

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 5[2,296 words]

CHAPTER FIVE

Claire started her American high school experience in the principal's office.

"Miss Kelly. Please have a seat." The principal, Mrs. Hanley, indicated the chair opposite her desk and motioned to the office secretary to close the door behind her as she left.

Once alone in the office, Mrs. Hanley sighed before making her way around her desk. "The detective wasn't kidding when he said you would look young enough for the job."

Claire had thought the exact opposite before pulling into the school parking lot. "I suppose that's why I'm here," Claire told her.

Mrs. Hanley looked to be in her midfifties, a little on the short side, probably enjoyed one too many desserts on the weekends. Nothing about her appearance said she was anything but a career teacher who managed to work her way up the ranks to the office of high school principal. She lifted Claire's student profile and started to read. "You live with your aunt, who has legal custody?"

Claire sat back in her chair. "That's the story."

The principal grinned. "We have a large number of single-parent students on campus along with several who are being raised by a grandparent or a close family member."

"Then I'll blend right in."

"Got in a little trouble at your last school." She waved the paper in the air.

"Not too far from my real truth when I was eighteen."

Mrs. Hanley looked like she wanted details. Claire didn't oblige. "What is the dropout rate here?"

For a minute, Mrs. Hanley acted as if she didn't want to answer the question.

"It's part of the reason we're here, Mrs. Hanley."

"Right." She put Claire's profile down and folded her hands on top of her desk. "It varies with socioeconomic status and race. Overall we're sitting at seven percent, more males

than females. But in the past three years we've seen a surprising number of younger female dropouts than we have in the past."

"Is there any commonality to the students that you've come in contact with that have dropped out?"

"Hard to say. In recent years, the counselors in our district have been used almost exclusively to direct students toward their future colleges and career aspirations. Unfortunately, that didn't leave a lot of time or energy for reaching out to at-risk kids unless they ended up on academic probation of some sort."

"Failing classes?" she asked to clarify.

"Exactly. But if they weren't failing, they never landed on our radar as potential dropouts."

"What is that percentage?"

"Less than one percent. But five years ago you'd be hard pressed to see a student doing well in school and with a somewhat stable home life just walk away from their high school diploma."

"Stable doesn't mean happy."

"Right. Obviously. My eyes were opened to that when Detective Warren's people were here. I thought they'd removed the teenage prostitution from the school."

"I read the profiles. It's called human trafficking, sex trafficking, for a reason, not simply prostitution."

Mrs. Hanley nodded. "Of course. If someone is exploiting these kids on my campus, I want to find them."

"That's why we're here."

The principal nodded and picked up her office phone. "I'm going to introduce you to Mr. Green. He and I are the only ones on campus that know you're here."

Two minutes later the vice principal walked in, eyed Claire, and then smiled at Mrs. Hanley. "New student?" he asked.

"One of the special students we talked about."

With that introduction, Mr. Green lost his smile and scanned Claire up and down. "You're kidding."

Claire looked at herself. Jeans and a T-shirt, flat sneakers that lots of teenage kids wore. She applied a little eyeliner and pale lipstick, but otherwise kept the makeup off. At her side, on the floor by her chair, was one of the secondhand backpacks she and Jax had gone out of their way to find so they didn't look like they'd just hit Target for back-to-school supplies.

Claire stood and extended her hand. "I'm Claire."

Mr. Green started to smile as he shook her hand.

They both took a seat.

Mrs. Hanley handed Claire's profile to him.

"Mr. Green is in charge of all disciplinary needs at Auburn High. Any kids caught skipping school, bringing illegal substances or paraphernalia, or engaging in possibly dangerous activities . . ."

"Unless it requires our local police." Mr. Green looked up from the paper. "Or you."

"I'm not a cop," Claire told him.

He looked confused.

"But you work with them," he said.

"Yes. But blowing our cover for anything that isn't directly related to our goal isn't an option for this detail."

"We have resource officers that work with the police," Mrs. Hanley directed.

"None of which know we're here. Once I walk out of this office, I'm Claire Porter, a teenager who's pretty pissed she had to relocate. You need to treat me like any other student. On or off campus."

"We can do that."

"Good."

Claire sat forward in her chair. "I'll find a reason to come in contact with one of you every week. If there are names of students you suspect as either a potential victim or perp, it will help that we know."

"All due respect, if we knew that, we wouldn't need Twenty-One Jump Street invading our school," Mr. Green said as he stared down his nose at her.

“Twenty-one what?”

He shook his head. “It was an old TV show.”

“I don’t watch a lot of TV.”

“It was before your time,” Mrs. Hanley told her.

Good, because a lot of American references were lost on her.

The morning bell rang, alerting them of the time.

Mrs. Hanley reached across the desk and handed Claire her schedule. “Our teachers give all incoming transfers time to catch up. Any issues with class placement will be shuffled in a couple of weeks. We’ll accommodate what we can, but if you don’t do some of the work, the teachers will request a change to give you the best opportunity to succeed. If you need help with anything, I’m here.”

Claire glanced at the schedule before shoving it in her backpack. “I’m sure I can manage.”

Mr. Green stood and indicated the door. “I’ll show you to your homeroom.”

As they walked into the halls of the school, students buzzed past as they hustled to their destinations.

The stares of students followed her as she walked down the hall. Reminding herself that she walked beside the disciplinary figure of the school, Claire attempted to appear aloof.

Rebel.

The word rolled in her head. I’m a rebel!

Reaching back in her memory of her years at Richter, she scanned the faces of those walking by.

Saw them.

Studied them.

Judged them.

Mr. Green walked her outside the administrative building and across a quad. “Your math and science classes are in C building. Literature and social studies are in B. Arts in A. Everything computer related is in E.” As he explained the campus, he pointed toward different areas, although nothing he said was foreign to her. Did he really think she didn’t look at a map before showing up for work?

“Got it.”

“Most seniors have a limited schedule, but because you decided to skip most of your junior year, it looks like you have some making up to do.”

Claire rolled her eyes.

Beside her, the vice principal chuckled. “You do that well,” he said under his breath.

She didn’t reply.

“Homeroom is twenty minutes at the start of second period. You’re with a selective group.”

“Selective?”

“Challenging.”

The bell rang again, and the last of the kids scurrying in the halls funneled into rooms. “Challenging for the vice principal, you mean,” she said.

He put his hand on the door, looked at her. “I know the name of every kid in this room and their reason for being placed there.”

Copy that, she said to herself.

“Ready?”

She blew out a breath, looked at him, rolled her eyes . . . and ignored his smirk.

“This is the faculty lounge,” Mrs. Hanley said as she showed Cooper around the administration building. Neil had arranged for knowledge of Cooper’s presence at the school to be limited to the principal only. It wasn’t that Mr. Green was a suspect so much as he just didn’t need to know Cooper was there. Mrs. Hanley would deal with any problems Cooper experienced in the classroom. “Food tends to disappear from the refrigerator, so use at your own risk,” she teased.

Cooper smiled and allowed her to introduce him to the few teachers that were in the space.

The administration building was filled with offices and reception desks. A scattering of chairs occupied a small waiting area, with very few people there. He was shown the nurse’s office, where a nurse only came once a week. Next were the counseling offices, where the counselors split their time on campus and were available to the students by appointment only. The halls were bare of lockers, taken out at least twenty years before and the walls patched to erase that they’d ever been there. Students were given a set of

books for home, and another was available in the classrooms, removing the need for lockers altogether. Sad, really . . . that kids who wanted to deal drugs and bring weapons to campus ruined the high school experience for so many.

Once Mrs. Hanley gave him the dime tour, they returned to her office.

“Mr. Diaz has left a class plan on your desk. He’ll put together a month-long one by the end of the week.”

“And if we need longer than that?” Cooper knew they would.

“Mr. Diaz will accommodate whatever you need. He was happy to take some paid leave time.”

Cooper sat comfortably on the other side of her desk. “Who have you told that I’m here?”

“No one. Well, my husband, if I’m truthful, but no one here on campus.”

“You’re friends with the staff?”

“Of course. I’ve known some of the people here for many years. But I’m well trained at keeping secrets. The last group that came through brought that point home. I honestly felt safer with them on campus. I’m quite surprised it took this long for you to come back.”

Cooper couldn’t help but wonder if her words meant none of Warren’s people were there any longer.

“Even your closest friends on staff know nothing?” Cooper prodded.

Mrs. Hanley laughed. “Goodness no. The students aren’t the only ones who gossip around here. The superintendent made it clear what my role is.”

Cooper watched the time. “I’ve been given information on the teaching staff, but if you could give me some insight on the ancillary staff, I’d appreciate it.”

“What kind of information?”

“Names, ages, what their roles are, how long they’ve been on staff. The basics. I’ll avoid coming to you directly as much as I can.”

“I’m here to help,” she offered.

“I’m sure you are. Your intentions are not what my focus is on. If I were to ask you about Sally, in the counseling office, and you and Sally spent your weekends together with your families, your bias will come through. Or you’ll unintentionally treat Sally differently and spook her, or spark conversations.”

“I understand.”

“This isn’t a two-way street. If you hear anything on campus about me or your new student, you need to let us know.”

“I can do that.”

Cooper stood. “I should get a feel for my room before everyone shows up,” he said, reaching out a hand.

“Welcome to Auburn High,” she said.

Auto shop?

How in the world did he qualify as a substitute teacher for auto shop?

Cooper searched the faces of the kids filing into the classroom that had a single wall between it and the shop filled with tools, lifts, cars . . . Yeah, he knew his way around the engine of a car, but what the hell did he know about teaching it?

He looked at the syllabus Mr. Diaz had mapped out. Third period was Auto 101. From the looks of the curriculum, it wasn’t auto so much as small engines. Not one tire or exhaust to change out.

The kids took their seats. Most of them looked like they were twelve.

How bad could this be?

Ten minutes into class, his back was turned while he drew an illustration on the board, and something wet hit his neck.

If not for the laughter that followed, he would have thought the aging school had a leak.

Memories of his younger years surfaced.

Images flashed of him sitting back in his seat, acting like nothing happened. His friends all laughing along . . .

Cooper turned and watched as one by one the smiles slowly faded to snickers. The upright spines slid into chairs . . .

One student’s eyes narrowed on his, the straight line of his lips shouted in their lack of expression.

As their eyes fixated, the room moaned in silence.

“What’s your name?” Cooper asked.

At least one of the kids cut in with an audible ohhhh.

Cooper knew he had his man . . . or kid, as it stood.

The kid responded in Spanish . . . and with the delivery of his name, he added a slur he didn’t expect Cooper to understand.

When Cooper narrowed his eyes, the kid laughed and looked around the room.

His friends, the ones who knew exactly what he said, started to laugh.

Cooper returned to his desk, crossed his arms over his chest, and stared.

The longer he did, the more silence cloaked the room.

Slowly, eyes shifted between each other until all darted back and forth from Cooper to the kid that smarted off.

“You got somethin’ to say?” the kid challenged.

Cooper shrugged. “You and your friends obviously know the material. No need for me to teach it.”

The kid tossed his pen on his desk and sat back.

The institutional-style clock on the wall ticked.

Each.

And.

Every.

Second.

Cooper waited until the bell rang.

“Mr. Diaz is out for the next three months . . . give or take. There’s a test first thing tomorrow on today’s material.”

Cooper heard at least one f-bomb drop as the class grumbled in opposition.

As the one class funneled out, the next shuffled in.

Cooper silently apologized to every high school teacher he ever dissed, and moved into position to take his lashes of pushover substitute for the rest of the day.