

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 12[1,697 words]

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cooper waited outside a bar in Valley Village, where Claire and Jax had taken an Uber. Since Cooper was the one watching the monitors, he was put in charge of getting them home.

He kept an eye on the parking lot while they went into the bar. After ten minutes, he was certain no one had followed them, and he sent Claire a text.

Once they were in his car, they both started to giggle.

The sound was infectious.

“That was highly entertaining,” Cooper said as he pulled out of the parking space.

He’d never eavesdropped on a teenage girls’ party without actually being there.

“Ally can seriously drink,” Claire said from the passenger seat.

“I noticed.”

“One drink and Elsie was done.” Jax sat in the back seat and leaned forward. “Do you know the guy Kyle came with to pick her up?” she asked Cooper.

“He was too far outside of range of the front-door cameras.” Cooper merged onto the freeway leading to their place.

“We need to fix that, then.”

Cooper had thought the same thing. “I already scheduled an adjustment.”

Claire smiled at him before turning around in her seat to include Jax in the conversation. “Not a lot on Kyle tonight, but Ally sure paid off. And that thing she has for Sean Fisher. I bet we can learn more about him through her, too.”

Cooper looked in the rearview mirror at Jax. “Do you know this Mr. Cummings?”

“No. But I’ll make a point to run into him tomorrow.” Jax sounded half-asleep.

“It’s hard to say how much of what Ally says is sensationalized for drama, or truth,” Claire said. “She has a hard shell.”

“I knew she lived with her grandmother, and assumed it wasn’t a great parent relationship, but after tonight, it sounds worse than I thought. She has an attitude at school, but isn’t at all like we saw tonight.”

“Lots of kids her age drink like that to get attention,” Claire said.

“That drinking gets them into trouble.” Cooper switched lanes.

“We’re all guilty of teenage drinking, and sometimes the purpose was the trouble.” Claire swiveled back around. “God, I’m tired.”

“Me too.”

Cooper glanced between the two of them. “It didn’t look like you guys drank that much.”

“Just enough to not drive,” Claire said. With her eyes closed, she reached over and placed a hand on his arm. “Thanks for picking us up.”

They’d put the plan in place to Uber to a drop-off or pick-up place away from the Tarzana home to avoid any tails. Not that it was clearly needed yet, but there was no reason to take chances this early in the game. Two girls Ubering to a bar with fake IDs was easier to explain than the assistant track coach picking up two teenage girls.

“No problem.”

Claire didn’t pull her hand back immediately, instead it kind of slid off and onto the center console. Cooper glanced over to see her eyes unfocused on the road in front of them. “We scored a party invite for Saturday.”

Jax groaned. “Lewis is gonna be ticked.”

“If he doesn’t understand your work, you might wanna get rid of the guy.”

Cooper felt a bit like a chauffeur listening in on the paying clients who were both half-asleep and half-drunk.

“He’s getting clingy. I didn’t think that would happen until he finished law school.”

“Your boyfriend is a lawyer?” Cooper asked.

Jax lifted a hand, eyes still closed, and yawned. “Almost a lawyer.”

“He’s not the guy for you, Jax. We’ve talked about this.” Claire took that moment to open her eyes. When she did, she pulled her hand away from his side of the car as if she didn’t realize it was there.

Cooper turned off at their exit and drove through the dark streets to their home. One look in the rearview mirror suggested Jax had fallen asleep.

With Claire quiet at his side, he didn’t think she was far behind.

He lowered his voice. “I take it you don’t like the boyfriend.”

Claire leaned her head against the window. “He’s fine. Just not the right guy. Jax has adventure inside of her, and he has an agenda.”

“What agenda?”

“My family has money and connections,” Jax said from the back seat.

Claire laughed, pointed a thumb toward her friend. “What she said.”

“And he wants those things?” Cooper asked.

“According to Claire.”

Cooper met Claire’s eyes.

She nodded.

“What do you think?” Cooper asked Jax.

Jax sighed. “Claire’s right.”

Okay, now he was confused. “Then why are you with him?”

Both Claire and Jax offered tired laughs.

“The sex is good,” Jax confessed.

Ooookay then.

Cooper pulled into their driveway, and Jax pushed out of the back seat. “Night, Cooper. Thanks again.”

“No problem.”

When Claire didn't follow her friend's lead, his nerves started to fire. He watched as Jax walked up the path to the front door, and Claire twisted in her seat and looked straight at him.

Getting the hint, Cooper turned off the engine.

"You've been different since you've been back," Claire started.

Was he ready for this conversation?

"Well, I've put on a good five pounds." He smiled and patted his stomach.

Claire reached out and stopped his hand.

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

Did she understand how warm her fingertips felt on his skin?

He took a deep breath, blew it out slowly. "Damn it, Claire."

"See, right there. That's different. Where's 'Yearling,' or 'Sasha wannabe'? You never say my name, and now you have to take a massive breath before you talk."

They were sitting in a car, in the dark . . . in a driveway. "Maybe we should go inside."

She shook her head. "You know as well as I do that the house is completely wired with eyes and ears everywhere. You can't sneeze without someone from headquarters phoning in to say *gesundheit*."

He laughed, despite the feeling of his gut stirring.

"Talk to me, Cooper. I thought we were buddies."

God, he hated that word. "You're wrong."

"About what?"

He looked her in the eye, pulled the humor out of the conversation. "I say your name. I said it a lot when I was in London. Even more when I visited Berlin the first time." He remembered standing in front of the Brandenburg Gate. "I asked myself, 'What did Claire think the first time she saw the Berlin Wall?' 'What did it feel like to be Claire escaping the prisonlike walls of Richter with no money and no plan?'" Cooper saw understanding seep into her eyes. "But most of the time I'd say your name when I asked myself what you were doing. Were you kicking ass in America, or breaking hearts?"

Her jaw dropped, but no words came. Her breathing increased, and the rapid rise and fall of her chest told him exactly what her heart was doing.

“We’re friends. You could have called and asked me those questions.”

He shook his head. “No, Claire. I couldn’t do that. I didn’t have it in me.”

“Why?”

He didn’t answer . . . “Remember when we were in Texas and you told Neil you needed some trigger time so you could think?”

She blinked. “Yeah.”

He smiled at the memory of that day. “You walked into the weapon room determined. I tried to hold you back, told you all the weapons were loaded. You marched past me, grabbed an AR, did a weapons check, tossed it over your shoulder, and moved on to the next.”

Claire smiled all the way to her eyes. “Yeah. And you stepped back and told me, ‘That was hot!’”

It had been. “And do you remember what you told me?”

“I told you to put it away, I was too young for you. I said that a lot back then.”

The muscles in Cooper’s throat started to constrict.

Silence hovered.

“I had to put it away, Claire.” His words came out slowly.

He felt her fingernails push into his forearm where her hand was still resting.

“What?” Her one-word question was asked with a quiver in her voice.

“You were eighteen.”

“Oh, God.”

“Eighteen and Neil stepped in as father figure.”

“Eighteen and able to make my own decisions,” she told him.

“You needed to grow up.”

Claire's hand pulled away. "And did I? Am I grown up now?"

Even dressed like a teenager, she wasn't one. "Yes."

"Is that why you're back now? I'm old enough for this conversation?" Her words were crisp and her smile was replaced with a thin line.

"I needed to stop pretending I was happy in Europe. I needed to stop getting information about you by asking coy questions to the team."

Her eyes narrowed. "So you talked to the team about this, but not me?"

"It wasn't like that."

She twisted even further in her seat, hands fisted by her lap. "We were friends!"

He hated that she put that in past tense. "Of course."

"You were crushing on me, so you left?"

Crushing wasn't the right word. "You were eighteen."

She ran a hand through her hair. "I was an adult."

"You had the nickname Yearling."

She lifted a finger in his face. "No. You don't get to call me that anymore. My friend called me that because I could outshoot, outrun, and hold my own with him. You called me Yearling as a way to pretend I wasn't qualified to work with this team when we all knew I was."

No, she had that wrong. "I called you Yearling to remind myself that no matter how hot you were making a target your bitch, no matter how sexy hearing you talk to Sasha in some foreign tongue was, and no matter how much I wanted to feel you pressed against me . . . You. Were. Eighteen!"

Claire's eyes shifted rapidly between his, her lower lip started to quiver, and her nose flared as she pulled in each staccato breath.

She scrambled to get out of the car.

Cooper didn't think, he just made sure he got out of the car faster and caught up with her as she reached the front door.

He stopped her hand before she could twist the knob.

Only now she was standing in front of him, his body pressed close to her back.

“Let me go,” she whispered. He heard the tears in the back of her throat.

Cooper closed his eyes and briefly lowered his forehead to the back of her head. He’d ruined their friendship with his confession. And that hurt more than he thought possible. He loosened his hold on her hand, and she slammed the door between them.

With his palm resting against the house, he heard another door inside slam.

“Damn it.”