

Changing the Rules Chapter 26[1,151 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jax stood at the fence line of the track while the crowd started to fill the stands. Over twenty schools were competing and could be told apart by the different colors on the uniforms. For the first time in a week, Jax saw Claire in person and not in a Zoom meeting.

She waved her over and gave her a hug. "Geez, could those shorts be any shorter?" Jax teased.

"Sasha approved them."

They both laughed. "I bet she did. Have you seen Elsie?"

"No. But I haven't seen anyone yet."

"Who's coming?"

"Elsie said she'd meet me down here. Ally said she'd be here at nine."

"And Russell?"

"Not completely sure." She'd left a note on the car saying that school security was watching like a hawk and she didn't want to get anyone in trouble.

"I can come up and sit with you between races. But no student cell phones out here." Claire looked left and right. "The coaches have phones."

Jax was careful not to say anything about the case. People were everywhere. "I don't think I expected this big of a crowd."

"Me either."

The announcer's voice boomed over the PA system, welcoming the runners and their families.

Claire looked down the field. "My coach is hot, huh?"

Jax laughed. "A bit old for you."

"Maybe." Claire turned back. "Nice necklace."

Jax played with the camera around her neck. “Thanks. My earrings didn’t match with this outfit.” She tilted her head to show Claire she didn’t have a mic.

“They’re too dressy for this.” She started to bounce. “Okay, I see them calling us over.”

“Do awesome.” Jax put her fist out, bumped Claire’s.

Jax stayed where she was and looked around. Her cell phone rang. “One is behind you, halfway up on the left. Two is photographing on the other side of the field,” Neil said over the line. “Three is in the office.”

She ducked her head. “I told you I was going to a track meet, Dad.” Lars was holding a camera and standing several yards away. Isaac sat in the stands.

“It’s hard to hear you when the announcer is talking. Leave your hat on. Take it off only if there’s trouble.”

Jax adjusted the rim of her ball cap.

“Four is holding back and will initiate contact.”

“Fine, but I don’t know how long this is going to take.”

“We’re clear.”

“Fine,” Jax said to an empty line.

She was about to text Elsie to see where she was when the girl ran up to her. “Hey, hey.”

“I was worried you were going to bail,” Jax told her, giving her a hug.

“No way. We have to see our girl race.”

They made their way up the stands, smack in the middle, and took a seat.

The stands kept filling up.

Cooper was shocked.

Claire stood beside him staring with the same amazement in her eyes. “I would expect this for a football game.”

“It’s only because it’s an invitational,” Chelsea told them. “Next week’s meet will only have two sets of parental support. And many of them leave the second their kid is done with their event.”

Cooper turned back to his sprinters. "All right, guys, if you haven't warmed up, get on it." They took the hint and started to move to the center of the field.

The first time the starting gun went off, Claire flinched and stopped herself from taking a protective stance.

The crowd in the stands was cheering and yelling out school and student names. The energy on the field went up a thousand percent.

Every corner was filled with activity.

For Claire, there was nothing to do but wait for her heats. One for the eight-hundred-meter relay and one for the one-hundred-meter sprint. Both were spread out far enough to where she had plenty of downtime. She had an hour before her first race, and since Cooper was highly involved with the sprinters, he was between the start and the finish line coaching.

She marked the positions of her primary team even though she couldn't communicate with them at all on the field.

Jax was in the stands with Elsie at her side. No sign of Ally.

Claire made eye contact with Sasha and was waiting for her signal to leave the field to join her.

When the signal came, she took a swig from her water bottle and dropped it on top of her backpack. She walked past her teammates who were lining up to run. "C'mon, Miller. You got this."

She hopped over the three-foot chain-link fence and walked over to her "aunt."

"I see you dressed down for this," Claire teased.

Sasha smiled and, in a very American accent, said, "This is as casual as I get."

She wore dress pants that billowed in the wind. The kind of high waist fit that only the long-legged, lean woman could pull off. Her white blouse was just as stylish. Her sleek black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her large-rimmed sunglasses a signature to her outdoor look.

If there was something about Sasha that impressed her from the beginning, it was how effortless she made every outfit look.

Behind Sasha, Eastman was looking their way.

Claire waited until he was close enough to hear. "I'm surprised you made it."

“I told you I would and here I am.”

Claire turned her look to Eastman, then glared at Sasha.

“Hello, Miss Porter,” Eastman said, smiling.

“Out for a stroll and stumbled back to school on a Saturday, Mr. Eastman?” Claire asked.

“School event,” he said, opening his arms to the field. “And I am a schoolteacher. I always want to support my students.”

“Are you telling me there is no coincidence that you make time to come,” Claire said as she pointed at Sasha. “And you show up to a track meet?”

Sasha removed her sunglasses. “Don’t be ridiculous and stop being rude. I called Mr. Eastman since those parent-teacher nights never seem to match with my schedule.”

“I told you I was doing fine.”

“Which is exactly what you said at your last school. And now we’re here.” Sasha turned and extended a hand. “I’m Sasha, Claire’s aunt and guardian.”

“Well, tell her how I’m doing,” Claire challenged Eastman.

Eastman stared directly in her eyes. “Other than the obvious chip on her shoulder, Claire has made some significant improvements.”

“See!”

Sasha kept a straight face. “Fabulous. Now don’t you have to go run or something?”

Claire rolled her eyes and worked her way back onto the field.

The starting gun shot again, and the crowd cheered.

“Ally’s not coming,” Jax told Elsie after reading her text.

“What? Why?”

“She said she got busted last night after getting back from a party.”

“What party?” Elsie asked.

Jax shook her head, started to text her that very question.

The announcer went through a series of calls, running down the stats of the athletes on the field. When Claire's name was mentioned, Jax put her phone down to watch.

"Eeeek, here she comes."

Jax looked around the stands to see who had cameras pointed at the runners. Not that it mattered; there were many athletes and no idea who was watching who. Jax went ahead and turned her camera to video mode to show Claire later.

Changing the Rules Chapter 27[2,156 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

There were five heats for the one-hundred-meter sprints. Even if she came in first for this one, there was no way of knowing if another heat's winner was faster. Not until they were all over. The starting gun went off for the group in front of hers. She jumped up and down a few times, swinging her arms.

Cooper stood at the finish line.

Sasha watched from the fence, Mr. Eastman at her side.

Her teammates were staggered along the inside field.

The girls she ran the relay with were at the start. "Hey, Claire," one of them called out.

She looked over.

"Run fast and don't get hurt!" the three of them all yelled at the same time.

"Runners line up," the ref told them.

Claire positioned her blocks in the fourth lane to her settings, dug her spikes in the ground, and crouched to her starting stance.

She stared down the lane, her focus on the finish line.

The noise in the stands faded, and her heartbeat sped up with anticipation.

The gun fired and she ran.

Names were shouted, hers in the mix.

She didn't look left, didn't look right. Everything was blocked out but the goal.

The race was over in seconds and Claire was across the line, not letting up until she ran out of room.

Catching her breath, she shook the hands of the runners in her heat and walked onto the grass, nearly getting tackled by her girls.

"Oh my God."

"You smoked 'em."

She hadn't noticed who crossed the line first because she simply didn't look.

Cooper jogged up to her, shaking his head with a huge smile.

"How did I do?"

He pointed to the digital score. She saw her name, and her time, right in the first spot.

She acted like an excited athlete and hugged her coach. It was the first contact she'd had with him in a week and she wanted to linger.

"Now that's how you win a race, Porter." Coach Bennett came up beside them, and she gave the older man a hug, too.

"That's number-one smart-ass to you."

Bennett didn't stay long. "I wanna see that again in the relay," he told her before walking off to another event.

"Rest up, walk it off, and don't eat anything heavy," Cooper told Claire and the others before walking away.

She looked over to where Sasha was standing and waved.

Sasha gave her a thumbs-up, and then pointed to her watch.

Claire nodded.

"Who is that?" Chelsea asked.

"My aunt."

"You don't look anything alike."

“Adoptions work like that.”

She noticed the other girls looking at each other.

“Is she leaving?” Leah asked.

“She’s a flight attendant and has to fly out tonight.”

As Sasha walked out of the stadium, Claire watched Eastman follow her.

“That’s super cool. Do you get to fly anywhere you want?” Claire wasn’t sure who asked the question.

“Only if she’s in the mood.”

Behind Eastman, Isaac slipped out of the stands and followed him.

At her backpack, she plopped on the ground and changed out of her spikes and into her running shoes. With Eastman out of the stands, it was time for Claire to check in with Jax.

Before she ran off, she cheered on the rest of the girls running the one hundred before making her excuses. “I’m going to say hi to some friends.”

Jax and Elsie met Claire at the bottom of the stands.

“You were wicked fast,” Elsie exclaimed.

“I think you came in second overall,” Jax told her.

“Are you guys having fun?”

“I’m gonna be honest,” Elsie said. “It’s a lot more exciting than I thought it would be.”

“Where’s Ally?” Claire asked.

“She was grounded.” Jax shrugged.

“That bites.”

“Do you want to see what they have at the snack bar?” Elsie suggested.

“Sure.”

They weaved through the crowd, and Elsie started telling Claire about her boy problems.

“ . . . I was telling Jax that he stopped wanting to do what I want to do. I kinda wanna break up with him, but then what happens with prom?”

“He totally bailed on last week’s party,” Claire said.

“He was pissed that I went without him. What does he expect? That I just stay home when he doesn’t want to go out? He’s the one that’s going to be in a dorm in August, probably join a frat or something. I bet he goes to a ton of parties and won’t ask me to go.”

They turned toward the concession stand and took their place in line. “I left my money in my backpack,” Claire told Jax.

“I got ya. You can pay me back later.”

“Jax?”

They all turned to her name being called.

Claire recognized him right away. “It’s Brian, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing here?” Jax asked.

Brian looked around, checked out the kids standing in line behind them. “I had to pick something up. Milo told me you’d be here, asked if I’d help out.”

Jax acted surprised. “Oh, yeah.” She reached into a side pocket of her purse and pulled out an envelope.

Brian handed her a card. “Milo told me to give you his number, make it easier.”

“This is really cool. Thanks.” Jax put the paper in her back pocket. “I thought I’d see you guys last weekend.”

“We took off early. We like things smaller,” he told them.

“It was a lot of fun,” Elsie told him.

Brian smiled at Elsie, a flirty lift in his eyes. “You were there?”

“Yeah, it was great.”

“Maybe next time I’ll stick around longer.”

Claire kinda wanted to puke.

He started backing away.

“Thank Milo again for me,” Jax said.

“I will. He said he’s really looking forward to seeing you.”

Jax put on the appropriate excited female smile one manages when she’s just heard the cute boy wants her number. “Tell him I said hi,” Jax called out to Brian as he walked away.

The line inched up and someone bumped Claire from behind as they were trying to get past.

She glanced around and saw Lars following Brian.

Cooper watched with anticipation as Claire’s next race set up to run.

He knew she wanted nothing to do with screwing up the other girls’ chances at medals and titles. And no matter if she blew it on purpose, or helped them win, they couldn’t claim the prize once this case was over. She’d told him earlier that she’d rather watch them smile now and deal with the fallout later. Maybe they’d understand.

Cooper liked to think they would.

The gun went off and the race began. Everything looked textbook, until the second baton was passed. Fifty meters in and Leah managed to miss a step and went down.

Cooper started toward her, but the girl jumped back up and started to run, only now she was limping, in obvious pain.

Cooper heard the announcer over the PA mention an issue on the field. But Leah kept going until she crossed the line. Claire hesitated, but the team yelled at her to go, which was how they trained.

Claire took off to finish the race.

The team swarmed Leah in seconds.

“Let me in.” Cooper shoved through, crouched down to her level. “Where does it hurt?”

“My ankle.” Leah had tears in her eyes.

Cooper reached down, gave it a gentle poke.

She jumped.

“Do you think you can stand?”

She nodded yes, and he and one of the students helped her to her feet.

Claire came running up behind him, hand on his shoulder. “Is she okay?”

Leah tried to put weight on her ankle and buckled.

Cooper bent down, lifted the girl into his arms, and walked her off the field. He heard the crowd and the concern of the announcer.

“What happened to run fast and don’t get hurt?” Claire tried to tease her.

Leah laughed through her tears.

“Do you think it’s broken, Coach?”

“I left my X-ray vision and my Superman cape at home. But my guess is it’s a sprain.”

Leah laughed a little more.

Cooper found Claire’s eyes and caught her smile.

They settled in the first aid tent where Leah’s parents rushed to her side.

Bennett showed up and told her not to worry, she’d be running again before the season was over. Even Cooper knew that was a long shot.

He stayed with her while they iced and bandaged her ankle. Claire and her relay team did a good job of distracting her. Once they’d done all they could, Leah’s dad took over, picked her up, and left to find an urgent care.

Claire walked with Cooper back onto the field. “That sucks,” Claire muttered.

“Sure does. She’s good and this is her senior year.”

“You’re a softy,” she told him.

“Coach Mitchel?”

He turned to see the coach from Bremerton walking toward him.

They shook hands. “Sorry to see your runner go down.”

“I think she’s all right.”

“You seem to have a knack for this coaching thing.” The other man smiled and patted him on the back.

“It’s certainly growing on me.”

“And this one.” The coach looked at Claire. “You’re pretty fast, young lady.”

“Claire, this is the coach from Bremerton. Coach Dale . . . Sorry, I forgot your last name.”

Dale waved him off. “No worries. Coach Dale works.”

“Hi,” Claire said.

“Keep running like that and I’ll see you at state.” He said goodbye and walked back to his team.

Cooper’s phone buzzed with a text from Neil. How is the kid?

He turned the message for Claire to read.

“You guys are all softies.”

“Okay, let’s finish this up. Go out there and get those distance runners motivated.”

Claire turned to leave, and it took everything in him not to slap her butt as she went.

Claire and Jax left the school together and sat in on a conference call while they drove to their Tarzana home.

“Just the bullet points, team. It’s been a long day for all of us. There’s a full report in your inboxes.” Neil took a breath and continued. “Eastman kept the conversation with Sasha Claire-centric. Nothing incriminating. The entire conversation is on audio file for you to go over. When Sasha left the school, Eastman followed her like he’d been trained to do so. She drove home, changed, and left for her long haul with a layover. Eastman then followed her to the airport until she turned into the extended stay parking lot. He waited for over an hour before he left. As you will hear in the audio file, Sasha set up that Claire was spending the long weekend with a friend until she came home.”

Claire turned to Jax. “Yes!” she said in a forceful whisper. She couldn’t wait to sleep in her own bed.

“Isaac followed Brian to the strip mall where he disappeared inside a mailbox location and stayed for two hours. He left with Gorge and continued to the Sanders home, where they’re still located.”

“Any other activity at that house we should know about?”

“Nothing that isn’t expected. We’ve planted a front driveway surveillance camera for now and will increase if needed.”

Claire rolled her head back in her seat, thankful Jax was driving.

“Any new details on your end that we may have missed?” Neil asked.

“You saw what I did all day,” Cooper said from his car.

“Claire?”

“I played high school athlete. Nothing new on the field.”

“Jax, your audio wasn’t ideal. We will change the setup in the future. Anything to report?”

“Elsie wants to break up with her boyfriend, but is afraid she won’t have a prom date.” Jax turned to Claire and giggled. “I asked her about algebra and her tutor, but she didn’t offer a name. I’m not sure if that was by design or indifference. Ally was grounded for a party she went to the night before. When I started asking about the party, her grandmother got on her phone and said Ally’s phone privileges were revoked until further notice. I’ll get more information when we’re back in school.”

“Okay . . .”

Claire waited for the words Have a nice weekend.

“Jax, enjoy your weekend.”

“Oh, no.” All Claire wanted right now was a stiff drink, a bathtub, and a good night’s sleep.

“Claire, Cooper, there is a five a.m. charter flight at LAX with your names on it.”

Suddenly sleep didn’t sound so needed. “The Bahamas?” Claire asked.

Neil was silent when he was annoyed.

Claire filled that silence with images of a beach and sand . . . and Cooper finding second base.

“Seattle. Marie Nickerson showed back up.”

The Bahamas dream would have to wait. Claire sat forward. “Is she in jail?”

“She’s in a hospital. In protective custody. They have her under the name Hope Boyer to throw off anyone looking for her. Claire, I need you to interview her as a PI, so bring your

identification. Cooper, I need you to keep Claire safe. You both know the players we've identified. If any of them are seen, your identities need to change, so bring backup ID and any disguise you need to go with them. All other travel details will be on the plane."

"Hey, Boss?" Cooper started.

"Yeah."

"This protective custody, is this Warren's doing?"

"Yes. He's working with the commander in the precinct Marie was found. A detective in homicide will meet you at the hospital."

"Did she kill someone?" Claire asked.

"No, but someone nearly killed her after taking two other young lives. The commander is giving us and Warren a shot before he takes this to the feds."

"Has anyone interviewed her yet?"

"She's not talking. I'm hoping you can change that, Claire."

"Copy that."

"Be safe. No unnecessary risks." Neil disconnected the call.

Changing the Rules Chapter 28[2,471 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Cooper pulled into Claire's driveway long before the sun even thought of coming up.

Dim lights were on inside the house, and Claire's silhouette filtered through the closed drapes. Much as he didn't like the thought of working, or the danger level of that work, he couldn't be happier to be at her side.

He cut the engine and walked through the misty morning to her front door and knocked.

"Almost ready," she said in a low voice after letting him in. Claire walked back toward the kitchen.

He followed her into the quiet house, mindful that Jax was probably as dead tired as they were.

Claire buzzed around the kitchen, pulled down two travel mugs, and proceeded to fill them with coffee. "I'm going to need a gallon of this today," she pointed out.

Cooper simply watched her with unabashed joy.

She wore tan linen pants with a cream silk blouse. She had heels on her feet, but not the sky-high ones she wore when going to a club. Her hair was down, but styled more like Claire the PI and not Claire the high school senior. And her perfume . . . He'd forgotten the scent but remembered it now. She hadn't worn it in his presence since before the assignment started. It wasn't floral, or some essential-oil type thing. It smelled like the dark woods on a moonlit night with just a hint of jasmine musk.

"Boy, I'm tired." She turned around and stopped with his stare.

Cooper stepped forward, took both mugs from her hands, and set them on the counter before pulling her into his arms. He pressed his lips to hers and savored the softness of them. So much strength in every inch of her body, but here, like this, she wilted and let him hold her.

He enjoyed her kiss for as long as he could without turning a morning greeting into more.

When he pulled away, her eyes fluttered open, and that frantic woman who was busy working her way out of the house was replaced with dreamy eyes and a giant sigh. "Good morning," she whispered.

"I wish we were going to the Bahamas."

"Me too."

He handed her back one of the filled mugs and took the other for himself.

Claire set the house alarm and locked the door behind them.

After she was safely tucked into the passenger seat, Cooper pulled out of the driveway and headed toward the airport.

She sipped her coffee and slowly started to wake up. "Did you get any sleep?" she asked him.

"Yeah, but not enough."

"What are the chances of Neil giving us a charter with a bedroom?"

Cooper laughed. "Slim to none."

She reached over and placed her hand on his arm as if she'd done so a thousand times. He wondered if she knew just what that did to him. She started to laugh softly.

"What?"

"I remember the first time Neil put me on a private plane. We were headed back from London. I remember the plane being huge. Bedroom in the back, big reclining seats in the main cabin with a giant TV, and a sofa equipped with seatbelts. It was impressive. Sasha and AJ were this bundle of sexual frustration. When they went in the bedroom, I put my headphones on in case they were loud." She laughed at the memory. "They didn't do anything. Or if they did . . . AJ was much too quick for Sasha to have stayed with the man."

Cooper didn't really want to think of any of his friends going at it, but Sasha accepting a quickie sounded out of character. "Neil was on that flight?"

"Yeah. He let me drink on the plane, but as soon as we touched down in Texas, nope."

"I remember him being such a hard-ass with you. Watching you needle him and making him crack, everyone noticed that. No one dared say a word, but man, that was great to witness." Cooper drove onto the nearly empty freeway, thankful the flight was on a Sunday morning and not a weekday.

"Does it feel strange to you that he's putting so much into this case?"

"How so?" Cooper asked.

"Most of the time it's surveillance and protection. Part bodyguard, part house spy. Celebrity events, high-profile protection. A lot of which is quite boring, actually. But this is new. Exciting." She rubbed his arm with the tips of her fingers. "Exhausting, but exciting."

"It probably does feel personal to Neil. Emma looks like our JV girls. With all the girl parts pushing out and the boys taking notice. You know that's gotta dig at the big man. A guy like him hears that someone in town is snatching up these kids and making them sex slaves. That would drive a normal man to kill, and we both know Neil isn't completely normal. I mean, I trust him with my life, and I also know he'd take someone out who threatened his family." Cooper turned his hand into hers and interlaced their fingers. "We're his family."

Claire squeezed his hand. "Is it strange that I jumped in with this family and never looked back?"

"Do you ever think about trying to find your real family?" he asked. He knew she'd been left at an orphanage door. Didn't even have the parental respect of a real adoption.

She shook her head, then paused. “Maybe in the beginning. Right after I graduated from college. But it’s not a driving need in me. That might change someday, who knows. You know what Neil told me once?”

Cooper shook his head. “What?”

“Say the word and I’ll find the facts. But when you do, be ready to hear them.”

“I wonder if he already knows.” Cooper wouldn’t put it past the big guy.

“I’ve thought that more than once. But I’m not there. Sasha told me her search for her biological parents stopped her from living her life, and when she found them, it nearly killed her.” Claire stared blankly out the windshield. “I don’t want something to consume me like that.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissed the back of it. “You have people who care about you who will never let something take over your life.”

They used the valet lot associated with private charters and whisked through security. Their names and identification were their tickets.

Cooper couldn’t help but see that Claire belonged in this lifestyle. She handed off her luggage to an attendant at the bottom of the steps to the private jet like she’d done many times. Truth was, Cooper had as well. Neil didn’t travel domestic when they were on a case. And when he was with his family on the many trips back and forth to London, where his wife was from, a family plane was used. Come to think of it, Cooper couldn’t remember the man ever using a domestic plane.

Neil liked control.

And Cooper liked Neil’s style.

The jet could seat five people with full reclining chairs, a small galley, and of course a bathroom. The captain greeted them and introduced them to the copilot. He plotted out the flight plan and told them what to expect, weather wise, during their flight. After that he disappeared into the cockpit, leaving one attendant. A ridiculous service, as Cooper saw it, considering the flight was only three hours and they could pour their own coffee.

The attendant stowed their luggage and offered that preflight beverage, which they both declined.

Cooper double-checked the closet, where he found the “appropriate devices” one might need to protect a loved one.

Claire set a bag with her computer and notebooks in the seat she planned on using and disappeared into the bathroom.

Once they had everything in order, the attendant closed the cabin door. And in the time most people took to get through normal security, they were taxiing to the runway.

Their seats faced each other, keeping Cooper from touching her, but at least he could watch her.

“Are we going to work, or try and catch some sleep?” he asked.

“I need to formulate my questions. I didn’t give it much thought last night before I fell into bed.”

Once the flight was in the air, the attendant busied herself with preparing their breakfast. Cooper leaned over the table and lowered his voice. “I thought maybe she was a chaperone, but I don’t mind someone else cooking breakfast.”

“We’re on a private plane, and you’re impressed with the fruit cup and microwave omelet.”

He tapped his chest. “I’m a simple guy.”

While they watched the sunrise, sipping coffee and eating fresh fruit, and not the cup variety that Claire suggested, Cooper marveled at how she switched gears. Yesterday she was pretending to be a smart-ass kid giving adults a run for their money, and today she was the quintessential professional that looked like she could take on a courtroom without a law degree. And she could do it in five languages.

Claire vacillated between her options out loud, asking for his opinion on occasion. She’d write down notes on paper, and put others on her computer.

She picked at her food and drank that gallon of coffee she threatened.

And Cooper soaked up every minute he was with her.

It was raining in Seattle. Their rental car was waiting curbside, again a treat from Neil. “Hotel first, or hospital?”

She glanced at her watch. “Hospital. We don’t know when our opportunity will be to talk to her. If we need to come back later, we will.”

Cooper followed the navigation to the hospital. When they got close, Claire reached in the back seat and removed one of the handguns from the suitcase Neil had arranged. She did a weapons check, chambered a round, and tucked it in her purse.

Cooper made a noise and she looked over. “Still works for you?” she asked.

“That’s so hot.”

“Put it away, Cooper. We don’t have time for that right now.”

That comment had him doing a double take. “So much better than the other way you used to say that.”

They bantered with a smile and a simple touch, all saying their relationship had changed.

They pulled into the parking lot. Cooper repeated Claire’s actions and put his weapon in a shoulder holster. Technically, she was the only one that was supposed to be carrying a gun.

But technically, Cooper didn’t give a shit. Someone tried to kill the woman they were about to go see, and he wasn’t about to believe that someone wouldn’t come back to finish the job. They locked everything else in the trunk and exited the car.

“Let’s do this.”

Claire’s fist came out, and he bumped it with his.

Claire walked by Cooper’s side as they entered the hospital. They stopped at the information desk and asked where Hope Boyer’s room was located.

As expected, they were asked to wait in the lobby for an escort.

Two uniformed police officers exited the elevators and approached the information desk.

Claire and Cooper walked up to them. “I’m Claire Kelly and this is my associate, Cooper Lockman.” It had been so long since she used her real name, it felt foreign on her tongue.

Claire identified herself with the private investigator badge that sat next to her primary identification. Her ID was checked quickly and given back.

They scrutinized Cooper’s a little closer. “Bodyguard and private security?” the officer holding Cooper’s identification asked.

“My retired military credentials are on the next page.”

After checking, the police officer gave it back. “Thank you for your service, Mr. Lockman.”

Claire and Cooper followed the officers and entered the elevator.

“Are either of you interviewing the witness?”

“No, ma’am. Detective Phelps is on the floor waiting for your arrival.”

Neil must have known they wouldn’t waste time getting to the hospital.

Cooper kept completely quiet, his body tense, eyes sharp.

The elevator stopped on their floor. Claire heard the click of her shoes as the scents that permeated medical buildings filled her nose. The first section of the floor was bustling with hospital staff, nurses, and doctors. Many stopped to watch them as they passed by. They took the first corner and angled down another long hall before stopping in front of a single door with a phone on the outside.

Along with a few nerves, some of Claire's spidey sense began to tingle. She wasn't sure if it was anticipation at what might be the break in the case they needed, or worry that something was going to go wrong.

One of the officers spoke into the phone, and someone buzzed them in.

The door emptied them into an ICU. One of the officers stayed behind, a single chair his only comfort.

The unit was significantly quieter than the one they'd passed through. Less staff and even fewer civilians.

All the rooms were completely visible from the central nurses' station. The only patient privacy was a curtain that could be pulled around a bed. Very few were pulled. Claire averted her eyes to avoid looking at the other patients in the unit, most of whom were either on a ventilator or hooked up to so many tubes and machines it was hard to tell if they were a man or a woman.

They arrived at Marie's room, the curtain pulled so they couldn't immediately see her.

A middle-aged woman in street clothes hovered outside the door. She smiled as they approached.

"Detective Phelps?" Claire asked.

"You must be Miss Kelly."

The two of them exchanged identification. Cooper showed his and stood back.

Detective Phelps shuffled them a few feet from the open door to Marie's room. "I'm glad you could come so quickly. She fades as the day goes on."

"How is she?"

"Good as can be expected, I suppose."

"We weren't given a lot of details," Cooper told her.

A nurse walked into Marie's room with a bag of IV fluids.

"My commander's orders were to tell you what I know."

"Have you identified the other two victims?"

"Not yet."

"Has she told you who they were?" Cooper asked.

Phelps looked at Cooper. "She hasn't told us anything. The staff came up with the name Hope. Boyer was a random computer name."

"Excuse me, Detective?" The nurse that had walked into the room interrupted them.

They all turned.

"We're going to have to do a dressing change soon. If anyone needs to talk to her, now would be the time."

"Thanks, Millie."

One of the housekeepers took that moment to walk past them pushing a cleaning cart out of the ICU.

Claire used the distraction to take a deep breath.

Phelps turned her attention to Cooper. "I guarantee you she won't talk if you go in there. She doesn't trust men."

Claire placed a hand on Cooper's arm. "I'm okay." She turned to walk into the room, paused. "What is the extent of her injuries?"

"They didn't tell you?"

"We have a lot of questions and not a lot of information."

Phelps looked between them. "After brutal abuse, they tried to burn her alive."

Claire felt bile rise in the back of her throat. Hearing those details wasn't something she was looking forward to.

Her expression must have shown her unease, since Cooper placed a hand on her shoulder.

Claire reached in her purse and turned on a recording device before squaring her shoulders and walking into the room.

Changing the Rules Chapter 29[3,022 words]

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The mug shot of Marie Nickerson looked nothing like the teenager who morphed into what looked like a breathing airbed.

Her eyes were closed. Bandages covered her neck and chest, her hair had either been burned or shaved to the scalp. Bruises in all stages of healing were a dark rainbow of colors. What wasn't bruised was swollen. She lay on the bed like something out of a cartoon meme, of a person in a body cast with all four limbs stretched away from her body. Knees supported by pillows in a slightly bent position, arms extended and elevated. Her hands were both completely bandaged.

And there was something about the scent in the air Claire knew she'd remember for her entire life.

Marie's eyes fluttered open, a moment of question swam in what looked like a sea of pure despair.

"Hello, Hope."

The girl closed her eyes.

"My name is Claire." She moved a little closer. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

She didn't answer.

Claire pulled a chair closer to the side of the bed that housed fewer medical devices. She sat and secured her purse in the chair beside her.

The sound of the bed humming and the devices on her legs squeezing them filled the silence.

"It looks like they're taking really good care of you."

Marie turned her head away, slightly.

Get her talking, Claire's inner monologue chimed. Anything to start the flow of words. Any words.

"Do you want me to call you Hope? I was told the nurses gave that to you. Everyone seems to care about your recovery."

Still nothing.

“There’s a lot of protection, too. Everyone’s making sure you’re safe.”

Marie swallowed and looked at Claire without turning her head. “You a cop?” Her voice was tired and hoarse like a ninety-year-old woman who’d smoked all her life.

“No. I’m not a cop.”

“You’re a shrink.” And that didn’t interest her by the way she closed her eyes again as if ending the conversation.

“God no. I’d be a terrible shrink. I’m a private investigator.”

Marie looked now, turned her head. “You don’t look old enough.”

Claire chuckled. “I’m older on the inside.”

Her words brought the first sign of any emotion, and Claire ran with it. “I was forced to do well in school. And not in the typical way most think of.” She sighed. “Do you know why Beethoven was so great at such a young age? His father all but chained him to a piano, and he was forced to do nothing but play from the moment he could sit up and put his fingers on the keys. His first concert performance was when he was like six.” Claire shook her head, spoke slowly. “People get good at things they’re forced to do.”

Marie was looking at her now.

“I bet he felt old before he was ten,” Claire let her voice fade.

A few seconds passed.

“You can call me Hope.”

Claire squeezed the fist in her lap to keep from showing too much excitement.

“I bet you’re feeling pretty old, Hope.”

“You sure you’re not a shrink?”

Claire smiled. “Would a shrink tell you that you kinda look like crap right now?”

Hope laughed and came up coughing.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Claire reached for the water that sat on the bedside table. “Do you want some water?”

Hope nodded, and Claire brought the straw to her dry lips for her to take a sip.

“Thank you.”

“I probably shouldn’t have said that.”

Hope closed her eyes. “It’s okay. Everyone comes in here and looks at me like I’m going to break.”

“I think you’re stronger than that.”

She went silent again.

“You have to be. Pretending like you’re something you’re not for so long.”

“I’m leftover trash.”

Claire swallowed, kept her teeth clenched. “They tell you that? The cowards that did this to you?”

She didn’t say yes, didn’t say no.

“You know what I see? I see a young woman who was handpicked out of a crowd of children and manipulated into this life. You’re older now, so you know kids can do stupid things sometimes. But when someone is older and they’re telling you the stupid things you’re doing are right, you start to believe them. Maybe you keep doing those things, and maybe they start to feel stupid again. Maybe they hurt more. Or maybe you’re just older. But somewhere in the back of your head you know this isn’t the life you want.”

Claire opened her oversized purse and pulled out several pictures she’d printed out before coming. “This is what I see.” She leaned forward and made sure Marie saw them. The first was a shot of the youngest cross-country runners bringing up the rear of the pack.

Marie’s eyes focused, and recognition seeped in.

She dropped the page to show another. This one a scene from the quad, with young girls that hadn’t found their confidence yet but were surrounded by older students. “And I see this. Don’t these girls look young to you?”

A tiny nod was Claire’s answer.

“Someone targeted you. Maybe they saw a shy girl, or an unpopular girl . . . someone who liked to sneak a little liquor and experiment. Maybe you just wanted to lose your virginity because your best friend did and she told you it was great. Or maybe someone already took that from you and you didn’t think anything after was worth savoring.”

Marie flinched, and Claire knew she hit the right combination. She tucked that knowledge away to deal with later.

“And what I and the people I work with think is that the guy who pulled you away from all this, that guy isn’t working alone. We think he has a lot of help and we’re getting closer to finding them. And I want to find them and stop any of these kids from experiencing what you’ve been through.”

Marie stared at the pictures, wetness behind her eyes.

“We want to know everyone involved. I know you have names in your head. I know you’re scared they’ll find you if you say them out loud. But they all think you’re dead so they aren’t looking for you. They’re moving on to the next kid.”

Claire showed the image of Marie’s cross-country team from when she was there.

“I don’t know any other way of life,” Marie said.

“A lot of nineteen-year-olds don’t know what to do with their lives, but they have the rest of it to figure it out. Protecting these people just gives them the opportunity to make sure you are dead the next time.”

And with that, Claire sat back and stayed silent.

When it seemed Marie wasn’t going to say anything else, Claire gathered the pictures and tucked them back in her purse. “If you change your mind and want to talk, I can come back.”

Claire stood and tried to smile.

Marie closed her eyes.

Damn it.

“The guy who put me here wasn’t the same as the one I left California with.”

Claire sat back down.

Marie looked her in the eye, then directed her attention out the window. “His name was Brian. He went by Big Brian.”

The curtain surrounding the bed moved slightly, and Phelps quietly walked in and sat down.

Cooper stood out of sight of Marie, poised at the door.

Marie glanced at Phelps and continued. "I met Big Brian at a party. Fancy house party with kids from all over the place."

"Do you remember where the party was?" Claire asked.

She shook her head. "Big house, long driveway. Really nice house with a huge backyard. I remember a firepit with a bunch of kids passing around a bong."

Claire made a note to get a picture of Milo's house for Marie to identify.

"Brian had a nice car. I thought he was a senior, maybe nineteen. Later I realized he was already in his early twenties. Not that it mattered. He was older, liked me. Listened." Marie shook her head, closed her eyes. "In the beginning we'd meet at hotels, make use of the back seat of his car. He never hurt me." Marie made eye contact briefly. "Not directly anyway. My father . . . there was a night my father had been drinking, told me I couldn't leave the house. I didn't like being at home alone with my dad." Marie's stare grew cold.

"Your father hurt you," Claire said.

Marie nodded.

"Sexually." Claire didn't phrase it as a question.

A slight nod was all Marie offered.

"With Big Brian it was my choice. He made me feel safe. When he suggested I run away, I packed a bag and didn't look back. Only it didn't last."

"What happened?" Claire asked.

"Big Brian hooked me up with a fake ID. Took me to the Venetian in Vegas."

Claire sat forward.

"He took me shopping. I remember thinking . . . 'Where did he come up with the money?' But I didn't bother asking. I felt like a princess. He bought me a fancy dress, like something you'd wear to prom. Left me in a spa for half the day. Hair, makeup . . . you name it. I thought he was my savior. At sixteen, I thought Big Brian and I were going to be together forever." Marie closed her eyes. "I'm so stupid."

Claire set her hand on the side of the bed. "You were being manipulated."

"Brian took me to a party. Nothing like a high school thing, this was in a penthouse overlooking Vegas." She went on to describe some of the other girls at the party, then returned to the man who took her there.

“Big Brian said he had a lot of rich friends he wanted me to meet. Encouraged me to be nice. The guys were older. They wore suits. I tried to act the age on my ID. Big Brian pulled me aside, told me one of the men at the party offered ten thousand dollars if I’d sleep with him. We laughed a couple times. Talked about how crazy that sounded. Big Brian hands me another glass of champagne and then starts talking about what we could do with ten thousand dollars. We could get a nice apartment and a real start on life. It’s this one time.” Marie paused. “It’s this one time.”

Claire beat down her own emotions as Marie revealed everything.

“The guy was old. I was drunk enough to not really care. He had a thick accent.”

“Do you know what kind of accent?”

“No. Didn’t matter. The party lasted for three days. At least that’s what I concluded once I woke up. Blips of men and bedrooms and Big Brian telling me I was doing the right thing. And I was high. I know now someone had given me something. I don’t remember how I got from one hotel to another, just that there were different places and a different group of men. When I came down, Mykonos was there.”

“Who is Mykonos?”

Marie looked at Claire. “The man who owned me.”

Claire listened while Marie spelled out what that meant. Mykonos made it clear that he owned Marie. That she needed to do anything and everything he told her and she could live a comfortable life, or he’d send her to a dirty country where she’d be whored out for pennies.

Twice Marie tried to get out.

Twice Mykonos sent her out for a lesson.

Marie explained how she’d lived with a handful of his girls that were rotated through like chattel. They’d come in young, some as young as fourteen. Some would filter in and be gone within a week, mainly the young ones.

By the time she turned nineteen, she almost never saw Mykonos. He would come in, sometimes he’d use her and reward her with a weekend away from Vegas. The rewards were always a hotel where a convention was going on. Marie had made it clear that she never searched out the men. They were always there, and arrangements were made. Whoever Mykonos had hired to stand beside her pointed at the men, and she was told to do whatever they wanted. No one ever handed her money directly.

When Claire asked how Marie got away, her voice was so monotone it sounded as if she were a robot. As if all emotion had been drained like the last drop of blood.

“Two months ago, Mykonos sent me to San Francisco. I looked in the mirror and didn’t recognize myself. I wanted out. I made it as far as a bus station. Mykonos told me I wasn’t worth the money to fly me out of the country for another lesson. I was relieved at first. But then he told me if I wanted to be on the streets in America, he’d make sure I knew what that looked like. I was drugged in the back of a van. My eyes were open but I couldn’t move. From the van, I was put in the trunk of a car. I knew I was in Seattle. When Mykonos’s man handed me over to Ice, I knew things were not going to be the same.”

Marie described how Ice took over. The fancy hotel parties where she was the party favor were gone, and the dark corner of an occasional motel was where she turned tricks. Ice, or one of his guys, was always there. The men were dirty and mean. But Ice was meaner.

When she was busted and processed, she never even considered telling her story. Who would believe her? She wanted to go back to Vegas, where at least she had clean clothes and some freedoms. She knew it wouldn’t be as good as it had been, but it was better than Ice.

Only that didn’t happen. She knew she was never going back to Mykonos when Ice removed half of the pinky on her left hand. Mykonos didn’t like his merchandise permanently damaged.

Ice still pimped her out. The men didn’t care about a mutilated hand. It gave them permission to hurt her more.

Claire listened to the whole story with her stomach in her throat.

The day Marie had been taken to the warehouse, two other girls showed up. One was Russian, and spoke very little English. The other was American, and from what Marie figured out, both of them were like her. And they were scared. Like they knew what was coming. She tried to talk to them, but they wouldn’t say a thing.

Marie overheard a fight between Ice and his guys. She heard them talk about finishing the job. Make a little more money and get rid of them. It was then she understood the fear.

The three of them were showered and put in clean clothes. Marie thought that she could talk her way out of whatever was planned.

Only speaking wasn’t allowed.

And when Ice lined up the other members of his gang, he made his last dollar on her. If she cried out while they raped her, one of the other girls would get cut.

She lost track of time, stopped feeling the pain.

Marie stopped talking at that point. And when Claire asked if Ice lit the flame that killed the other girls and nearly killed her, all she did was nod.

“I didn’t think she was going to talk,” Detective Phelps said, bent over a fresh cup of coffee in an isolated conference room a few steps away from the ICU.

Cooper sat beside Claire, saw the fire in her eyes as they reviewed the testimony Marie had provided.

For the first time in their assignment, they had names.

“I thought I lost her. Thank God I brought the photographs,” Claire said.

“This is much bigger than it first appeared,” Phelps told them.

“Do you have any idea who Ice is?”

“Obviously a street name. We’ll start our search with the known gangs out of White Center where she was found and work our way out. We’ll get a sketch artist in as soon as we can. The downfall of these guys is their love for street credit. Their name is everything to them. We’ll find him.”

Cooper had already texted the name and the location of the abandoned industrial building to the team. Along with a request to the precinct commander that had given Claire and Cooper access to the witness to give them more time before releasing the case to the feds.

“Mykonos sounds like a big fish,” Phelps suggested.

Cooper leaned back in his chair. “The party in Vegas, the first one Big Brian took her to. She describes a lot of girls, most of them young, some with accents, foreign and domestic. And all of them painted up like six-year-old pageant divas. Whoever arranged that party and cashed out those girls is the bigger fish.”

“We need Las Vegas vice on this,” Phelps said.

Cooper exchanged looks with Claire, both of them had the same concern.

“We need time. Big Brian sounds like someone we’re already following. But he’s not smart enough to have put all of this together. We need to know who fed her to Big Brian,” Cooper said.

“It sounds like she did that all on her own.”

Claire shook her head. “That’s how our unknown fish stays underground. From the first meeting to Vegas is less than a month. Poof, she vanishes. How does this case look if Big Brian pleads that his biggest sin was not knowing she was sixteen? That she had a fake ID

to prove it? They go to a party in Vegas and she runs off with some rich guy? Just taking Mykonos into custody without finding the players that handed her to him in the first place only gives those players a chance to disappear.”

Phelps nodded her agreement. “And since I’m sitting here with a private investigator and a bodyguard at the request of my commander, and not a detective from your local sheriff’s department, I’m going to assume there’s a dirty officer involved.”

“If there is, we’ll find them. But if Mykonos is taken in, and whoever Big Brian works with is tipped off, everything crumbles.”

Phelps rolled her shoulders. “I’ll report everything to my commander.”

They all stood.

Claire tucked in the file of information Phelps had for them into her purse.

After they shook hands, Claire asked, “Is she going to be safe here?”

“Anyone trying to get to her has a lot of people to get through first.”

“If she wants to talk to me again . . . ,” Claire said.

“We’ll call you.”

Cooper and Claire walked out of the hospital side by side. Once they passed the main doors, he felt her hand slip into his.

Changing the Rules Chapter 30[2,356 words]

CHAPTER THIRTY

They checked into an upscale hotel that had views of Puget Sound.

Neil had booked two rooms with an adjoining door. Claire suggested just taking one, but Cooper said something about rubbing it in and the affection he had for his perfect smile.

It was almost five, and the sun was still a good hour away from setting. They both decided a hot shower and a real meal would be the best way to ease the tension of the day. And since they had two showers to use . . . they did.

Even though Claire's thoughts were on the case, it didn't escape her that she and Cooper were about to have their first real date. She was thankful she'd thought about that when she packed.

Cooper had used the concierge at the hotel to book a nice restaurant. Claire put on her best outfit.

She slipped the black dress over her head and flattened the fabric along her waist. A look in the mirror made her smile back.

She knew, without a doubt, that Cooper would call the dress a Sasha Special before the evening ended. Her guess would be less than an hour.

It was sexy and short, but not tacky. And the shoes she wore were eye catching and high without being sleazy.

Claire swept her hair up in a messy bun and put on a pair of glittery earrings. The earrings had been a gift from Gwen when she graduated from college. She was fairly certain the diamonds were real, but she'd never ask. Neil refused to take credit for them, but she gave it to him anyway.

Sitting at a vanity table, she finished her makeup with a rose tint on her lips.

Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Cooper walked up behind her and traced the spot on her neck that reached her shoulders. She closed her eyes and leaned into his hand.

"We should go before I try and change your mind about the importance of food," he told her.

The rain had let up before they left the hospital. The sky held a scattering of bright white clouds that stood poised on a variegated blue sky.

They took a hotel car to the restaurant, where their table offered views of the Sound and displayed streaks of purple and gold from the sunset.

"Did you talk to Neil when I was in the shower?" she asked once they were seated.

"I did, briefly. The team is burning the midnight oil to find faces to go with the names. By the time we're back, we should have more answers than questions and a direction to go."

"I hope so. The thought of the people who did this getting away makes me physically ill."

The waiter came over and asked if they wanted to see the wine list.

"Do you want wine?" Cooper asked. "We can, but I know nothing about wine."

Wine with a romantic setting always sounded like the perfect combination, but after their day that wasn't what she wanted. "Vodka martini, two olives," Claire told the waiter.

Cooper handed the menu back. "Make that two."

"Thank you."

The waiter walked away.

"Today was brutal," Cooper said, reaching over and placing his hand over hers on the table.

"Today made it personal. Putting a face and story to the victim. I don't know how anyone does this every day." And she didn't. The crime scene photographs, images of Marie from the hospital before she'd been taken into the burn unit, and what about the two that didn't make it out? What were their stories? "Let's talk about something pleasant. Concentrating too hard is throwing up roadblocks in my head."

Cooper traced her fingers with his. "Should we talk about how we're in Seattle and there isn't a chance that anyone from school could walk by and see this?"

That definitely helped her mind free space. "It's almost like we're having an affair."

"Maybe when the case is over we can have a role-play weekend once a month." He tilted his eyebrows in an expectant way.

Cooper was thinking long term, and yet they'd only shared a couple of stolen kisses.

She lowered her voice, leaned forward. "You have to get to second base before we can talk about next month."

He laughed. "Unless you're wearing that Sasha Special just to tease me, I'm guessing I can unveil your need to cover all the bases."

Claire took a quick look at her watch. "Forty minutes," she said.

"What?"

"You called this a Sasha Special. I knew you would. It took less than an hour for you to do it."

"You're stunning in anything, but dresses like that make me very hungry."

The drinks came and they ordered their dinner.

“Do you know how many times I’ve sat and imagined this night with you? Sitting in a nice place, sipping something, and holding your hand. And more importantly, you not trying to break mine for doing it?”

She took hold of his thumb and twisted it just a little.

“It might take me a little more time to catch up to all you imagined,” she said.

He kissed her fingertips, looked out the window in a nonchalant way, and said, “I think, if you’re not too tired when we’re done here, we can go back to the hotel and run the bases a time or two. Replace the dreams with reality and make it our history.” His eyes returned to her with a soft smile.

No man had ever asked permission to sleep with her. It always just happened. But apparently Cooper felt the need. She lifted her glass. “To life today that becomes our history tomorrow.”

They both sipped, then put their glasses down. “Now, if we’re done talking in metaphors . . . the answer is yes, I’ll share your bed tonight.”

It was easy to tell that Cooper tried hard not to smile like a child with a new toy.

He squeezed her hand and leaned forward to speak in a whisper. “Is it too early to ask for the check?”

She bit her lip and watched as his eyes lingered. “You’re going to need the steak for the energy it’s going to take. Until then, put it away.”

Dinner was part nutrition, part flirtation, and part frustration.

She slipped her shoe off at one point and found the inside of his calf under the table. When he started eating faster, she slowed down and felt the energy build.

On the way back to the hotel, Cooper’s hands played with the edge of her skirt, out of the view of the driver.

They talked about baseball and stealing bases while Claire gave Cooper the opportunity to touch anywhere he pleased. He kept it decent, but that didn’t stop her body from turning up the heat.

The talking stopped when they exited the car.

Hand in hand, Cooper led her to the elevators.

She was breathing hard just knowing Cooper was finding it difficult to talk, and he hadn’t even touched her yet. Well, touched, but not touched.

The elevator door opened and a couple walked out.

Cooper pressed the button to their floor and the close door button at the same time.

Claire watched, hoped that no one stuck their hand between the doors to stop them from being alone.

The door closed and Cooper twisted her around. He pinned the hand he'd been holding to the wall and pressed his frame against hers. His mouth crashed down in complete possession. Hot open-mouth kisses were made even more scorching because of the public place they were in.

The bell in the elevator pinged as if signaling the end of round one.

Cooper backed away as the doors started to open.

His hand stayed on the small of her back on the short walk down the hall.

The electronic keycard was out of his wallet and they pushed into the room breathless.

Cooper reached for her, one hand on her neck, the other on her waist. Everything about their meeting of lips was pure passion. Claire closed her eyes and let him lead her wherever he wanted to go.

Her fingers spanned the width of his back, digging in the pure muscle she felt.

He released her lips long enough to catch a breath, tilted her head to the other side, and returned with more fervor.

When she felt his hand follow the curve of her spine and then squeeze the globe of her bottom, she broke their kiss. "You're stealing bases."

He smiled before lowering his lips to her shoulder and taking a small bite. "I'll cover all the bases." Slowly he kissed along her collarbone and then the swell of her breast that was visible in the dress she wore. Both his hands swept up and settled on the edges.

Her nipples tightened in anticipation of his full coverage of second base.

While he reminded her what it felt like to be touched, Claire pulled his shirt from the waistline of his pants and enjoyed the feel of bare skin.

It was hard to believe she was there in his arms as he drew sensations out of her so powerful they left her lightheaded.

Cooper slowed down, his thumbs flickering over her nipples through her dress.

She loved the slow tease of his touch, followed by a kiss and a tiny pinch. "You've been practicing second base," she told him.

He pushed the edge of her dress aside. "My pillow tells me I need therapy."

He made her laugh and repeated the tease, kiss, and pinch.

"Your pillow talks to you?"

He abandoned one for the other, repeated the actions. "Every night."

Her body responded, nerve endings firing in all directions. "What else does your . . . oh, God yes. Do that again."

"Demanding minx. I should have guessed that about you." He pinched a little harder.

Her hands dropped from his back, down his ass, and flirted with his hip. They were still standing in the center of the room.

She reached for his belt, and Cooper found the zipper on the back of her dress.

A wiggle of her hips and the dress slid to the floor.

Cooper's hands froze on her shoulders, and he stepped slightly away.

"What?" Claire asked, looking into his eyes.

"You. You're so beautiful."

She wore a lace bra and matching thong. Body image was never something Claire struggled with. She'd been given smallish breasts that worked well with her frame. Her slender hips gave way to a toned butt she exercised daily. If there was a lesson of Sasha's that Claire would remember forever, it was the one where she explained that if Claire loved her body, accepted every curve, sex would be so much better.

Watching Cooper study her shape drove that point home.

Claire stepped out of the dress, pressed both palms to Cooper's chest, and backed him toward the bed. His knees caught and she pushed him down.

"I think I'm in trouble."

Instead of messing with the buttons of his dress shirt, she tugged it off over his head. "You started this," she told him, reaching for his belt. "We could go back to just friends if you've changed your mind."

Their eyes locked.

“Bite your tongue,” he said.

She shook her head, stopped playing with his belt, and reached lower, captured the length of him through his pants. “I’d rather bite yours.”

Their lips met and Claire stretched out on top of him, legs straddling his hips. She pushed into the friction their bodies created. Sparks of what was to come made everything inside of her tighten with need.

Cooper caught fire, and suddenly his hands were everywhere. The clip in her hair was out, tossed to the floor. Her bra followed. And they kissed like starved animals going after food.

He rolled her over and stood on the edge of the bed long enough to remove the rest of his clothes. When he returned, his hand traveled from her knees to her feet, took each shoe off slowly. He licked his lips, tugged her closer, and slowly played with the length of her legs. “Third base looks phenomenal.”

She opened for him, ran a hand over her own stomach, and slid a finger inside her panties. “You should have a taste, see if it works.”

He pushed the lace aside and did just that. He started on the outside and slowly moved in. All Claire could do was lie back and enjoy every ounce of attention Cooper was giving her.

Sparks and flutters. “To the right,” she instructed. “Yes, right there . . . oh.”

He was so incredibly good at what he was doing, just the right amount of pressure, his movements changed when she felt her body getting close. Her foot reached his back, a hand on his head, and then there was no feeling except the build and sudden gush of release. She called his name, and her body went limp while she caught her breath.

“Note to self,” Cooper said as he inched her panties down her legs. “Claire loves a thorough inspection of third base.”

She chuckled and opened her eyes.

He shuffled through their clothing and found his wallet. A condom came out, the wallet tossed back where he found it.

Claire reached to help him put it on, made sure she inspected the length and girth of the man. “This is a thick bat you have here.”

The condom on, she played a little more. Turned Cooper's chuckles into moans and when he'd had enough he reached for her, scooted her hips higher on the bed, and climbed on top of her. He kissed her, the taste of her own essence on his lips.

She felt the tip of him reaching, until Cooper finally slid home.

Full. The man completely filled her.

"So good," he whispered in her ear.

And it was.

He took his time, said sweet things, and worked her up again. And when their cadence marched in sync with each other, and the need became too much to even kiss, Claire rode out the last wave and crashed right beside Cooper on the shore.

The only sound in the room was the two of them breathing, and maybe the beat of their hearts.

"Good God, Claire, you've ruined me." He stayed on top of her, in her, but kept some of his weight on his elbow.

"I hope that's a good thing."

Later, when she was tucked into his arms, her head resting on his shoulder, she had to confess. "Cooper?"

"Yes?" His reply was sleepy.

"I don't even like baseball."

His laughter bubbled and his arms held her closer.

"Neither do I."