

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 9[3,031 words]

CHAPTER NINE

Wearing a T-shirt and jeans every day had Claire searching for something a little different when she wasn't at school.

With Jax at her side, they walked into headquarters at eight thirty for their nine o'clock meeting Saturday morning. Most days, Jax would drive separately, not seeing the need to arrive early, but Lewis was meeting her around the corner for lunch, and the plan was to stay with him until Sunday. The poor guy had been put on the back burner since their assignment began.

Jax stayed in the situation room, and Claire moved on to the surveillance room searching for coffee.

"Hey," she said as she crossed through the doors.

She went straight to the coffeepot and was surprised to smell something fresh.

"Oh, hi."

She glanced up to find an unfamiliar face watching the monitors. "Sorry, you must be new."

And youngish. Late twenties, maybe early thirties. Looked like the typical Neil recruit. Still had the military haircut and shoulders that filled out a shirt. Easy smile, a good seven out of ten on the attractive scale.

"I'm Manuel," he said, leaning over to shake her hand.

Claire moved the coffeepot to her other hand to shake his. "Claire," she told him.

"You work for Neil?" he asked.

"Yeah. We have a nine o'clock briefing."

Manuel didn't offer more than a nod.

"This smells fresh." She lifted the coffeepot.

"I made it about a half hour ago. I can't stand stale coffee."

Claire found herself smiling. “Finally, someone in this office that has taste buds.”

Her new coworker laughed and turned back to the monitors while she fished out a clean mug and poured herself her second cup for the day.

“Nice meeting you,” she said as she backed out of the room.

“You, too.”

At the whiteboard in the situation room, Jax was laying out their notes and pictures of some of the possible players they’d managed to identify.

Lars arrived next, and before the door shut, Cooper and Neil stepped in together.

“Wow, why are you girls all dolled up?” Lars asked before he sat down.

“Jax has a date,” Claire announced.

Neil came to a stop. “Not with one of the students.”

Jax made a motion as if she was going to be ill.

Claire laughed.

“What’s your excuse?” Cooper asked. “Do you have a date, too?” His eyes walked up and down her body. She was wearing a dress, which she didn’t often do unless she was painting the town with her best friend.

But sometimes, when she’d been cooped up too long and hadn’t been able to shop or let her hair down, or be something other than a girl trapped in a world she didn’t want . . . yeah, at those times she needed to get out. It was her release valve.

Jax started to laugh.

And laugh.

Claire followed Cooper’s gaze in Jax’s direction.

“Claire doesn’t date!”

The hair on her neck started to stand on end.

“I date.”

Jax leaned her head back and laughed. “No, what you do doesn’t classify as dating.”

Much as Claire wanted to disagree, she knew her friend spoke the truth. It wasn't that she had an aversion to dating, there just didn't seem to be enough datable guys out there.

"What the hell does that mean?" Cooper's tone was anything but happy as he asked the question.

Claire was about to ask why he cared when Neil stepped forward. "Are we done with the chitchat and ready to work?"

"Technically this is my day off, and since I have homework, not even that."

Neil's expression told Claire he wasn't amused.

Cooper looked like he had more to say, but kept his lips shut.

Lars patted Cooper on the back as he walked by. "I need coffee."

"There's a fresh pot in the surveillance room," Claire informed him.

"We start in ten," Neil said before heading to his office.

Once the door was closed, Cooper slid beside Claire. "Mind elaborating about this 'doesn't date' thing?"

She slowly looked at him, took a sip of her coffee. "Why deny all the men?" she asked, tossing back the words he'd used on her only a week before.

"You're lying."

Any amusement in her faded with the seriousness of his voice. "Why are you so interested?" And why was Cooper standing so close and watching her as if an expression was going to give something away?

When his eyes dropped to her lips, her belly did a little twist.

It was then that her brain started to short-circuit and the coffee felt bitter in the back of her throat.

There were two reasons a man stared at a woman's lips.

The first was if they were a family member or possibly a gay friend that wanted to comment on the shade of lipstick.

And the second . . . he wanted to kiss her.

Holy shit!

She blinked several times.

Cooper wanted to taste her.

The realization of that fact had her head spinning. Then, because she couldn't stop herself from looking, she took in his lips, and then the expression on his face.

So many things clicked together. With them, a thousand questions.

Lars pushed through the door from the surveillance room talking and had Cooper taking a step back. "Have you met the new guy?"

Claire's eyes stayed on Cooper. "Yes, I have."

Cooper blinked and turned away. "I have not."

A few more steps and Cooper walked into the other room.

"What the actual hell?" Claire asked the universe out loud.

Lars walked by, oblivious to what had just happened.

"What?"

Claire glanced over at Jax to see her soft smile.

In German, Claire asked, "Did you see that?"

"I felt the static in the room," Jax replied.

"You know it's rude to speak in a different language, right?" Lars said.

Jax shook her head and went back to writing on the whiteboard. "Sorry," she replied in English.

Cooper listened, participated, reported his end of Operation High School, and did everything in his power to not look Claire's way.

He'd blown it. Got caught salivating over her as if she was ice cream on a hot summer day.

Put it out of your mind, dude.

Manuel had joined them and was brought up to speed.

“And what exactly do you plan on doing to get out of participating in the track competitions?” Neil asked when the conversation came up about Claire having the fourth position in the relay.

“Cooper and I talked about this. I can always throw a race or two and then fake an injury or fail a class and be prohibited from competing.” Claire looked at Cooper.

“I like the idea of an injury, but want to wait until the first meet. Right now Claire is popular enough with the team, and I think we should cement that before we take her away.”

“If she’s injured, does she drop track?” Neil asked.

“No.” Cooper shook his head. “She has to come along to the meets and the practices, even if it’s just to time other students. If there’s an academic probation, she’s likely to lose favor with the coaches and her fellow students. Which might be something we pull later if we need to.”

Neil nodded in agreement. “I like that. Lars, what do you have?”

“Both decoy residences are up and running,” he told them.

“Good, because I’ve struck up a couple of ‘friendships’ with the promise of study dates,” Claire said.

Jax pointed between the two of them “We met last week, and together we’ll start to narrow our search. We’ll bring the students I’ve struck friendships up with from Bremerton together with the Auburn kids. There is a surprisingly large number of kids that are close with those from the other school.”

“Which of these players are involved?” Neil nodded to the whiteboard.

“Elsie is Kyle’s girlfriend. She doesn’t fit the profile as victim or perp, but because of Kyle’s comments, we thought she needed flushing out,” Claire told Neil. “We’re meeting at Jax’s place, because her dad is working late. And my aunt is home.”

“Yeah, and there’s a new student at Bremerton, Ally. She’s living with her grandmother, parents lost custody and think the best place for her is a prep school. A couple conversations and I can already tell she’s looking for trouble. Parties, sneaks out at night.”

Neil narrowed his eyes. “What about this guy?” He pointed to one of the names and photographs on the board.

“Sean is the class bad boy at Auburn,” Claire said. “Spends a lot of time with the vice principal and barely makes the grade. But he drives a brand-new car and yet lives with his single mom and older brother. Something there doesn’t add up.”

“Maybe the absent dad feels guilty and buys big toys,” Lars suggested.

“We need to get to know him in order to find out. The decoy houses are the safest places to talk,” Claire pointed out. “Where is Sasha, anyway?”

Lars answered instead of Neil. “Sasha’s chasing a lead in Seattle. We’ve been spending time looking into the dropouts over the past few years.”

“All the way up in Washington?” Jax asked.

“If this is as organized as Warren suggested, moving girls away from people they know would be key for going unnoticed.”

“Warren said he’s had deep undercover work going on at Auburn for several years and is convinced there’s something sinister lurking they couldn’t dig up.”

“But not Bremerton?” Claire glanced at Cooper when she asked the question.

“If Warren had undercover cops there, the principal wasn’t aware. Which is exactly how we are playing it with Manuel. He’s the school’s new resource officer. There shouldn’t be a reason you don’t get to know Bremerton’s problem kids.”

“Are the principals at either school suspects?” Manuel asked.

“Burke passed inspection, but we have no idea if he talks to his teachers at Bremerton. So the less he knows, the better. Hanley and Green seem to be exactly who they say they are. Backgrounds check out.”

“Mrs. Hanley is a middle-aged woman, not exactly the profile fit for this behavior,” Cooper added.

Claire cleared her throat. “Never underestimate a middle-aged school administrator.”

Cooper found her gaze and was brought back to a moment in time shortly after they’d met when they were infiltrating Richter and learning just how sinister middle-aged women could be. “Right,” he said, acknowledging her thoughts without them being spoken.

Jax broke the silence. “If anyone at either school knows we’re there, I can’t imagine them doing anything so long as we’re on campus.”

“I’ll pass these names on to Warren, and if he objects to any of them, I’ll let you know.” He looked around. “Anything else?”

They collectively shook their heads.

“Okay, then. We’ll meet back here next week. I want to see more intel on staff. We’ll start switching schedules around.”

Jax bounced out of her seat. “See you on campus, Manuel.” She then turned her attention to Claire. “I won’t be home tonight.”

“I know.”

With her purse over her shoulder, Jax hustled out of the office.

Lars abandoned the room along with Neil and Manuel, leaving Claire and Cooper alone.

Instead of running off, Claire folded her arms over her chest, stood in front of Cooper, and waited.

Did he play dumb?

Did he blow off what had happened as brotherly concern?

Or did he just stare back?

That’s what he did.

And like any game of chicken, one of them would have to cave.

It was Claire.

She unfolded her arms, grabbed her purse, and stormed out the door.

“That went well.”

“Don’t you look lovely?” Gwen MacBain greeted Claire with a kiss to both cheeks before standing back and taking her in again. “It seems every time we have one of our lunches you look more grown up than the last.”

“You say that every time, Gwen.”

“Because it’s true.”

The maître d’ pulled out Claire’s chair and quickly moved to Gwen’s before she could adjust it herself. They were just off Rodeo Drive in an upscale restaurant that Claire only knew because of Neil’s wife. Every eight to ten weeks, Gwen insisted on a private lunch, which was often followed by a shopping trip, so she could keep tabs on Claire’s life. The life she had outside of MacBain Security and Solutions. If Neil was a surrogate father, Gwen took the role of mother.

When Claire had first moved to California, these lunches were more frequent, and the shopping trips were up there with Little Orphan Annie and Daddy Warbucks going to the mall. No matter how much Claire insisted she didn't need a lot, Gwen acted as if she didn't hear her. Sasha did the same, but never at the same time. One look in Claire's closet and you'd never know she was an orphan.

"I'm glad I could squeeze in some of your time before this new assignment consumes you," Gwen started.

"I have a feeling this one is going to take a while."

Gwen sat politely across the table, her hands in her lap. The woman was regal. Always turning heads whenever they walked into a room. Today was no different. Even though the restaurant was filled with a larger number of women than men, that didn't stop those masculine eyes from shifting her way.

"When Neil told me you'd be working nights and weekends, in addition to the school hours, I told him it was too much."

Claire grinned. "Let me guess, he gave you the look and walked away." They both knew the look. It said: I know what I'm doing. We're not talking about this. The subject is now closed. All in one.

"That look doesn't work with me."

"Doesn't stop him from trying." Claire reached for the sparkling water already poured in her glass and took a drink.

"When he told me Cooper was back and on the case with you, I felt a bit better."

Just the mention of Cooper's name had Claire thinking of the lip stare. "It's good to have another set of eyes on campus."

When Gwen didn't comment, Claire looked over at her. The quiet lasted a bit longer than expected.

"He's changed since he was here last," Claire said.

Gwen smiled. "I can't say I've noticed, since we've seen him from time to time in Europe."

"He seems to have slipped right back in with the group. Makes me wonder why he left in the first place."

Gwen broke eye contact and picked up her menu. "I'm sure he had his reasons."

Claire wondered what the diversion was about. “Do you think this case had something to do with him returning?”

“I couldn’t tell you. I know Neil wanted as many hands on this as he could spare. The whole idea that these awful things are happening where Emma goes to school . . . I don’t have to tell you how he is. I thought for sure he was going to insist on Emma changing schools.”

“There would be no way to know if the same thing isn’t happening elsewhere.”

“Exactly what I told him,” Gwen said, smiling. “I know my husband, though. If the team isn’t successful, he’ll figure out a way to homeschool.”

That had Claire laughing. “I can’t see him as a teacher.”

“Goodness, no. We’d hire someone. But that isn’t fair to Em.”

“That’s true. I wouldn’t worry. We’ll find out what we’re there to uncover.”

“I hope so. Neil might not show it at work, but I know this is eating at him.” She put the menu aside. “He’s compared this trafficking to the fate of some of your classmates from Richter. Forcing kids to do things they wouldn’t otherwise until they can’t see their way out. I realized then that on the surface it looks like he’s evolved because of Emma, but in reality, it’s penance for what could have been you.”

She’d never considered that. “Has he always had this soft spot?” Claire asked.

Gwen laughed. “Don’t let him hear you say that. And yes . . . I saw it from the beginning, although our mutual friends didn’t. He’s certainly opened up through the years.”

Claire couldn’t help it. She busted out a laugh. “There is nothing open about Neil.”

The waiter arrived, took their order, and left them alone again.

“How is it being back in school?”

She sat back. “Awkward. But I think I’m getting the hang of it. I don’t get the impression that anyone is clued in to the truth.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I always knew you’d excel in whatever you put your mind to.”

When Claire heard words like that, she was quickly reminded why she looked to Gwen as a motherly figure. Although she’d had to have been pretty young to be Claire’s biological mother.

“Can you hint to Neil, the next time we go undercover, to pick something in the south of France?” she asked, joking.

“You want to study French?”

Claire shook her head. “Never mind. Make it Italy.”

Gwen said something to her in French that Claire didn’t understand, and Claire replied in Italian. Even though the Italian sounded rusty to her ears.

When they stopped laughing, Gwen took her napkin and spread it on her lap. “Now that we have work out of the way, let’s talk about your love life.”

“It’s always the same with you.”

“Would you rather I tell you about mine?”

Claire found herself squeezing her eyes shut. The image of Neil and Gwen . . . If she needed any more proof as to the roles they had taken in her life, picturing them naked cemented it.

“What if I told you that Neil was—”

Claire lifted a hand. “Nope. I’m good. Thank you for keeping the details to yourself.”

“So?”

Claire erased the image from her mind. “There is nothing to tell.” And as she said the words, the image of Cooper popped up in her head. His eyes lingering on her lips.

“Are you certain?” It was Gwen’s turn to give the look. But hers said something entirely different from her husband’s. Gwen’s look meant You’re not telling me everything, and I’ll just be quiet until you do.

Only this time, Claire wasn’t falling for it. “When is Neil going to let Emma date?”

One question, and Claire’s love life was cleared from the conversation.

By the time they were finished with lunch and took a short walk through a few shops, Claire left Beverly Hills feeling refueled. There wasn’t a day that went by that she wasn’t grateful that she met Sasha and AJ, and in turn Neil and his family.

She pulled into her driveway and was reminded that Jax wouldn’t be home. Her next thought was to call Cooper, maybe grab some takeout.

Then she remembered the lip stare.

Instead of takeout, she settled on a pasta dish she shoved in the microwave and a glass of red. With that, she settled in front of the TV and clicked through the streaming services looking for something to binge-watch.