

Changing the Rules

EPILOGUE[839 words]

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“C’mon, Chelsea. Swing those arms! Don’t let her get away!”

Claire stood on the sidelines on the inside of the field, stopwatch in her hand. She spoke to Cooper at the finish line through her fancy headset. “That looked like a personal record.”

“It sure was,” Cooper replied.

She waved at him downfield and put a check next to Chelsea’s name.

“Coach Kelly?”

Claire turned to see the relay team girls standing there. “For crying out loud, it’s Claire. You can still call me Claire.”

Cooper and Claire had made a unanimous decision to finish out the year coaching the team. There was a strange mixture of confusion, feeling cheated, and anger when they’d explained who they were and what they did for a living. In the end, they were welcomed with open arms.

Elsie had spent the night in the hospital and a week away from school. Claire knew it was going to take a lot longer than a week for Elsie to heal. When everything was explained, Ally and Elsie both were shocked at how close they had been to becoming a statistic.

As it turned out, Kyle had let Tony borrow his car the day he’d kidnapped Elsie and Claire. Never once did Kyle understand what the outcome would be.

When Neil had put Warren on the task of apprehending Levine, word made it to Tony through one of his buddies on the force. Leo’s investigation was still ongoing, but it didn’t appear that this friend knew anything about what Tony was up to.

Neil’s monitoring of the Bremerton campus clearly showed Tony walking into Coach Levine’s classroom and exiting in a hurry shortly after. Computer files implicated Levine in taking a cut for three years. He filtered the students through his tutors. For three years Milo’s supposed nephews and nieces linked tutors with students and so far, three of those students, including Marie Nickerson, had come up missing. It was hard to say how Levine got involved, and with Milo talking through lawyers, and Levine and Tony dead, they might never know all the details. The whole thing took some time to swallow, and honestly, Claire didn’t think that would happen for quite a while.

Clearly Levine could have implicated Tony.

In the end, the outcome was the best Claire and the team could have hoped for.

Marie was in a protection program tucked so deep she'd probably never see her family again. But from what Claire had learned, that wasn't a hardship.

Neil said nothing about Olivia, or indicated if the woman was still watching over Marie. Claire secretly hoped she was.

And now Claire was staring down three of her runners who insisted on calling her by her last name.

"Okay, Coach Claire. What do you think of this dress for prom?"

Claire looked at Leah, then the dress. "What does the back look like?"

Leah swiped the screen on her phone to the right. Claire blew out a breath. "Can you see your butt in that?" It dipped that low.

"Not really."

"Who's your date again?"

Leah told her and Claire smiled. "Okay, that dress is fine."

"My date makes a difference?"

"Yeah, your date is too shy. He won't know what to do when you walk in wearing that."

They all laughed, and Cooper walked up behind Claire and rested his chin on her shoulder. "What are you guys looking at?"

"Prom dresses."

"Girls!" he said, chuckling.

"Oh, yeah . . . show him."

Leah turned her phone around and showed him the picture.

"No. Absolutely not," Cooper said, deadpan.

"What about Coach Kelly, can she wear that dress to prom?"

Claire looked up at him, waited for his answer.

“Yes. Absolutely.”

More laughter.

The girls ran off and Claire relaxed in his arms. “Can you believe we’re out here in this heat while Jax is in the Bahamas on some beach drinking a mai tai?”

“I don’t care where we are, as long as you’re with me.”

“Awww. That totally sounds like a line.”

“Even if it’s true?”

“Yup.”

She turned in his embrace, wrapped her arms around his waist. “I’m really glad you changed the rules.”

He leaned down and gave her a brief kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” And she did, a little more and a little harder every day.

“How do you think Jax would feel if I moved in while she was gone?”

Claire looked at him like he was crazy. “I thought you already did.” He’d stayed every night since the busts.

“Okay, then. That’s settled.”

“You might need to ask Neil.”

Cooper pulled her in close. “I have other questions for Neil.”

“Oh? What?”

“About changing more rules.”

Her suspicious bone tingled.

“Don’t I need to approve rule changes?”

“Sometimes you need a father’s approval.”

Never in a million years did she believe she’d be having this kind of conversation with Cooper Lockman.

“I’m a size six,” she said putting her left hand out in front of her.

He kissed her a little too hard and a little too long.

The athletes close by started clapping.

Claire clicked her tongue and shook her head. “Public displays of affection in front of the kids, what will they think?”

He pressed his lips to her ear. “Wear that dress to prom and we’ll really give them something to talk about.”