it up.

And as Claire dragged her feet in the halls of a high school, ignoring a boy suddenly felt very adolescent. They needed to talk, and not about work.

As she pulled her phone out to tell him just that, the bell rang, reminding her she was late. Students rushed past as she opened the classroom door.

Her teacher stared her down and pointed to her watch.

"Yell at Mr. Eastman. He kept me late."

"Don't think I won't check on that."

Claire plopped down in her chair. "You do that."

Claire waited outside Mr. Eastman's classroom door, in the shadows of one of the other buildings. With her backpack flung over one shoulder, she appeared to anyone watching like someone texting on her phone.

Movement out of the corner of her eye showed Eastman closing his classroom door behind him. He walked away from where she stood, and toward the field. She waited until Cooper sent a signal, and when he did she slid out a couple of tools as she angled to the door. It took less than ten seconds to pick the flimsy lock and push her way inside.

Behind his desk, she woke his computer and went straight to work. Thanks to some coaching from Sasha, Claire had learned a few tricks about hacking into the school's intranet. Through a back door, she linked Eastman's information to Cooper's classroom. Thankfully, the computers weren't ancient, and accessing audio without letting the person staring at the screen know they were being heard took less than ten minutes.

Still, the clock on the wall told her every minute she was in there was a minute closer to being caught.

With that work done, she did a quick look through Eastman's desk. She wasn't sure what she would find, but rifled through it anyway.

When she found the bottom drawer locked, she considered picking it as well.

The time told her she was pressing her luck.

Careful to put everything back the way it was before she came in, she opened the door, looked twice, and left.

Cooper glanced at the time after he texted Claire that Mr. Eastman was on the field.

Eastman couldn't have been much older than him. He wore slacks and one of the high school shirts that had the mascot logo on one side, and "Auburn Pride" written on the other. One of the students pointed Cooper's way, directing the other man.

"Cooper Mitchel?" he asked when he approached.

Cooper smiled, extended a hand. "Mr. Eastman."

"It's Leo."

Cooper indicated another spot on the field. One, so no one could hear their conversation, and two, so he could see when Claire walked onto the field.

"I'm glad you messaged me," Leo said as they walked. "I was about to do the same to you."

"Really? About Claire Porter?" Cooper's message to Leo was to discuss Claire.

Leo offered a single nod. "She's a bright girl."

If only you knew how bright. "And pretty fast on her feet, too."

"So I heard. Does she have an attitude out here?"

Cooper shook his head. "Nothing that I've seen. I was surprised when Mr. Green told me she's spent time in his office."

"My homeroom is full of kids with chips on their shoulders. I don't buy into a lot of their drama, but when I see someone with potential acting out, I try and learn what makes them happy and use it to help them focus."

"And you think that's track?"

"I'm asking you."

"The kids seem to like her, she doesn't have that chip out here," Cooper said.

Leo looked around them. "I'm hoping we can work together and keep her focused. I'd hate to see her attitude keep her from competing. I told her that today."

Cooper tried to act surprised. "I'll certainly talk to her, see if there's something causing her anger that we can mitigate."

Leo nodded a few times. "So was there something you wanted to talk with me about?"

"You covered most of it. I've reached out to a couple of her teachers when Green told me she needed to shape up." Then, because Cooper needed to stall, he asked, "Is there a behavior you've noticed with her?"

"In homeroom, she seems annoyed to be there. But I've heard she likes to challenge her teachers and say fuck a lot."

Cooper couldn't stop his laugh.

"I know. But a lot of the teachers get up in their ass about those things."

"Seems stupid to treat seventeen-year-olds like they're five."

"Hard habit for many teachers to break, I'm afraid."

"I see Claire hanging around Sean Fisher. Anything you can share about him?"

Leo shook his head as if he had plenty to say. "Sean's parents are both in the business . . ."

"Hollywood?"

Leo's nod was the answer. "His parents are uninvolved. Plenty of rumors on campus that if there was a drug you wanted, he could help with that. I had a conversation with his mother early in the year. I hinted about drugs . . . Her response was that 'pot is legal now'."

"Ouch."

"I know."

"I have him in my auto class, he doesn't appear strung out on anything to me."

"He's had plenty of Mondays where he doesn't get to school on time. I think he cleaned up a little after the holidays. Hard to tell. His grades are marginal, reminds me that his parents didn't go to college and they do just fine."

"Maybe Claire will have a good influence on him. I don't see her as the party type."

Leo laughed. "Oh, she parties. I guarantee it. Let's just hope she sticks with the simple shit and Ubers. There's a safe ride program with the school, too."

“How often is that used?”

“Not as much as it should be.” Leo looked around the field. “Sports help, so I’m glad Claire is here.”

The buzz in Cooper’s pocket distracted him. A glance at his home screen said Claire was on her way. “I’ll talk with Claire. We don’t want to see her dropping track.”

“Is she really that good?”

“I’m new to coaching, but Bennett thinks she’s a contender for state.”

Leo held out his hand. “Let’s use that to keep her focused.”

“Great talking to you,” Cooper said.

“We should grab a beer sometime. I have a few of your kids, would like to know what makes them tick. Maybe direct them toward trade schools.”

Cooper nodded. “That would be great. We’ll hit happy hour.”

“Next Thursday?”

The kids started running their warm-up laps. “You’re on.”

Cooper waved as Leo walked away and moved to where the kids dropped their backpacks. It wasn’t long before Claire showed up.

He walked up, ignored how good she looked in her running shorts and tank top. “Did you get what you wanted?”

She dropped her backpack next to the others, lifted one leg up on the short fence, and stretched over it. “I got in. Now I need your computer to funnel the details out of the intranet and into my home computer.”

“We can do that. Not sure why. The man seems legit. Worried you’re searching for drama and will get lost.”

“I think he’s our mole.”

“Warren’s man?”

Claire switched legs. “Think so. I sincerely doubt he knows we’re here. I won’t know for sure until we can do some recon.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Cooper said, looking behind him.

Claire stopped stretching, turned to him, and smiled.

She had the most expressive eyes. Coral blue with long lashes. Cooper's chest pulled, and he dropped his gaze.

She started to walk away.

Not really thinking, he reached out and grasped her arm. For a second, he just looked at where he touched her before meeting her eyes again. His mind never moved far from the Saturday meeting, and since then they'd only been polite or talked exclusively about the case. "I think we should talk," he whispered.

Her smile slowly melted and her eyes drifted closed. "I think so, too."

Cooper's neck tingled and he dropped his hand, looked around. He saw Leo Eastman turning in the direction of the parking lot and walking away.

"Not here," he said.

She pulled one knee into her chest and then the other. "Of course not."

He watched her as she jogged away and caught up with the kids running the track.

Now what the hell was he going to say?