

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 4[2,072 words]

CHAPTER FOUR

“So what sport did you play in school?” Dale, the track team’s head coach at Emma’s private school, stood on the inside field with his arms crossed over his chest.

Cooper hadn’t been sure what to expect, so he donned a pair of shorts and a T-shirt with simple running shoes for his crash course in coaching high school track.

“None,” Cooper informed the man. “Joined the service the day after I graduated.”

Dale nodded a few times, his eyes tracking several kids as they jogged the inside lanes. “I think Neil told me that. Not that the man elaborated.”

“Talking isn’t his strong point.”

Just then two students walked up, both upperclassmen from the looks of them.

“Hey, Coach.”

Dale patted the kid on his shoulder. “Get everyone stretched out and warmed up.”

“You got it.”

The student turned away and started to yell, gaining the attention of those on the track to circle up.

Dale started walking with Cooper in tow.

“Seniors love taking control of the field during practice, and since we have a small athletic department, I use them to mentor the younger kids.”

“Makes sense.”

Dale motioned toward the pole vault pit. “Do you have the basics of any of the field events?”

“Only what I learned in boot camp.”

“Then we’ll stick with relays and sprints.”

Cooper could work with that.

They walked over to a stack of hurdles. “So, what’s this all about with you coaching the Auburn kids, anyway?”

He wasn’t about to give details. “What did Neil tell you?”

Dale placed a hand on one of the hurdles. “Let me see if I remember the conversation. ‘Coach Levine. I have something I need ya to do for me.’” Dale lowered his voice to mimic Neil. “‘Sure,’ I said. Then he said, ‘I have one of my men filling in on the Auburn track team, keeping an eye on one of the students.’” Dale nodded a couple of times. “Yup, that’s all he told me.”

“And that’s all there is to it. Simple job,” Cooper told the man.

“Huh. I didn’t think any of the parents at Auburn had the money to hire anyone from Neil’s line of work.”

Cooper kept his expression steady. “You’d be surprised.”

Dale shrugged his shoulders. “Hopefully it’s nothing serious.” He lifted a stack of hurdles and nodded to another stack for Cooper to grab.

“I doubt it.”

Dale pointed to where the hurdles needed to be placed and then proceeded to lower the height of the contraptions. For the next hour and a half, Dale did his job with Cooper as a shadow. The kids knew what they had to do, for the most part. The coach’s relationship with the students was more friend than mentor. Though when he had constructive criticism, the kids listened and worked harder to hear his praise.

As the practice neared its end, Cooper felt like he had some of the lingo down, and by the end of the week, he should be good to go.

The same students that led the warm-up finished the cooldown.

Slowly the kids peeled off the field when practice ended.

Dale handed Cooper a stack of papers. “This is how track meets are scored. Probably best you know this before you start your job at Auburn.”

He scanned the papers. It seemed pretty straightforward. “Does your team rival Auburn?”

“Not really. We see each other at invitationals, mainly. The coaches there are straight up. Good guys who like kids and fell in love with the sport. I’m guessing you and I will see each other a few times this season.”

One of the students called Dale from the opposite side of the field. “Yeah?”

“I can’t find the keys to lock up the shed.”

Dale lifted a hand, indicating he’d be there in a minute.

The phone in Cooper’s jacket pocket started to vibrate.

“When we do see each other, I’d appreciate it if you keep my real vocation out of the conversation.”

“Of course.” Dale peered across the field. “I’ll see ya tomorrow. And if you talk to Neil, thank him again.”

Cooper tilted his head and questioned Dale with his eyes.

“For the new pole vault pit. Should be here in about a week. The kids are excited.”

Cooper smiled. “I’ll do that.” As he walked away, the phone in his pocket buzzed again. He pulled it out to see who was texting him.

He smiled before he clicked on Claire’s name.

Claire and Jax smiled at him with the Golden Gate Bridge framing the background.

Look who has the cushy job this week!

Cooper’s fingers danced over the phone’s keyboard. We’ll see who’s bragging next week when you have homework.

Claire followed up with a frowning face emoji.

For a moment, he stared at her image. She’d grown up since he moved away. Oh, she still had the snark that underlined nearly everything she said and did, but there was a calmness that hadn’t been there before. He remembered the first time he saw her, fresh from the boarding school in Germany and only a hair past eighteen years of life. Much too young for him; or so he convinced himself at the time. Granted, he’d been younger, too. He’d casually flirted with her back then. In turn, she rolled her eyes and blew him off. “Put it away, buddy . . . you’re much too old for me,” she’d said to him on more than one occasion.

But when the initial drama of their first assignment waned, he had a hard time working with her side by side. She treated him like her best friend’s off-limits brother. He told himself he was fine, that his infatuation would fade, until she walked into their headquarters one evening wearing what he referred to as a Sasha Special.

He was in the surveillance room keeping a selective eye on one of their Hollywood celebrity's cameras since the movie star was having a party. One of their team was at the party on the off chance something happened, and Cooper was the second set of eyes from miles away.

The door to the room opened behind him as he was running the license plates of the cars rolling through the valet.

The click of high heels suggested Sasha had walked in the room.

"You would think you'd get tired of wearing those pencil shoes," he said without looking over his shoulder.

"You're just jealous you can't."

With the sound of Claire's voice, his head swiveled, and his brain short-circuited. He blew out a breath as if someone had punched him in the gut. She wore a black, curve-hugging dress that stopped mid thigh. Long legs stretched toward the ground where a pair of stiletto boots took over the entire look. Walking his gaze back up her frame, blonde hair draped over her shoulders and a dusting of makeup highlighted her girl-next-door features.

"Whoa."

Claire turned in a full circle, as if he needed more ammunition. "Do you think this is overdoing it?"

It was the kind of question meant for a girlfriend.

"Depends on what you're doing?"

"It's a first date," she said as she tossed a clutch purse in the seat beside his.

He swallowed and beat down the tinge of jealousy that sprouted from her words. Forcing his eyes off of her, he looked back at the camera footage. "Depends on how you want your date to end."

She sighed, almost like she was whining. "It's too much, isn't it?"

No, it was exactly right. And the lucky bastard that was taking her out . . . "Wait, who's the guy?" He turned back her way.

"From my school."

"A frat boy?" That just made him nauseated.

Claire narrowed her gaze. "You say that like it's a problem."

It was a huge problem. "I always took you for someone with better skills than beer pong."

She slid him a slight smile. "I'm sure there's more to him than drinking games."

"How long have you known him?" While Cooper quizzed her, he clicked the camera to focus on another license plate as the party on camera started to fill up.

"I don't really know him at all."

"Yet you're dressed like that for a first date."

"He said a nice dinner."

"Which is what? In-N-Out versus McDonald's?" She was dressed to rival the women in his field of vision from the party he was watching.

Cooper felt, more than heard, the silence stretched between them. When he looked over his shoulder at Claire, she was staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You . . . you sound jealous."

He immediately rolled his eyes and huffed. "Don't be ridiculous." He didn't sound like anything, he was feeling everything. "I'm just . . . concerned. You're still new here. You live alone, and even though I know you can kick serious ass, you don't have a wingman to fall on if this frat boy looks at that dress as an invitation."

Claire stepped between him and the vacant chair, leaned her hip on the desk. "Jax will be here in two months, so I won't be living alone for long. I might be new here, but I'm not some naive midwestern girl who doesn't know better than to not leave her drink alone with a first date. And yeah, I can ditch the heels and kick all kinds of ass if I need to. So your concern is almost insulting and something I'd expect from Neil, not you."

Cooper secretly wished his boss were there. He'd demand she change into jeans and a sweater. The man had taken Claire under his protection when he hired her on to the team. While she talked like Miss Independent, Claire thrived under the rules Neil had set out. Go to college, get good grades, report to work, and she had a home to live in with all her expenses taken care of. Neil treated her like a younger sister one day, and a daughter the next. And right now Cooper would give his next paycheck for Neil to walk in the door and tell Claire to go home and do her schoolwork.

"What? Nothing to say?" Claire crossed her arms over her chest.

“If you didn’t want my opinion about the dress, or the guy, why did you come in here and ask me?”

The smugness of her chin slowly faded.

Her folded arms slid to her sides, and Cooper knew she was concentrating on her answer. “Because my wingman isn’t here yet, and even though I can take care of myself, I’m smart enough to let someone know I’m going on a date.”

“Why not tell Sasha?”

“She and AJ are in Colorado.”

“Neil?”

It was Claire’s turn to roll her eyes. “He’d try and stop me.”

So that left Cooper.

Shoved into the friend zone.

And as much as he hated that position, he’d despise it more if Claire was left without anyone watching over her.

She pushed off the desk. “You know what, never mind. I can take care of myself.”

He shot out his hand and grasped her forearm before she could storm away. It would have taken so little for her to get out of his hold, but instead she looked at his hand and then his face.

Cooper wanted to stand up next to her, have those blue eyes looking up at him. But that would be torture. She’s eighteen, his head screamed.

Letting go, he swiveled around and walked to a cabinet filled with tracking equipment. Instead of handing it to her, he activated the device and put it in the purse she’d thrown on the chair. “What’s his name?”

For a second she didn’t reply.

“If Jax were here, would you tell her?”

He saw her swallow. “Miles Ketterman.”

Cooper wanted to hate the name, but found it completely harmless. He handed the purse over and brushed his fingers against her in the exchange. Not trusting himself to say

more, he sat back down and turned on one of the many screens in front of him to link up with Claire's tracker.

He should say something smug, something to express friendship and snark. But Cooper didn't have it in him.

Claire took a few steps toward the door and stopped.

"Thanks, Cooper."

"If you need backup . . ."

More footsteps and then the sound of the door opening.

Before she could walk away, he finally said what he couldn't hold in. "You look incredible." He kept staring forward, seeing her reflection in the monitors.

"Thanks," she mumbled again before letting the door close behind her.

The following week, Cooper and Neil had a long conversation about the help needed in the London office.

Only now he was back and Claire wasn't the eighteen-year-old off-limits girl she once was.

Cooper took one last look at the picture of her and Jax before tossing his phone in the passenger seat of his car and leaving the high school parking lot.