

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 11[1,695 words]

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Claire and Jax roamed around the decoy apartment set up by Lars.

It was perfect. It looked like a bachelor pad attempting to be a family home. Hard surfaces of glass and fake leather. A big-screen TV. No real knickknacks. No family photos. The kitchen had essentials, and someone had brewed a pot of coffee and left half the coffee in the pot and grounds in the filter. Lars must have gone through the effort of making a meal and leaving the mess. Even the dish towels were stained.

“Make sure you know where everything is in the kitchen,” Claire said, opening and closing the cupboards and looking for herself.

Jax started to laugh. “Even the dishes are chipped. Well done, guys.” Her words were meant for whoever was at headquarters listening in on the conversation.

Claire meandered into Jax’s fake bedroom, flipped back the blankets on the bed, jumped inside, tossed and turned, then kicked the sheets away. In the bathroom she brushed her hair and pulled what was left in the brush free and dropped it in the wastebasket. After that she pulled away a few tissues, blotted her lipstick, and tossed that away, too. Under the sink she found the usual suspects . . . tampons, extra toilet paper, and acne cleansers and creams.

Jax walked past her and emptied a plastic bag full of dirty clothes in the corner of the room. Next was a handful of cosmetics she no longer used and a vanity mirror. She sat at the pretend desk, rifled through them. “Looks like they thought of almost everything,” Jax said.

Even the dresser had clothes tossed in with no apparent order. A closer look might clue in a detective that the style didn’t exactly match Jax, but a glance would certainly pass as teenage crap. “I bet Neil took a picture of Emma’s room and told Lars to match it.” As Claire spoke, she looked up at the camera that was disguised as a smoke alarm. “You did, didn’t you?”

The camera didn’t answer back.

Then again, there was no guarantee Neil was on the other end. Cooper, on the other hand, was likely there watching.

The doorbell to the apartment rang.

Jax turned Claire's direction. "Someone is early."

"Probably the pizza."

Jax jumped up and hustled down the hall.

As she did, Claire tossed the bags they'd brought stuff from home in into the trash.

"It's the pizza," Jax yelled from the living room.

A peek in Lars's so-called bedroom confirmed that the setup was pretty complete. A bedside drawer check was missing one thing. "A man might have condoms," she said for the cameras.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

A text message from the office stated, A man with new custody of his teenage daughter isn't having sex in his own bed.

She laughed. "Good point."

And even though she didn't like where her thoughts led, she wondered if Cooper was the one responding. The second thought was . . . Did he have condoms next to his?

Claire shook her head.

Not going there.

Just because he'd looked at her lips and had been acting different ever since he returned didn't mean a damn thing.

They would talk about it and clear the air.

And everything would go back to normal.

Claire worked her way into the living room of the apartment. Jax was spreading her world out. Backpack sprawled on the floor, notebooks on the coffee table. "It's like we're back in Richter all over again, minus the pizza," Claire said.

Jax started to laugh. "If the headmistress could see us now."

"She'd be shitting her pants."

The doorbell rang.

Claire stopped laughing, looked at Jax. "Showtime."

Jax offered Claire a fist bump before opening the door.

“Oh, hi . . . is this a—” It was Elsie’s voice.

“Hey, Elsie.” Claire bounced off the couch and peeked her head around the corner through the front door. “You found the place.”

“Yeah.”

Jax stood back, let Elsie in.

“Elsie, this is Jax.”

Jax waved her hand, closed the door behind her. “Nice to meet you.”

“Thanks for having me over,” Elsie said.

Elsie’s backpack met the other two on the floor.

“It’s cool. I need to meet new people.” Jax pulled a pillow off the couch and set it on the floor before she sat on it.

“Claire said you go to Bremerton.”

Jax rolled her eyes. “My dad’s idea of parenting is sending me to the strictest school he could find so he could ignore my existence.”

Elsie sat next to Claire on the couch.

“At least he lets you have your friends over.”

Jax laughed. “As long as I clean it up after. He’s such a pig, I don’t think he’d know if I didn’t.”

Claire couldn’t help but notice how easily Jax slipped into an American accent. It was like she’d never been to Germany, let alone grown up there.

The doorbell rang again.

Claire leaned forward and grabbed a piece of pizza. “Dig in,” she whispered. “Jax’s dad gives her guilt money.”

“I sometimes wish my parents would get divorced so I can have some of that,” Elsie said, reaching for a slice.

Jax walked around the corner with a petite girl who was undoubtedly the youngest one in the room, yet wore the most makeup. By her side was a woman in her sixties.

“Hi, girls,” the older woman said. “I’m Ally’s grandmother.”

Claire waved with her pizza. “Hey.”

“I told you everything was cool.” Ally’s jaw was tight, her eyes said she wasn’t happy with Grandma walking her in.

The grandmother seemed to take in the whole room. “Do all of you go to Bremerton?”

“Just me,” Jax said.

“We go to Auburn High,” Elsie told her, waving a finger between her and Claire.

Grandma looked down in that disapproving way some adults could manage. “Are any boys coming over?”

Ally grunted. “Grandma!”

“Hey, I’m gonna ask.”

“You’re so embarrassing.” Ally marched into the room and placed her backpack to the side of the coffee table.

“My dad would kill me if we had boys over,” Jax assured her, polite smile firmly in place.

That made the older woman soften. “Is your dad here?”

Jax shook her head. “No, but if you want to talk to him, I can call him. He’s at work, but he picks up if it’s me.”

“Grandma!” Ally glared.

“No. That’s okay.” She turned to her granddaughter. “Call me when you’re ready to leave.”

“I told you someone could give me a ride home.”

That was news. “I can,” Claire volunteered.

“Not this time.” Grandma turned toward the door. “You girls have fun.”

Ally wanted nothing to do with it. “Goodbye!”

Claire waited until the door closed before she started to laugh. "She's worse than my aunt."

Ally dropped her head back on the chair. "So annoying. I can't wait to get my driver's license."

"Jax said you're a junior," Claire said.

"I am, but my mom wouldn't pay for the class, and my grandma said I needed to get Cs in all of my classes before she'll do it."

Claire took a bite of her pizza. "I get it."

"I don't. So stupid. She blows money on a stupid private school instead of a car."

Jax and Claire exchanged glances. She seemed to remember Jax complaining of the same thing when they were at Richter.

"Do you live with your grandma?" Elsie asked.

"Sadly. My mom has a few problems. So I'm living with the old bat."

Claire couldn't help but think a "few problems" were more than Ally was suggesting.

"I'm Elsie, by the way."

"Claire," Claire said, with her mouth completely full of pizza.

Jax sat back on the pillow. "Sorry, guess I should have introduced you."

"Whatever." Ally grabbed a slice of pizza.

Jax bounced up almost as soon as her butt sat down. "Want something to drink? I think my dad went shopping." She headed toward the kitchen.

"Do you have soda?" Ally's voice grew louder.

"Think so."

Ally leaned over and picked up her backpack.

"Found some," Jax called from the kitchen.

Claire looked over her shoulder to see Jax waving a two-liter bottle of cola.

"Good, it will work with this." Ally waved a plastic water bottle in the air.

“What’s that?” Elsie asked.

Ally’s lips pulled into a Cheshire-cat grin. “The old bat should really put a better lock on the liquor cabinet.” She handed the bottle to Claire, who took the lid off and sniffed.

“Whiskey.”

“Yep. And good stuff, too. Not that cheap Jack that my mom always drinks.”

Elsie started laughing. “Now that’s the way to study!”

Oh, God. Underage drinking. Where did that fall in the investigation?

“Ally, I thought you were failing algebra,” Jax said, looking at Claire.

Yeah, they were both thinking the same thing. And it sucked. In reality, Claire couldn’t care less about a little adolescent fun, had drunk several times before she turned twenty-one. Then again, she’d turned eighteen while in Germany, and it was legal there.

Elsie set her half-eaten pizza down and moved into the kitchen. “Where’s the glasses?”

Jax hesitated. “You get the ice.”

“I can help.” Ally jumped up and moved into the kitchen.

“Hey, Jax, we need music.”

Jax left the kitchen while the other two scurried around in the kitchen opening cupboards.

“Well?” Claire said under her breath.

“My dad uses some country station on the TV,” Jax said, a little loud. Her eyes opened wide with a what the hell do we do now expression.

“Veto on country.”

Claire noticed an Echo on a side table. She told it to turn on and play.

“You’re the rebel and I’m at home,” Jax said quietly in Russian.

Yeah, they were kinda screwed.

Claire shrugged. There were plenty of ways to pretend to drink, not that she had to in an apartment that had several eyes watching them. The concern of something being slipped into the drink wasn’t there, and there was backup in case that did happen.

“Elsie, did you drive here?” Jax asked.

“Yeah, but I can call Kyle to pick me up and tell my parents I had car trouble.”

“You sure?” Claire asked.

Jax sighed with relief.

The girls walked into the living room and handed out the drinks. “To new friends,” Elsie said.

Claire could smell the liquor before she put the glass to her lips. “Wow, that’s strong.”

Ally nodded several times. “Yeah!” she said with a smile.

Jax looked at Ally. “What about algebra?”

Ally knocked back a pretty good size swallow. “Mr. Cummings looks at my tits, I’m sure I can sweet-talk my way into a C.”

And with comments like that, Claire knew their study date was the right choice. “Cheers.” She took a sip of her drink.