

Changing the Rules (Richter Book 1) - Chapter 1[2,483 words]

CHAPTER ONE

Claire Kelly maneuvered around the auction table, her eyes in constant motion as she watched for anyone who might think to take one of the many pricey trinkets on display. A form-fitting black dress hugged her frame and stopped before her knees. She wore her strawberry blonde hair straight, and only a minimal amount of makeup dusted her features. Claire silently swore at the pain of her feet pinched into shoes that brought her to a height three inches taller than what her driver's license said she was.

The guests at the charity auction were dressed to impress. The women wore cocktail dresses, and the men wore suits. Because the event was invitation only, the philanthropic, star-filled guest list mandated serious security. That was where Claire came in. Well, she and her colleagues at MacBain Security and Solutions.

She preferred the solutions part of the job as opposed to a security detail, unless the security detail gave her the opportunity to kick someone's ass for breaching it. When the guest list was drawn from Hollywood's famous, Billboard's top artists, and people who frequent the Forbes list of richest Americans, ass kicking would have to wait for another day.

"Ready for a break, Loki?"

Claire smiled at the use of the nickname she acquired in her boarding school. A name she had needed to keep her identity ambiguous should the headmistress stumble upon the covert communications between her and her best friend, Jax. "Yes, please," Claire said into the small microphone none of the guests could see she was wearing.

After rounding the table, Jax smiled at her briefly and took Claire's position so she could step away.

Everywhere Claire looked she saw bling. The women wore dangling earrings encrusted in diamonds, and necklaces sporting every possible gemstone out there. "There's some serious money here," Claire said into her microphone to everyone on the team who cared to listen.

"I'm not sure why this surprises you," Sasha replied.

"If they didn't have money, we wouldn't have jobs," Lars added.

Twilight settled into night, and strings of lights illuminated the outside venue in a magical way. The massive Victorian had coastal views and a large piece of property. The charity

event was raising money for a home for orphaned children and teens. It had grown through the years, according to Neil, and with it the celebrity guest list that made the event a who's who of the rich and famous.

In the six and a half years she'd been employed with Neil MacBain, Claire had met several of the people milling about the lawn. No longer did she feel starstruck when she saw a familiar artist or celebrity. She was numb to it, in all reality. Between the famous people that Neil and his wife knew, and all of their close, personal friends, it appeared that he knew just about everyone.

Claire walked around the back of the house to where the small mobile office was parked. She pressed in the code on the keypad and smiled at the camera focused on the door before making her way inside.

Lars was one of the oldest members on the team. He was not quite five ten with a bit more of fluff around his middle and a sprinkling of gray hair, but that didn't fool her. The man could move if he needed to. She'd seen him do it. He sat at a desk filled with monitors that displayed livestreams from all the cameras around the venue.

"It's perfectly boring out there," Claire announced.

Lars pushed the microphone in front of his lips out of the way. "Just the way we like it."

She motioned toward the door. "You need a break?"

He shook his head. "I'm good."

She glanced at the monitors again. "We could use someone trying to smash and grab right about now," she said almost to herself.

Lars chuckled.

"Be careful what you wish for." The voice in her ear belonged to Neil.

"I thought you weren't working this event," Claire said.

Lars pointed to the monitor. Neil stood beside his regal blonde bombshell of a wife. He wore a suit, but his clothing was the only thing that blended with the crowd.

Neil was a brick house of a man. The perfect bodyguard. Which was what he leaned on after he left the Marines. He hid behind the title of bodyguard until he married. Then he branched into a team environment. Years later he had the crew here in California, and another one in the United Kingdom.

"Look who cleans up well," Claire teased Neil through the microphone.

“What have I said about chatter on the line?”

Claire rolled her eyes and shook her head, but kept her mouth shut.

The announcement for the silent auction tables closing was broadcast over the PA, which gave her a job to do.

Pushing off the wall, she patted Lars on the back. “That’s my cue.”

Back outside the trailer, she pulled down on the hem of the cocktail dress she still hadn’t completely gotten used to wearing. Blend in, she’d been told. The place had security everywhere. The men wore three-piece suits and looked like they were personal bodyguards. And in reality, there were a few of those there as well. But Jax, Sasha, and Claire wore dresses. Granted, there was an awful lot of spandex in the dresses they wore, on the off chance they needed to interact with anyone up to no good. But they were still dresses.

When the auction table came into view, those at the event who were bent on winning something hovered over the items and waited for the countdown so they could write their names in the final and winning spot. Which meant the table was packed with people.

Claire noticed the back of Jax’s head at the far end.

“Everything good down there?” she said into her mic.

Jax didn’t respond.

Claire tapped on the microphone that looked like one of the many beads on her dress. “Yoda?” She used Jax’s nickname.

When she didn’t respond a second time, Claire tapped on the microphone again. “Lars, is there an issue with the mics?”

Her earpiece crackled, almost like it was underwater.

“Great.” The state-of-the-art, high-end toys were shockingly reliable in difficult situations like jumping between rooftops and surviving hand-to-hand combat, but apparently walking around a lawn party was when they failed. “If anyone can hear me, my audio took a hike. I can’t hear any of you.”

Silence met her.

Instead of returning to the trailer, Claire waded through the crowd and did her job.

She was in charge of the east end of the table, and Jax was on the west.

The announcer started the final countdown, and a buzz went up among the hovering guests.

Claire smiled at people as they stepped in front of her, but then looked around them to lay eyes on one of three extremely pricey items up for auction. Items that were small enough for someone to walk away with.

A man stood in front of the pair of diamond earrings. The woman with him smiled as he wrote his name slowly.

Next was a sapphire-and-diamond tennis bracelet where a lone woman was also writing her name.

Then there was a Victorian brooch that was previously owned by some famous woman Claire didn't know. The starting bid was twenty thousand dollars. But at last look, the bid was nearly double that. It, too, was where it needed to be.

"Three, two, one. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, it's time to step away from the auction to enjoy the rest of the evening." With the final direction from the announcer, she heard the first chords of a guitar strummed from the stage. The band hired for the evening welcomed everyone.

The coordinators for the event started to push in as the guests dispersed.

Her gaze ignored those acting as they should and instead found a man who switched places with the woman gunning for the bracelet. His back to her, Claire started to move forward.

His hand reached out to touch the jewelry. Something many of the guests had done all night. But when Claire peered closer, she saw something dangle in his fingers for less than a second. With a flick of his hand, he switched the bracelet on the table with whatever he had in his palm. If she'd blinked, she would have missed it.

Her heartbeat sounded in her ears as her adrenaline started to pump.

"We have a situation," Claire said into her mic as she moved to intercept the man.

The silence that followed had her cussing dysfunctional equipment.

She didn't run, didn't call out. These events called for diplomacy, so unless someone was flashing a weapon, the team was meant to apprehend and deal with any situation with as few witnesses as possible.

The thief kept his back to her as he slowly walked away. Unlike the other guests, he wasn't headed to a table or the bar line that never seemed to end. He headed toward the back of the house to where the catering vans were clustered.

Claire looked away for less than a second to signal to Jax. Only Jax's view was blocked by the exiting guests. When Claire looked back, the man was slipping around the house and out of view.

She reached down and took off one spikey heel and then the next before she picked up her pace.

"Someone lifted the sapphires and is headed to the back of the house. If anyone can hear me. Male, approximately six one, wearing a black suit." Just like every other man there. "I didn't see his face. He is on the heavier side and needs a haircut."

As soon as the voices behind her drifted away, Claire started to run, her shoes dangling in her hand.

The side of the house was deserted, only the fleeing thief swiftly walking away.

"Hey!" Claire yelled.

He didn't look back.

Instead, he started to run.

Claire had the advantage. If there was something she took pride in, it was her ability to beat anyone on the team in a one-hundred-meter dash. So she dashed. Her skirt hiked higher and her legs took off.

She was on him before he reached the pavement.

Her arms tackled his waist from behind and brought him to the ground.

He rolled with her.

Claire attempted to grab on to his skin through his clothing and found her hands filled with padding. Almost like he was wearing something under his suit.

He used her hesitation to twist out of her grasp and scramble to his feet.

Only she was faster. She kicked his legs out from under him before he managed to run a second time.

She jumped onto his back and had his right hand twisted behind him and her knee to the back of his shoulder blades, pinning him to the ground face first. "You're not getting away, buddy," she said between pants.

He heaved his body and Claire put more pressure on his arm. "Okay," she heard him say. And then, for whatever reason, the man's body started to shake.

With laughter.

She pulled on his arm again.

“Okay, uncle.”

Something about his voice.

“Who are . . .” Her hold softened, she moved her knee from his spine, and the man twisted out from under her. Without warning, she was on her back and he was straddling her.

Clear, calculated, and well-practiced moves started to unfold inside of her. Her arms and legs moved at the same time. Her knee came up and met something entirely too hard to be mistaken for flesh, especially male genitalia, which was what she was aiming for. Even without that jarring surprise, she twisted her legs up with his and heaved her weight until he was on the ground under her.

And he was still laughing.

Claire brushed the hair out of the man’s face and finally saw him.

Her mouth opened and her eyes narrowed.

“Cooper?”

Their eyes connected. “Hello, Yearling.”

Cooper Lockman hadn’t seen her in nearly six years.

Six long, education-filled years.

Six years in absence because it was the right thing to do.

Six years where not one day escaped that he didn’t think of her.

Claire’s surprised expression was followed by flailing hands that slapped at his chest in a much more playful way than when she was tackling him. “What. The. Actual. Fuck!”

And he laughed.

“You’re the one that asked for drama.” Neil’s voice sounded in both of their ears.

Cooper could see Neil’s words register in Claire’s head at the same time they did his.

Claire settled on top of him. Her legs spread over his hips, her body upright . . .

Slowly, she started to smile.

When she did, her body relaxed on top of his, and it was then that Cooper realized that six years had changed absolutely nothing.

He placed his hands on her hips to move her off of him.

Once she was on his side, he felt he could actually say something intelligent. Something other than . . . God, you're beautiful and just as amazing as the last time I saw you.

"I thought we lost you to Europe," she said.

"And become an expat? Never gonna happen."

Her smile moved from happy to radiant seconds before she threw her arms around him in a hug of unadulterated happiness.

Cooper allowed his arms to encircle her in response.

He closed his eyes and found himself lost in the moment.

Not that it lasted.

"I trust no one is hurt."

Cooper looked over Claire's shoulder to find Sasha standing several yards away.

"Never better," Cooper told her.

Claire stopped smiling in a millisecond, and without warning she placed her hand on the cup that protected his sexual future. "I knew it."

He brushed her hands away before her touch made him turn red.

They pushed off the ground at the same time. Cooper shrugged out of his jacket and lifted his shirt to tug on the Velcro that kept the fake pounds around his waist.

"When did you get back?" Claire asked.

"Last week."

"Are you back to stay, or does Neil have you slated for the London team forever?"

He opened his mouth to offer an ambiguous reply only to be cut off.

“The reunion can wait. We still have work to do.” Sasha walked up to the two of them and handed Claire the shoes she’d tossed to the ground before she did a full body tackle to take him down. Not that he resisted all that much.

Claire pulled at the hem of her skirt and smoothed a hand over her stomach. “Is my dress okay?”

Cooper wasn’t sure the question was directed at him since she turned a full circle in front of both him and Sasha.

“You look like you’ve been rolling around in the grass,” Sasha said, her Russian accent always apparent.

He reached out and pulled a leaf out of Claire’s blonde hair.

Claire was all smiles. “Or maybe people will think I snuck away to get lucky.”

He laughed.

“Run a brush through your hair. It’s getting dark, no one will notice the grass stains on a black dress.” Sasha turned to Cooper. “Relieve Lars. We’ll recap at the end of the evening.”

Claire turned toward the back door of the Victorian home. “Glad you’re home,” she called out over her shoulder.

“Me too.”

Then she was gone.

He brushed at his pants. “That was fun.”