

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 8[1,282 words]

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Miss Porter, are you paying attention?”

It took a full second to realize the last name the teacher was saying was hers.

Claire popped the end of her pen in her mouth and sat back in her chair. “Yeah.”

Mrs. Wallace placed a hand on her hip and stared. “You’ve been tapping your pen and doodling for almost thirty minutes of class.” The woman walked up and lifted Claire’s notes up in the air. A shake of her teacher’s head made Claire thankful she’d been writing her notes in code.

“It’s how I digest the knowledge you expound upon us.”

When the other kids in the class started to laugh, Claire knew she’d gained some trust in them.

Mrs. Wallace didn’t seem to like the spotlight and showed Claire’s “doodling” to the class. “And what knowledge did you digest?”

Shit . . . What class was she in?

Shakespeare.

Romeo and Juliet . . . MacDeath . . .

Claire felt her pulse race, realized all eyes in the room were on her. Be in the spotlight long enough to gain their trust and show you’re one of them.

She leaned back, just enough to show her disrespect, and took a chance. “You were asking if Romeo and Juliet was a romance or tragedy.”

Mrs. Wallace closed her lips and tilted her chin.

Claire hesitated.

“I suppose it’s not fair that I ask you as you’ve only been with us for a week—”

“It’s stupid teenage drama.”

A few students chuckled.

Claire looked to her left and her right and found the two guys in her class that she'd pegged as troublemakers, or at least the boys bad enough to know how to get in touch with the truly bad boys, and they were both smiling.

"Do you want to elaborate?" Mrs. Wallace asked.

Claire grabbed her notebook from the teacher's hand and slapped it on her desk. "Let me see if I got this right." She raised her voice an octave. "Waaah, my daddy doesn't like your daddy so we can't date." Claire lowered her voice. "But I love you, we can make it work." Her voice rose again. "How?"

Claire leveled her gaze to the teacher. "Romeo, wherefore art thou . . . you stupid asshole. I'll kill myself, but ha! Just kidding. Then Juliet comes along . . . Oh no"—Claire slapped her hands against her face for effect—"I'll kill myself, too. Then the boy toy wakes up . . . Oh no . . . the girl I love is dead and it's all my fault. I have to kill myself for real this time." Claire glared. "I think Shakespeare is a fucking joke and wouldn't be given a one o'clock time slot next to soap operas if he was a screenwriter today. The fact I have to sit through this stupid drivel is the true tragedy."

When the class erupted, Claire knew she had her audience.

Claire sat on the other side of Mr. Green's desk and waited until the door shut.

"'Shakespeare is a fucking joke'?" he asked as he started to laugh.

She chuckled. "If all it takes to be sent to your office is me cussing, I'll be in here a lot." Claire grabbed her notebook. "What can you tell me about Sean Fisher?"

Cooper was starting to question why he'd decided to leave his lax Europe-based job to work twelve hours a day, every day.

He rolled into the auto shop early Friday morning to find Kyle bent over the hood of a car, the shop doors rolled up, and a half a dozen guys drinking coffee and eating donuts.

"Good morning," Cooper said as he walked into the shop.

"Hey, Mr. Mitchel." The greetings came from at least two voices.

Cooper offered a wave and glanced at the pink box filled with sugar. "What's this?"

Kyle glanced up from whatever he was working on. "What self-respecting auto shop doesn't have donuts on a Friday?"

Cooper picked up a chocolate glazed and bit into it. "You won't see me complaining."

Kyle stood back from the car, wiped his hands on a shop towel. “This is Tony. Graduated last year but comes in once in a while to help out.”

Tony could easily pass for twenty-one. Big guy, more facial hair than anyone Cooper knew at that age. Of course he had been enlisted at that time, and extra hair wasn’t accepted.

Tony stepped forward, reached out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Cooper glanced at Kyle’s project. “What are you working on?”

“It was supposed to be simple spark plugs, but the damn things are rusted in.” Kyle went right back to work as he spoke.

“You shouldn’t have bought a Jeep that originated in Michigan,” Tony told him.

Cooper looked around. Another set of his senior students had a car on a lift and were doing a brake job. “Anyone need any help?” he called out.

“Got it.”

“We’re good.”

Cooper waved his donut in the air. “In that case, I’ll be at my desk.”

“Thanks for letting us come in,” Kyle said.

“We’re good.” He indicated the classroom. “You know where I am.” As Cooper left the shop, he popped an AirPods in his ear and removed his phone from his back pocket. What looked like he was listening to music was actually him eavesdropping on the shop conversation as he left the room.

“He seems cool,” Tony said right as Cooper cleared the door.

“So far so good,” Kyle said.

Kyle’s words made Cooper pause.

From that point on it was rust this and plug that. Nothing incriminating.

It wasn’t until he stepped on the track field that he felt anything else that needed recording. None of which had anything to do with the case, and had everything to do with Claire.

He arrived late, which was expected on Fridays until the track meets started.

Claire was poised and ready in the last hundred yards of a relay race. She watched as the third runner pumped arms and feet as she rounded the corner.

Claire's hand reached back, her legs bouncing.

Cooper walked to the side of the field to Coach Bennett. "Hey."

Bennett shook his head. In each hand he held a stopwatch. "Watch this."

"Watch wha—"

Bennett interrupted with the lift of his right hand toward the track.

The second Claire started to move, Bennett leaned forward.

The baton passed, and Bennett clicked one of his timers.

Claire took off, and the other teammates stopped to stare.

Cooper knew she could move, had watched her more than once, not to mention the last time she tackled him to the ground.

His lips pulled into a grin.

She was a powerhouse that didn't let up until she was well past the finish line and Bennett was staring at both of his stopwatches with a huge smile. "We just found our last leg in our Varsity Girls Relay."

The grin on Cooper's face spread ear to ear.

And as he watched Claire catch her breath and walk off the track with her teammates patting her back, he realized the fine line they were treading.

Get enough attention, but not too much.

He was afraid Claire had just pushed over the line.

Cooper walked beside Coach Bennett as he made his way to Claire's side.

She was hunched over, hands on her knees as she caught her breath.

"Not bad, young lady," Bennett said.

Her attention found Cooper first and quickly moved on to the coach. "Thanks."

"I'm putting you in this position for our invitational."

“What?” Claire lost her smile and found Cooper’s eyes. “Really?”

“Maybe the one hundred, too.”

The coach diverted his attention and walked away.

Cooper glanced around, then leaned closer. “That’s not good.”

She stood tall and wiped her forearm over her brow. “I was holding back.”

Just then, two of the other girls from the relay bounced up to Claire and put their arms over her shoulders.

“You just flew!”

“So cool.”

Claire placed a fake smile on her lips and stared at Cooper. “I didn’t know I had it in me.”