

Changing the Rules Chapter 36[1,846 words]

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Jax had never witnessed anyone control stone-cold rage the way Neil MacBain did.

When Claire had spelled out her discovery, the entire team turned to their boss. The link to some of the kids on that wall was right in his front yard. The set of his jaw and the tension in his shoulders said everything while he didn't speak a word. His daughter went to that school.

Jax didn't think that would last much longer.

It was then she realized why parents tucked their kids away in places like Richter. Although for many, that backfired. But if there is a magical school of safety, she'd bet her next paycheck Emma would be enrolled by fall.

Neil hung up with Claire and dialed another number.

"Detective Warren . . . Interrupt his meeting, tell him it's MacBain."

Neil put the call on speaker. Lifted a hand to indicate that no one was to speak other than him.

"Neil?"

"I need you to do something for me, no questions asked."

"As long as it's legal," Warren replied.

"I need you to take Coach Dale Levine at Bremerton into custody at exactly three this afternoon."

"You found something."

"Three o'clock. Not a minute before or after."

"What the fuck, Neil?"

"Do not use your men on this case. Take him in yourself if you have to. Keep it quiet."

"Shit's going down," Warren concluded.

“Three o’clock.”

“Consider it done.”

Neil disconnected the call, pointed a finger at Jax. “Call Ally and Elsie, find out what role Levine had.”

He directed the next demand to Lars. “Everything on Levine. Bank accounts, cars, where he had lunch on Saturday.”

“On it.”

Neil was back on the phone. “Manuel. Find Emma, take her home. Call me when you get there.”

The doors to the shop were rolled up, the sun beamed into the space. Cooper took his lunch with a few students that needed extra time.

He watched the time ticking away, knowing everyone was geared up and ready to claim victory on the arrests.

“How did I know I’d find you in here at lunch?”

Cooper turned to see Leo Eastman standing in the doorway, a smile on the man’s face.

Cooper left the side of his students and offered Leo a handshake. “Dedication to the job, I guess. What brings you here?”

Leo’s eyes drifted to Tony’s car, then back again. “Couple buddies of mine are headed out this weekend, do some fishing. Wondered if you’d like to come along.”

Cooper planned on spending the weekend in the Bahamas with Claire tucked into the hammock with him.

“I have plans this weekend. Besides, is it even fishing season?”

Leo shrugged. “Nothing illegal about sitting in a boat with beer.”

Cooper laughed. “Fish jumping in the boat is just the icing.”

“Next time, then.”

“That would be great,” Cooper said.

Leo turned, indicated Tony’s car. “Is that your car?”

“No. Belongs to a kid that went here last year. He still comes in to use the shop.”

Leo peered in through the windows. “I wouldn’t let my car out of my sight when I was a kid. Did all the work myself.”

Cooper couldn’t help but wonder if there was a hidden message in there somewhere. “Tony is in here all the time. Helps a lot of kids.”

Leo nodded, continued to look around the car.

“Funny, the first time I saw Tony I thought he was a teacher or something. Looks a lot older than nineteen,” Cooper said, hoping for a reaction.

“A lot of these kids look like they could be in college. It’s a curse, if you ask me. Their bodies grow up before their brains. Gets them in trouble sometimes.” Leo stopped poking around, met Cooper’s gaze. “It’s important to keep an eye on the ones that are older than their years.”

Like bugging the bushes outside of front doors? “Why is that?” Cooper asked.

“It means they have trouble at home, stuff they don’t want anyone else to know, or they’re at risk for older and smarter people taking advantage of them.”

Cooper waited for Leo to look at him. “You sure you’re a public school teacher?” he asked, point blank.

“I am today,” he said.

Interesting choice of words.

Ten minutes later, once Leo had drifted away from the shop, Cooper called headquarters. “Are we still tracking Eastman?”

“According to our monitors, he’s in his classroom. Why?” Neil asked.

Cooper explained the conversation and was told that should Eastman deviate from his normal routine, they would activate their team to follow him.

After Cooper disconnected the call, he once again glanced at the clock. It wouldn’t be long now.

Claire changed clothes in the girls’ locker room to get ready for track. Her eye stayed on her watch.

At 3:08 the first report came in, Lars’s voice in her ear.

“Vegas vice has Mykonos Sobol in custody,” Lars reported.

Claire jumped up and cheered. “That one’s for you, Marie.” She felt like crying.

“Two victim locations are being liberated.”

“You okay, Claire?” one of the students asked.

“I’m on fire,” she told her, stuffing the rest of her clothes in her backpack. “See you out there.”

Claire held her cell phone, ready to make a call to headquarters.

She stepped out of the gym and rounded the corner past the senior parking lot to head to the field.

Someone honked a horn.

She looked up and saw Elsie in the passenger seat of Kyle’s car. The girl was crying.

“Hey, are you okay?” Claire jogged over, and the driver leaned forward.

Tony stared back at her.

Claire’s world froze.

That’s when she saw the gun pointed at Elsie’s chest. “Get in.”

Her feet moved, and she reached for the car door.

“Ice is in custody,” Lars reported.

Cooper was chewing gum and smiling like a crazy man.

“You running with us today, Coach?” one of the kids asked.

He’d put on track pants and was stretching with the rest of them. “Nice day to do it,” he said.

“Strip mall is locked down! Brian and Gorge in custody.”

God, he wanted to celebrate.

Claire needed to hurry up so they could smile like fools together.

He watched the path she normally took from the main gym, saw the team trickling down.

She was probably up there dancing in one of the bathroom stalls. He could see that image vividly.

Cooper narrowed his eyes, saw Eastman walking down to the field.

That put a bit of rain on his sunshine. What are you doing here?

Eastman waved him over.

Cooper jumped to his feet and ran across the gritty track.

They shook hands. "Twice in one day?" Cooper asked.

"I wanted to catch you before you left."

"Practice lasts a couple of hours."

Eastman shook his head. "That's not what I mean." He looked around.

"Mind elaborating?"

Lars's voice boomed in his ear. "Levine is deceased. I repeat, Levine is deceased. Single gunshot to the head in school classroom."

Cooper put his hand to his ear, turned a half circle. "What the fuck!"

"Cooper, Claire, report in now."

Tony tore out of the parking lot and away from the school.

"Claire?"

"Keep your hands where I can see them." Tony pushed the gun into Elsie's ribs.

"Calm down," Claire told him, her voice even.

Tony's eyes scanned his mirrors.

Claire pushed away the fear that was crashing in and focused.

Elsie whimpered and huddled next to the door as if doing so offered some protection.

The window on her right side went down. "Toss the backpack."

Claire scanned the area. They were in a residential neighborhood, and no one was on the street.

“Do it!” Tony yelled.

Her backpack went flying out the door.

He kept driving. “Cell phone.”

She looked at her cell phone and hesitated a second too long.

Tony’s hand that wasn’t holding the gun came around and smashed against Elsie’s face.

“Jesus!”

Claire couldn’t toss the phone fast enough.

“Your watch.”

Claire damn near ripped it off her own wrist.

Elsie’s nose was bleeding, her body rocked with sobs.

“Hands where I can see them!”

Claire placed her hands on the seat behind Elsie. “Here they are. See.” Her heart was racing, mind scrambling to find a way out.

“Let her go,” Claire told him.

“You want me to let her go?”

He lifted the gun to Elsie’s head.

Elsie screamed and Claire put her hand in front of Elsie’s face. “Okay, stop. Please just calm down.”

“Shut up,” he yelled.

Claire tried to coax her friend. “It’s okay. We’ll get you out of here. C’mon. Shhh.”

He looked over at her, didn’t like how close she was. “Scoot back.”

She started to move.

“Wait.”

She froze.

“Get that shit out of your ear.”

Some of her optimism was fading. She’d yet to hear that anyone knew they were missing.

Claire removed the device, knew what to do when he rolled down the window.

“Who the fuck do you work for?” Tony took the corner hard and started weaving through traffic.

Claire didn’t answer.

“You’re a fucking fed, aren’t you?”

“No.”

Elsie looked over, each breath sucked in a cry.

“You fucking are.”

“No . . . I’m not.” They needed to get out of this car.

Tony poked the gun at Elsie again.

“I’m a private investigator!” Claire yelled, wishing it was her in the passenger seat so she could disarm the bastard without getting Elsie killed.

Tony hit the gas, slammed his driving hand on the steering wheel. “Fuck me. Just fuck me!”

Cooper felt panic in his knees and it started to rise.

“Report in now!” Neil yelled.

“What’s going on?” Eastman asked tensely.

Cooper patted his back pocket.

He left his keys, phone, and wallet back on the field.

He ran over to them, grabbed everything.

“Is everything okay, Coach?”

“Has anyone seen Claire?” he asked.

“I saw her in the locker room right after the bell rang.”

That was twenty minutes ago.

He scanned the field, knew she wasn't there.

He ran across the lanes again, hopped the fence, and headed straight for the locker rooms.

Half the track team followed, along with Eastman.

A sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach started to spread.

He bolted in the locker room. "I'm coming in!" he yelled.

He ran through, looked down every aisle. No Claire.

"We're sending backup," Lars reported.

Cooper pushed past Eastman, back outside.

"Has anyone seen Claire?"

"I saw her jump in a car with Elsie and her boyfriend's friend."

Cooper marched up to the student talking. He was in one of his auto classes. "Which friend?"

"Tony, the guy that comes in the morning."

"Which way did they go?"

The kid pointed.

"Son of a bitch!" Cooper heard Eastman yell.

Cooper jumped in his face, bumped into him. "What the hell do you know?"

"Stand down."

Both hands reached for Eastman's shirt. "Start talking."

"Hey, hey!" Coach Bennett was pushing in. "What the hell is going on here?"

"You've been following Claire for weeks, planted a camera at her front door."

Eastman's nose flared.

Cooper pulled his fist back.

“Federal. I’ve been on Tony for a year. Waiting for him to fuck up.”

“Who does Tony work for?”

“Local PD.”

Cooper shoved him out of the way and screamed his frustration.

He pulled out his phone and ran to his car.

Neil answered.

“He has Claire. Tony has Claire.” Saying it out loud made it real. “Elsie is with them.”

Cooper popped the trunk of his car, pushed back the felt covering, and placed his hand on the biometric safe. It slid open and he grabbed his weapon.

The entire track team was standing there.

Cooper turned to Coach Bennett. “Get them out of here. Call the police.”

Eastman was on his phone, jumping in Cooper’s passenger seat. “Special Agent Leonardo Grant requesting backup.” He rattled off his badge number.

Cooper tossed his phone in a drink cup, started the car. Neil’s voice came through the speakers.

“Which way is she headed?”

“North.”

He punched the gas.