

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 6[1,829 words]

CHAPTER SIX

One of the parts about being a graduate from a military school that had its students recruited for legit special forces units—and at the other end of the spectrum, criminal assassins—was extensive knowledge of communications.

Claire was fluent in English, German, Russian, and Mandarin and proficient in Italian and Spanish. Mandarin was the hardest one for her to tackle. It sounded like a mouthful to anyone from America. But since she'd spent years in Germany, German-English translation was easy, and her Italian wasn't half bad. Russian was her first challenge and then Mandarin made Russian look easy. She added Spanish to her American college studies. It seemed only appropriate with the number of Hispanics living in the States.

Once Mr. Green dropped her off at her homeroom, and she took one of the only seats left, which sadly was right in the front row, Claire removed a notebook she'd purposely and literally run over with her car, and started to doodle.

Mr. Eastman was the homeroom teacher. Claire's first impression: no nonsense. He called the students by their last names. Something retired military did. And her, if she was being honest. He was pleasant enough when Claire entered the room, but didn't single her out for just walking in the door.

The students were primarily male. Many of them muttered behind her. She caught some of what they said, but because she was sitting in the front, she didn't see who did the talking.

She doodled, or so it would look if anyone glanced over to see what she was doing. What she was actually doing was writing notes in the three languages she doubted anyone in the room could identify, let alone speak. To every voice she offered an adjective. Aggressive, vulgar, loud, chatty, rude. The handful of girls in the room she found an entirely different list of words to describe. Needy, shy, assertive . . . and all of that was assessed in the twenty minutes she had before the bell rang.

As the kids scurried out of the room, Mr. Eastman called her back, "Porter."

Rebel.

She turned to the call of her fake last name and lifted her chin. "Yeah?"

“Homeroom is meant for homework and a place to ask for help in any subjects giving you trouble.”

She hiked her backpack on her shoulder a little higher. “First day,” she told him. “I don’t have any homework yet.”

He looked her in the eye. “Right. You know where your next class is?”

Claire pulled the printed schedule from her pocket and glanced at the paper. “Shakespeare?” Really?

Mr. Eastman offered a half smile. “It’s your English credit.”

“So B building.”

For a brief second, Mr. Eastman’s gaze narrowed. Then he nodded. “Yeah.”

Claire waved the paper in the air toward him and shoved it back in her jeans. “Great.”

As she walked out the door, he spoke again. “Welcome to Auburn.”

Instead of responding, she offered him her back and a wave of her hand. Just like a slightly rude, disrespectful teenager might do. Every step away from his room gave her a bit more confidence that she was blending in. Even though every kid she passed looked so young to her.

When the fifth period bell rang, signaling the end of Cooper’s first day as substitute sucker, he sat behind his desk and rolled his shoulders back to ease some of the tension the day created. What a shit show. Each class seemed to have its own smart-ass, know-it-all, or clown. Three of his five classes had pop quizzes the next day, which meant he needed to come up with something relevant to test them on.

He gathered the syllabus the teacher had left him and the class roster he had scribbled notes on with the details of the power struggle he’d played a part in all day.

Looked like he had homework after all.

He walked through the shop and locked the place up.

As he turned off the last of the lights, the door leading from the classroom to the shop opened.

One of the seniors he recognized from his better-behaved class stood there.

“Mr. Mitchel?”

“Yeah.” Cooper walked closer. “Sorry, I don’t remember your name.”

“It’s Kyle.”

“What can I do for you, Kyle?”

“Mr. Diaz usually opens the shop early on Tuesdays and Fridays so his trusted students can get some help with their cars. I’ve been his TA for two years now. Sometimes Mr. Diaz gets here a little late, and he’s allowed me to open it for him.”

Cooper nodded a few times. “I saw your first name penciled in on his schedule.”

Kyle sighed. “Good.”

“He was vague on the details.”

Kyle’s smile faded. “Oh, uhm . . . Can you get ahold of him? I’m sure he’d vouch for the early days. Especially if Mr. Diaz isn’t gonna be back for a while.”

“I see no problem with that. How many of you come in early?”

“Depends on whose car is sputtering.”

Cooper smiled at that. “Let me put a call out to Diaz, ask the administration if there are any issues.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Cooper motioned out the door. “I need to lock up. I’m helping the track coach while I’m here.”

Kyle walked with him. “I also help Mr. Diaz with grading papers and stuff like that.”

Suddenly Cooper felt his homework load getting lighter. “What about creating pop quizzes?” he joked.

Kyle shook his head. “No, but he has a stack of old quizzes he makes the students do when they’ve been fuc . . . screwing around.” The kid hesitated after nearly dropping an f-bomb.

“Any idea where those quizzes might be?”

Kyle nodded and pointed to one of the locked filing cabinets. “I make copies for him all the time. Especially after a sub has come in.”

Armed with that, Cooper fiddled with the shop keys until he found the one needed for the cabinet. With Kyle's help, he found appropriate quizzes for the classes that challenged him, and gave Kyle the task of making copies.

With the promise of coming early the next day, Cooper left Kyle to the office printer and made his way to the track field.

Coach Bennett, or simply Coach, as everyone called him, stood in front of the team with Cooper at his side. As he addressed the students, they sat in various stages of stretches on the field.

"This is Coach Mitchel. He's going to be helping with sprints and hurdles starting on Monday. Today I'm having him circulate so he can get to know you and the team as a whole."

Unlike the classroom, the field was filled with kids that truly wanted to be there.

"You have two new teammates. Claire?"

Cooper tried not to smile when Claire raised her hand and the other kids turned to look at her.

"And Terrance."

The younger student raised his hand.

"I'll have Coach Mitchel circulate with the both of you through sprints and field events to see where you land. We have our invitational in less than a month. Any of you who haven't hit your parents up for donations, get on it unless you want to be schlepping candy bars for a buck a piece for the rest of the season."

There were lots of moans from the team.

"Okay, that's it. Seniors, get some stretching in and two laps before you split up."

With their dismissal, the students started talking while the seniors took over.

"Do they really have to sell candy bars?" Cooper asked.

"Haven't had to for years. Between the parent donations and the invitational, we get what we need. But you need to cattle-prod these kids and remind them of the alternative."

Coach Bennett walked him over to the sand pits and introduced him to the long- and triple-jump coach. As they stood there in small talk, the students started to run the track.

Cooper's eyes found the only student he knew as she kept pace with the high school kids in the pack.

She stayed right in the middle. Not overachieving, not lagging behind.

Yet she stuck out.

Maybe it was because Cooper knew Claire wasn't a high school senior.

Maybe it was because they worked together.

Or maybe it was because they were a pair of magnets that kept slipping by each other until the right parts could connect.

He tore his gaze away and stopped torturing himself.

". . . did you run, Cooper?"

Cooper found himself blinking, digging hard to find the question the jump coach had just asked.

He ended up shaking his head. "Sorry . . ."

Coach Bennett patted him on his back. "Yeah, they didn't look like that when we were in high school," the older man told him.

When they laughed, Cooper reminded himself that he was looking at Claire, who wasn't only age appropriate, she was equal in many other ways. What the coaches were looking at were several underage girls. That, somehow, put a thickness in his throat he didn't like.

"You were asking?" Cooper redirected the conversation.

"I wanted to know what your event was in track?"

"I didn't run track."

Coach Bennett narrowed his eyes. "Really? Most if not all of our coaches were runners at some point."

Cooper shrugged. "I was too busy running into trouble. Ever since I started subbing at the high school level, I realized I like this age group. Thinking about starting night classes to get my permanent teaching credentials and not just the emergency one."

Coach Bennett shook his head. "I don't know if I'd do it again. I've taught math for twenty years. Each year classes get bigger, regulations get thicker, and it feels like I'm not

making a damn difference in most of these kids' lives. If it wasn't for track, I probably would have changed professions five years in."

"Good thing I volunteered out here, then," Cooper said.

Thankfully, any other personal questions were diverted when Claire and Terrance jogged over.

Cooper purposely avoided Claire's eyes.

Coach Bennett turned to the students. "Okay, you two . . . today you're concentrating on jumps. Tomorrow sprints. I don't care about form, I just want to see where you land. Unless you have a preference."

Terrance shrugged, and Claire blew out a breath.

"I'll take that as a no."

Again, neither of them spoke.

Coach Bennett looked at the jumps coach. "You got 'em, Mark?"

Mark offered a wave, and Bennett turned his attention to another spot on the field.

"Okay, kids. There are two key rules in long jump." He pointed to a white line. "Never start your jump after this line. Even a toe disqualifies it."

Cooper watched Claire as she nodded.

"Second, when you land, fall forward. Landing on your ass or falling back on a hand takes away inches if not feet from your jump." Mark pointed to the white line again. "On or behind the white line." He pointed at the sand. "Fall forward."

"That's it?" Claire asked. Her tone held a slight edge.

"For today, that's it." Mark pointed to Terrance. "You'll start."

Cooper and Claire took a few steps away from the pit while Mark worked at getting Terrance in the right position to run up and jump.

Cooper whispered Claire's way. "How did it go today?"

She looked to the side. "Happy hour at my place."

Terrance ran up and took his jump . . . and landed straight on his ass.

