

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 16[1,605 words]

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He'd been ready to quit. Call Neil and tell him the minute the assignment was over he'd be looking for another job. Someplace where he didn't have to see Claire constantly and mourn the loss of their friendship. Worse, moon over her like a lovesick puppy.

Instead, Claire offered an olive branch by way of Chinese takeout and martinis.

The three of them ate and drank, and talked about the case. He told them what he'd learned about Eastman. As of yet, the man wasn't putting stuff on his class computer to indicate that he was anything other than a high school teacher with good intentions. According to the employee record, he'd transferred into Auburn that year, which lined up with the divorce he'd spoken to Cooper about.

"Expect harder questions if you plan on putting Eastman in his place again," Cooper warned Claire.

He could tell by the look in her eyes she was buzzed from the alcohol.

"I might have to actually study. I don't remember everything."

"More than me," Cooper said.

Jax changed the subject. "After tonight, we're going to have to map out the teachers' homes. Get a general idea of their stomping ground."

Claire leaned her head back on the sofa. "It feels like this assignment is taking forever."

"I'm not sure that's going to change anytime soon," Cooper said.

"We have back-to-back parties the next two weekends. Hopefully we can find a solid lead."

"Any weight to Mr. Cummings?" Cooper asked Jax.

"He has the reputation of staring at chests." Jax hoisted her breasts with both hands. "These are a little hard to miss, I'll see if he notices."

"You have to wear a uniform."

Jax frowned at Claire. "Never stopped us at Richter."

"True."

"Cummings is short, balding, typical dad body. Reminds you of the guy who lost his virginity at thirty. Easy to label him as the dirty old man. School gossip may just be assumptions."

"You just described Dunnan," Claire told her. "Only he has the reputation of hating his job."

"That's exactly what Bennett said," Cooper added.

"The invitational is coming up. Maybe something will evolve."

"Still thinking of throwing a race?" Jax asked.

Claire shrugged. "Not sure that's the best thing right now. Bennett is working hard to keep me on the team."

"That's because you're good." Cooper nudged her foot with his. He was rewarded with a smile.

"I'm also several years older than my teammates. It's not exactly fair."

"As soon as this case is over, your wins will be removed. Second place becomes first."

"Fine, for the individual races, but the relay will screw with three other girls. And if the team loses after a win . . . that just sucks for them."

Claire had obviously been thinking about this a lot. "A moral dilemma, no doubt, but what we're doing there is bigger than a track meet."

"I know. It just sucks, that's all I'm saying. Do we even know why being placed on the track team was a thing? So far all I see is relatively well-adjusted kids competing and coaches that like their jobs."

Cooper had thought the same thing. "A question for our next briefing."

Jax sat up from her lounging position. "I suggest we bring Manuel in on our next impromptu huddle."

"How is that working out?"

"Fine. I've only seen him on campus twice. Both times he completely ignored me."

“If you’re not causing trouble, that would be the case,” Cooper suggested.

Jax stretched as she stood. “I have a book report due in the morning.”

“And you’re doing it?”

Jax looked at Claire like she was crazy. “No.” She shook her head, then started to nod. “I don’t know how to slack.”

Claire laughed harder.

“Are you telling me you’re not doing any homework?”

“I have a report due tomorrow on Macbeth.”

“And?”

Claire cleared her throat. “Macbeth, by Claire Porter . . . They all die. The End.”

The laughter in the room didn’t ebb until Jax climbed the stairs and left Cooper alone with Claire.

“I probably don’t need to remind you that failing a class isn’t an option until we cut track out of our agenda.”

“That won’t happen. I have it covered.”

“No doubt you do.” For the space of ten seconds they sat there staring at each other.

When Claire started to fidget, it was time to leave.

He placed both hands on his knees and pushed off the sofa. “Thank you for the drink.”

She stood with him. “Thanks for paying for dinner.”

“Least I could do.” He patted the front pockets of his jeans, searching for his car keys.

Claire pointed behind them. “Kitchen, I think.”

She followed him, an awkward silence took the place of easy conversation. Waving the car keys in his hand, he said, “Got ’em.”

He was two steps toward the door when she stopped him.

“Cooper?”

He looked up, found those fidgeting fingers clasped in front of her. “I handled last night poorly.”

“I—”

“No,” she interrupted. “No one has ever said anything like that to me. I wasn’t expecting it. I mean, I’ve noticed a few things since you’ve been back, but I told myself I was wrong. I need time to process it.”

Air filled his lungs, and he beat back a smile that threatened. “I can live with that.”

“I hope so. Because I don’t want to lose this . . . tonight, kicking back with a quick meal and comfortable conversation.” She rolled her shoulders. “I don’t want this tension or to feel the need to fill the awkward gaps in conversation.”

“I don’t want that either, Claire.”

“Good.”

“Good,” he repeated.

“So we’ll talk about awkward stuff, laugh at it, okay?”

“I can do that.”

“I don’t know if we can be . . . you know. If we can ever be more. I didn’t think about it . . . then last night.” She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “Now I can’t think about anything else. And I know that’s going to screw up my work. And we don’t want that.”

He was smiling. He couldn’t help himself. “We don’t want that.”

She finally looked up at him. Her eyes glistened just a little. “Why are you smiling?” she asked.

He paused. “Because you’re not saying no.”

She pushed at his shoulder. “I’m not saying yes either.”

He took a step closer, waited until their eyes met and her fidgeting stopped. Cooper placed a hand to the side of her face, traced her cheek, and relished in her tiny gasp at his touch. “But you’re not saying no.”

Her chest rose and fell a little quicker, and unlike the night before, it wasn’t anger fueling her change in heart rate. That, Cooper could tell by the way she slightly bit her lips together as if not doing so could possibly be an invitation. “I should go.”

“Yes, you should.”

He looked at his palm on her skin and soaked in the feeling a moment longer.

Reluctantly, he let his hand drop. “I’m going.” He heard Claire’s footsteps behind him as he walked to the front door.

Hand on the knob, he turned back. “I’m sorry I made you run hard today.”

Claire’s cheeks blushed with her smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll pay you back.”

Cooper clenched his chest. “Don’t I know it.”

She reached around him, opened the door, and gave him a playful shove. “Goodbye, Cooper.”

“We’re good, right?” he asked, knowing they were but needing to hear it from her beautiful lips.

“We’re good.”

He practically skipped to his car, a chorus to a song tapping in his head. And when he looked up, he found Claire watching him.

The party was hosted by a student at Bremerton. That’s all they knew up until thirty minutes before it started. There was no way for the team to work out any details until the address was posted. On Instagram, of all places.

Ally had the connection, and since the algebra-study-session-turned-girl-party had procured the invite, with the encouragement to invite others, it looked like Elsie had done just that.

Wearing tight jeans and a spaghetti-strap top that stopped above her belly button, Claire was teenage party ready. Jax took it up a notch, as any kid in a private school forced to wear a uniform would, in a tight miniskirt and a top that boasted her ample D cups. They both wore their hair bone straight and in exactly the same style. They wore hidden earpieces, the devices so tiny you would have to be looking for them to find them. They worked as microphone and earphone. Jax wore a pendant necklace equipped with a tiny camera. Claire’s smart watch had a similar function. Their cell phones were a constant uplink of the entire experience to a mobile headquarters, otherwise referred to as the creeper van, which was parked a few blocks away.

Sasha, Cooper, and Manuel were in the van. Their mics tuned in to Claire’s and Jax’s.

Neil was back at headquarters watching it all.

Teenagers, and several not so teen, were strolling toward the bump of the music and mix of voices like bugs to light.

Claire and Jax had parked just far enough away so that they could leave without a lot of eyes on their car.

“Let’s do a mic check,” Cooper said in their ears.

“This is Yoda, one, two, three.”

“Sounds good. Claire?”

“Loki. It’s Loki to you. One, two, three.”

Someone chuckled.

“Your turn,” Claire instructed.

Each person in the van said their name and counted.

Nearly at the edge of the driveway, they did a sweep of the area. “Do we have the details on who owns this place?”

“Working on it,” Sasha said.

“It’s a nice neighborhood, average list price in the three million and up range, I’m guessing,” Claire said.

“North of that. Find the residents so we can get a clear picture of them.” The request came from Neil.

“Copy that,” Jax said.

The closer they came to the front door, the louder the music screamed.

“Let’s do this.” Claire reached out a fist and bumped Jax’s as they walked inside.