

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 7[1,649 words]

CHAPTER SEVEN

“It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack.” Claire sat on the edge of being annoyed as she spread out the notes she’d collected throughout the day.

In like fashion, Cooper looked over his lists of students and then worked to compile the athletes on the field. A half-eaten pizza and a couple of empty beer cans filled the space on the table that wasn’t occupied with notes.

Jax took up the other end of the dining room table. “We need to put this into a spreadsheet.”

Cooper and Claire both pointed at her at the same time.

“I pick you,” Claire said.

“We have track,” Cooper explained, waving his hand between the two of them.

Claire fisted her pointing finger and bumped knuckles with Cooper.

Jax rolled her eyes. “Fine.” Her tone was anything but fine.

“Did you make any connections today?” Claire asked Jax.

“Not really. There were a few friendly smiles, but no one went out of their way to be welcoming.”

“At least you didn’t get hit with spit wads,” Cooper pointed out.

Claire laughed.

“It’s not funny,” Cooper said with a glare.

“It’s kinda funny.”

“The headmistress would have had us in isolation if we did anything like that in school,” Jax said.

“Last I looked, our headmistress did time for child endangerment,” Claire clarified as she took a bite of her pepperoni with extra cheese.

“Which is crap, considering our parents knew what they were signing us up for.”

Their boarding school was strict, in the military sense, and yes, parents knew the environment their kids were being exposed to. But in Claire’s situation, it wasn’t a parent that placed her there.

Jax must have realized what she was saying and quickly averted her eyes. “Sorry. That was insensitive of me.”

Claire shook off her best friend’s concern, put her pizza down. “Don’t be. It’s not your fault I was left on an orphanage doorstep by parents who didn’t care. Much as I want to hate on those that eventually put me at Richter, I’m better for having been there.”

The three of them exchanged looks, and when Claire diverted her attention to her papers, they got the hint to drop the subject. She’d spent so much time feeling sorry for herself, the last thing Claire wanted was her friends to worry on her behalf.

Jax moved from the kitchen table only to return with a laptop.

Claire shifted her homeroom roster notes to Jax. “Mr. Green gave me a list of students in my homeroom. They’re the kids that spend time in detention, from what I was told.”

Jax glanced at the notebook and grinned. “Back to our old tricks.”

Claire nodded. “A mix of English, German, and Russian with enough doodling to make it look like I’m bored.” Jax and Claire had passed similar notes with the mix of languages while attending Richter.

“There’re no names with the notes.”

“I got stuck in the front of the class. I’ll rectify that tomorrow.”

Cooper took her homeroom roster and scanned through his classes. “Looks like we have a few of the same names.”

“Any of them spit-wad kid?” Claire asked.

“My back was turned, but if I had to guess . . .” Cooper starred a couple of names. “This kid spends time lifting weights, and this one eats too many burgers,” he described.

“Find the rebels and we’ll find the parties. It will be a lot easier to get a handle on these kids’ agendas on a Friday or Saturday night than in homeroom.”

Cooper ran a hand through his hair. “This assignment isn’t going to give us much time for R and R.”

“We’ll make Neil give us a couple weeks in the Bahamas when it’s all over,” Claire suggested with a wink.

“Doesn’t sound like Neil.”

“He’s softened up a little since you’ve been gone.”

“Bahamas soft?”

Claire batted her eyelashes a few times. “I can talk him into it.”

While Claire and Cooper talked about a vacation they had yet to earn, Jax typed away at her laptop. “What about the teaching staff? Anything to report there?” she asked them both.

“Nothing yet,” Claire said.

Cooper, however, hesitated before he answered.

“What are you thinking?”

He shook his head. “Probably nothing.”

“Let us determine that as a team.”

Cooper looked Claire in the eye. “Coach Bennett.”

Claire was surprised to hear that name. She hadn’t gotten a vibe off him at all. “What did he do?”

“He didn’t do anything. I was, uhm . . . watching you guys running laps, got distracted. Bennett made a comment about how the students didn’t look that good when he was in school.”

“That’s fair, I guess. One of the throwers has a full beard and looks like he’s thirty,” Claire told him.

“Yeah, but that wasn’t the vibe I got.”

“So what, was he checking the students out?”

Cooper shook his head. “No, but it looked like I was, and neither Coach Bennett or Mark called me out. I don’t know. It felt off.”

“Hmmm, so you were checking out the girls—”

“No. I was . . .” Cooper squirmed. “I saw you run by and thought you blended in really well.”

“So you were checking Claire out,” Jax said with a snicker.

“No . . . well, yeah. I mean, that’s what it looked like to them. But I know you’re not a teenager, arguably that doesn’t put me in the dirty-old-man category.”

“But Bennett has to be in his late fifties, and Mark close to that.”

Cooper lifted his hands in the air. “You see my point.”

“Yeah. Not that it means anything. But certainly something to watch.”

Jax stopped typing and turned her screen toward them. “I’m categorizing the students in three ways. Possible victims, accomplices, or leads. Leads can be gateways to parties or events where our victims might be lured. The adults are perpetrators or accomplices. I say we divide this up.” She pointed to Cooper. “I see you doing happy hour with staff to learn their secrets, find the perps and accomplices.”

“I can do that.”

“I’m going to focus on victims. There wasn’t any evidence that the perps were at Bremerton. Unless there’s a staff member that Neil hadn’t vetted,” Jax said.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Neil has a home office storyboard with every teacher and staff member and what they had for dinner last night,” Cooper teased.

Neither of the women disagreed.

“I’ll be the brooding teen looking for love in the wrong places,” Jax said.

“I’m going to focus on leads and accomplices this week. Try and get into the party crowd. I want to know who’s peddling what on campus,” Claire said. Drugs were a common denominator for the dirtbags getting the girls on board.

Jax pointed between the two of them. “I say we strike up a friendship and you feel sorry for me and I tag along.”

Claire liked that idea.

“Also helps if you’re ever seen in public together outside of school,” Cooper pointed out.

Jax leaned back and stretched her arms over her head. “Well, I’m done.”

“Go to bed, I’ll clean this up.” Seemed only fair, since Claire started school an hour later than Jax.

Jax took her computer with her after saying good night.

Cooper piled his papers together before grabbing the pizza box and taking it to the island in the kitchen.

“I can get that.” Claire dropped the empty beer cans in the recycling bin.

“Takes two seconds,” Cooper told her.

Claire removed a large resealable plastic bag from a drawer and handed it to him before heading back to the table to clean up their plates. A strange silence settled between them, and Claire felt the need to fill it. “You know, I think Neil picked us for the job because we’re all single. Well, Jax is seeing someone.”

“She is?”

“It’s not serious.”

“Hmm, well, I think Neil picked you guys because you’re the closest to the age group we’re targeting.”

“I get that, but it would be harder to do if we were involved with someone.”

Cooper glanced over at her before moving to the sink to wash his hands. “I guess it didn’t work out with Miles Ketterman, then.”

The name from her past had her staring. “You remember that guy?”

Cooper turned off the water, and she handed him a dish towel. “You asked me to be your wingman.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the counter. “I forgot all about him.”

Her statement was followed by more silence.

When she looked up, she found Cooper staring.

“What about you?” she asked. “Anyone special in Europe? I thought for sure when you didn’t come back there had to be a woman.”

For the space of a heartbeat she thought he was going to deny her assumptions.

“One?” He puffed out his chest and ran his hands over his pecs. “Why deny so many of some good old American muscle?”

She pushed at his shoulder. “Such a liar.”

He laughed. “What about you? Obviously Miles didn’t do it for you.”

“Miles had the attention span of a gnat. All he cared about was college sports and weekend parties.”

“That might be helpful right about now,” Cooper said.

“I’m pretty surprised you remember him.”

“I remember everything.” His words were slow and poignant as if they had more meaning than the obvious.

Words stopped, and both of them stared at the other.

The breath in her lungs felt as if it were being held hostage and she couldn’t exhale.

Cooper shook out of it first. “I should go. Early morning tomorrow.”

Claire closed her eyes. “Right. Auto shop.”

She followed him to the front door and turned on the porch light.

He turned to her briefly as he opened the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night.”

He glanced at the keypad to the house alarm system. “Be sure and set that.”

“Now you’re starting to sound like Neil.”

Instead of saying more, Cooper walked out the door and to his car.

When Claire closed the door between them, she leaned on the wall and stared at the alarm panel.

The lights from his car lit up the living room before fading away.

There was definitely something going on with Cooper, and she was a little afraid to find out what. Before she dug any further into her thoughts, Claire locked the deadbolt and set the alarm.

