

Changing the Rules Chapter 31[1,937 words]

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Their time together was too damn short.

Cooper woke before her and just watched her sleep. He knew he was in deep. Knew before he returned to the States that with Claire, he flirted with falling too hard only to be left with a shattered heart in the end.

But after the few stolen hours that they used to their full extent, Cooper let himself hope.

He'd never made love to a friend. Yes, he became friends with his lovers, and when things ended for whatever reason, he still considered them friends. Of course, that never lasted. Cooper knew he risked losing a friend when they became lovers.

All those thoughts and more tossed around in his head as the private charter climbed to a cruising altitude.

Claire had opened her laptop the minute they'd settled in their seats.

Without looking up from her computer, she said, "You do know you're staring."

"I have to soak you in now."

She had long eyelashes. How had he not noticed them before?

"What are you thinking about?" Claire asked, still typing.

"Your eyelashes."

That made her look. "My what?"

He loved her smile. "When you sleep it's like they're resting on the pillows of your cheeks."

She gave up on work and put it away.

After several moments of silence, Claire turned her head and looked out the window.

"Does anything about us . . . scare you?" she asked.

"I was more afraid there would never be an us."

“Now that there is?”

He shook his head. “What scares you?”

“Losing our friendship.”

“That’s never going to happen.” He said his words fast, as if doing so would guarantee the outcome.

Claire’s smile waffled. “Lewis will never be Jax’s friend. Sex changes things.”

Cooper leaned forward and took her hand in his. “You’re going to have to trust me on this one. Besides, it sounded like Jax’s relationship with Lewis was only about the sex. That isn’t us.”

She met him in the middle of the table, pressed her lips to his. “We’re pretty amazing at the sex thing.”

“I haven’t even started to show you what it’s like for a man to worship your body.”

“I think you made a pretty good start.”

It was his turn to ask for a kiss.

“Should we make some rules?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you wanted to see someone else—”

“That’s not going to happen.”

She gave him a look that said she didn’t believe him. “In case you wanted to.”

Maybe she didn’t understand the six years of absence was enough to tell him what he wanted. Then it dawned on him. What if she wanted to keep their relationship open? The thought was enough to drive him mad.

“I stopped seeing two women at the same time when I left the military. Maybe it’s too soon for us to be talking about exclusivity . . .”

“It is?”

“Isn’t it?”

She shrugged. “Maybe for people who aren’t friends first?”

He found his smile again. "Okay. Just you and just me."

Claire squeezed his hands and smiled. "Can I wear your letterman jacket?"

He laughed. "I never had one."

"If at some point, even if you think it's not going to happen, you meet someone you want to explore something with, we talk first," Claire said. "Same for me."

"I think that goes without saying, but if you want to write up the rules, by all means."

"I don't have to write them down."

He laughed at that. "Yes, you do. And you'll do it in five languages."

They drove directly to headquarters.

The team was there and looked like they had been the entire weekend.

Jax jumped up from her computer when she saw them, walked over to Claire, and pulled her in for a hug. "We all listened to the interview. God, that must have been awful."

"Satisfying, but not fun." Claire looked at Cooper, giving him credit for her not breaking down.

Jax stopped hugging her and narrowed her eyes. "You look very relaxed."

"It wasn't all work."

"How you doing, Yearling?" Lars asked.

Claire realized everyone was looking at her . . . well, all but Sasha, who rolled her eyes before focusing on the computer she was in front of.

Neil looked her in the eye. "Great job getting her to talk."

"Having the track team photographs was key."

"Smart," Sasha said.

"Is she going to be safe?" Claire asked Neil directly.

"I have eyes on her. If something looks out of place, I'll assemble a team."

"What do you mean, 'eyes'? Is there a team in Seattle you aren't telling us about?" Claire asked, half joking.

“Not a team.” Neil stared down at her, eyes unwavering.

In that moment Claire’s mind flashed to the ICU. The staff moving around the unit . . . the housekeeper that had pushed a cart through the door. “Oh my God . . . Olivia.”

Neil’s lips pushed together.

“You’re kidding me,” Sasha said, turning to stare at Neil.

“In the ICU.” Claire looked at Cooper. “When we were talking to Phelps, she was disguised as a housekeeper.” Claire could see her clearly now. Olivia was ex-Richter. Only she didn’t escape the clutches of evil that the school harbored.

“I don’t remember,” Cooper admitted.

Claire returned her stare to Neil. “It was her, wasn’t it? She’s the one keeping an eye on Marie?”

Quiet filled the room.

Olivia was an assassin. Or had been, before Neil and the team tore apart the fabric that cloaked Richter.

Neil’s silence confirmed her suspicion.

Who better to watch out for an assassin than someone who’d been in that role in the past?

“Marie will be safe” was all Neil added.

Cooper rubbed Claire’s back before walking to the front of the room. “So where are we at?” He stared at the situation board, hands on hips.

It took a few seconds before the shock that Olivia was not only alive but working for Neil wore off.

Jax answered Cooper’s question. “Marie positively identified Big Brian Contreras.”

“That’s a huge check on the board,” Claire said. “What about Mykonos?”

“Mykonos Sobol,” Sasha reported and handed Claire a picture. “Extended family with money and power. They are the kind of family that goes to jail for tax evasion instead of prostitution and murder.”

“Russian mafia,” Cooper said, deadpan.

“Affirmative.”

Lars picked up from there. “Vegas vice has been wanting to bust him for years, but no one talks. Two times he was booked, both times the witnesses recanted and later disappeared. Marie’s testimony is exactly what Vegas needs.”

Every time Claire heard Marie’s name, she worried more for her safety, felt better knowing the person protecting her.

“Any direct link between Mykonos and Milo?”

Isaac spoke up. “I’m working on that now. So far, nothing.”

Claire’s mind flashed with the pictures of the bodies in the police report. “Do we have the autopsy reports yet on the two deceased?”

“I’m told we’ll have them tomorrow,” Neil told her.

Cooper pointed to a new photograph on the board. “I’m guessing this is Ice.”

“Detective Phelps already got back to us on him,” Lars informed them. “Marie gave a positive ID. Similar to Brian, he was headed toward his third strike when he and his guys cleaned up their act. The running theory is when Marie was sent there to learn her lesson, Ice needed to make sure she did. When she got busted, she wasn’t going back to Vegas directly to Mykonos, so Ice was told to kill her. But instead of doing that right away, he makes more money off of her, then lines up all of his guys and makes them participate in all the brutality before the girls are set on fire.”

“Which makes all of them accomplices to murder,” Jax concluded.

Claire started nodding as the pieces fell into place. She moved to a clean board and picked up a marker. “Local gangs only organize with leadership. I’ve met Brian, he’s not sharp. But he doesn’t talk like a thug and he doesn’t have an abundance of ink or piercings.”

“He’s not a bad-looking guy,” Jax pointed out.

“Let’s look at the money,” Neil said, taking the pen she wasn’t using out of her hand. “Marie is taken to Vegas and sold.” Neil wrote Brian’s name on the board, put a dollar sign next to it. “Mykonos has her for three years, makes an untold amount of money. By her descriptions, many of these events were high end. These men are expecting more than anything they can find on the street. Chances are they don’t even pay for the girls individually, more like a bonus for spending more than a hundred grand a day in a casino.”

“That’s how it sounded to me when Marie was talking,” Claire told him.

He wrote several dollar signs around Mykonos’s name. “He sends her to Ice. Ice gets paid.” More dollar signs next to his name.

Claire took the pen from Neil. “Three years ago, girls started to be selected, which is why Detective Warren sent in undercover cops. Now that we know what happens to those girls after they disappear, we know there’s serious money for the one who sells them.” She drew a big dollar sign. “It’s given to Brian, and the school connections, and the dirty cop, if there is one. So it has to be big money. And if I’m spending a lot of money, I want to get what I want. A busty blonde with blue eyes, or a fifteen-year-old that looks like their sister . . . or whatever perverse thing drives them.”

Claire studied the board, capped the pen, and put it down. “We need to find the want ads?”

“No, what we need to do is flush out these leads at the school,” Neil said. “And we have less than a week to do it. Now that we know this is over the state line, the commander in Seattle can only hold off on getting the feds involved a short time. He’s giving us that courtesy. Let’s not waste the time. I don’t want any person in this shit show getting away. We can’t depend on Brian pointing fingers or not ending up dead so he isn’t able.”

They all had their assignments for the next day.

Cooper needed to put a tracker on Tony’s car. Hopefully the guy cooperated and showed up for the shop day.

Claire needed to obtain the roster of tutors and find the connection to Bremerton, work Eastman and see if she could get anything else from him.

Jax needed face time with Russell. And get as much information about this party Ally went to.

And Manuel, who Claire was starting to think spoke only when spoken to, was on watch for any change in activity.

The rest of the team were doing all they could to infiltrate the mail store frequented by Brian and Gorge, and provide more visual and audio to the Milo residence.

Cooper pulled Claire into a quiet corner when it was time to leave.

“I would feel so much better if you and I could stay together when we’re not at school.” He kept a hand to the side of her neck as they talked. “Especially now that we know what we’re dealing with.”

“It’s the seventh-inning stretch.”

That took away his worried expression.

“I’m pretty good at taking care of myself. And Sasha . . . we all know she’s capable.”

“Call me when you get home.”

She tilted her lips to his and savored how they felt.

And when they couldn’t justify standing in the corner making out any longer, she broke away and said goodbye.

Back in her flight attendant uniform, Sasha drove them home.

They made three miles of complete silence.

And without prompts, Claire said, “It was incredible.”

Sasha’s eyes smiled though her lips didn’t. “The look on your face when you walked in the door told me the sex was good.”

A couple more miles passed by.

“This Mykonos and his family . . . this changes the case,” Sasha said.

“I know. I saw Marie.”

“Be careful.”

Claire felt the warmth of those two simple words. “I will.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Instead of waiting for Russell to approach her, Jax waited for him to park his car in the senior parking lot.

Manuel was watching from around the corner.

Russell pulled in and, like most of the students, sat in the parking lot and talked with his friends until the bell rang.

When it did, Jax approached him. “Hi, uhm . . . you’re Russell, right?”

He was all his profile said he was. Tall, at least six two, and thick. “Do I know you?”

Jax shook her head. “I was at your house party a couple of weeks ago. I met your uncle.”

Russell looked away from her face and down to her chest. “The blonde,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry?”

“Right.” He started walking again. “We don’t do that delivery thing here.”

She tried to act disappointed. “Oh.”

His eyes looked her up and down, before quickly looking away. “If you have Milo’s number, you should call him anyway.”

“I can do that.” The whole conversation felt strange. Like he didn’t want to be there.

Claire’s words from the briefing the day before about Mykonos ordering a busty blonde sounded in her head.

“Are we beating up the cars today, or working on them?” Cooper walked into the shop, happy to see Tony’s car up on one of the lifts.

“Loverboy made up with the girlfriend,” Tony said, looking over at Kyle.

“Elsie seems like a nice girl.” And she needs a date for prom.

Kyle and Tony were working on the rear brakes.

“I took her out on Sunday and we had a long talk.”

Cooper walked over, tried to appear interested in what they were doing. “So no more tutor from Bremerton?”

“Nope.” Kyle handed Tony a tool. “I told her I could help. But her mom doesn’t believe we can actually study when we’re together.”

“Elsie’s pretty hot,” Tony said.

Kyle kept working. “I know.”

“How is she going to pass algebra?” Tony pulled the question right out of Cooper’s head.

“Claire.”

“Do I know Claire?” Tony asked.

“She’s the new girl. She was with us at that party . . .” Kyle stopped talking, looked at Cooper. “Shit.”

“What?” Tony stopped what he was doing, looked between Kyle and Cooper.

“Claire’s on the track team.”

That seemed to spark Tony’s interest.

Cooper turned his head. “I heard nothing. Unless it’s before a track meet. No parties before the meets.”

Kyle smiled. “Thanks, Mr. Mitchel. I finally feel like I got my girlfriend back, I don’t want her to think I’m dissing her friends.”

“I’m glad it’s working out,” Cooper said. He looked at the job they were doing, looked at the time. “This looks like it’s going to take more time than we have this morning.”

“We were hoping you didn’t mind if we left it here until Friday to finish,” Tony said.

“That’s not a problem.” The more Cooper looked at Tony, the less he saw a newly graduated high school student and the more he noticed a grown man with wisdom in his years. Like suggesting he leave his car there instead of asking. A kid would have asked. But with the car stuck in the garage, there wouldn’t be any tracking of Tony’s movements that way. “Do you have another car?”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “A buddy is letting me borrow one of his.”

A buddy with two cars? Nineteen-year-olds don’t have friends who lend them cars. Cooper grabbed a donut. “Be sure to lower the lift before you take off,” he instructed.

Claire walked into homeroom with one of her earbuds in her ear, and stopped at Eastman’s desk. “Since my aunt didn’t yell at me when she got home, I’m guessing you gave a good report.”

“I told her the truth. Said you were improving and were a little less of a pain in the ass.”

“I need to try harder, then.”

Sean walked behind Claire on the way to his seat. “Hey, Claire.”

She twisted, said hi.

“My aunt is hot, don’t you think?”

Eastman did a double take.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t notice. You know, you’re single, she’s single, could work.”

“Are you suggesting I hit on your aunt?”

Claire smirked. “Dude, my aunt would never go out with you in a million years. She has excitement standards, and you’re a schoolteacher.”

“Have a seat, Porter.”

Twenty minutes went by fast. She hoped her needling would have resulted in something. Instead, Eastman jumped on a couple of the students in the class, and talked about the limited time to graduation.

Claire left the room frustrated. Every hour at school was one closer to her last. Without new information, or confirming information, the players at the school level stood a chance at getting away.

Her mind was stuck on the image of the charred remains as she walked the halls to her next class.

“Hey, Claire.” Sean walked up behind her.

“Hey.” There was no intel to gather in Wallace’s class . . .

“I heard you took second place at that track thing this weekend.”

“Yeah . . .”

“That’s cool.”

They kept walking.

“Hmm . . . Sean, do you know of any parties that happened last Friday?”

He shrugged. “There’s always something going on, but nothing big.”

Hopefully Jax could draw something out of Ally.

Sean stopped her. “Claire, uhm . . .”

He was fidgeting. And he’d done something different with his hair, or maybe it was just washed. How different could a guy change his hair unless he shaved it off?

And the memory of Marie’s shaved head surfaced.

Claire closed her eyes, shook it away. “What?”

“I know it’s kinda lame, but we only do this high school thing once . . .”

“Yeah.”

“I want to know if you wanted to go to prom.”

Claire stood shocked.

“With me.” Sean smiled.

She did not see this coming. Fuck!

“Oh . . . I wasn’t planning on going to prom.”

His face fell in disappointment. “I get it. Like I said, it’s lame.”

“I’m sorry.”

Sean swallowed hard. “We’re cool.” He turned and walked away.

Son of a bitch!

During Cooper’s lunch, when the shop was empty, he took a picture of the VIN on Tony’s car, sent it to the team, and made a call.

Neil answered, “What do you have?”

“I just sent a VIN on Tony’s car. And since it isn’t leaving the school until Friday, hopefully we can get something useful from the car itself.” With the phone to his ear, Cooper opened the passenger door, rifled through the glove compartment.

“License plate number?”

He rattled off the number on the plates, then found the registration papers, took a picture of it, and sent it in.

“Got ’em. Keep looking.”

“I will.” Cooper disconnected the call as frustration started to build.

Claire graded papers instead of getting a lecture during algebra and was told to come back at lunch so Coach Bennett could review her grading before sending her into Dunnan’s tutor pool.

Making sure she wasn’t late, Claire made it to Bennett’s classroom before the lunch bell rang.

“You’re early.” Coach Bennett had already pulled out his soggy sandwich.

"I'm an overachiever, what can I say." Claire dumped her backpack, found her eyes scanning the pictures on the wall.

Marie's face was never far from Claire's thoughts. Her throat started to constrict. Damn it . . . she did not need to tear up.

"I looked over the work," Bennett said.

"And?" She kept her back to him and tried to get it together.

"I think you need to go to college."

"I heard."

"You're bright, Claire. I've been doing this for twenty years, and it takes me longer to grade these papers."

She swallowed the lump that rose in her throat after looking at Marie's smiling face on the cross-country team picture, and turned around. "I should go to college so I can be the head of the math department at a high school?"

"I know this isn't glamorous, but it's what I chose."

"What, besides the heartburn from that lunch, is the perk behind going to high school for the rest of your life?"

Bennett smiled.

"My schedule's easy. Most of the kids aren't as much of a challenge as you. As you can see by this room, track is my passion. And don't think I haven't seen that in your eyes, young lady, because I have."

She snorted.

"The district sends me twice a year to different symposiums. It's like a free vacation."

"Your idea of a good time is questionable, Coach." And yet something clicked in the back of her head.

"Well, I don't teach for the pay, so I'll take my kicks when I can. Especially if someone else is footing the bill."

"So you go to a convention where you party with all the other math nerds?" Click, click, click . . .

"Fine, don't become a teacher. But go to college and become something."

She had to give the guy kudos for his effort. “Maybe tutoring will change my mind.”

Bennett sighed. “We have a little problem with that.”

Not what she wanted to hear. “Oh?”

“Dunnan doesn’t want to work with you.”

“What?”

“He has to take the time and supervise you tutoring someone before he puts you in rotation. And he’s not convinced you’re worth the time.”

Claire felt that lead slipping away. “You’re the head of the math department, convince him.”

“I’m not his boss.”

“C’mon, Coach. What do I have to do?”

She turned back to the wall of pictures, placed a hand on Marie’s.

Marie’s tears trickled down her beaten face.

Claire felt all the pent-up frustration about to boil over.

She could go to Mr. Green, make the administration take over, but if anyone was watching, they’d know something didn’t add up.

She needed more time.

The team needed more time.

“We might be able to set you up with an outside system so you can make the money for your trip.”

An outside system took time.

Claire felt a single tear drip down her cheek. She slammed the side of her fist on the wall and turned around.

She had to get out of there before the floodgates opened.

The coach called after her when she grabbed her backpack and left his room.

Changing the Rules Chapter 33[2,295 words]

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Coach Bennett filled Cooper in on what had happened with Claire.

Without talking to her, he knew exactly why emotion had overtaken her. He, too, felt like the hourglass was turned upside down and someone was shaking it.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she skipped track today,” Bennett told him.

“She’ll be here.” Even if she hated it.

“If she shows, pull her aside, talk to her. I would, but I don’t think she’ll listen to me.”

“Isn’t there any way to get her into the tutor job?” Cooper asked.

“I’ll see what I can do. Maybe get one of the kids that can’t afford to pay for a tutor to come in so I can sign off on her skills.”

Cooper looked at his watch. “C’mon, Claire.”

The team was halfway through their warm-up before she walked down to the field.

Instead of joining in, she sat under a tree with her back resting against the chain-link fence on the far end of the field. Her eyes followed the runners.

Cooper knew where her thoughts were.

Bennett walked up to him. “Part of the job is listening to teenage girls cry, and teenage boys rant.”

Cooper made it to her side and sat on the grass beside her.

She’d been crying.

“You okay?”

She closed her eyes. “I don’t cry.”

“Did Richter burn that out of you?” he asked. Their end of the field was empty. Being overheard wasn’t a concern.

“I’m so frustrated, Cooper.” She picked at the grass by her side.

“We all are. But this is when we need to keep it together.”

“I know that.”

He picked at the grass, gently touched the side of her hand that sat between them. “You didn’t process her. I expected tears when we left, maybe on the plane . . .” He kept his voice low.

“I have no business doing it now.”

He couldn’t argue that.

“Do you know how hard it is to sit here and not pull you into my arms?”

She avoided looking at him, and nodded. “I’d just cry harder.”

“That would make me hold you tighter, then I might accidentally kiss you. Then everyone would talk.”

She looked up at him, nudged his arm with her shoulder, and smiled.

He could die a happy man if she just kept smiling at him like that. “Dunnan doesn’t want to work with you because you’re a pain in the ass.”

“I have repented and changed my evil ways,” she said, a lift in her voice.

“What do we really need from him?”

She picked the grass more. “Get into the pool. Find which troubled students go to which tutors and are any of them a player? We’re running out of time.”

His pinky reached for hers. “Every time I thought that today, I found myself staring at the clock. My mind would go blank. Nothing productive happened.”

“Glad I’m not alone.”

Cooper stared downfield, saw Bennett working with the sprinters. The man was just as big a teddy bear as Neil. He really wanted to help Claire. “Sometimes we get so stuck in the weeds . . .”

“What?” Claire asked.

“Wouldn’t the head of the math department have access to the tutor need and tutor pool on his own computer? At least for the students at his school?”

Claire stopped picking the grass.

“Aren’t you our resident hacker?” Cooper turned his head, his eyes collided with hers.
“Sometimes to steal the car, all you have to do is ask for the keys.”

Those tears were gone. “I want to kiss you so hard right now,” she said, smiling.

Cooper settled with helping her off the grass and a hug.

They walked over to Bennett together.

“Hey, Coach?”

Bennett turned around. “You all right?”

Claire looked at the ground and talked slow even though Cooper saw her fingers twitching. “I’m better. I just need to go . . . I need a few minutes.”

“Of course.”

“I forgot something in the desk where I was grading papers. Mind if I go get it?”

Bennett shook his head, pulled the keys from his pocket, and singled out the right one.
“Lock up when you leave.”

“Thanks.”

Cooper watched her run off.

“Is Claire okay, Coach?” The relay team had moved in when Claire left.

“She’s fine.”

“What’s wrong?” Chelsea asked.

Cooper didn’t respond.

Leah, who was sporting crutches, said, “I heard Sean Fisher asked her to prom and she turned him down.”

Cooper bit his lip until actual pain to keep from laughing.

Claire and Jax sat in their Tarzana house with a situation board of their own.

Aunt Sasha had left the decoy house and Claire hadn’t returned.

The rest of the team was at headquarters or out in the field.

“The mail location in the strip mall is owned by an Aram Aghassian. He owns three of these types of stores. Two in LA, one in Orange County. They rent out mailboxes, send post through all the major carriers, have a notary service, passport photos, and sell all the things you need to send Nana a package on her birthday.” Isaac was the one reporting.

Claire and Jax had him on speaker.

Jax was typing in names on her computer and putting faces to them. Between the two of them, they had identified several pairs in less than an hour. Finally, Claire felt like they were getting somewhere.

“Any link to Milo?”

“Only through Brian and Gorge. However, after photographing several of their patrons, it’s safe to say this location has an unusual number of customers that have spent time in jail. The security cameras are visible in the usual locations, front door, back door, and register. Typical alarm system, but we can’t locate a monitoring service.” Isaac stopped talking.

Claire stared at a picture of one of the juniors at her school. “That should give Detective Warren more than enough to obtain a search warrant.”

“We’ll have our own knowledge of what they’re hiding before we waste anyone’s time,” Neil said.

“I wish I could be on that detail,” Claire said, more to Jax than the team. Running around in the dark wearing spandex and breaking into places sounded like a lot more fun than a giant jigsaw puzzle of high school kids.

“Not this time, Yearling.” Just hearing Cooper’s voice made her smile.

Jax shoved her aside with a grin. You have it bad. She mouthed the words but they were easy to read.

“Does that mean you’re going and playing Spider-Man?”

“Without the tights.”

Claire laughed.

“Milo Gusev does have links to the Sobol family, though he is not blood. Gusev has a lot of nephews. They come to America for a semester abroad. Last year he housed Ivan Zahbin during his junior year. The year before that was a niece. He has been on ‘guardian of a minor’ papers at Bremerton for the third year in a row.”

Jax had stopped typing and looked at Claire. “That would make sense of how Russell reacted today. I finally intercepted him in the parking lot. He didn’t have a single interest in my fake ID. Suggested I call Milo, which I did. But he didn’t answer.”

“Does Russell know what’s going on?” Cooper asked.

“He knows about the fake IDs, but beyond that? Who knows? He can’t be completely oblivious,” Jax reported.

“But he’s seventeen. A minor, and Milo is harboring that age group.” Lars had a point.

“What about Tony’s car?” Claire asked, having heard more about that when she’d talked to Cooper on her way home from school.

“Registered to Tony Mazzeo. The car was bought a little over a year ago. Right at the time Tony was a senior at Auburn High. The registered address is an apartment complex. Since the name on the mailbox is Chen, he has either since moved, or he was never there. Which would line up with him being an undercover cop,” Cooper told them.

“So we have two undercover cops. One working the teacher level, Eastman, and one working the student level, Tony. Boy, doesn’t that sound familiar.” Claire summarized the situation as she saw it. “I wish we could flush one of them out.”

“We’re not flushing anything until the feds are there and everyone is in custody. One leak before we’re ready to roll and someone in the chain gets a tip . . .” Neil didn’t have to finish his sentence. They all understood the consequences.

“Jax and I will get this road map figured out, send pictures before the night is over. Tomorrow we’ll need surveillance at Jax’s decoy apartment. We’ve invited Elsie and Ally over for an algebra lesson. Make a last attempt to find any connection we’re not seeing.”

“We’re out, then. And, ladies, all audio and video is live until this is over.”

Claire looked around the room, knew exactly where all the microphones were. “That’s fine.”

“Be safe,” Jax said.

“Let us know when you’re clear.” Claire couldn’t help but worry. And when they disconnected the call, Cooper had already sent a text. Spider-Man never gets caught with his mask down.

There were parts of Cooper’s job he didn’t get to exercise nearly enough. As he put on black utility pants, protective armor, and a field jacket before he started tucking everything he thought he’d need for the job, he felt his excitement grow. Neil and Sasha

geared up in the same way. Neil was taking a position on the outside, and he and Sasha were going in.

The three of them got in the van along with Lars, and Isaac took the wheel.

Back at headquarters, Manuel and Rick were on the monitors.

Nothing in the strip mall was open twenty-four hours, which made their job a little less complicated. Not that they'd be walking in the front door.

Their plan had been mapped out and time stamped. Get in, find out what they're hiding in the place, plant a bug of their own, and get out. And more importantly . . . leave no trace.

Cooper popped a stick of gum in his mouth, found the repetition of chewing something calmed his nerves.

It was almost one in the morning. The storefront had been empty since nine. The adjacent business had been closed since eleven. They had done a thorough head count in all locations, coming and going, since Cooper and Claire returned from Seattle. The lights were off and nobody was home.

As they got closer, they secured their headgear.

The chewing gum started to lose its flavor, so Cooper tapped his fingers on his knees.

"Must you?" Sasha asked.

Cooper gave her his best smile.

"You know, you're still a really hot older sister." He'd told her that once before, and lived to tell the tale.

Neil stayed silent.

"Don't make me remove your balls now that Claire has become so fond of them."

Cooper lifted his eyebrows, chewed his gum a little louder.

"Three minutes," Isaac said from the front seat.

The three of them put the face coverings over their features.

Cooper pulled the wrapper out of his pocket, shoved the gum inside. "Save this for later," he said, putting it in front of Lars, who sat at the computer board.

"Neil." Isaac slowed the van to a stop and Neil jumped out.

“For a big guy, he sure is silent,” Cooper mused aloud.

Isaac did a drive-by. “Be ready.”

Cooper’s hand was on the back door.

“Three, two, one.”

Their feet were barely on the ground and the van was off.

“Radio check.” Lars’s voice sounded in his ear.

“This is one, in position,” which meant that Neil had already climbed onto an adjacent building with a weapon at the ready should he need it.

“Two,” Sasha said next. “One minute to position.” She was halfway up a drain spout.

“Three.” Cooper waited at the back door.

“Headquarters. Everything is clear.” It was always good to hear Rick’s voice.

“Four,” Lars said from the van. “Waiting on your cue.”

Cooper looked at his watch, finger poised.

“Go,” he heard Sasha say.

Cooper pressed the stopwatch when the power on the entire block went out.

He put on his night-vision goggles and waited.

Sasha was small enough to get into the access point on the roof. All Cooper had to do was wait for her to unlock the deadbolt on the back door.

It took her ninety seconds.

Inside, Sasha disabled the battery backup on the alarm system while Cooper scanned the main business area. He moved to the back of the building, where if there was anything to find, chances were it would be there.

There were two doors past a small storage room.

Boxes of mail filled the crowded space. Locks that took only seconds to pick. Sasha moved into that room while Cooper breached the other.

The room was about ten by eight. There was a table shoved to one side, some kind of printer on top. “Are you getting that?” Cooper asked the team.

“Crystal clear.”

Sasha tapped him on the back.

Someone on the team made a sound.

Cooper turned around and looked at the wall filled with pegboard.

He moved closer to find dozens of pictures. Some passport-photo size and quality, some were random shots. Each picture had an envelope next to it with more copies of the photographs inside.

Sasha pointed to the left and made a sweeping motion down.

“We see it,” Lars said.

And now, so did Cooper. The groupings of pictures were categorized. Blondes, Caucasian. Their age, height, and weight written on the corner of the picture. Next category, brunettes. Next category, Asian, Hispanic, African American, and so on, all girls and all under the age of nineteen. On the far right was a limited number of boys.

“Switching off infrared,” Sasha said before she removed the goggles from her eyes.

Cooper did the same, and Sasha switched on a flashlight.

It was then that it all came together.

Sasha was on autopilot, scanning the wall with a camera so the base had it instantly.

Cooper recorded the rest of the room, down to the trash can.

In there, pictures had been removed from the wall and discarded. He picked up a few and looked through them. He found a picture of Ally. He dug further and found Elsie.

Sasha touched his arm and pointed.

Jax was on the board.

At the end of each column was a date sometime in the future.

“Two minutes.”

Cooper and Sasha exchanged glances.

They'd gotten what they came for.

Changing the Rules Chapter 34[2,205 words]

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Claire heard noise from the kitchen and assumed Jax had woken up before her and was making coffee.

When she descended the stairs, she found Cooper rummaging through the cupboards. "This is a nice surprise."

He turned, looked her up and down. She had worn a T-shirt to bed. On it was an image of a bear with the caption "Screw Mornings!" The shirt barely covered her butt. "Yes it is."

She walked up to him, knowing she looked worn out, but not giving a damn. "Good morning."

Cooper's lips reached for hers, and his hands took firm hold of her ass.

She laughed through their greeting. "What are you doing here?"

He rested his forehead on hers. "We need to go over some things."

"Coffee first." She turned out of his arms. "I should tell Jax to put something on before she comes down."

"Good call."

She turned to leave the room. "I feel your eyes on my ass."

"Affirmative."

Ten minutes later, they were sitting at the kitchen island and not the table since it was still littered with the work from the previous day.

Claire and Jax sat in stunned silence at the photographs obtained the night before.

"It's just like you said. They place an order and people like Brian go out to fill it."

Jax took her cup of coffee over to the dining table, held one of the photographs from the storefront wall.

Claire looked at Cooper, both had concern in their eyes. Jax had gone white when she saw her picture next to the call for a curvy white blonde, seventeen to nineteen years old.

“No one can say we don’t know what we’re doing,” Jax told them. “We identified Elsie and Ally and obviously I managed to hit the club.”

Cooper rubbed Claire’s shoulder when she stood to go to her friend’s side. There were still tutors they didn’t know and didn’t have pictures of. “I’m guessing Neil’s got someone working on identifying all these kids.”

“There’s a lot of coffee being consumed at headquarters,” Cooper confirmed.

“With Elsie and Ally’s pictures in the trash, we have to assume they didn’t fill some kind of box,” Jax summarized.

“We’ll find out tonight what those were.”

“I’ll see if I can get some information out of Ally today at school.”

Cooper made a noise from the kitchen. “That’s a negative.”

Claire and Jax both turned to him at the same time.

“It’s too dangerous. We have until the end of the school day tomorrow and Neil is calling it in. Since your picture is on that board . . .”

Jax opened her mouth, then closed it.

“You’re more useful at headquarters putting this map together. Tonight at your girls’ party, we’ll have the team close by. You two get the girls talking.”

“And if we don’t flush out Eastman or Tony, and one of them is dirty?” Claire asked.

“At some point we have to hope the feds are good at their job. Whoever put them undercover did a Neil-precision job of it. We’re not finding anything on either one of them. And without a positive ID, we can’t check cash flow or travel records.”

Claire turned to Jax, put an arm over her shoulders. “Use the Force, Yoda. Work Neil into that Bahamas trip.”

That helped Jax smile.

“I’ll get all this together,” Cooper said. “You guys shower. I’ll follow you on the way to school. And Lars should be here when we leave to drive you to headquarters.”

Jax rolled her eyes. “I can drive—”

“That’s a negative. Maybe on the next case where you’re not a direct target.”

Jax glared at him. “You know, Loki . . . your boyfriend is bossy.”

Twenty minutes later, Jax was safely tucked in the passenger seat of Lars’s car, and Cooper was following Claire.

Because Cooper had access to the shop parking lot, which was right off the student lot, he took advantage of that so he could keep an eye on her.

As she was walking by, Claire said hi to several students she’d managed to get to know.

He stopped himself from staring, but did catch her out of the corner of his eye as she looked over her shoulder one last time before disappearing on campus.

This would all be over soon. And if Neil didn’t send them on vacation, Cooper would make it happen.

He unlocked and rolled open the shop doors. I’m going to miss the place. He looked at Tony’s car as he walked by. He had a bug in place and hoped the feds could nail him if in fact he was one of the bad guys. Eastman was tracked as well. Not one of them wanted a loose end, but taking out the biggest players and keeping Marie safe had to be their primary goal.

The bell rang and his students started walking in the room. “Hey, Mr. Mitchel.”

He heard that name so often, he was starting to adopt it.

“Hi, Coach.”

“Morning, Gavin.”

The bell rang and the stragglers ran in.

“Everyone, pull out a piece of paper, put your bags on the floor. Time for a pop quiz.”

A collective moan went through the room.

He turned around and picked up a pen for his whiteboard.

Not one spitball.

He dropped the pen. “Never mind. Let’s have a shop day.”

Moans turned to cheers and they all filed out of the classroom and into the shop.

Sometimes it's good to be the boss.

Claire sat in homeroom, watching the backs of kids' heads. Her shortest class of the day had the last standing suspect in this end of the investigation.

She really hoped she wouldn't be staring down a courtroom testifying against him.

Every once in a while, Eastman would look up at her and she'd look away.

Sean ignored her altogether.

Claire found herself tapping her fingers when she was thinking. Just like Cooper.

"Have you taken to doing your homework before you get to school these days, Porter?"

"I'm fresh out of homework all week, Eastman," she told him. "Do you want me to do yours?"

There were a couple of snickers.

"I'll be sure and let your teachers know they're not challenging you enough."

Claire sat back, placed a hand over her heart. "Ahh, and I was starting to think you didn't care."

He actually started to laugh, and when he did, the kids in the class felt like it was okay to laugh with him.

"You've got balls," Dalia, who sat in front of her, said.

Claire shook her head. "I just know that in a few years, when I'm at some bar soaking up the scene, Eastman's going to be sitting there nursing a light beer. When he sees me, I'm going to make him buy me a drink, and he'll remember what a joy it was for me to be in his class."

Eastman met her gaze, respect shined in his eyes.

The bell rang and she grabbed her pack.

She wanted to catch Sean before he ran off.

Eastman stopped her. "Porter?"

"Yeah?"

He shook his head. "Never mind."

She took a step, turned. “We’re good?”

He smiled.

Claire stuck out her fist. He bumped it with hers. “Don’t forget that beer,” she said as she ran out of the room.

She saw the top of Sean’s head and followed it. “Sean?”

She moved closer.

“Sean?”

He turned back, expression blank.

“Wait up.”

Once at his side, Claire slowed down. “Can I talk to you a second?”

He sighed.

She pulled him out of the line of students scrambling to their next period.

“Listen, I’m sorry.”

“You said that yesterday. I get it. You’re not interested.” He did not want to be standing there.

“It wouldn’t be fair. You’re a good-looking guy. I’m sure plenty of girls here would love it if you ask them to prom.”

Confusion sat around Sean’s eyes. “You have a boyfriend or something?”

It’s not the first time you’ve said this, Claire, it probably won’t be your last. “I . . . Shit.” She took a dramatic pause right out of a Shakespearian play. She leaned close, put a hand to his ear, and whispered. “I’m a lesbian.”

Sean leaned back, a myriad of expressions passing over his face. Doubt, confusion, acceptance, and then that . . .

“Don’t look at me like that’s hot.”

“Well, it kinda is.”

“Sean!”

He went back to acceptance. “Well, at least it isn’t me.”

“Like I said. You’re good-looking. It just doesn’t do anything for me. But you know my friend Ally?”

“She a lesbian, too?”

“No.” Claire spat the word at him. “She talks about you all the time. I bet she’d go to prom with you in a heartbeat.”

“She goes to Bremerton now.”

“And hates the kids there. She’d love a chance to come to Auburn’s prom.”

The walkways were clearing out. They were both going to be late.

“I’ll think about it.”

They started walking again.

“I know this is really juicy gossip. But can you keep it on the down low for a little while? There’s someone I want to ask out and if this starts spreading it will probably scare her off.”

Sean had that hot look in his eyes again.

Claire hit his arm. “I’m serious.”

“Okay, okay.”

The bell rang.

“Aw, damn,” he cried.

Claire kept walking slow. “Just tell your teacher someone turned you down for prom, they’ll cut you some slack.” She put her fist out.

“I’m starting to think you do have balls.”

They had pizza, chocolate, soda, and chips.

No liquor.

Apparently the old bat found a bigger lock for the liquor cabinet.

"I'm actually surprised she let me out," Ally said after the conversation about the lack of liquor.

Claire, Jax, Ally, and Elsie were spread out around the living room. They had the music on, food everywhere, and books pushed aside.

"What did you do that got you busted last weekend?" Claire asked.

"I went to a party."

"We knew that," Elsie teased.

"It was last minute. I shouldn't have gone."

Claire was halfway through a piece of pizza. "Did it suck?"

"Hundred percent. I was told there'd be a bunch of kids from Auburn. I get there and I only recognize a few people. Nobody I really know."

"Where was it?" Claire asked.

"Up in the foothills."

"I hate going to parties when I don't know someone," Elsie said.

"That's why you only go to parties with your friends. Always take a wingman, right, Claire?" Jax said.

"I never leave home without one."

"I thought I had one. Louisa is the one who suggested it. When I get there I can't find her. I think she ran off with her boyfriend. Totally ditched me."

"Do I know Louisa?" Jax asked.

"No. She goes to junior college in Glendale."

"That's kinda far away, isn't it?"

"She was supposed to be helping me with my algebra. She was harder to understand than my teacher. So when she said my favorite word, party, I'm like, let's go. I get there, and it just didn't feel right."

Claire thought of Ally's picture in the garbage can. Thought of Marie. "Don't do that again," Claire told her.

Ally didn't bother arguing. "I won't. I only drank half a beer and called an Uber. Halfway home I felt completely wasted."

"Oh my God, someone totally slipped something in your drink." Elsie said what they were all thinking.

Ally kept nodding. "Scared the crap out of me. That's the kind of thing that happens to other people. I didn't survive my mom to end up like her." The girl had tears in her eyes.

Jax reached over and put a hand over hers. "You're not your mom."

Ally took her napkin and wiped her eyes. "My mom was always high. She was so embarrassing. But all of us have been to a party, we have a little fun. Is it the same thing?"

"There are a lot of adults out there who drink that aren't alcoholics," Claire told her.

Elsie sat up. "I'd rather hang out with you guys, and if we score some beer, great. Otherwise we get carb drunk and talk about guys."

Ally leaned her head on Jax's shoulder.

"You were smart enough to get away, Ally. And the Uber is even better." Claire glanced over at the cable receiver where the camera was hidden. Although the team had probably already hacked into Ally's account and were tracing that address.

"You can call me anytime for a ride," Jax offered.

"That goes for all of us."

"Thanks, guys. I just feel really dumb." The girl was still tearful. Claire hoped she'd be that way for a while and never get caught like that again.

"Learn a lesson, but don't beat yourself up too much. It could have happened to any one of us."

Ally got herself together. "If I don't do some homework, my grandmother isn't going to let me come here."

Jax jumped to her feet and took the pizza box off the table, and Elsie and Ally pulled out their books.

"I got you covered. Algebra is easy for me," Claire said.

Ally moved to the couch, sat next to her. "Did Sean really ask you to prom and you said no?"

“Of course.”

“Why? He’s super cute,” Ally asked.

“Because you dig him. Friends don’t do that.”

It looked like Ally was going to cry again.

“I also told him I liked girls, so don’t tell him otherwise.”

Claire saw Jax standing in the kitchen laughing.

“Why did you do that?” Elsie asked.

“Because once you’re playing for the same team, guys open up. Then I told him you thought he was hot. If he doesn’t ask you to prom, I might have to kick his ass.”

Jax returned, sat on the floor.

“It’s high school, people will talk.” Elsie grabbed a handful of chips.

“The less you worry about what other people think, the sooner you’ll live a happy life.”

Elsie threw a chip at her. “You’re such a dork.”

Changing the Rules Chapter 35[1,920 words]

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Cooper stretched out in Claire’s bed and waited for her to get home. Maybe he was pushing the boundaries, but then again, they hadn’t set those up yet.

He watched the monitor feed from the front door and knew when it opened it was Claire and Jax.

He’d parked on the street, so she wouldn’t be surprised he was there.

The girls chatted as they ascended the stairs, their voices softened as Claire approached the closed door to her room. He heard them saying good night before she walked in.

“I thought you’d be asleep?”

He lifted up on an elbow. “Not a chance.”

She kicked her shoes off en route to the bed, climbed up beside him, and rested her ear on his chest. "I'm so exhausted."

He kissed the top of her head and marveled at how easy she tucked into his arms. "It's almost over."

She released a long-suffering breath and pushed off the bed. "I need to brush my teeth before I drop."

He used the time she was in the bathroom to pull back the sheets and dim the lights.

She returned wearing a nightshirt, this one showing a bear stretching with sunshine in the background. The clock on the nightstand said eleven p.m.

"Cute," he told her.

She'd brushed out her hair and washed her face clean.

Claire returned to the tucked position at his side, her free arm wrapping around his waist.

"What's the word from Neil?" She knew their deadline was up. The girls' party was the last push to find more names and details. Which worked out, to a small extent.

"The commander in Seattle went to the feds. They're scrambling to make as many arrests tomorrow at the same time to avoid anyone getting away."

"What about Warren?"

"Everything is out of his hands at this point. If Tony or Eastman are his guys, they won't know anything until after it's all done. Neil has a meeting scheduled with Warren late tomorrow night."

"I bet he'll be pissed that this went way over his head."

Cooper shrugged. "I think he knew it was bigger, that's why he hired us. His hands were tied to his jurisdiction. Ours aren't."

Claire snuggled a little closer. "I wish we knew more about Tony's movements."

"Me too." They hadn't seen the man since he left his car in the shop.

"What does tomorrow look like on our end?" she asked.

"Business as usual. We go about the day like we have since this started. We can't step outside of normal or risk someone being tipped off. We want the feds to sweep in, take it all down at the same time."

“You think that’s how it’s going to go?”

“I think it’s no longer in our hands to worry about. We’ve done all we can.” That didn’t stop him from worrying about her safety. “We stay hypervigilant.”

“I know.” Her voice was sleepy.

Cooper reached over and turned the light off, then snuggled close.

She looked up, asked for a kiss.

Their lips met for what he thought was going to be brief, but Claire had other ideas.

Cooper’s arms pulled her closer, his hand brushed over the curve of her hip. “Girl, where are your panties?”

He felt her squeeze his bare ass. “Making out with yours.”

In the light of the moon shining through the window, Cooper traced the side of her face, memorizing the feel of it. “If you’re too tired . . .”

Her exploring hands said she wasn’t that tired. “Stop talking and kiss me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Cooper and Claire bustled around the kitchen first thing in the morning. They both synced their phones with headquarters and put the nearly invisible earpieces in place so they could obtain up-to-the-minute reports as the day progressed. She and Cooper were told to call in a verbal check every hour.

Claire’s watch and cell phone had tracking enabled. At the last minute, she secured a third device disguised within the clasp in her hair.

Jax dressed in what they’d labeled DEFCON five clothing. It was a field outfit; much like what Cooper had worn two short nights before. If at any time the team needed to mobilize, all they needed to do was jump in the van.

Claire gave Jax a quick hug, whispered “Bahamas” in her ear, and watched her drive away with Lars.

Cooper set the alarm and locked the door. The garage door was already open, her car tucked next to Jax’s.

She enjoyed a parting kiss. “I think we’ve done a really good thing,” she said between kisses.

“Let’s say that tonight when it’s all over.”

“See you at track.”

Cooper pursed his lips. “I’m going to miss track.”

“Me too.”

He opened the car door for her, closed it after she was in.

Like the day before, he followed behind her, watched her as she parked in the school lot and walked onto the campus.

The audio feed in her ear switched on. “Checking feeds. Report back.”

Claire reached for the cell phone that lived in her back pocket.

Headquarters picked up on the first ring. “Yeah?”

Claire was pretty sure Lars had answered the phone. “Did you know that the female praying mantis eats her lover after they mate? Sometimes while they’re still going at it. Talk about dying for sex.” The system was simple. When she made a call, she had to ask a question so the team knew there was no threat. Granted, she could have asked, How are you? But where was the fun in that?

“We’re clear.”

Claire looked at her phone. “Rude much?”

She bounced into homeroom and paused.

Eastman’s chair was empty.

He almost never came in late.

She walked to her seat, set her backpack on the floor.

Some of the sparkle faded like fireworks dying in the night sky. Don’t be a wanker, Eastman.

Time ticked.

The room filled.

She did not want to call this in.

“Hey, Claire?” Sean greeted her.

A quick fist bump. She kept her smile.

The bell rang . . .

Five seconds passed.

Fuck!

And then the bastard walked in the door like nothing was wrong.

Claire slumped in her seat.

“I was starting to wonder if you were going to show up.”

Claire turned to Sean, who’d called the man out.

“Did you miss me?”

“You weren’t gone long enough,” Claire chimed in.

Eastman looked her in the eye. Something flickered.

“Mr. Eastman, did you know that the female praying mantis eats her lover, sometimes while they’re in the middle of the nasty?” Claire asked.

“No way!” Several students turned in their seats, looked at her.

“Seriously, look it up. Found it on YouTube last night. It’s sick.”

Cell phones came out, and within seconds the class gathered around each other watching videos.

“That’s epic,” Sean said, laughing.

“Sometimes education happens on accident,” Claire said, glancing at the video.

“How true that is.” Eastman sighed, sat down in his seat, and let his homeroom scroll through YouTube videos on the strange mating habits of insects.

Cooper called in. “Did you get the spark plugs I needed?”

“We’re clear.” Lars hung up.

The shop was empty.

The two-stroke engines that were group projects were spread out on tables. He walked around, checked their progress. When he saw something wrong, he wrote a note. Check your work. When the work was perfect, he left a different note. Help your neighbor find their problem.

Cooper left his surveillance equipment alone. Knew they'd do a sweep before leaving campus altogether.

The bell rang and Cooper proceeded to his last day in school.

Because it was business as usual, Claire spent her lunch in Bennett's classroom, and she started it by putting an apple on his desk.

"What's this?" Bennett asked, picking it up.

"It's called fiber." She made a sweeping motion with her hand. "It's good for the plumbing."

He smiled. "Do I look constipated to you?"

"Honestly . . . sometimes."

He took a bite, looked at the apple. "Grab a chair," he told her.

She pulled one over and sat.

"I've put together a few common problems and answered them wrong. I know you can identify them, but I need you to talk me through them." He turned a paper toward her and continued to eat his apple.

She underlined the first part of the work that was wrong and turned it back. "How did you come up with this?"

Coach Bennett was already smiling.

They finished two problems even though he tossed some pretty lame reasons for his wrong answer to the questions.

Bennett pushed his pathetic lunch away and sat back. "If I gave you a college application, would you fill it out?"

"We're back to that."

"I never give up."

She laughed. "That way we can party at the geek convention in a few years?" Click, click . . .

"I'm past my party days."

Claire thought of the pictures of Ally and Elsie in the garbage. Both struggling in math, both sent to Bremerton to obtain tutors. Ally's tutor takes her to a party with spiked drinks. Elsie's quits after two sessions because she's impossible to teach. Which was bullshit since she'd left their study date confident she'd pass her test today.

"Do all the math teachers go to this convention?" Claire asked.

"District budgets don't give everyone a ticket. Mainly department heads."

Click . . . click . . .

"Do all department heads run the tutoring programs?" Claire got up from her chair, walked back to the wall of photographs as something close was clicking its way into focus in her head.

"Not all, but some. There's a lot of networking at the events. We share information our students can use. Like cost-effective tutoring, or even free. Why are you asking?"

Claire couldn't help but wonder if the random sampling of pictures on the want-ad wall would show math-challenged kids being funneled to Bremerton. "Who is the head of the math department at Bremerton?"

"That would be Dale Levine. I've known him for years."

"And does he run the tutoring program there?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact. He took it back under his wing a few years ago. I thought he was crazy. Coaching track takes up all my spare time. But not for Coach Levine, apparently. He's a dedicated guy. Always asking if there's someone on my team struggling in math that he can pair up with the right person."

Claire's memory flashed. The man had smiled at her, told her he'd see her at state. "Jesus."

"Are you thinking of skipping Mr. Dunnan and going to Coach Levine directly?"

So many pieces click, clickity, clicked into place. Here she thought Dunnan might be the one directing at-risk kids to Milo and Brian, but instead it was the coach at Bremerton, with access to Milo through Russell. Or was there another connection between Levine and Milo? If they'd been watching Levine from the beginning, maybe they'd have all the

answers. Claire kicked herself for not putting that together before today. “I should have done that all along.”

“I can give him a call—”

“No!” She cleared her throat, spoke softer. The last thing she needed was Levine to get wind of anything. “That would totally undermine Mr. Dunnan, and you see him every day. Completely unprofessional.”

Bennett nodded. “You have a point.”

“Tell you what, I’ll go over a strategy plan to approach Levine, Coach Levine,” she corrected herself. “No outside help. I’ll run it past you before I go over there. Maybe bring a bottle of his favorite whiskey?”

“That would be inappropriate.”

This information needed to get out before the feds rolled. At least get the local authorities to pick the man up.

“Right. You have to promise me, no outside help. Not even a phone call.”

Coach Bennett held back. “Fill out a college application.”

Claire smiled. “I’ll fill out three.”

Bennett stretched his arms over his head and leaned back with a huge smile.

Claire grabbed her backpack and ran out the door, her phone to her ear.

“Yeah?” Lars answered.

“Did you know that an apple a day keeps the doctor away?”

“We’re clear.”

“Put Neil on speaker.”