

Changing the Rules Chapter 13[1,572 words]

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

First thing Monday morning, Mr. Eastman stood in front of his whiteboard with several algebra equations scribbled on it.

As Claire filed into the room, and took her normal spot toward the back, she heard several students grumble.

“What’s this?” Sean flung a hand gesture at the board as he turned his chair around and straddled it.

The last of the students walked through the door when the bell rang.

“I’ve been told that several of you are having trouble in Dunnan’s class, so I thought it would be a good idea to spend our time reviewing some of the basics.”

One of the girls raised her hand. “Angie and I are taking geometry.”

Eastman smiled. “Then maybe you guys can tutor some of your classmates who are struggling.”

Claire lowered her head in her hands with an audible moan.

“Do you have a problem, Miss Porter?”

“Too much whiskey last night,” Sean muttered so quietly under his breath, only those closest to him heard what he’d said.

She snarled at the guy. He obviously had spoken to Elsie or Kyle. Good gossip spread in a high school faster than a venereal disease in a brothel.

“Mind sharing?” Eastman asked.

Claire glanced around the room. It was time to ramp up her reputation. “Yeah, I have a problem.”

He lifted both hands to the classroom. “You have all of our attention.”

“I’m hungover and I’m not going to math today.” She used math as if it were a verb.

The class erupted in laughter.

Eastman tapped the whiteboard pen against his palm.

“Hungover?” he stated.

“Hey, I’m here, aren’t I?” Truth was, the conversation with Cooper had zapped all the alcohol from her system the second his words were out. Her hangover was from crying and avoiding Jax’s questions all night. She’d managed three hours’ sleep and she felt it.

“So is that going to be your excuse when you have a job and can’t perform the next day?” he asked.

“I can do the job,” she challenged him. “I said I’m not going to.”

“Ohhh . . .”

Claire was surprised there weren’t cell phones out and filming the way the class was chattering among themselves.

Without warning, Eastman tossed the whiteboard pen in the air.

She caught it on instinct.

“Prove it.”

She leaned back in the chair, tossed the pen back. “What’s in it for me?”

He looked at the board, then to her. “Free pass from homeroom for a week.”

That brought an excited rumble from the students.

She realized, in that moment, that she’d grab all the clout she needed from this class of troublemakers. Party invites would be in the bag for the rest of the semester. People would talk to her, and maybe they could wrap this assignment up sooner so she could find that beach in the Bahamas and truly get drunk.

When she slid out from behind the desk, the class went back to whispering.

Claire walked up to Eastman, plucked the pen from his hand.

For a moment, she looked at the board and growled.

Several voices said she couldn’t do it.

But what the class didn’t understand was that algebra was in fact a useful math that needed to be mastered before the computer classes at Richter were allowed. And Claire loved hacking into computers.

She scratched her head for drama and pulled the cap off the pen.

The first equation was like putting ten divided by two on the board for a CPA to get right. She wrote the answer and moved to the next.

“Show your work.”

She rolled her eyes, erased the answer, and spelled out the process of solving for x.

She stopped, glared at Eastman, and waited for his nod.

The second equation required fractions, the basics. She skipped over the board, spelled out her answer, and proceeded to finish the last two before capping the pen and tossing it at Eastman.

Without asking if she was right, she returned to her chair, grabbed her backpack, and walked to the door.

“Peace,” she said with two fingers flying in the air as the door closed behind her.

As the day inched by, one class at a time, Claire heard her name spoken by people she didn’t know.

Elsie jumped up behind her between classes, full of energy. “Here’s the girl who’s the talk of the school.”

“Et tu, Brute?”

Her snark was lost on Elsie. “What?”

Claire shook her head. “Never mind.”

“Did you really tell Eastman off?”

She was about to correct the girl. “If we wait an hour, the school gossip mill will have me punching the man.”

“So cool,” Elsie laughed.

“Who did you hear it from?”

“Sean told Kyle. The whole school is talking about it.”

“Great.” She really could use something for her headache.

“Is it true you told him you were hungover?”

“What’s he gonna do? Call my mommy and tell on me?” As the words left Claire’s mouth, she realized she’d said them before. Back when she would act out at that age. She didn’t have a mom then any more than she had one now.

“He could tell your aunt.”

“My aunt doesn’t care. She can’t wait until I’m out of her hair.”

“That’s so cool. My parents would flip.”

They walked into class together.

Claire rubbed the space between her eyes. She had one more class before she was faced with Cooper. And she wasn’t ready for that.

She and Elsie sat in their usual chairs. “Do you have an aspirin or something?”

The bell rang as Elsie reached into her purse. “I might.”

Claire looked and found Mr. Dunnan, with his receding hairline and blustery red nose, staring down at her. On the board were almost identical questions to those that had been on Eastman’s.

“Oh, shit.” Claire moaned.

“I can’t find anything,” Elsie whispered.

Dunnan walked down the aisle of desks. “I understand we have a protégé in our class.”

Not today . . . not again.

Claire reached for her backpack and stood.

“Where are you going, Claire?” Dunnan asked.

Because she was there on an assignment, and because she knew walking out without some cooperation from the teacher would likely cause more problems, Claire suffered a breath. “I don’t feel well.”

“Heard that, too. So unfortunate.” Dunnan wasn’t amused. “Have a seat.”

“Fine.”

He turned back around.

“Does anyone have an Advil or something?” Claire asked the entire room.

Someone laughed.

“Students are not allowed to take any medication on campus unless they’re in the nurse’s office,” Dunnan explained.

Claire grabbed her backpack and was halfway to the door before Dunnan stopped her.

“Excuse me!”

“You said go to the nurse’s office.” She used his words against him.

“That was not what I said.”

She looked him in the eye. “All due respect, Mr. Dunnan, but I have a bitch of a headache and I’m on my period. So unless you want me moaning and bleeding all over your classroom, I suggest you allow me to go to the nurse’s office.”

Nothing shut a man up faster than the period card.

“Go.” His nose deepened in color when he was mad.

News of Claire’s shenanigans caught up with the track team.

Cooper wasn’t sure if it was strategy on her part or because of what he’d told her the night before. A combo of both, he assumed.

He searched the team as they slowly made their way on the field, looking for her.

They needed to keep it together.

Coach Bennett approached him. “Afternoon,” he said.

“Hello.”

“I heard our new sprinter is pushing the limits in the classroom.”

“You mean Claire?”

“You heard about it, too?”

Cooper nodded.

“Yeah. Listen, I don’t want to lose her. Varsity girls need a solid runner.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Cooper said.

“No, I’ll do the talking. After, I want you to run that attitude out of her.”

Damn.

He wanted to text her, send a warning.

“Here she is. I’ll let them stretch and then pull her aside. No reason to give her an audience. I heard she likes that.”

Cooper tried to make eye contact with Claire, but she was doing her best to look anywhere but at him.

When the stretching was done and the kids took the field, Coach Bennett waved Claire his way. A look over his shoulder and he asked Cooper to join them.

“Do you know why we called you over?” Bennett asked.

Her eyes caught Cooper’s for two seconds.

“Yeah.”

“I like you, Claire. You fit on the team, the coaches like you. But the classroom has to come first. If you mess up out there, fail your classes . . . track is history.”

“I’m not failing.” The attitude she used on campus seeped out.

“Do you want to be out here?” Bennett asked.

Claire looked from the coach to Cooper. “Yeah.”

“Then clean up the bullshit. I can’t stop you from doing what you wanna do when you’re not in school, but if you bring it on campus, I won’t have any choice but to cut you.”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

She started to walk away.

“And, Claire?”

She turned around.

“I asked Mr. Green to switch you into my algebra class. Mr. Dunnan seems to think he bores you and you need a challenge.”

“You what?”

“See you tomorrow.” Bennett smiled, completely amused.

Claire shook her head and started her laps.

“Did you volunteer to take her?” Cooper asked.

He shook his head. “Dunnan wanted me to cut her from the team. I negotiated to take her off his hands.”

“Smart.”

“She’s going to hate it.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to make her work. Dunnan lets kids skate. Should have retired five years ago. When you demand excellence, you get it. When you accept mediocrity, you get it. Remember that, if you decide to fall into the trap of being a full-time teacher.”

“I’ll do that.”

Claire ran by.

“You got it from here?” Bennett asked.

“Yeah.”

“I want to see her sweating. If she’s partying, she better not bring it on my field.”

Any previous conclusions that Bennett was one of the bad guys vanished.

Changing the Rules Chapter 14[1,800 words]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Claire collapsed onto the living room sofa the second she walked in the door. Not only had she suffered a headache the entire day, Cooper ran her like a trainer working an Ironman competitor.

“That sounds like a bad day,” Jax said as she walked around the corner of the kitchen.

“You don’t want to know.”

Claire flung an arm over her eyes to block out the sun.

She heard Jax walk in the room and then exhale as she sat down. “You’re right. I don’t give a crap what happened in school, unless it involved Cooper. What I want is the details of last night after I got out of the car.”

Before Cooper picked them up, Claire and Jax had agreed that Jax would give them a few minutes to have a private conversation. Now Claire regretted that plan.

“The long story, or the short story?” Claire asked.

“Whatever one you want to deliver.”

Claire’s arms slid off her head, and she pushed herself into a sitting position.

“Cooper has a thing for me.”

Jax sat silent, blinked a few times. “Okay, and?”

“What do you mean, ‘okay, and?’”

“Sorry, Claire, but that’s obvious. I think you’d have to be an idiot to not see it. Even the guys on the team see it.”

“What? Are they talking about—”

Jax stopped her with a shake of the head. “Of course not. But you can tell by how they look at the two of you that they know there’s an attraction.”

Claire pointed to her chest. “I’m not doing anything, it’s him.”

“Maybe it’s more him.”

She kept shaking her head. “No, it’s all him. I’m not instigating anything.”

“You flirt with him all the time.”

“I do not,” Claire huffed.

One look from Jax and she rescinded her statement. “Okay, we banter. But it’s always been like that. I have the pool stick, he makes some kind of phallic joke. It’s banter. Not flirting.”

Jax sat back, crossed her arms over her chest.

“You know when I’m flirting, you’ve seen it. Remember Blane in the stacks at Richter? That was flirting. And Steve last year in Vegas? That was flirting.”

“That’s a flower calling a bumblebee to mate. It’s called getting laid, not what you and Cooper are doing.”

Claire couldn’t believe her best friend was calling her out. “We’re friends. And last night he ruined that by telling me he’s had a thing for me since we met. Told me he left sunny California for dreary London because I was too young and naive to handle him when I first got here.”

Jax narrowed her eyes. “Is that really how he said that?”

Claire’s headache was coming back. “No. He said I was a child.”

“A child?”

Claire stood up from the couch, started for the kitchen. “He kept repeating that I was eighteen back then.”

Jax followed behind. “Which is true.”

Claire yanked open the fridge, pulled out a beer. “Whose side are you on?”

“Yours. Always. But I just don’t see where all the fire is about this. Cooper owns up to the flirting comments and puppy-dog looks he gives you, and you’re pissed because he walked away six years ago. Walked away because you were barely eighteen and he was what? Twenty-four, twenty-five? Think about that, Claire. We’re back in high school, the kids there . . . Do you look at any of them and think, Well, maybe?”

She shook her head. “Of course not.”

“Okay . . . but what if you did?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“So fast-forward six years, you see that guy again . . .”

Jax was starting to make sense.

“It’s different.”

“Why?”

Claire twisted off the cap of her beer, took a sip. “Because Cooper and I are friends. He was the only one on the team that treated me close to an equal.”

Jax grabbed the beer from Claire's grasp and took a drink. She handed it back and said, "That's because you're the closest in age. And guess what, you're not eighteen any longer. He's not too old, and you're not too young. There is zero ick factor to the two of you getting together."

Like picking a lock, the pieces slid into place and finally started to click. "But he's my friend."

"Trying to say you've never thought of him as more?"

"No." Her denial was quick.

Jax started to smile. "You've never checked out his ass? The guy can fill out a pair of jeans."

Some of the anger she'd harbored all day eased. "That's true."

"And that smile. When he's belly laughing he has the tiniest dimples."

Claire closed her eyes, pictured his smile. She hadn't noticed the dimples, but now that she thought about it . . . She opened her eyes to find Jax staring at her.

"Sounds like you have a thing for him," Claire said.

"Wouldn't matter if I did, and I don't, by the way, but it wouldn't matter. The guy can't stop looking at you."

Claire put her beer down, leaned against the kitchen counter. "I don't know what to do."

Jax moved across from her. "Where did you leave things last night?"

"I was shocked. The man uprooted his whole life because of me, and I had no idea. And here I thought I was the smart one."

"Okay."

Claire looked up. "I ran. I didn't know what to say, so I bolted."

"What about today? You saw him at track."

Claire found a smile for the first time that day. "I ran again. Only he was holding the whip."

"What?"

“Claire Porter got into some trouble. Well, not trouble so much as showed off for a couple of teachers. I bragged about being hungover, then shoved Eastman’s algebra equations down his throat. Petty of me, but it felt kinda good. Then in Dunnan’s class, I did it again. Which probably worked to my advantage since I’ve already made my connection with Elsie in that group, and should move on.”

“So what did all that have to do with Cooper and a whip?” Jax asked.

Claire let out a laugh, the first one all day. “Coach Bennett told Cooper to run the attitude out of me.”

When Jax started laughing, Claire caught the giggles.

“Cooper must have been dying.”

Claire squeezed her eyes shut, thought of the look on Cooper’s face when he said he had to make her work hard. “After the first mile, which none of the sprinters like to do, I passed him and asked if he was enjoying himself.”

“Ouch. Now you’re acting like an eighteen-year-old.”

The mention of the age brought the humor out of the conversation. “God, what am I going to do with him?”

“I don’t think you have to do anything. It’s not like he asked you out and you said no and now it’s awkward.”

“You’re right. It’s worse than that.”

“You’re overthinking it.” Jax pushed off the counter. “You know what, let’s gussy up a little and hit a proper happy hour. We’ll talk in German and pretend we don’t speak English and shamelessly flirt. All this high school crap is making us act like we’re truly back there. Time to remind ourselves that we’re grown-ass women who are kicking butt and taking names.”

Claire abandoned her beer. “Now that is exactly what I need to do and get my mind off of boys.”

“Yeah. Flirt with other boys.”

This was the last place Cooper wanted to be and the last person he wanted to be there with.

“What a shitty day.” Leo Eastman bent over his draft beer while Cooper did the same.

They sat at one end of a crowded bar with happy hour in full swing. The time and date had been dictated by Cooper, the place picked by Leo. It worked out fine since Cooper's apartment wasn't far away. He could have a beer, pick the man's brain, and slither home where he could work up the nerve to call or text Claire and apologize for making her run like she was escaping the reaper.

"You can say that again."

"We don't get paid enough."

Cooper chuckled. "Hey, you get paid more than the lowly auto shop sub. And I volunteered for the drama in track." Actually, Cooper wasn't getting paid anything for the teaching. It was all part of the operation.

"I take it you heard about Claire's latest today," Leo said.

"Oh yeah."

Leo started laughing, throwing Cooper off. "What's funny?"

"I should have put harder problems on the board."

Cooper studied his beer, found his smile.

"The minute she asked what was in it for her, I knew I was screwed. You should have seen her. Sass and attitude as she damn near flipped me off walking out the room. She impresses me almost as much as she aggravates me."

Cooper lifted his beer. "You have no idea."

"I never have understood why smart kids act dumb."

"It's all about reputation."

"How so?" Leo asked.

"Oh, c'mon, you remember high school. You're what, thirty-five?"

"Thirty-four, but high school feels like a lifetime ago."

"It's no different for them than it was for us. In order to stand out, you have to be the best at something. You have to be the quarterback and not the benchwarmer claiming someone else's fame. No one remembers the person who was second-in-line for valedictorian. Hell, I don't even remember number one."

Leo nodded in agreement. "Our Claire wants to be a badass."

“Number-one badass,” Cooper corrected.

“Have you met any of her family?”

He immediately thought of Neil. “I heard she lives with her aunt. Hoping I can meet her at a track meet.”

“I’m sure there’s more to that story. So many kids are getting the fucked-up end of bad parental choices.” Leo sucked down a generous amount of beer.

“Are you married? Have kids?”

There was a moment of hesitation. “Did that once. Have a four-year-old I’m allowed to see a couple weekends a month.”

Cooper hadn’t found that bit of information on the man.

“That sucks.”

“Just another parent fucking up their kid.”

“Lots of kids grow up fine with divorced parents.”

Leo looked over at him. “Your parents still together?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re lucky. Divorced for twenty years and my parents still bicker about each other any chance they get. I don’t want my kid growing up hearing those things.” He stopped talking long enough to finish his beer and signal the bartender for another one. “You know why I ask for the troublemakers at Auburn?”

“No.”

“Because I want to identify the kids that are really screwed up. The kind that walk onto campus with an AK and light it up. I want to stop a kid from being the one that will never be forgotten because of an adolescent mistake.”

That, Cooper wasn’t expecting.

“No guarantee you’re going to pick that kid out of a crowd.”

Leo turned in his seat, lifted his fresh beer. “Not going to stop me from trying.”

Cooper touched his glass with his. “If it makes you feel any better, I don’t think that kid is Claire.”

“I have a feeling she’s going to light up the school, just not with a gun.”

Cooper couldn’t help but laugh. “She’s definitely that girl.” He tilted his beer back and looked across the bar.

Beer slid down the wrong pipe when his eyes collided with hers.

Changing the Rules Chapter 15[1,450 words]

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

This was exactly what Claire needed.

Loud music and a crowded bar that she and Jax had never gone to before. It proved difficult to pretend you didn’t speak English if you went to an old haunt.

They ordered drinks with a thick German accent, and purposely screwed up the names of their cocktails. Their parlor trick was always the best way to have a private conversation in a crowded room. And if the right guy came along, they could speak enough English to have a conversation.

Still, it had been a while since they went out on a random weekday for happy hour, and Claire realized she missed it. “Lewis has distracted you these last six months,” Claire told her in German.

Jax sipped her fuzzy navel while Claire drank a proper martini with two olives. If there was one thing about being tutored on the finer things by Sasha, it was ordering the right drinks. Anytime Claire tried to order some fruity stuff like Jax’s, Sasha would send it back and order something else.

Sasha scolded in Russian.

Claire found it endearing.

“I know. He’s been nagging about going to visit my parents,” Jax said.

“He obviously didn’t listen when you told him your parents weren’t high on your list.”

“He seems to think he can mend fences.”

“Fences that surrounded Richter and the parents that put their children there don’t come down easy.” Claire plucked one of the olives out of her drink. With it halfway to her mouth, tall, dark, and not-so-handsome slid up to her.

“Well, hello,” he slurred.

“Talk about subtle,” she said to Jax in German.

“Oh, what are you speaking?”

Jax offered her flirting smile, the one that called the man an asshole before she opened her mouth. “From Germany,” she said in broken English.

“I’ve never been to Germany.” He stared down at Claire’s drink.

“He’s never been outside of the valley.” She smiled and sipped her drink as if she’d just offered some kind of a compliment.

He took it as an invitation. “What’s your name, beautiful?”

It took everything in her to not laugh. He was trying way too hard, and she was in no way interested.

Jax spoke for both of them. “Our English not very good.”

“I understood that.”

“How long has this guy been in here drinking?” Claire asked Jax.

“Smells like a half a liter in.”

Mr. Not Getting the Hint reached out and touched Claire’s shoulder and asked her name again.

She moved away from him. “No touching.”

“How about another drink?” He raised his hand for the bartender.

Claire waved over her drink. “No. One only.”

When he touched her a second time, she was close to ending the charade.

“I’m going to dump this drink on him,” Claire told Jax.

The bartender walked over, and both Claire and Jax waved off the offer of drinks by Mr. Pushy. “Doesn’t look like the ladies want another round.”

Claire smiled at the bartender, said thank you in German, then again in English. She lifted her drink and looked anywhere but at the guy who wasn’t getting the hint.

With the glass to her lips, she looked over the rim and gasped.

There, on the other side of the bar, Cooper sat staring at her.

Next thing she knew, he was coughing and someone was handing him a bar napkin. When the profile of the man became clear, Claire nearly shrieked. “Ah, fuck.” Without warning, Claire grabbed Jax’s arm and pushed her into the barstool she was on so her back was to Cooper and her homeroom teacher.

“What the hell?” Jax asked.

Mr. Pushy smiled. “You’re cute, too.”

“Go away,” Claire demanded in English, then she tossed out an expletive in Russian.

The guy lifted his hands in the air, called them a nasty name of his own, and walked away.

“Look over my right shoulder, slowly,” Claire coaxed Jax.

Jax switched their drinks around and did just that. “Cooper’s here.”

“Do you see who he’s with?” Claire felt panic rising in the back of her throat.

“A friend?”

Claire grabbed her glass, downed the drink, and started searching the bar for an exit. “My homeroom teacher.”

Jax’s eyes grew wide. “Oh, no . . .”

“Is he looking over?”

“No, the bartender is setting down another drink and handing Cooper napkins.”

“I’ve got to get out of here.” But to get to the front door, they’d have to walk right by Cooper and Mr. Eastman.

“Front door is too risky,” Jax stated the obvious.

“Always back doors in kitchens.”

“I’ll create a diversion,” she said as she undid another button on her blouse. “Have the car running.”

Claire reached in her purse, dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. A wink and a fist bump to her best friend, and she waited.

Jax stood and walked a straight line toward Cooper.

Claire waited until Jax was standing at Cooper's side, leaning over the bar. Cleavage did what it does when heterosexual men are around, and gave Claire an exit.

When Eastman scooted around in his seat, Claire made her move. Quickly but not to the point of attracting attention, she inched out of their line of sight and walked right past the "Employees Only" sign. The obtrusive bright lights of the kitchen had her blinking.

"The bathroom's not back here," someone said behind the grill.

Claire shook her head, pointed toward the bar. "Abusive ex-boyfriend. I need the back door."

Without questions, the man pointed behind him.

"Thank you."

Claire's shoes clicked on the tile floor as she rushed outside.

Once she was inside her car, engine running, Claire texted Jax.

Two minutes later, as they rushed out of the parking lot, Claire was happy Neil had taught her to back into every parking space she ever used.

Jax watched from behind. "Go."

Three blocks from the bar and the adrenaline that had been pumping finally fled Claire's system, and she started to laugh.

"Damn, that was close."

Jax was laughing so hard she snorted, and that had Claire doubled over the steering wheel.

"Guess we're drinking at home for the duration."

Within ten minutes of their arrival at home, Cooper was walking through their front door.

Claire had ditched her fancy shoes and mixed new drinks.

"All the bars in the world, and you had to walk into mine." He was all smiles and relief.

Much as it was hard to see Cooper walking through her house and tossing his keys on the island in the kitchen where she and Jax hovered, it was also a comfort.

“What are the odds?” Jax asked.

Cooper looked directly at Claire, his eyes softened. “What are you drinking?”

“Vodka martinis.”

“What do I have to do to get one?”

Normally, that charged question would have a snarky remark on its tail. Something slightly sexual and inappropriate. She settled for something else. “Don’t tell my homeroom teacher I was out drinking tonight.”

Claire moved around the kitchen to mix another one, pulled a glass out of the cupboard.

“He didn’t see Claire, did he?”

“No indication he did. How long were you guys sitting there?”

“Not long. Thirty minutes, maybe,” Jax answered.

“Long enough for Mr. Clueless to hit on us,” Claire said as she poured a generous amount of vodka.

“I missed that,” Cooper said.

“Good thing. I was about to make a serious scene. One that Eastman wouldn’t have missed.” Claire shook the tumbler several times before dumping the liquid into a glass. She reached for her jar of olives.

“I don’t need that.”

Claire glanced over her shoulder and, without looking, picked an olive out of the jar and plopped it in the glass. “A martini without an olive is just vodka.”

He smiled, and it was then she realized that he didn’t have to be belly laughing for his dimples to show up.

“What on earth made you pick a bar on that side of town?” Cooper asked, accepting the martini.

Claire and Jax exchanged glances. “Should we tell him?” Claire said in German.

Jax shrugged.

“Is that ‘told’ or ‘tell’?” Cooper asked.

Claire's smile fell. "You . . . wait, you understood that?"

There was a moment when Cooper just grinned. "I didn't spend all my time in London when I was overseas."

"Seriously? Du hast Deutsch gelernt?" Claire asked.

"I'm not sure you can call it studying German. I spent a lot of time outside of the bigger cities so I could learn it. I'm pretty sure most of the people I came in contact with were horrified at how I butchered their language. But I can hold a fairly decent conversation about day-to-day things."

She couldn't stop smiling. As brownie points were earned, Cooper stacked his deck with that one.

"Why?"

Their eyes locked. "I would think that would be obvious at this point."

His words did what his previous confession had failed to do. It made Claire look deeper in Cooper's eyes and see an emotion she hadn't noticed before.

"Uhm . . . I can leave the room," Jax teased.

Claire offered Cooper a sincere smile and shook her head. "I'm in the mood for Chinese food."

"Sounds perfect." Cooper smiled and sipped his drink.