

Changing the Rules Chapter 17[2,257 words]

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The party had just gotten started, and the crush of teens was staggering.

“Start talking so we can zero in on your voices,” Cooper told them.

Jax started. “I can’t believe I’ve only been in LA for a couple months and I’m at a huge party. This place is massive. What parent tells a kid they can have full run of the house? Even this would be too much for my dad. It’s crazy—”

“Got it. You’re fine-tuned, Yoda.”

Claire liked that Cooper obliged them by using their nicknames.

“Stick with me, Jax, I’ll get you invited to all the parties. Lots of party kids at Auburn.”

“You’re good, Loki.”

Claire smiled at the faces of kids she didn’t know as she walked by. A few of the guys looked her up and down the way they do.

“There’s Ally.” Jax pointed to the far end of the living room.

Three guys surrounded the younger girl, one Claire recognized from Auburn.

“We need to get drinks in our hands,” Jax reminded her.

The music was a little easier on their ears when they walked into the kitchen. On the massive island was a host of alcohol and mixers with a cooler filled with ice that sat by the side.

Claire nodded toward the open French doors that led to the backyard. There were teens gathered around a beer keg in the outdoor kitchen where Claire and Jax took their place in line.

“Hey! Aren’t you in my homeroom?”

Claire turned and smiled. “Yeah. It’s Todd, right?”

“Right. Man, what you did the other day with Eastman, that’s some epic shit.”

“Eastman’s an asshole,” Claire said.

The kid took a drink out of his red cup. “I know. Total douche. How do you know Russell?”

“Who?”

“The guy who lives here.”

“I don’t,” Claire said.

Jax leaned in to talk over the music. “My friend Ally invited us. We go to Bremerton.”

They took a step forward in line.

“Are you coming to the big party Nunez is talking about?”

“Free beer? I’ll be there.”

In Claire’s ear, she heard Sasha’s voice. “Get him to point out Russell.”

“Which one is Russell?” Jax asked.

Todd did a three-sixty. “I don’t . . . wait, yeah, he’s over there.”

Claire followed the pointing finger to see a huddled group of eight to ten people. Couple of them looked a little older than the high school group. “He’s the big guy.”

“They’re all big,” Jax said with a flip of her hair.

“He’s cool.”

They stepped up to the keg, and Claire filled two red cups.

“Does he have these parties a lot?” Jax asked.

“He and his friends rotate. Keeps the cops from showing up.”

“The parties in my old neighborhood always got busted when they were this big.” Claire handed Jax a beer.

The three of them stepped away from the keg. “I was at Brandon’s last one. Cops showed up at midnight. No one got busted or anything, they just told everyone to leave.”

Claire had no idea who Brandon was. She nodded toward the group of guys that apparently included Russell when Elsie and Kyle intercepted them. Elsie walked in, arms open. “Is this cool or what?”

There were hugs, hellos, and introductions. Elsie said something about Jax's outfit, the compliment was returned.

The line to the keg kept growing, so they moved away.

Twice she tried to redirect the conversation to the people giving the party, both times she was interrupted.

"There's a lot of Auburn kids here."

"Hey, we go to every Bremerton party we can. They have better booze," Todd told her.

"Well, if it isn't the algebra protégé."

Claire turned to see Sean Fisher and two of his sidekicks flanking him.

"Hey, Sean."

From the gleam in Sean's eyes, it appeared that he'd either been pregaming for the party or he'd been there longer than everyone else.

Todd and Sean did a little fist bump. "That was some crazy shit you did in Eastman's room."

So crazy it seemed that's all anyone wanted to talk about.

"Jax, move to Claire's left, look behind Sean." Cooper's voice added a layer of distraction.

"I wish I had seen it."

"Epic, ballsy shit."

Claire listened while the small group she stood with yammered on and on.

"Did you really get pulled out of Dunnan's class?" Kyle asked.

"Coach Bennett made it happen."

"Sucks. I had Bennett last year. He's the hardest math teacher at Auburn."

"Did you have him for algebra?"

"Physics."

"A little more to the left, Jax." Cooper's voice was a whisper in her ear.

Claire kept the conversation going. "That's pretty advanced math."

"I want to get into USC."

Elsie leaned into her boyfriend's arm. "You'll get in."

"Got what we need, Jax."

"There you guys are!" Ally came bouncing into their circle. "Is this awesome or what?" She slid up next to Sean, smiled.

"It's—"

"I need a drink, do you need a drink?" Ally couldn't stand still. The nystagmus in her eyes was off the charts.

"I do. We were headed to the keg and ran into—"

Ally didn't let her finish. "You don't want beer. C'mon," she said, pulling on Elsie's arm.

"Hey, babe. Go easy, okay. Your parents . . . ," Kyle tried.

"Parents? Who cares?" And Ally pulled her away.

"Wow! What did she take?" Jax asked.

"Never know with Ally," Sean said.

Claire turned to him. "You know her? She doesn't go to Auburn."

"Not anymore, no. We went to the same junior high and sophomore year at Auburn, before her mom ended up in some rehab and she went to her grandmother's. Even back then she seemed to always know where the parties were."

Claire and Jax exchanged glances. "Any idea what her mom was taking?"

"Heroin, I think. That was the mom rumor anyway." Wasn't Sean a wealth of information?

"Mom rumor?"

"My friend's mom was the PTA mom from hell. She always talked about everyone's parents."

"I can't picture a woman taking heroin being on any PTA," Claire told Sean.

“I read an article a couple years ago that heroin was on the rise with the soccer moms. I think that’s what the paper called ’em. Heroin Soccer Moms,” Kyle told them.

“Why heroin?” The question was asked by one of Sean’s friends.

“Because Dr. Feel-Good stopped handing them oxy. And heroin is cheap.”

Sean was right. As street drugs went, heroin wasn’t hard to come by. “Aren’t you the knower of all things drugs. Something you’re not telling me, Sean?” Claire prodded.

Sean took a drink of whatever was in his cup. “I’m smarter than I appear. I mean, I won’t be handing Eastman his ass anytime soon, but I know shit.”

Kyle kept watching the back door. “I’m gonna go find Elsie.”

Claire thought that was a great idea.

“Do you need the bathroom?” Jax asked.

Claire looked into her completely full cup. “Yeah, I need to empty the one out to put more in.”

The two of them left the guys and worked their way inside.

“Do you need to go?” Claire asked.

Jax shook her head. “I noticed the guys in the back split up and start mingling.”

“Let’s find Russell.”

“Any clue which one that was?”

Claire shook her head. “No, but I have an idea.” Back inside, they moved into the living room, which had completely packed out. She pointed up the staircase, saw a few family photos on the walls.

Leaving her red cup on a table with twenty empty ones, she and Jax bumped around kids and took in the images on the walls.

“Jax, stop.”

Cooper halted them in front of what looked like brothers. All of them in their mid-to-late twenties, early thirties.

And that was about it.

Two girls squeezed behind them. “Is there a bathroom up here?” one of them asked.

“That’s what we’re looking for.”

They followed the others until they found a line. “Get what you need?” Claire asked.

“Yup.”

Both she and Jax reached for the phones buzzing in their pockets.

“Wait until you’re alone to check your phones,” Sasha told them.

Claire opened her camera, put an arm around Jax’s shoulders, and took a selfie.

The first person in line pounded on the bathroom door. “C’mon.”

Five seconds later a couple came out and two girls went in.

When it was their turn, they went in laughing. Once the bathroom door closed behind them, they both opened their messages.

The house belongs to Mr. John Sanders. No wife on title. Looks like the house might be a rental. This is a picture of Russell Mirkin from the Bremerton files.

“Slavic or Russian?” Claire asked.

“We’ll work that out later. Let’s meet the party throwers,” Cooper said.

“Copy.”

Another flush of the toilet, and then a quick wash of their hands, and they left the bathroom giggling. “He is really cute. I saw the way he was looking at you.” They walked down the crowded hall, heads together like teenage girls do.

They roamed the house, said hi to a few of the kids they knew, then meandered to the backyard again. A mixture of cigarette smoke and pot formed a haze as the temperature outside dropped. A gas firepit lit up a corner of the yard. Around it were three guys who looked old enough to be the ones that bought the liquor. One of them might pass for one of the guys in the hall picture.

Claire jumped right in. “Hey, is one of you Russell?”

“Who’s asking?”

Jax giggled. “We heard Russell was throwing the party, and we wanted to thank him.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “She doesn’t get out much.”

Closer now, it was easy to see that these guys were not teenagers. Easily late twenties, maybe flirting with their thirties, and two of them were drinking out of crystal highball glasses.

“You’re welcome.” The guy that looked like an older version of the photographs in the hall sat back, all smiles.

“You’re Russell?”

“Milo, his uncle. Why don’t you ladies have a seat?” Milo was a good-looking guy and he knew it. The other two he was with were a bit bulkier, not unattractive.

Jax tugged on her miniskirt as she sat down.

Claire took a seat beside her and said, “Nice place you guys have here.”

Milo nodded. “It’s okay.”

Claire pointed behind her. “You know it’s a mess in there, right?”

“We pay people to clean it up.” Yup, the guy talked like a baller.

“My dad would never let me have a party like this.” Jax played the innocent girl really well.

Milo leaned forward. “Where do you girls go to school?”

They both answered at the same time and then laughed.

“I’m Jax.”

“Claire,” she said, pointing to her chest.

“Welcome to my home. This is Brian and Gorge.”

Brian and Gorge were sitting back in their chairs, arms spread, smiles wide. Claire made sure to swipe at an imaginary bug so her watch faced the other guys. Jax’s necklace was the perfect magnet in the V of her breasts.

“You guys seniors?”

“Yeah,” Claire answered.

“Eighteen?” Milo asked.

“Next month,” Claire answered.

“My birthday is in July.”

Milo nodded a few times. “That’s cool. You ladies could pass for twenty-one. Do you have fake IDs?”

“Keep him talking,” Sasha told them.

“Of course,” Claire told him. The rebel would.

Jax shook her head. “No. I wouldn’t know where to find one.”

“I could help you out with that.” Milo reached for a pack of cigarettes at his side, pulled one out.

Jax’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

Milo bent his head, lit his cigarette. The action of him lighting up a cigarette added to the whole package. Claire made a mental note to adapt that skill.

Milo blew smoke between his lips. “Yeah. You seem like you’re all right. No reason not to help out a friend. Besides, I was seventeen once.”

“That would be really awesome.”

“Wait, what’s it gonna cost her?” Claire played bad cop.

Milo tilted his head. “Aren’t you the suspicious one?”

“Shut up, Claire.” Jax turned back to Milo. “I can pay you. I mean, I can come up with—”

Milo shook his head. “A girl as pretty as you doesn’t have to pay for anything.”

“Bingo!” Claire heard Cooper in her ear.

“Now what are you ladies drinking?” Milo pointed to Brian and Gorge. “Go get the good stuff, none of that shit the kids are drinking in there.”

“Neil is sending in a diversion,” Cooper said.

There was no way they’d be sipping what Milo’s boys were bringing.

“Have you been to one of our parties before?” Milo asked Jax.

Claire wasn’t oblivious to the fact that Milo wasn’t asking her.

Jax smiled, blushed as if on cue. “My parents just got divorced, now I’m living with my dad.”

“That’s tough.”

Jax shrugged. “New school, bunch of kids I don’t know. Sucks.”

Milo sat forward, a flirty smile on his lips. “You’re meeting new people.”

“I guess.”

It took a lot not to laugh. Jax had never been that passive in her life.

“Holding on diversion until your drinks are delivered. Bring them with you.”

“I guess?” Claire nudged Jax.

The two of them went back and forth for a few minutes.

A good ten minutes passed.

“Took long enough,” Milo told his boys. And that’s how Claire saw it. Milo was the leader, the others were ancillary.

Brian handed Jax and Claire crystal glasses.

“What are we drinking?” Claire asked, stalling.

Jax sniffed her glass.

“I enjoy a good whiskey. The kind that doesn’t need a lot of help.”

Jax smiled, flirted. “You mean it’s straight?”

Brian set the bottle on the side of the firepit, poured liquid into his glass.

In her ear Claire heard Cooper’s voice. “Five, four . . .”

“A good whiskey doesn’t need any fillers.”

“. . . three, two . . .”

Sirens filled the air.

Two things struck Claire at the same time.

Milo looked utterly shocked while sitting still.

Second, his friends stood tall, flanking Milo as if protecting the boss.

“Cops?” Jax asked.

“We got this,” Milo said.

Claire grabbed Jax’s arm. “We need to bounce.”

“My dad will kill me.”

Claire looked at Milo. “Is there a way out back here?”

Milo huffed, sat back in his chair, and pointed to the far end of the yard.

Claire and Jax started to go.

Jax turned. “I had a good time. We’re still good on the ID?”

“I’ll have Russell hook you up.”

Jax bit her lip. “Thanks.”

And they ran.

Changing the Rules Chapter 18[1,551 words]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Five of them shoved in the back of the surveillance van was rather tight, not that Cooper would complain with Claire at his side.

Sasha bagged the glasses and bottled what was left in them for testing and prints.

Claire and Cooper worked together to ID every kid at the party that they knew from Auburn, while Jax and Manuel did the same for Bremerton.

Cooper enhanced an early image of Milo standing with his two friends and a few others.

Manuel pointed to the screen. “This guy could be Russell. Hard to tell from this angle, but I’ve seen him at Bremerton.”

“Troublemaker?” Cooper asked.

“Not that I’ve noticed. I’ve seen him leave campus at noon, not sure if he comes back.”

“Put a trace on his car,” Sasha said from the front of the van.

“Easy enough. Seniors have assigned parking spots,” Manuel said.

Cooper circled a half-hidden face in the crowd. “This guy looks familiar.”

Claire shook her head. “He looks too old to be a student.”

Jax leaned back, scratched her head. “This is unusual, right? A big party like this with a huge mix of kids from private and public schools?”

“If this was a neighborhood party, I’d say no. But Bremerton’s students come from all over, and most of the kids at Auburn had a decent drive to get here.”

“The question is, why?” Sasha asked.

Claire turned around to look at Sasha. “I think that’s obvious. We’re looking for a link between the schools, and we may have found it.”

Sasha shook her head. “You’ve found nothing incriminating. We have a rich man entertaining his nephew, who is showing off for his friends.” She lifted the plastic evidence bags. “If these come back tainted, then we have a little more, but not much. In Seattle, I chased a lead. The girl is now nineteen. Marie Nickerson, she ran cross-country for Auburn. She wasn’t good. We know she dropped out of school her junior year. Warren’s investigation revealed this girl as having met an older man she never introduced to her friends or family. She started to attend parties, skip school, and within a month of finding trouble, she disappeared. The first hit in the system signaled Warren. Until now, there was no way to know if she was simply a runaway or a victim.”

“Sounds exactly like the profile we’re looking for. What happened in Seattle?” Claire asked.

Sasha lifted a finger in the air. “One prostitution bust. One. Then nothing. Disappeared again.”

“They’re moving the girls around.” Cooper glanced at Claire.

“Keeping it underground. I take it we don’t know who the guy was she was dating,” Claire said.

Sasha shook her head. “All we have is a car description, no plates. And that is a three-year-old lead.”

Manuel cleared his throat. "What about the john? The man Marie was caught with?"

"Booked and released. Pleaded not guilty. Said he was answering an ad for a professional massage."

Cooper shook his head. "Yeah, right."

"But now we have a name and a positive ID of a student at Auburn." Sasha turned to Claire. "Remember where we met? And what I was doing?"

Claire smiled. "In the library at Richter and you were going over old yearbooks."

"Guess where you're going to be on Monday. It's only been three years that she's been missing. Many of her teachers will likely still be at Auburn."

"Why not go to the administration and pull an old schedule?" Cooper asked.

Claire and Sasha exchanged looks. "Because we don't know if we can trust them."

"The less people that know what we're learning the better," Sasha said.

"Even Warren?" Cooper asked.

"Leave Warren to me." Neil's voice came from a single speaker in the van.

Claire jumped.

Cooper placed his hand over hers. "Damn, Boss. We forgot you were even there."

"Neil is always listening," Sasha reminded them.

And when Sasha's eyes didn't leave Cooper's, an uneasy pitch in his stomach had him wondering just how much Neil listened to.

Claire went into the next week with a completely new agenda. She arrived to school early and went straight to the library. Unlike Richter, the library at Auburn seemed to house more computers than books, and a quick search uncovered that the library didn't have a stash of old yearbooks. Those could be found with Mrs. Appleton, the yearbook committee director.

No way Claire Porter would want to be on that kind of thing. That left Claire only a couple of ways to get the books. She could break into the classroom and steal them, or break into the classroom and hack Mrs. Appleton's computer and hope the old files were in there.

Much as Claire loved a good computer hack, she doubted she'd have enough time to find what she needed and get out unnoticed.

When Mrs. Appleton wasn't dealing with the yearbook, she was teaching English in the room that adjoined Mrs. Wallace's, which was a lot less conspicuous to break into from than a hallway filled with students walking by.

A plan formulated as Claire walked into Shakespeare and took her usual seat.

Instead of her normal attitude, she paid attention to the lesson and wrote a few notes.

When the bell rang, Claire held back.

"Mrs. Wallace?"

The older woman looked over the rim of her reading glasses, her expression unamused.

"About my book report . . ."

Mrs. Wallace removed her glasses and pointed them at Claire. "We can't call that a book report."

"Oh, so you read it already."

"Let me see if I remember it clearly. 'Everybody dies. The End.'"

Claire lowered her eyes. "Yeah—"

"I especially liked the postscript. 'Five acts for any play is three acts too many.' Bravo, Claire. Your best work to date."

Claire huffed out a breath. "I just don't get it. And last week I had a ton of work and I didn't actually read anything but CliffsNotes until this weekend. And I'm still not . . ."

Mrs. Wallace kept watching her as if she didn't believe a word Claire was saying. The woman was smart like that.

"When I try to write down the meaning of the play, I just get all tied up."

"Then ask for help." Mrs. Wallace started to soften.

"That's what I'm doing." Claire laid on the sad face, the one that used to get her a hall pass from Checkpoint Charlie at Richter.

Students for the next period started to enter the room.

"Okay, come in at your lunch."

"I can't. Coach Bennett has me at lunch for algebra."

For the first time, Mrs. Wallace cracked a smile. "I'm surprised he doesn't own your nights and weekends."

"How about after school? I can ask to show up a little late for track. The coaches did say my schoolwork had to come first," Claire said, smiling.

It took Mrs. Wallace a few seconds to answer. "Fine."

The bell rang, and Claire turned toward the door.

"Miss Porter?"

"Yeah?"

Mrs. Wallace scribbled on a notepad. "A pass for being late."

Claire took it, waved it in the air. "Thanks."

Instead of finding third period, she worked her way to the auto shop.

The metal roll-up doors were all the way to the top, and twenty or so students were working on small engines on various tables set up beyond the car lifts.

Cooper was bent over, showing a handful of kids something in the engine.

For a few seconds, Claire stared and listened. Jax was right, Cooper filled out a pair of jeans really well. And his laugh, the richness of it, had started to become something she wanted to hear often.

One of the students looked up, and then nudged Cooper and pointed her way. "Uhm, Mr. Mitchel."

He turned and saw her, and those dimples she had just started to notice appeared on his cheeks.

"Sorry to interrupt, Coooach. Can I, ah . . . t-talk to you for a minute?" Claire nearly called him Cooper and stuttered.

"Yeah." He wiped his hand on a shop towel and patted one of the kids on his back. "You got this. Try again."

"I have to be late for track today," Claire said loud enough for anyone listening to hear.

"Oh?" Cooper opened the door to the empty classroom. "What's up?"

Claire lowered her voice to a whisper. "Yearbooks aren't in the library. I need to get into Mrs. Appleton's room. I've arranged to meet Mrs. Wallace after school. Their rooms connect. I need you to check up on me and distract her."

"How much time?"

"I don't know where she keeps them, ten minutes?"

"That's a long distraction."

"I'm not going to get another chance, so make it work." Claire gave him a knowing grin. "Flirt with her. I know you know how."

"Seriously?"

"Don't try and tell me you haven't flirted with older women."

Cooper's gaze moved to her lips. "And younger women." His words were slow.

"You're killin' me." Claire ignored the heat rising in her face.

"I certainly hope so." His words were charged, the look in his eyes matched.

"Cooper," she said his name between clenched teeth. "Save it for Mrs. Wallace."

"Sorry." He closed his eyes, shook his head. "Better now."

Claire took a step back, put out her palm.

"What?"

"I need a hall pass. I'm pretty sure Mrs. Wallace's expired after the first fifteen minutes."

Cooper started to laugh. "What's in it for me?"

She had a hard time not laughing. "C'mon." She pushed at his shoulder.

Cooper found the notepad and handed her a pass. "You could have just texted me this info."

"And spend my time in World Affairs? Where is the fun in that?"

"You just wanted to see me."

His words made her pause. Probably because he was partially right.

Or maybe more than partially.

Changing the Rules Chapter 19[1,478 words]

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jax sat in the tiered quad, her uniform sweater under her butt to keep her skirt from getting wet. If there was one thing about this assignment she didn't like, it was plaid. She'd burned her Richter uniform, every version of it, down to the socks. To her, there was nothing worse than a strict uniform code making all the students look exactly alike.

With a sandwich in one hand and book in the other, she ate and watched.

If it wasn't for Ally and her connections to the party crowd, Jax was starting to think her presence on Bremerton's campus was a waste of time.

Her phone rang, pulling her out of her thoughts.

Lewis's initials flashed.

"Hey. I'm a . . . I can't talk long."

"How about a simple hello?"

Jax closed her eyes. "Sorry. I don't want you upset if I have to hang up." She glanced around, found no one watching her.

"You sound like you're outside."

"I am." Lewis had no idea where she was, only that she was part of a group investigating human trafficking. She told him that if he saw her anywhere, even if she was with Claire, to ignore her and walk on by.

"Where?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"I'm starting to think you're living a double life."

"Technically, I am," she said with a slight laugh.

"Hmm." He wasn't amused.

“You’re calling midday, so something’s up.” Jax put her sandwich down, no longer interested in it.

“Me and a few of my friends are renting a big Airbnb in Santa Barbara over the long weekend, blow off some steam.”

She knew without asking what he was going to say next. “I’m sure you need it.”

“We all do.”

She was quiet.

“I want you to come.”

Jax picked at the grass. “I’m not sure I can.”

“You can’t work seven days a week.”

“Actually, I can.” She looked to her side. “I can’t talk about this right now.”

“Really, why?”

“Lewis.” His name was a warning.

“I hear voices. Like you’re in a park.” He sounded angry.

“I’ll call you later.”

He huffed. “Just tell me something.”

This conversation had gone on too long. “What?”

“... is there someone else?”

“What? No.” It was her turn to be pissed. “I told you—”

“Yeah, that you’re working. But we both know you don’t have to work. And since you’ve reduced me to once a week, I’m starting to think it’s all bullshit.”

“I do have to work.” She whispered the last word and spat it at him at the same time. “I have to go.”

From behind her, her name came out in a girlish scream. “Jaaax!” Next thing she knew, Ally was practically jumping on her before plopping at her side. “I’ve been looking for the party girl all day.”

“What the—”

“Goodbye,” she told Lewis before hanging up the phone.

“Ewww, that sounded bad.”

Jax rolled her eyes. “My dad is so annoying.”

“Did he find out about the party?”

“I stayed with Claire so he wouldn’t, but he’s suspicious.”

“That sucks.” Ally laid on the grass. “Saturday was epic. I think I was drunk until Sunday afternoon.”

“You didn’t seem drunk. You were bouncing.”

“I know.” She sat up, rested on her elbow. “I think I was roofied,” she said, smiling.

Jax wanted to deny that. “Did you pass out?”

“No. I didn’t at all that night. Crashed big time Sunday afternoon.”

“So you didn’t take anything on purpose?”

Ally shook her head. “Not my thing.”

The girl was sixteen, she didn’t know what her thing was. Nevertheless, Jax was happy to hear she wasn’t seeking drugs on purpose. “Who would put drugs in your drink?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was just the tequila . . . or vodka.”

The bell rang and they both stood. “Next time, stick with me,” Jax told her. “I’ll keep anyone from spiking your drink.”

Ally put her arm around Jax’s shoulders. “Yeah, we girls need to stick together.”

Jax tossed her uneaten lunch in the trash can as they walked by. “Hey, if you see Russell, can you point him out?”

“Sure, why?”

“His uncle is gonna hook me up with a fake ID,” she whispered.

Ally jumped in front of her and stopped. “Get the fuck out. No way.”

“That’s what he said. I mean, before the party broke up.”

“Dude! I want one.”

Jax’s first thought was, Ally wouldn’t pass for twenty-one with a fake ID. “Okay. I mean, I don’t know if he’ll do it. But we can ask.”

They started walking again. “I probably shouldn’t go bursting up to him and asking about an ID.”

“Probably not.”

“I wonder if he’ll be at the Nunez party.”

Jax felt tired just thinking about it. “I heard it might be canceled.”

Ally pouted. “That would suck.”

The warning bell rang. “Shit, I can’t be late to Mr. Levin’s class.”

Jax waved the other girl away.

Instead of heading for her class, she walked toward the girls’ bathroom and texted headquarters.

By the time she made it to the administration building, her pass to leave campus was stamped and she was headed toward the parking lot.

Manuel leaned on the side of a security car, eating a burger.

She walked up to him and handed him her pass. “Any luck with the car?”

“Didn’t show up for school.”

“I’m ducking out early.” She needed to deal with Lewis before he did something stupid and blew her cover.

“Copy that.” Manuel looked beyond her as if bored.

“If you see Ally jumping in any cars, make note of the plates.”

“Got it.”

“See ya,” she said under her breath before heading to her car.

Claire stood outside B building after the final bell and waited for Mrs. Appleton to walk out before she made her way inside.

“I was starting to wonder if you were coming.”

“I was on the other side of campus, sorry.”

Mrs. Wallace indicated one of the front seats, and Claire sat down. “Before we get started, I have to tell you . . . your behavior in this classroom has been nothing short of appalling.”

Time for a lecture. “I know.”

“Why?”

“Can I be honest?” Claire asked.

“If you can keep the profanity out of it.”

Claire squeezed her eyes as if in pain. “It’s so freaking boring! I mean, not you. Shakespeare.”

“How can you say that about Macbeth? There’s high drama . . .”

“And endless death. It’s predictable. After you get through the singsong way he phrases everything, as if iambic pentameter makes it better. It doesn’t, it puts you to sleep like a children’s lullaby.”

Claire kept talking, purposely giving Mrs. Wallace things to chew on so when Cooper arrived she’d be just flustered enough to need a few minutes to digest everything Claire was saying. From Claire’s experience with teachers, nothing excited them more than when a student has a light bulb moment of clarity.

“Yes, but—”

“You know what reading Macbeth did for me?” Claire didn’t let her answer. “It made me look up good old Bill’s daily life. Who were his people? Cuz there had to be some serious story in there. Sure enough, he had siblings die, as in several. Kinda the norm back then, but then he had his own kid bite it because of the plague.”

By now Mrs. Wallace was sitting back and listening.

“And why didn’t he write a play about marrying a cougar at eighteen after knocking her up? Now that play I might try and suffer through, even if it’s written like a musical without actual songs.”

“Well—”

“And a hypocrite to his deathbed. Or at least his tombstone. ‘Good friend for Jesus sake forbear, To digg the dust enclosed heare: Bleste be ye man y’t spares thes stones, And curst be he y’t moves my bones.’” Claire took a breath. “In one breath he says he’s a godly man and the next he’s cursing you if you loot his grave. Those two things are a contradiction, don’t you think?”

Where the hell is Cooper?

“Certainly—”

“And his poor wife . . . he dies and leaves his wife a bed? And he dies a month after signing his will. I have to tell ya, I wouldn’t put it past Anne to reenact Macbeth and kill him herself once she realized she’d get nothing when he bit it. Was he faithful? I bet—”

There was a knock on the door.

Claire finally took a breath. About time!

Cooper walked into the room, his eyes collided with Claire’s.

“You are here,” he said as if surprised.

Claire brought her attitude back. “I told you Mrs. Wallace was giving me extra help.”

“You’ll have to forgive my lack of trust, you haven’t exactly been completely honest lately.”

With her arms crossed over her chest, Claire turned to Mrs. Wallace. “I’ve been here the whole time, right?”

Mrs. Wallace smiled. “She has been. It’s Mr. Mitchel, right?”

Cooper turned a full-wattage smile toward Mrs. Wallace, and damned if her face didn’t perk up.

“That’s right.”

“It does appear as if Claire is attempting to get on track with her studies.”

Cooper nodded a couple of times. “Can I have just a moment?” He opened the door.

Claire’s hand slid into her pocket and fiddled with lock picks.

“Certainly.”

Claire huffed as if annoyed, and waited until Cooper closed the door before bolting from her seat.

Changing the Rules Chapter 20[2,259 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Thank you,” Cooper said as he kept walking to draw Mrs. Wallace farther away from the classroom. Once they reached the double doors leading into the hall, he stopped and glanced at his watch. “You have no idea how glad I am to see Claire in your room, Mrs. Wallace.”

“It’s Louise.”

He put a hand to his chest. “Call me Cooper. I feel like I haven’t met a third of the staff.”

“If you’re here long enough, you’ll learn the names.”

“I’m sure. Anyway, I need to know how bad Claire is doing in your class.”

Louise lifted her eyebrows and shook her head. “If you’d come to me last week, I’d tell you she’s failing.”

He shook his head as if disappointed.

“But after everything she just told me, I honestly couldn’t possibly fail her. Education is meant to teach a subject, yes . . . but it’s also meant to open the eyes of the student. Make that student look for their own answers to life’s big questions. And that is exactly what Shakespeare is doing for her.” The woman looked like a proud parent.

“You mean Claire likes the class?”

“Quite the opposite, I think she hates it. Hates it enough to study the man and not his work. But you cannot do one without the other and truly understand.”

Wow, this lady really loved Shakespeare. “So Claire is doing the work?”

Louise shook her head. “Not really.”

Cooper glanced at his watch.

Louise started to chuckle. “She turned in a book report on Macbeth. You’ll never believe what she wrote.”

Actually . . . “Do I really want to know?”

She leaned a little closer. “Everybody dies. The End.”

Cooper closed his eyes, tried not to laugh.

When Louise’s giggles grew, Cooper joined her. “What a little shit,” he said.

“I know. She’s not wrong.”

“Maybe not, but still . . .”

“I think I can get her back on track so she can keep running for the team,” Louise said.

“I hope so.” He looked at his watch, still two minutes to go. “Maybe with Coach Bennett moving her to his algebra class, the girl will be able to graduate.”

“He will shape her up. And if she’s still struggling, Mr. Dunnan has several tutors he can recommend. I’m told they’re young and speak teenager.”

“I’ll make a note of that.” Cooper felt his pocket buzz. Looked like he didn’t need to flirt with the woman after all. “I won’t keep you. And thank you for giving her a chance.”

“I like the girl. I’d just like to see her be less of a . . .”

“Pain in the ass?” Cooper finished for her.

“Well, yes.”

He walked Louise back down the hall and opened the door.

Claire sat slouched behind a desk, cell phone in her hand. She really knew how to play her role.

“Well, Claire, it appears that Louise . . . Mrs. Wallace, is willing to help you out. Although after that book report, I’m surprised.”

Claire rolled her eyes, attempting not to grin.

“I’m excusing you from track today . . .”

“But Coach Bennett—”

“I will talk with Bennett. You go home, do your homework, and get a good night’s sleep. And when you come back to school tomorrow, we all need to see some improvements.” Cooper saw her trying so hard not to smile.

“Okay, Coach.”

“Good.” He redirected his attention. “Louise, thank you again.”

“I broke up with Lewis.”

Jax’s announcement met Claire the second she cleared the front door. “You what?”

“I was waiting for him at his apartment door when he came home, I handed him his box of crap he’d started leaving here, and I said goodbye.”

Claire dropped her backpack, dumped her purse on top of it, walked over to the couch, and pulled her friend in for a hug.

Jax sniffled and hugged her back.

When Claire leaned away, she looked hard in Jax’s eyes. “Is this an ice cream breakup, a tequila breakup, or a trip to Vegas breakup?”

Jax wiped a tear from her eye. “Vegas sounds perfect, but we both have school tomorrow.”

That was laughable.

“So, tequila?”

“Make it wine . . . no, champagne.”

“Bubbles?”

“Yeah.”

Claire pushed off the couch to fill her request. When she returned, Jax had curled back up on the couch with a blanket over her legs. Claire handed her a glass and joined her.

“Okay, tell me everything.”

Twenty minutes later the story was out, and Claire was refilling Jax’s glass.

“You know what really made me do it?” Jax asked.

“You had so many reasons.”

“The part about him saying I didn’t have to work. I mean, for God’s sake, has he listened to nothing I’ve told him in the last six months?”

“You know what he heard? ‘Blah, blah, blah . . . level up . . . blah, oh, sex . . . blah, blah, level up, connections . . . and more sex.’”

Jax released a long breath. “I know. I shouldn’t have ever told him about my family. Then it would have been ‘Blah, blah, blah . . . sex, sex, sex. Blah, blah.’”

Claire smiled when Jax did.

“He even started telling me he loved me.”

Claire almost spat out her bubbles. “He what?”

“It happened right after we started this assignment. I think he saw me getting excited about work and felt cockblocked.”

“He wouldn’t be wrong about the cockblocking. Do we even have groceries?”

Jax laughed until it dwindled to a chuckle. “Damn.”

Claire watched while reality settled.

“Am I going to be one of those people who has to hide their family?”

Claire bit her lip to keep her thoughts from becoming words. At least you have a family to hide. “I don’t know,” she said instead.

“I’m wallowing.”

Claire reached for the bottle. “You’re allowed. You just broke up with a guy. It’s a free pass for feeling sorry for yourself.”

Jax tilted the glass back. “You know what really bugged me about Lewis?”

All Claire had to do was be silent to get the answer.

“My parents would have loved if I brought Lewis home. It wouldn’t matter if he was a decent guy. Wouldn’t matter if he really loved me. He has the right pedigree.”

“And that makes you a mare.”

Jax lifted her head from the couch, sat up. “All I’ve ever been to my family is a burden. If I marry well and bring them something, I am something. Bringing Lewis is exactly what they want.”

They both took a heavy pull from their glasses. Some of that wallowing dissipated. In all the things Claire had to think and worry about, disappointing a mother or a father wasn’t

one of them. Wanting their love . . . yeah, she wanted that. Her mere existence disappointed them enough to leave her the moment she took her first breath.

“Good thing we’re not living our lives for someone else’s approval.”

“Amen!” Jax grabbed the bottle, refilled glasses.

Claire tucked Jax into bed, reminded her she was her own woman, and left her snoring friend.

She sent a message to Neil and the team. Told them Jax was taking the next day off.

After a shower and slipping into a simple baggy T-shirt to sleep in, Claire pulled one of the yearbooks from her backpack and started flipping pages.

Her eyes kept sliding to the digital clock on her nightstand.

She put her AirPods in her ears to keep at least half of the conversation from anyone who may be listening. She trusted Neil with her safety . . . privacy, not so much.

Cooper picked up on the first ring.

“Go home and do your homework?”

Claire curled up in bed, a water bottle in her hand.

“Hey, I’m an upstanding staff member. I need to start talking like one.” Cooper answered as if they were in the middle of a conversation.

“You know, I think you like bossing me around.” Claire flipped the page.

Cooper was silent for a moment.

“What?” Claire asked.

“I’m not commenting on that one.”

“Dangerous ground?” she asked, teasing.

His silence made her laugh.

“Jax broke up with Lewis tonight.”

“Ohhh . . . is that a bad thing?”

“No. Still sucks. He called her and started giving her crap about not being around for him. She was at school. Ally was there. He was never right for her.”

“How is she?”

“I poured her into bed. Taking tomorrow off.”

Cooper chuckled. “That’s fair.”

She turned a page, looked past all the pictures of previous Auburn seniors.

“What are you doing right now?” he asked.

“I’m doing homework, in bed.”

Silence.

She stopped leafing through the pages. “And don’t ask what I’m wearing.”

He moaned. “That was mean.”

“Oh, was it?” It was good to laugh.

“Yeah. Now I want to know exactly what you wear to bed.”

“I’m not going to tell you.”

Was that Cooper growling?

Claire closed the yearbook and rubbed her eyes. “This is weird, Cooper.”

He paused. “Weird good or weird bad?”

“I don’t know, just weird. It’s like the rules changed overnight. And now, every comment, every joke, every look is charged, you know?”

“And that’s bad.” His voice sounded strangled.

Claire tried to grasp on to her feelings, which was never an easy thing for her. “Not bad,” she decided out loud. “Weird. Upended. That’s what it is. I’ll feel turned around and not sure which way to step or what to say.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I know.”

“How about going with your gut. Instead of thinking, just step or turn. Move forward.”

She shoved the yearbook off her lap and kicked the covers off her legs. “For the first time since I left Richter, I’m worried I’ll make a wrong move and regret it.”

“Will you do me a favor?” he asked.

“Depends on what it is.”

“I’m probably shooting my own foot, but when you stop thinking and start feeling, will you act on that?”

“That could go wrong.” In so many ways.

“Maybe, but it’s your truth. When I joined the service, I just jumped, went with my gut. Six months in I was like What the hell did I do?”

Claire laughed at that.

“But that didn’t last long. Yeah, I wanted out after four years, but I came out a different person. When I signed up to work for Neil, I knew it was the right choice. It filled that part of me that I joined the service for, without tying my hands the way the service did. I thought I was the luckiest bastard in the world. I got paid doing the shit I love to do with enough of an adrenaline rush to make me feel alive.”

“I know exactly what that feels like.”

“I know you do. We all do, even Sasha, who tries so hard to act indifferent. We’re all cut from the same cloth, as my mom would say. And if going with my gut hasn’t led me down an irreversible path, then maybe that will work for you, too.”

“Go with my gut?”

“You did that when you hopped the fence at Richter. How did that turn out?”

Claire looked around the bedroom she called hers. In a home that felt like she belonged. “Not bad.”

“Damn good, if you ask me.”

She was smiling again. “Pretty damn good.”

“There’s the spark in your voice I’m used to.”

She liked how easy their conversation flowed. “I’ve been wondering about something . . . ,” she started.

“About what?”

“All that time in Europe . . . Did you ever come back?”

“Yeah. I visited my parents a couple times. Mainly during the holidays.”

“I don’t remember where they live.”

“Rural Michigan. Which was a huge reason why I joined the service to start with. Winters suck, summers are too short.”

Claire tried to scrape together her memories of Cooper’s conversations about his parents.
“You have a brother, right?”

“You remember.”

“Barely. Back when I first moved here I didn’t pay a lot of attention to anyone else’s family unless I met them.”

“I don’t think any of us went out of our way to talk about our families. Didn’t seem right since you didn’t exactly have one.”

She couldn’t argue there. “It doesn’t feel that way now.”

“Hmmm, you’d like my parents. My dad works heavy construction. Mom works in a dental office as a receptionist. Pretty boring and normal. Mom was nervous when I joined the military but got over it. She thinks I’m a bodyguard, now.”

“A job you’ve done a few times.”

“If I told her about our time at Richter, she’d do that worry thing all over again. It’s best I just keep that to myself.”

In all the ways Neil and his wife, and Sasha and her husband, had filled the holes in Claire’s life, having them worry about her wasn’t part of that. They all knew what their jobs were and understood how to execute them and stay safe. She supposed that didn’t stop them from being concerned from time to time, but they’d never once tried to change Claire’s mind about working for Neil. “Did you ever think of flying back here to visit?”

“All the time. I didn’t trust myself.”

“I guess that’s my fault.” She didn’t like the thought of being to blame for him staying abroad all those years.

“My choice. I went with my gut to leave, and had to own my feelings so I could come back.”

“You can’t tell me that you’ve been pining over me for six years.”

He paused. “I wasn’t a monk, if that’s what you’re suggesting. But I did try and put you out of my head.”

“Did that work?”

“Yes,” he said a little too quickly.

“Really?”

Another pause. “No. I flew back to the States and kept lying to myself. But this lady I know pinned me down, kicked me in the groin, and woke me up.”

Claire took a deep breath and curled her knees into her chest. “She sounds badass.”

“She is.”

They both stopped talking.

“Claire?”

She still wasn’t used to him calling her by her first name.

“Yeah?”

“Are you feeling less weird?”

She laughed away the last of her tension. “I am.”

“Good. Now do your homework and go to bed.”

“Good night . . . Cooper.”

“Night, Claire.”