

Changing the Rules Chapter 21[2,282 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A nagging ping in Claire's head pulled her out of a dream. She rolled over, curled up on herself, but the ping didn't stop. Her eyes opened. It was still completely dark outside. A glance at the clock said she'd only been asleep for thirty minutes.

The ping came from her cell phone. Neil's number lit up her screen.

She sat up in bed, ran a hand over her face. "What's going on?" she answered.

"We have a situation."

Twenty minutes later she was standing in the surveillance room at headquarters.

Neil was sucking on a cup of coffee, Sasha looked like she'd just walked off a fashion runway, and Cooper mirrored Claire's appearance as having been pulled out of bed in the middle of the night. All they'd been told was that there was activity at her decoy house and to prepare accordingly.

Claire walked directly to the monitors. "What's going on?"

"You have a visitor." Neil ran the footage.

She expected to see Elsie or maybe someone from the house party.

A shadow swept by the first camera, too dark to really see anything other than darkness on the screen.

Cooper pushed a cup of black coffee in her hands.

She smiled her thanks.

The infrared cameras turned on and the blur came into focus. The image jolted her awake, more than the taste of stale coffee. "Mr. Eastman?"

"What's he doing?" Cooper asked, peering closer.

"Checking to see if anyone is home," Sasha told them.

Claire's eyes kept glued to the monitors. "How long did he stay?"

Neil leaned forward, advanced the time of the film. Eastman walked around the small half of the duplex, stuck to the shadows, and glanced in the windows. He didn't linger. The camera stayed on him as he walked out of the yard and continued across the street to get in a car. Neil stopped the image.

"How long was that?"

Neil shook his head, pointed to the live feed. "He's still there."

Claire looked up at Cooper, who was standing over her. "He's making sure I live there."

"Why?"

"To know that, we need to know exactly who he is." Sasha did this part really well. "We can rule out that he's a concerned staff member worried about his student."

"He's either the link to the organization who feeds them children—" Neil started.

"Sorry, Boss. I'm not seeing that," Cooper countered.

". . . or one of Warren's men."

Claire pressed a button, watched him casing the yard again. "So he's a cop. And he's onto me."

"At what angle?" Cooper asked. "Let's say he's clean. Claire shows up, he profiles her as a possible risk. That's reason to keep watch on her house."

Claire listened, rewound the tape again. "If he's a good cop, wouldn't he phone in for someone else to do this? A little risky poking his head into my bedroom window when I know what he looks like."

"If he's a bad cop, he isn't going to phone in anything." Cooper placed a hand on Claire's shoulder.

She knew Cooper's feelings on Eastman. Neither one of them wanted to see him coming out of this with dirt on his hands.

"Good cop who is watching out for new players and he's made me as one," Claire suggested.

". . . or someone you are in contact with as one." Sasha directed her look at Cooper.

Claire felt Cooper's hand squeeze her shoulder. "We have very minimal contact on campus, most of which is on the track."

Neil cleared his throat and focused their attention on another monitor.

Claire recognized the front of her house. In the frame, Cooper was pulling into the driveway after the sun had set. When Jax jumped out of the back seat, Claire knew what was coming. Neil fast-forwarded until she'd run from the car.

He stopped the image with Cooper standing behind her, his body well inside her physical space.

Claire glanced over and found Neil looking between them.

At her side, Sasha was silent.

"Eastman has seen something," Neil told them.

Cooper spoke for both of them. "There is nothing more to see than this."

Sasha made a clicking noise. "Emotion is felt."

Claire sometimes hated that Sasha was sharper than a samurai's sword.

Neil was pinning his eyes on Cooper. Tension in the room simmered.

Claire reached up, touched the hand on her shoulder, and held it firmly in place. They'd done nothing to compromise this case. "Then we need to flush Eastman out. He's at the decoy house because that's what's on file. Gathering Cooper's address isn't as easily obtained." She turned back to the monitors, reran the images of Eastman walking around.

"What are you looking for?" Sasha asked.

"If I was a cop, good or bad, I'd plant some kind of bug so I could sleep at night."

Cooper set his coffee beside hers and pointed. "There."

Claire backed up the image, frame by frame. A tiny flash of light reflecting was all they needed. Something was in the bushes.

"Looks like I'm moving in." Which did not make her happy.

"Do we have a tail on Eastman?" Cooper asked.

"AJ is on him now. We'll have wherever he's staying staked out and online within twenty-four hours." Sasha's husband, AJ, was an occasional helper to the team.

Claire patted Cooper's hand and scooted back in the rolling chair to stand.

“Sasha is coming with you,” Neil said. “You’re not alone in the house until we understand the danger level.”

Claire nodded.

They all started to leave the room.

Neil stopped Claire and Cooper. “You have a few minutes in private to work out whatever is going on here,” he said to both of them. “But it stays here and not out there unless it can work to our advantage.”

Claire and Cooper stayed back, watching the other two walk away and close the door behind them.

“This is on me,” Cooper said the second they were alone.

“We don’t know that.”

He turned her to face him. Shook his head. “My thoughts are less than pure when I see you on the field. If Eastman is watching, or someone reporting to him is . . .”

She smiled, looked up. “Don’t kick yourself too hard. I might have been checking out your ass when you were elbow deep in that engine today.”

He rubbed his hands up and down her arms, and instead of feeling the need to pull away, she wanted him to pull her close.

“I knew I felt heat on my backside,” he teased.

Claire placed one hand on his chest. For several seconds she looked at her fingers and enjoyed the strength of the man under them.

Cooper placed a hand to her cheek and tilted her head.

She felt her lips pulling into a smile and her gut suggesting she move in closer. Instead of questioning, she reached for his neck and met him halfway.

His lips were warm and soft, gentle with the first taste.

Inside she felt her gut celebrating their first kiss, telling her she was doing the right thing.

Cooper wrapped one arm around her back and pressed their bodies close from knees to lips. Then reason took a back seat to the desire that started to churn. Mouths opened and her tongue pressed against his. All the wonder of what it would be like to be kissed by this man fled with the reality that it was spectacular. Both hot and sweet and nothing like

anything she'd ever felt before. Probably because she knew the man kissing her more than any other in the past.

She felt his kiss soften and his hands grip her harder right before he ended their first taste.

Her breath came fast and her eyes opened slowly to find him staring down. "I guess that answers that," she said in a whisper.

Cooper closed his eyes, and wrapped her close for a hug. "Thank God," he said against her ear.

They walked out of the surveillance room holding hands.

Sasha stood in a flight attendant uniform, the appropriate luggage at her side. Her expression completely neutral.

Neil's jaw, on the other hand, was tight.

"Are you ready?" Sasha asked in Russian.

Claire nodded. And with a squeeze of her hand holding Cooper's, reluctantly let go.

Cooper watched her leave, and for the first time since they met, hope flared so brightly inside of him he wanted to scream. The cruel irony that their first kiss was going to be their last until . . . he had no idea how long . . . was the only thing biting at his joy.

"Remove that expression from your face before I'm forced to remove it for you." Neil's words were measured.

Yeah, even that didn't dim Cooper's sunshine. "Are you telling me you don't approve?" he asked Neil flat out.

His boss, and friend, was slow to respond. "Why do you think I sent you away?"

Cooper remembered their conversation. It had been short and clipped.

"I see what is going on. Do I need to remind you how old she is?"

"Eighteen going on thirty."

"Stop at eighteen. And under my protection."

Cooper had already concluded his attraction wasn't appropriate and was doing everything he could to stay away. But he loved his job and couldn't imagine finding work somewhere else.

“Everyone here is my second family.”

Neil looked him dead in the eye. “Second. We are her first.”

“What do you want me to do, quit?”

Neil shook his head. “I’m expanding in Europe. Many of our clients have second homes there. My wife’s family . . . Richter proved there is need. I’d like you to head the operation.”

“You’re sending me to Europe.”

“I’m suggesting you request a transfer.”

Which was better than being fired.

“You need distance and she needs an opportunity to figure out what is best for her without distractions.”

Much as Cooper had wanted to argue the point, Neil had been right. And his solution made sense.

Cooper pushed his memories aside. “I requested the transfer.” He looked Neil in the eye, saw some of the tension fade.

“I would have fired you if I didn’t approve and wouldn’t have let you come back if I thought Claire wasn’t . . .” Neil didn’t finish his thought. “Just don’t rub it in my face.”

Cooper wanted to laugh so hard it hurt. “She’s a daughter to you.”

Neil wasn’t one to overtly show his emotions, but he was failing that self-imposed rule with Claire.

“We’re the only family she has.”

Cooper couldn’t stop smiling. “You’re a giant teddy bear.” He knew he was pushing Neil’s buttons. There wasn’t a soft anything on the man’s body.

Any teasing, if you could call it that from Neil, was gone from his next message. “If you hurt her, I’ll be forced to hurt you.”

Cooper could accept that.

With a moment of quiet understanding, he broke up the heavy air with one question. “Does this mean I can call you Dad from now on?”

And Neil grinned.

Claire sat in silent reflection as Sasha drove to the decoy house. Much as she would've loved to be thinking about the case, the only thoughts in her head involved Cooper and the churning he'd caused in her body.

She glanced at Sasha, who hadn't uttered a word.

"Aren't you curious?"

Still there was silence.

"Surprised?"

Claire leaned her head back and broke up the quiet. "I was. Did you know Cooper went to Europe to stay away from me? How was I so clueless?"

"You're not clueless now," Sasha finally said.

Claire ran her fingertips along her mouth, still felt the press of his lips. "Am I making a mistake?"

"I'm not the one to deliver advice on personal relationships." Sasha made a turn off the freeway.

"That doesn't stop you from having an opinion."

When it seemed Sasha wasn't going to say anything, Claire pushed. "C'mon, Sasha. You're a sister to me."

That title had grown on the other woman in the past six years. When Claire used it, she usually got what she wanted.

"I was preoccupied at the time Cooper left for Europe. The time I spent overseas and the few occasions Cooper and I worked together, his questions centered on you. It was easy to deduce why. Him leaving was the right thing to do."

"I'm still not so sure about that."

"Time and wisdom will change that opinion," Sasha said.

"You still haven't said if you like the idea."

Sasha glanced over and a smile crested her lips.

That was all the approval Claire needed.

“Now, I have a question for you.”

These moments with Sasha were rare. Claire ate them up. “Go for it.”

“How is the sex?”

She blurted out a laugh. Not at all surprised about the question. If there was one thing Sasha had taught her, it was to be open about her sexuality and what her needs were. “I don’t know.”

“Excuse me?”

“We haven’t.” She cleared her throat. “Cooper wasn’t lying when he said we had done nothing to create suspicion. In fact, tonight was the first time we kissed.”

Sasha was smiling. “And how was that?”

Claire curled up in the front seat. “Freaking amazing.”

They pulled down the street that Claire needed to become more familiar with, very quickly. “What about Neil? What does he think?”

Sasha shook her head. “Neil is a man. And protective about you.”

“He’s not happy.”

Sasha shrugged. “Let me know if Cooper is bruised tomorrow and I’ll talk to him.”

Claire lost her smile. “You don’t really think he’d do—”

“I’ve brought him off a ledge more than once these past years. The man loves you as his own, even if he never says it.”

That had unexpected tears filling the back of her eyes.

Gwen had told Claire that more than once, but to hear it from Sasha made it more real.

“Thanks, Sasha. We don’t do this enough,” Claire said.

“It appears that is about to change.” Sasha turned the corner. Neither of them looked directly at the car that had a man watching in the shadows, but both of them saw it.

Sasha signaled a garage door opener with her phone.

“Burst out of the car and yell at me and slam the door into the house. Make sure he sees you but don’t give him a target.”

Claire smiled. "Showtime."

Changing the Rules Chapter 22[1,752 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Leo Eastman lived in a gated apartment complex. Or at least, the man posing as Leo Eastman lived there. Lars followed Eastman until he pulled into the employee parking lot at the school. And Cooper took charge of planting a tracer on Eastman's car.

While Claire experienced her first day back in homeroom, the apartment above Eastman's experienced an unexpected odor that required a team to identify and fix the issue. By the time Claire was delivering her revised report on Macbeth, Eastman couldn't so much as burp in his apartment without someone at headquarters hearing or seeing it.

With a renewed desire to see the case find some resolution, Claire systematically spent time in the principal's and vice principal's offices, and Coach Bennett's classroom, long enough to plant an audio device in each of them.

By track practice, Claire was linked in and listening to clips of conversations.

Her first glimpse of Cooper was on the field. It took colossal effort to avoid searching him out and looking at him. But in doing so, she found a rhythm in watching everyone else.

The sprinters, which she was technically a part of, stayed together. They stretched together, ran together, and gossiped together. As age and grade tended to be a hierarchy, and only permeated by a younger student if their skills stood out, it was easy to identify the students like Marie Nickerson.

She texted Cooper from across the field, didn't look his way. Find a way to make me run with the distance runners today.

He didn't text back, but she could tell the message had been received.

Without shifting her routine, she joined the three girls she ran the relay with and started her warm-up stretches. The girls were talking about prom dresses and hairstyles. Considering Claire hadn't had a senior prom, she found herself wrapped up in their excitement, even though the prom was over two months away.

They moved from stretching to warm-up laps, and the conversation never stopped. "What about you, Claire? Anyone ask you yet?"

"Why does the guy have to ask?" she responded.

“Right? That’s what I’ve been saying.”

And so the conversation circled.

When they stopped to catch their breath, and the team started to segregate, Claire found herself face-to-face with Cooper for the first time since he reminded her what it felt like to be kissed. Thankfully she was flush from the run, and any blush while looking at him wouldn’t look out of place.

She found herself squinting to see if there was in fact any bruising on the man.

Coach Bennett clasped his hands, Cooper at his side.

Bennett huddled them up. Most of them sat in the grass, stretching. “We’re going to run full relays today. I want to see clean starts and smooth passes. The invitational is a week from Saturday, our first competition of the season. This will set the pace for the year. We have some strong teams. Solid teams. Chelsea, I want you taking Claire’s place as anchor today.”

A hush went over the group. Chelsea wasn’t on their normal relay.

“Why?” Claire asked, speaking out.

Coach Bennett stared her down, his lips a thin line. “Because she needs to practice in case your English grade doesn’t pull up and you let your teammates down.”

Claire dropped her shoulders and looked at her team. “What do you want me to do, then?” she asked.

He pointed across the field. “Distance runners are doing a five-mile loop.”

Several sprinters groaned.

“That sucks,” one of the guys muttered. Sprinters hated distance runs.

One of the girls mouthed the word sorry.

Claire stood and dusted off her shorts. “No, it’s fair,” she said to them. She turned to Chelsea. “You totally got this.” She extended her hand and fist-bumped the other girl.

“I can help you in English,” Leah offered.

Bennett and Cooper exchanged smiles. “That’s the kind of teamwork I like to see.”

Claire took a few steps.

“And, Claire?” Coach Bennett said.

“Yeah?”

“Keep pace and come in pushing the leaders.”

That she didn’t expect. The back of the pack was where she wanted to be.

She turned and had to double her pace to catch up.

“Let’s get to work.” Cooper’s words fueled her legs.

It didn’t take long, or much, to catch up to the back of the pack. Most were sophomores and freshmen and built like beanpoles. The boys weren’t shaving yet, and the girls had half a foot on the boys, which put many of them at perfect boob height.

She caught up with the first cluster, surprised them from the back. “Hey,” she said.

“What are you doing?” Terrance was the kid she’d run through her first circuit with. He settled for distance.

“I’m failing English,” she said, hoping to get them to talk, even a little.

“Really?”

“Currently. I mean, I won’t.”

The three other kids he ran with puffed out their chests, wore big smiles.

Okay, this won’t work.

She picked up her pace. “See ya.”

One of them said she was hot when he thought she was far enough away not to hear.

Up on a pack of girls. And that’s how they ran, in a pack and chattering. Which meant they weren’t in this run to do anything but finish it. “Hi.” Claire jumped off the sidewalk to push into their group.

She tried to remember even one of their names, and found her mind blank. Claire made eye contact with one of the more heavysset girls. “You’re, ah . . . I forgot your name.”

“Melissa.”

“Right, Melissa. We pass each other in, ah . . .”

“C building.”

“Right.”

“What are you doing?” Again, the questions came, the answers were the same.

The conversations were brief, but gave Claire what she was looking for. Before she sped up to the next group, she parted with “You know the guys behind you are just there to check out your asses, right?”

They all looked, laughed, and waved her off.

And so it went. As she inched her way to the leaders of the pack, she tried to make contact with all of them, especially the stragglers. The ones who ran alone, though there didn’t seem to be many of them. Once they left the neighborhood surrounding the school, and onto some of the busier streets, the stoplights gave her a decent chance to catch up. They were on their last mile and she was certainly feeling it. It wasn’t unlikely for her and Jax to go for long runs on the weekends, or hit an obstacle course for the fun of it, but she hadn’t done any of those things since the Auburn-Bremerton operation had begun.

She and Jax had made a pact that they weren’t going to be those women who lose their fitness level after they left Richter. And that course rivaled any boot camp Claire was familiar with. This five-mile run was telling her she and Jax needed to take it up a notch.

The last mile of the run she was up with the top varsity girls, who ran with purpose. Although they were still chatty.

“Good God, you guys do this every day?” Claire asked, pushing into the mix.

Her presence was met with surprise and a little less awe than from the younger classmates.

“This is a short run.”

“Yeah, sometimes we do ten miles.”

“That’s ugly,” Claire said.

“You must have pissed off Bennett.” The girl talking was in her World Affairs class. Brianna. And from what Claire had witnessed, she’d be the one to beat for the two mile on the Auburn team.

“Good guess,” Claire said.

There were three of them, and they all laughed.

“Do you run cross-country, too?” Claire asked them as a group.

They nodded.

“So you’ve been voluntarily running this shit for four years?” Claire’s head started to tick. Marie had dropped out of school three years ago. One of them may have known her.

“It’s an illness,” Brianna said, laughing.

“You guys are crazy.”

They chatted a bit.

“Have you always been on varsity, Brianna?”

She shook her head. “No, Bennett doesn’t put lowerclassmen on varsity if they can’t place with the older kids. Once I found my pace and strategy, I got better.”

“What’s that?”

“Stay at the top and skate until the last lap.”

Claire looked ahead. Only varsity boys were in front.

“They don’t count, huh?”

“Not at meets.”

Claire saw the school in the distance, picked up her pace. “What about out here?”

“This isn’t a race.”

“I’ll never understand distance runners.”

Claire moved faster and found the other girls right on her heels.

The four of them ran up behind the guys, who weren’t running to win, and pulled alongside.

“Hey,” Claire acknowledged them.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Dying,” Claire said between breaths. “Where is the damn finish line?”

“We come up the back side and stop midfield.”

Claire knew this was going to hurt, but she did it anyway.

“Well, shit.” She estimated they were a little more than a quarter mile to their destination, and she needed to make sure she ran with these guys again. “See you there.”

It took some serious concentration and effort to keep her legs moving. But she did.

And right behind her, so did the rest of the varsity teams.

Her chest was on fire, her legs burned, but she put her body into the race, and when she turned the corner and saw the field, she stopped thinking altogether.

The rest of the track team that was wrapping up their day stopped and watched. There were nine of them from the distance run stretched out and hauling ass. As a rule, the distance runners didn’t spend their endurance conditioning runs racing for fun. But there was laughter and jostling for first place. To make it better, some of the sprinters on the field started yelling her name, while others called out to their friends.

Two of the guys overshot her, as well as Brianna when they reached the fifty-yard line. By the time they reached the end of the grass, they were sucking in air like guppies out of water.

Claire walked in a circle, patting backs and giving high fives.

“You might want to save a little for the invitational,” Bennett said, coming up behind them.

Claire braced both hands on her knees. “Your fault,” she accused him. The sight of Cooper jogging over made her smile brighter. “You said to keep pace and come in pushing the leaders.” Claire extended her arms. “Mission accomplished.”

“You’re giving me gray hair, Porter.”

She laughed. “Looks like someone beat me to it.”

He was shaking his head, but he was smiling. “All right, walk that off and get in a long stretch. I don’t need any of you cramping up and getting hurt this early in the season.”

Claire saluted him.

Cooper had a hand over his eyes, a smile on his face.

She knew he wanted to say something. Instead, he turned on his heel and walked away.

Changing the Rules Chapter 23[1,912 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Cooper rolled into the shop early on Friday.

He knew Kyle was already there because of the monitoring system he'd put in place shortly after taking on the job.

In the shop, Kyle's Jeep was up on a lift, one of the wheels was off, and he was using a hammer with some serious aggression on the control arm. The usual pink box was missing, and the music hadn't been turned on. From the way Kyle was swinging the hammer, it was obvious something was wrong.

"What did the car do to deserve a beating?" Cooper asked, making his presence known.

Kyle rammed the hammer down two more times before tossing it on the floor with a loud bang. "Piece of shit. I don't know what I was thinking buying this."

Two of his seniors took that moment to walk in the shop. "What's up with you?" one of them asked.

Cooper reached for his wallet, pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. "Why don't you guys go grab some donuts?"

They took the hint and left, leaving Kyle and Cooper alone.

He gave Kyle a minute to calm down.

"You wanna tell me what this was all about?"

Kyle ran both hands through his hair. Took his time answering. "It's Elsie."

Cooper sighed. "Nothing will drive a man more crazy than a woman." When Kyle didn't elaborate, Cooper asked, "She break up with you?"

A shake of the head. "No. But I'm starting to think I need to break up with her."

"You guys seem tight."

Kyle grabbed a shop towel. "We were. Then she started hanging out with some new friends and she's changed."

“Changed how?”

Kyle sighed. “Suddenly her life sucks. She’s complaining about her parents, acting like she’s miserable. She wants to go out and party . . .” He glanced at Cooper as if he’d just told him something incriminating.

“I get it,” Cooper said. “I was seventeen once, too.”

“It’s too much. When I go with her, she runs off with other people. I don’t know . . . when I talk to her about it, she tells me I’m smothering her.”

Cooper opened his mouth to respond, only to be cut off.

“She’s tanking algebra, for the second year. I’m in physics, I could totally help her, but she’d rather see her tutor, who’s probably trying to get in her pants.”

Cooper was about to blow off the whole conversation as typical teenage drama.

“Her tutor?”

“Someone from Bremerton. Or used to go there. I don’t know.” Kyle turned to the tire on the ground, kicked it, and yelled, “Fuck.”

Tony walked in through the shop door. “That doesn’t sound good.”

Cooper looked over. “Girl problems.”

“Screw women. Cost too much.”

That pulled a smile out of Kyle.

Cooper did a double take, saw Tony’s profile, and paused.

“I think Elsie is cheating on me,” Kyle told his friend.

“With who?”

When Kyle didn’t answer, Cooper did. “Her tutor.”

“The douche from Bremerton?”

“Yeah.”

“That blows,” Tony said.

The seniors came back with the donuts. One brought the change over to Cooper and dropped it in his hand. "Thanks."

When someone turned on the music, Cooper knew sharing time was over.

With trips to headquarters on hold, Claire and Sasha joined the team online. Their once-a-week meeting had now turned into an every-other-day update.

The faces of the team lit up on one monitor; the other was a storyboard similar to the one in their main office with names and pictures.

Sasha and Claire sat at the living room table of their temporary home. They had headsets on and notes in front of them.

As the team slowly blipped online, their images popped up on-screen.

Claire waved at the camera when Jax appeared. "Hey, Yoda. You doing okay?"

"Yes. You know the asshole hasn't even called, hasn't even tried to change my mind."

"Proof he isn't the right guy."

Neil's image flickered before he disabled his camera.

Manuel joined in from headquarters along with Lars.

Finally, Cooper's face appeared. "Hi," he said to the group.

It was nice to look at him and not hold back her smile.

"Is Sasha here?" Jax asked.

"I am."

Claire tilted her laptop to bring Sasha into the frame.

Neil's voice boomed in her ear. "I want to keep this brief and organized. No extra chatter."

Claire held her hand over her mic, turned to Sasha. "Is he pissed?" Her words were a tiny whisper.

Sasha's lips were tight, her eyes reflected a lack of concern.

"Good. First up. The device by your front door is a camera. Limited range that activates with motion," Neil told them.

“Audio?” Claire asked.

“Not enough to pick up inside conversations. We’re leaving it.” Neil kept talking. “Is everyone looking at the map?”

Claire directed her attention to what was on the situation board.

After a series of affirmatives, he moved on. “We need to narrow this field of vision. Let’s start with eliminations.”

Jax started. “We can remove Cummings.”

“Completely?”

“Make him a strikethrough for now. I see no evidence to spend any time or manpower on him. He may have a wandering eye, but there is no trace of anything else.”

Someone on Neil’s end updated the map as they spoke.

“Where are we with Russell?”

“I tagged his car. His movements are to school and back home with the occasional stop at a strip mall. There are two restaurants, a convenience store, nail salon, real estate office, and a mail location,” Manuel informed them. He gave the address of the mall, and someone updated the situation board.

“Lars, let’s find out if there are any city cameras we can tap into.”

“Got it.”

“More on Russell? Jax?” Neil kept things moving.

“There was a note on my car windshield today. I’m assuming it’s from him.” She held up the note that had been placed in a plastic bag. “He says he needs a passport photo for my gift. And he put his space number where his car is parked in the senior lot.”

“Good. Anyone else on your list we can eliminate, Jax?”

“No. Ally is still fluid. She knows a lot of people from both sides of town.”

“Cooper, you’re up,” Neil directed.

Claire watched him as he spoke, his concentration on his task very focused.

“Couple of developments today and a possible new lead.” A picture of the party Claire and Jax had attended popped up on the screen. “Everyone got that?”

A chorus of yeses was heard.

“His name is Tony Mazzeo. Twice a week, at Kyle’s request, I open the shop early. Let the gearheads use the place. This guy is alumni. How old would you guess him to be?” he asked the group.

“Twenty-five.”

“Twenty-three to twenty-eight” was Claire’s guess.

“Nineteen,” Cooper confirmed.

Claire looked closer. There was no way.

Even Sasha shook her head.

“He was a transfer in the last half of the year. More typical senior, only spent half a day on campus, a lot of time in auto. He is a friend to Kyle. A direct connection between Auburn and Bremerton since he was seen at this party.”

“Every Auburn kid at that party has a connection,” Claire argued.

“Do any of the other Auburn kids look this age? This doesn’t smell right,” Cooper added.

Tony’s name and image moved to the top of the board.

“Anything else?” Neil asked.

“Elsie.”

The girl’s name had Claire listening closer.

“She may have a new boyfriend at Bremerton. She and Kyle have been fighting, and outside of the teenage drama part, a few things came up. She has a new group of friends, isn’t acting herself, and this algebra tutor is being blamed by Kyle for the crack in their relationship.”

The hair on Claire’s neck started to stand up.

“The tutor and the new boyfriend are one and the same?” Manuel asked.

“I don’t know if we can call him the new boyfriend, but yes.”

Claire spoke up. “Can we pause here for a second? Jax, the night Ally and Elsie came over, did you tell Ally you needed help with algebra or—”

“No. The other way around. Ally said she was failing, I suggested the study date. The other day she said something about seeing a math tutor as well.”

“Are we talking teachers or student tutors?” Neil asked.

Jax shook her head. “No idea. But that should be easy enough to uncover. Girls’ night at Claire’s house.”

“Okay, Claire, you’re up,” Neil said.

“I can’t eliminate anyone. My recon with Marie and the yearbooks didn’t shed light on anything. Outside of the class photo and the cross-country photo, there was no mention of Marie Nickerson. Cooper arranged for me to run with that group today. It gave me time to look at the most vulnerable kids that match Marie Nickerson’s personality. And it gave me connections to the girls that were on the team when Marie was at the school. I need to put in more legwork. That’s about all I have right now,” Claire concluded and sat back from the computer.

“Any change in Eastman’s actions today?” Neil asked.

“No. I asked him if he had any new equations he needed help with so I could sleep in the rest of the week. He called me a smart-ass and I agreed. You’d never know he was in the yard planting a camera.”

She heard Jax laughing and watched Cooper smile.

“Okay, Sasha . . .”

“Leonardo Eastman is the name on the lease agreement at the apartment. He appears to live alone, however, this two-bedroom apartment has a young boy’s room with the appropriate toys. Either Eastman is an exceptional housekeeper for his son, or the boy hasn’t visited in some time. The rest of the place is a mess.”

“Hoarder status?”

Sasha moved her head into the frame of the camera. “Look up from your screen,” Sasha told Cooper.

He did.

“That kind of a mess. We’ll watch through the weekend and find an opportunity to get inside for a more thorough search next week.”

“Do we have a landline tap?” Neil asked.

“No landline. But there is an alarm system. Nothing fancy.”

“Okay.”

“The prints on the glass from the party belong to a Brian Contreras, twenty-six years old. He’s used several surnames, but Contreras appears to be the one he was born with. Has a rap sheet going back to when he was sixteen. Spent some time in juvenile hall, mainly drugs and gang affiliation. Only he’s been off the police radar for close to four years.”

“Leopards don’t change their spots,” Cooper said.

“What about Gorge?” Neil asked.

“The images we have from the party weren’t good enough for a positive ID.”

“And the content in the glasses?”

“Whiskey. Nothing else,” Sasha reported.

“If there isn’t any more new news . . .” Neil paused. “All right. At the invitational, I want as many players in this circle in the stands. I want to see movement. Who is interacting with who. Jax, try and make Russell pick up the photo in person. We’ll have Lars and Isaac on the sidelines. Sasha, time to have a face-to-face with Eastman. Claire’s concerned aunt only has time during the meet. Did the party after get canceled?” Neil asked.

“It was moved to tomorrow,” Jax said. “That’s the word from Ally.”

“Any idea where or when?”

“That news drops on Instagram thirty minutes before it begins,” Jax elaborated.

“You’re starting to sound like Emma,” Neil pointed out.

“By-product of going back to high school.”

“You have to use their language to fit in,” Claire reminded Neil.

“Okay. We’ll have Jax show up when Sasha leaves for work. Make a point about going to a party where Eastman’s bug can pick it up . . . see if Eastman makes any moves. As soon as the information is delivered, we’ll mobilize. Any players we have on the board are our first priority. Any questions?”

The line was silent.

Claire found herself looking at Cooper’s image on the screen. Wondered if he was smiling at her.

“Call in with any changes.”

With Neil's final instructions, everyone disconnected the call.

Changing the Rules Chapter 24[2,932 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As soon as the online meeting was over, Cooper called Claire privately. It took three rings for her to pick up.

"Hi. Hold on." It sounded as if Claire had put her phone on a table and was talking to Sasha. Cooper listened to her voice, not understanding a word.

It took nearly a minute before Claire got back on the phone. "Sorry. My aunt and I need to go shopping and buy food we actually want to eat."

"Do you write all your shopping lists in Russian?"

She laughed. "No. But since Sasha's Russian is better than mine, I'm trying to use this alone time to my advantage."

"It sounds good to me," he said, a hum in his voice.

"Me speaking a different language does something for you?"

"I think I told you that."

"This is weird."

Cooper felt his smile slipping. "We're back to that?"

"No. I know headquarters is listening in."

He switched his phone to the other ear. "They only hear your voice."

"So only you can talk dirty?"

Suddenly Cooper's mind shot right there and that was all it took to have him shifting his hips in his seat and adjusting his jeans. "Are we going to talk dirty?"

"Not with Isaac listening."

With that image, the heat he'd started feeling had ice cubes raining down. "Probably a good call."

“Yeah.”

“My mind didn’t wander off of you all day.”

“We’re in the same boat.”

He knew she wasn’t going to be as verbal as she’d been in the past. Not with their colleagues listening. “I always knew kissing you was going to be spectacular, but my imagination didn’t come close to the reality.” He heard her breathing into the phone. Some of that warmth started to return to his bloodstream.

“It made me want to do it again . . . soon.”

“Things are starting to turn in the case. I’m more than motivated to find a resolution.”

“You’re not even the one running five miles a day.”

“Running off the frustration created by not being able to even look at you the way I want to might be a good idea.”

“Well, okay, Coach. Maybe on Monday, instead of watching, you put on your running shoes and join us.”

“Maybe I’ll do that.” Not gonna happen.

“Dare ya.”

He moaned. “That’s not fair.” She knew he didn’t duck and weave a dare.

“You think about that. I told Sasha I wouldn’t be long. I’d like to get a decent night’s sleep. Help make up for the tossing and turning I’ve been doing.”

He liked to think he was the cause. “Spreche mit dir morgen.”

“Talk to you tomorrow,” she repeated in English. “Gute Nacht.”

Cooper disconnected the call and stared at his phone. Three years out of the six he spent overseas learning a new language was paying off.

“Bring a backpack and skip the makeup. I told my aunt you broke up with your boyfriend and we were going to spend the weekend dissing guys and making plans for our summer.” Claire stood outside the decoy condo in full view and earshot of Eastman’s surveillance.

Jax was on the other end of the line. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“We’ll have a good time.” Claire lowered her voice. “Any word on where the party is yet?” They were both watching Instagram for the Bat Signal. Between Ally’s feed and Sean’s, they should have something within the hour.

“No.”

“Soon as my aunt leaves, we’ll get ready to bounce.” Claire ignored the camera in the shrubs and walked back in the front door.

Sasha was decked out in her flight attendant uniform and had a suitcase at her feet.

Once Claire was out of range of Eastman hearing her, she addressed the team through her com link. “Anything on Eastman?”

Isaac reported back. “He stopped eating his microwave dinner and looks like he’s preparing to leave his house.”

Claire and Sasha looked to each other and smiled.

By the time Jax showed up at the front door, Eastman was parked up the street and huddled in his car.

“AJ is in position to follow Eastman. Sasha, you’re clear to vacate.” Neil spoke through their earpieces.

Jax had already moved to the single bathroom to change clothes and get party ready.

Claire stayed out of sight when Sasha left the condo, her eye on Instagram.

Outside, the sky had darkened, and the smell of rain sat ripe in the air.

Eastman didn’t move.

All they waited on was the party details.

“Anything yet?” Neil asked twenty minutes later.

“Nothing,” Claire reported.

Jax was texting Ally.

Claire was starting to think the party was a bust.

A ping on her phone had her looking at a direct message from Sean.

“Got it.” Claire rattled off the address, and Jax looked it up on a map.

“Doesn’t look residential.”

“It’s not,” Neil told them. “We’re en route.”

“Right behind you.”

Wearing skintight black leggings, a tiny halter, and a matching leather jacket, Claire slid on her ankle boots and grabbed the car keys.

Jax wore ripped black jeans and a sparkly gold sweater off the shoulder. The choker on her neck had a camera.

Claire would depend on her cell phone.

Together they pulled out of the driveway and headed toward the party.

“Eastman is three cars behind,” AJ said from the back of the line.

Claire kept an eye on her rearview mirror while Jax gave directions.

Her cell phone rang right before they were getting on the freeway.

Elsie’s name popped up on the screen.

“Hey, girl.”

“Did you get the information about the party?”

“Yeah, Jax and I are headed there now.”

“Can you swing by and pick me up?” Elsie asked.

“I thought Kyle was taking you.”

“He’s being a dick. Doesn’t want to go.”

Without any objection from the team, Claire consented.

“Okay. I’ll be at your place in ten minutes.” Claire moved into the left lane to make a U-turn.

“Park across the street and text me.”

She hung up the phone and told the team the address she was headed toward.

“AJ, hold up on the side street during the pickup. We don’t want Eastman seeing you.”

“You got it.”

With an eye on the rearview mirror, Claire noticed Eastman hang back when she turned into the quiet residential neighborhood.

When she parked, Eastman pulled into a driveway and killed his lights.

“Do you ever get the feeling we’re playing cat and mouse?” Claire asked Jax.

“As long as we’re the cats.”

They laughed, texted Elsie, and waited.

Within a minute, Elsie bounced out of her house, a backpack in her hands.

She tossed the pack in the back seat and jumped inside. “Thank you so much.”

She closed the door and Claire pulled away from the curb.

Jax swiveled around in her seat. “Did you have to sneak out?”

Elsie shook her head. “Told my parents we were gonna head to the mall, then have a sleepover. Hope that’s okay.”

“My aunt’s gone, so you can stay over.”

While they talked, Elsie was pulling her bulky sweater over her head. Under was a tight tank top, appropriate for a teenage party.

“What’s up with you and Kyle?”

Elsie groaned. “He’s acting strange. Totally bailed tonight. Which . . . whatever. He’s a drag at these things. I’ll have more fun without him.” The girl kept in motion, different shoes came out of her backpack, and more makeup was put on her face.

Claire turned on the freeway. In her ear she heard Neil telling them the position of Eastman and AJ. The team was already at the venue. “Looks more like a rave than a house party. Lights and loud music. Signs indicate there’s some kind of Hollywood movie shoot going on,” Cooper reported.

“Do we know who’s throwing the party?” Jax asked.

“Jim told me it was Brandon and Russell.” Elsie applied a fire shade of red to her lips.

“Who is Jim?”

“My tutor. He goes to Bremerton. You might know him,” Elsie told Jax. “Jim Cromer.”

Jax shook her head. “Doesn’t sound familiar.”

“Total geek. I think he thinks if he can impress me with party information I’ll hang out with him.”

“How does the geek get all the good party info?” Claire asked. More for the team than for the girl in the back seat.

“He knows Russell. I think Russell tutors, too.”

Claire and Jax exchanged glances. Seemed like some of the lines in their investigation were starting to cross.

“Jimmy Cromer. Senior at Bremerton. Honors student. Runs for Bremerton’s track team. Distance. Never wins.” Sasha’s voice sounded in Claire’s ear.

“Everyone knows someone,” Claire said.

“I heard this party was going to be huge.”

“She’s not wrong,” Cooper said.

Jax gave the last of the directions, and before long they found the movie-set markers posted on corner fences that wound around an industrial park.

“Holy shit.” Elsie pushed up between the bucket seats of Claire’s car as the venue came into view. Two blocks away and they could hear the music.

Cars were parked everywhere as kids flooded the party.

“Wow.”

Claire parked the car, noticed when Eastman drove past with AJ on his tail.

The sky had started to drizzle misty drops, which had the girls walking faster toward the entrance of the party.

At the door, Claire took notice of two new male faces. They could pass for high school seniors, but her guess was early twenties.

The guys looked them up and down as they walked past.

Inside was a haze. Lights flashed from a small stage where a DJ was blasting music. People were dancing and carrying on.

The building itself was a corner shell of what looked like an industrial center, although the inside didn't look like it was being used for anything other than the party.

"This cost some serious money."

Elsie's eyes were open wide. "I had no idea."

"Does anyone look familiar?" Jax asked as they mashed through people.

"Not really," Elsie answered.

"Let's stick together," Jax suggested. Her eyes leveled with Claire and back to Elsie.

"Good idea. You guys drink if you like, I'm driving."

Elsie looked surprised. "You're not going to drink anything?"

"Not worth it."

They weaved in and out of the crowd and found a cooler filled with drinks. Jax and Elsie both grabbed a hard seltzer and they started to circulate.

"Need a mic check," Neil told them.

"I can barely hear myself think," Jax said over the music.

"Let's move toward the back, see if we find anyone we know," Claire replied.

They walked away from the music and searched the room for players.

Cooper's attention was tuned in to Claire's voice.

Unlike the house party, this one seemed to attract kids from every school in the district. At least three times the number of kids from before. And like Claire, he felt he was looking at an entirely new group of people.

Sasha had changed into black spandex, her hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail.

Neil sat at the monitors.

Manuel and Isaac were outside the van and scoping out the building.

"AJ, what's the status?" Neil asked.

"Eastman is sitting in his car, looks like a glow of a computer reflecting up at him."

“Back of the warehouse is a utility van,” Isaac reported and then gave the license plate number.

Sasha reached for the door in the back of the van.

“What are you doing?” Cooper asked.

“The people throwing the party will have parked close to the entrance or exit. Let’s run some plates and get some names.”

Neil offered a nod, and Sasha slipped out the back.

Lars moved from his perch and sat beside Neil.

They took notice of Sasha’s feed. Her camera focused at the level of the vehicle’s license plates as she skirted around in the dark.

“Ally just sent a text, said she’s on her way in.” Jax’s voice came in clear.

“Hey, guys.” Cooper heard a male voice.

“Hi, Sean.”

Jax’s camera came into view.

Sean Fisher stood staring at Claire. Not that Cooper could blame him. Claire was seriously hot.

The unmistakable sound of Ally’s high-pitched voice was heard in Claire’s and Jax’s microphones.

“Time to circulate,” Neil probed. “I want to see the faces of the people in charge.”

Neil watched the monitors, took screenshots.

As the images that Sasha took splashed through, Cooper and Lars typed them into the system and started generating names.

“This looks like something you’d do,” Ally told Sean shortly after Neil told Claire and Jax to get moving.

“What do you mean?”

“Your parents have connections to movie sets. Seems like your kind of gig.”

Claire watched as Sean shook his head. “This isn’t a set. This is a great way to stop people driving by from asking questions. I doubt the cops will show and break this party up.”

“Ingenious, if you ask me,” Claire found herself saying.

“Elsie?”

Claire turned to find Tony Mazzeo pushing through their circle.

“Hi, Tony.”

“Where’s Kyle?”

“He didn’t want to come.”

Claire saw Jax turn toward Tony, her choker aimed his way.

“That’s too bad,” Tony said. His gaze moved a little too slowly over Elsie’s frame. “He’s missing out.”

Jax must have sensed the same ick feeling that ran through Claire because Jax moved in closer.

“Who’s this?” Tony asked.

“I’m Jax,” she said, her shy smile in place.

Claire wanted to laugh. Jax had a way of putting on the innocent look but could strike faster than a pissed-off rattlesnake if someone got too close.

“You ladies look amazing.”

Claire noticed Sean turn away with a shake of his head.

At the same time, someone walked behind Claire, and she felt fingertips glide over her ass.

As snakes strike, she twisted toward the person behind the fingers, a beefy hand in her grasp.

Her eyes met her startled accoster.

He was big, as in he hit the gym kind of big. Early twenties.

“I’m sorry, you must have mistaken my ass for someone else’s,” she said as she twisted his wrist until he had no choice but to move back to stop the pain.

Sean stepped toward him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Let him go, Claire," she heard Neil in her ear.

She released the guy's hand.

"Sorry."

Claire stepped back. "I'm sure you are."

The guy disappeared into the crowd.

Ally was laughing. "Did he just grab your ass?"

Claire shrugged.

Tony's eyes met hers. "Have we met?"

She shook her head.

"This is Claire," Elsie said. "Tony is a friend of Kyle's."

Tony looked beyond her. "Lots of ass grabbing going on in here. I wouldn't take it personally."

"That's totally not cool, Tony," Sean spoke up.

"Looks like your girlfriend here can take care of herself," Tony said.

Claire didn't correct him, waited for what he was going to say next.

Tony looked left and right. "You guys have fun." He started walking away, stopped at Claire's side. "Try not to hurt anyone."

He walked away.

Sean blew out a breath. "I hate that guy."

"Who is he?" Jax asked.

"He graduated from Auburn last year," Elsie explained.

"You're kidding? What was he, on his fifth senior year and someone finally gave him a free pass?" Ally spoke up.

Claire and Jax looked at each other.

“Guy’s a douche.”

“I can’t disagree, but why do you think that?” Claire asked.

Sean shrugged. “I used to score some pot from my dad’s stash. Sold him some last year, then he kept asking if I could get other stuff. Pushy. And Ally’s right, the guy doesn’t act like us. Rubs me wrong.”

Ally moved closer to Sean. “Cool how you stuck up for Claire.”

Sean put an arm over Ally’s shoulder and the other around Claire’s. “I’m the only guy here, I gotta watch out for you girls.”

Hours later, after Elsie and Ally had one too many, and Claire and Jax couldn’t find Russell or Brandon . . . or any of the players from the first party, it was time to go.

Sean had buddied up with a couple of his friends and waved them off.

Claire drove Ally home, aware that Eastman had stayed the course and was still following behind.

She dropped Ally off at the street, and waited for her to sneak back in.

Once she texted from the inside, Claire pulled away.

At the condo, Claire gave her bed to Elsie, who was half-asleep in the car. As soon as her head hit the pillow, the girl was out.

Claire went through the motions of finding a waste bin in case Elsie woke up sick. She put a bottle of water by the bedside with two painkillers next to it.

She and Jax moved into the living room, closing the door behind them.

“Okay, guys. Talk to us.”

“Eastman waited for the garage door to close and left. Appears he’s headed home,” Cooper reported.

“Any sign of the party throwers?” Jax asked.

“None.”

“That’s odd, isn’t it?”

“We have a lot of plates to run. Need to put them next to the school rosters. We have to assume most of the cars are in parent names.”

“Get some sleep,” she heard Neil tell them. “We’ll have more tomorrow.”

Claire put two thumbs up in the air and stared at the camera hidden on a shelf.

She and Jax both pulled their earpieces out.

“This party felt completely different from the other one,” Jax said.

Claire looked down the hall. “A lot of drunk girls.”

“And only a few drunk guys.”

“Lots of grinding on the dance floor, sex in the dark corners. Unsupervised high school party?” Claire asked in a whisper.

“Half high school, half twentysomethings.”

Claire agreed with a yawn. “Take Sasha’s bed. I’ll take the couch.”

“It’s a big bed, I won’t cuddle,” Jax teased.

“One of us should be out here in case Elsie thinks she should sneak out.”

Jax nodded and unfolded from the sofa. “Night, Loki.”

After taking turns in the bathroom, Claire curled up with a pillow and a blanket.

Cooper had sent a text.

Sean has a crush on you.

She laid her head down. I like older men, she texted back.

Get some sleep. You look exhausted.

She stared at the camera. Are you still watching me?

Does that make me a voyeur?

Only if I were naked.

The three dots scowled on the screen for several seconds.

If I ever have the pleasure of seeing you naked, I want to be at your side, not miles away.

Claire felt heat in her cheeks and a smile on her lips. She started to type when he sent another quick text.

I love that smile.

She waved a finger at the camera.

Night relief walked in. I'm headed home so don't make kissy lips at the camera.

Claire giggled quietly. Good night.

Changing the Rules Chapter 25[2,244 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Monday rolled around, and both Jax and Claire skipped school and spent the time at headquarters combing through pictures and names. The party had bumped up Tony's name on their board and dragged Sean's closer to the bottom.

The location of the weekend blowout was owned by an out-of-state corporation, who, when called, stated they had no idea that their empty building had been used for a party.

The DJ owned the utility van that had been parked behind the building, and from what the team had surmised, his presence at the party was nothing more than paid entertainment. And since they didn't find any recent checks added to the DJ's bank account, they assumed he'd been paid in cash.

Claire found herself staring at Marie's mug shot and her class schedule before she disappeared. The investigation of her family indicated they'd moved from the apartment shortly after the girl went missing.

"There's always a possibility that the party was exactly what it looked like. A rave set up by rich kids to celebrate life," Jax pointed out when they'd come to a lot of dead ends.

"Yet the rich kids didn't show up. Or if they were there, they were hidden in the shadows. That doesn't ring true," Claire said.

"I'm going to meet this Jim Cromer tomorrow. Hang out in the stands during track practice."

"He's the only lead we really got."

"Better than nothing," Jax said.

They were the only two in the situation room at headquarters. They left notes for the rest of the team and on the direction they were going as they rolled into the next week.

The next time the entire team would be rallied was Saturday. If Jax was needed off campus, she could bail. Claire, on the other hand, wouldn't be able to run at the invitational if she missed any more school.

On Tuesday, Claire walked into her "lunch date" with Bennett. The same one she'd had every school day since he moved her into his class. He would sit at his desk, eating. She sat at hers doing the homework she didn't bother with the night before.

She pulled a book from the shelf, plopped it on her desk, and wandered over to the pictures of previous track and cross-country teams that were tacked on the walls.

"How did you feel after your workout with the distance team?" was how Coach Bennett greeted her.

"Not bad, actually. You should try it sometime." She found the picture that had Marie Nickerson in it.

"Are you always a smart-ass?"

She looked over her shoulder and smiled. "I save it for you and Mr. Eastman."

He full-on laughed. "So you're giving Mrs. Wallace a breather."

She groaned. "That woman should move to Stratford-upon-Avon and call it done." She searched out Brianna and then looked for the previous year to see if she recognized her. The image of what Marie looked like in her mug shot kept flashing in her mind. The woman looked thirty now and not nineteen.

"Are you going to open that book?"

"Hmm, yeah, sure," she said, distracted. "Hey, Coach. Do you remember all of the kids in these pictures?"

"Most," he said.

"Okay, who is this?" she asked, pointing to a random kid in a random year.

He moved from behind his desk and put on his glasses. "Dan Corsaletti. Pole vault."

"Oh, yeah? What about this little dude?"

"Patrick Durby." The coach moved to a group shot three years later. "Here he is, senior year."

Claire looked twice. “Damn. He found a membership at Gold’s Gym.”

“It’s crazy how much you guys change in the four years you’re here.”

“What about her?” Claire pointed to Marie.

He peered closer. “Uhm . . .”

“Aha!”

“No, now wait, it’s coming. Marie Nickerson? She wasn’t on the team long. A year or two, I think.”

Claire shrugged, watched him from the corner of her eye. “You could totally be lying to me.”

“Like the way you lie to me?” he asked.

It took everything in Claire to keep from changing her expression. “What do you mean?”

“You told me you weren’t a distance runner.”

Oh, thank God. “Oh, that?”

“Is there something else you’re lying about?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m the smart-ass, never can tell.”

He tapped her book as he walked back to his desk.

She moved to sit down. “Do you tutor all the track kids that need it?”

He laughed. “This isn’t tutoring. This is babysitting.”

“So if someone needed a tutor, who would you send them to?”

He put his glasses back on and pulled a stack of papers in front of him. “I don’t think you need a tutor. You need discipline.”

“Okay, fine . . . but who tutors?”

He wrote something on the paper in red ink, flipped to the next one. “Dunnann is in charge of the tutors. I’m too busy with track.”

“What does it take to be a tutor?”

He looked up and dropped his hand on the papers, completely annoyed. “You have to pass the class and show the ability to problem solve.”

“Does it pay? Like real money?”

“Yeah. Not a ton, but it’s a good way to work and go to school.”

Claire slapped her hands together and gave them a firm rub. “Okay, then. Let’s do this.”

“Let’s do what?”

“Pass the class. Give me your final.”

He narrowed his eyes, took his glasses off slowly. “What are you talking about?”

“Listen. My aunt said that if I pass all my classes and stay out of trouble, she’d let me backpack through Europe for six months after I graduate. I need to make some cash so I have more than ten euros a day to spend.”

“You’re serious?”

She folded her hands and blinked several times as if a halo suddenly appeared over her head.

“Listen, Claire, even if you did pass my final, which I doubt can happen since we haven’t covered the material yet, I can’t just let you out of the class.”

“I’m not asking to leave the class. But I can skip all this labor.” She pointed to the book. “And take that off your hands.” She glanced at the stack of papers he was grading. “I’ll be your TA and maybe you can leave campus for lunch once in a while and eat more than a soggy sandwich with processed cheese. That stuff will kill ya, you know.”

“You sound like my wife.”

She cringed.

He nodded a few times, rolled his chair closer to his computer. “All right, Miss Smart-ass.” Glasses went back over his eyes, and within a few seconds he was printing out a test.

He walked over to her desk, papers in hand.

She reached for them. He held them back. “You need an A.”

“B.”

“B+. And show your work.”

He put her in a solo desk in the front of the room. She had an hour and a half to complete the test.

Bennett set a timer and sat back down.

Claire went to work.

When the class bell rang, the room filled up, but she stayed focused on the test. The idea to infiltrate the tutor pool had come to her after she and Sasha had returned from the grocery store. The badass attitude got her into the party crowd, but the kickass student gave her access to whatever was happening in that world. So instead of catching up on that sleep she told Cooper she needed, she spent most of the night refreshing her brain on the more complicated math problems she'd see in a test.

Coach Bennett's voice and instructions to the room full of kids became a hypnotic background noise.

Three minutes before the bell, Claire double-checked her work and waited.

As the kids ran off to their next hour of torture, Claire took her test to Bennett.

"Here."

"You still have time."

She shook her head, grabbed her backpack. "I'm good. Those last two bonus questions had me. I took a stab at 'em."

Bennett flipped to the last page. "I'll give it a look, tell you how you did after Saturday's invitational."

"You can't tell me tomorrow?"

Bennett stared at her. "Has anyone ever told you that you lack patience?"

"That's torture."

"Try meditation. It works."

Friday morning was met with donuts and Kyle.

Tony didn't show.

Cooper spent extra time in the teacher's lounge, talked with some of the staff.

The only employee that drew his attention was Leo Eastman.

Cooper arrived to practice in track pants and running shoes.

He saw Claire walk on the field, noticed the new attention she received from the distance runners on the team. She gravitated toward the sprinters, and smiled when she saw him.

She sat on the field, put one leg out in front of her, and started stretching. She looked him up and down. “What’s this, Coach? You plan on running today?”

“Since practice is minimal, and only meant to keep you limber and ready for tomorrow, I thought I’d run off some of the cobwebs.”

He received a sufficient amount of teasing from the smaller group, but hit the track with them anyway.

He purposely stayed out of Claire’s orbit until the second lap.

“How are you feeling about tomorrow’s meet?”

“I think I’m ready.”

“Should be a good start to the season,” one of the varsity guys said from the other side of Claire.

“It’s my track-meet cherry about to get popped.”

Cooper was pretty sure the kid on her left wasn’t expecting that.

Claire glanced over, grinned. “Sorry, guess I’m a little nervous.”

He found his inner coach. “Just run fast and don’t get hurt.”

“Run fast. Don’t get hurt. Maybe you should have said that before today,” Claire teased and started to run faster. “It’s only four laps, right?”

Ah, damn.

He had no choice but to keep up, even though he wouldn’t mind staying right where he was. Behind her watching her butt as she rounded the corner.

She set the pace, and everyone stayed with her.

With one lap left she went a little faster, but nothing crazy. Watching her was like watching a racehorse stuck on a lead rope.

At the end of their mile run, Claire gave him a once-over. “I guess you still have it in you . . . for an old guy.”

“She got ya there, Coach.”

One of the guys put an arm over his shoulders. “Gonna happen to all of us.”

Claire was ear-to-ear smiles.

His heart twisted the way it always did when her eyes sparkled with that smile.

They both looked away at the same time.

Laughter slowly faded as they met up with the rest of the team. Coach Bennett gave them the details for the invitational. The entire team was expected to show up even if they weren’t competing. That included the JV team. They talked everything from uniforms to what they needed to eat for dinner. “And don’t even think of going to a party. I will smell it and your performance will suffer.”

There were a few snickers.

“That party was canceled, Coach. We’re good,” Claire smarted off.

Cooper laughed, placed a hand over his mouth to try and keep it together.

Even Bennett chuckled. “All right. That’s all for today. Report to your coaches when you get here. You have to sign in a half an hour before your event. Late arrivals are scratched.”

Cooper watched the team as they exited the field. His eyes found Claire and lingered only for a few seconds. He huddled with the coaches, talked out a few details. “. . . and, Coach Mitchel, the kids seem to really respond to you. Your call on Claire Porter was spot-on. She has some real potential. Good coaching keeps ’em on track. I hope you’ll consider coming back again next year. The team could use you.”

Guilt bit him in the back of that praise. “I’ll consider it,” he told the man.

He thanked everyone for their time and they broke up.

Bennett walked over and shook Cooper’s hand. “I hope you do.”

“I will.”

Bennett grabbed his duffel bag, tossed it over his shoulder. “You’ll never guess what the track smart-ass did this week.”

“You mean Claire.”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t pull her off the roster for tomorrow, so I’m guessing it wasn’t that bad.”

“She challenged me to take the final in my class so she can get out of the homework.”

“What? Did you give it to her?”

“I did. She tossed it at me, said the bonus questions were hard.”

Cooper could picture the exact look she’d use saying those words. “And?”

“I looked at the bonus questions first. Damn if she didn’t get them right.”

“That’s a good thing.”

Bennett shook his head. “They were calculus equations. If my students attempt them, I give them credit. I don’t expect anyone to get them right.”

“And the rest of the test?” Cooper asked.

“I graded it Tuesday night. Nearly perfect, but I’m not telling her until after tomorrow.”

Claire had mentioned a couple of times during the week that she was anxious to get moving on the tutor angle.

“Making sure she runs tomorrow?” Cooper asked.

“There’s a lot of energy in these stands. Gives the kids that extra kick and excitement they don’t get during practice. I want her hooked on the sport. I get the feeling she didn’t really want to be here when she first started. Now that seems to have changed.”

“I guess we don’t need to worry about her having an academic probation keeping her off the field,” Cooper said.

“Tomorrow’s a madhouse. If you see her parents, let ’em know I’d like to talk to them at some point. Wait, she lives with her aunt.”

“I think so.”

“Either way. I’d like to talk Claire into going to college. Track coaches will want her. She might have to miss a season until she earns a foreign language credit—”

Cooper covered his sudden laugh, turned it into a cough. “Bug,” he said, swallowing. “If I see her, I’ll let her know you’ll be getting in touch.”

They shook hands. “It’s a long, hot day tomorrow. Bring a hat.”

