

Changing the Rules

- Chapter 2[3,050 words]

CHAPTER TWO

“I forgot how hot he was.” Jax stood in the doorway of Claire’s room in the Tarzana house they shared.

It was after one in the morning, but they were still buzzing from the late night. Claire was slipping out of the formal clothes and into a pair of boy shorts and a T-shirt to sleep in. And Jax was talking about Cooper.

“Don’t let him hear you say that. He will remind you every chance he gets about that ‘one time’ you said he was hot.” Claire motioned toward the disguised camera in the hall that she knew was equipped with audio as well. The home had undergone some extensive security adaptation back when Neil’s wife had lived there. The man took protecting his family to serious extremes. When Jax made the move, she and Claire both decided that the internal cameras and audio needed a kill switch. The last thing either of them wanted was for their coworkers to see what they were doing in their personal time. Like talking about the hotness that was Cooper.

Jax flopped on the end of Claire’s bed and curled her pajama-covered legs under her. “Any idea what this special meeting we have tomorrow is about?”

Claire shook her head.

Neil had told the team to sleep in but be at the office at ten in the morning.

“Neil’s cryptic. You never know what the man is thinking until he actually tells us.”

“I hope it’s fieldwork.”

Claire walked into her bathroom and turned on the hot water in the sink to scrub off her makeup. “You and me both. Running after Cooper and taking him down was the highlight of my week.”

Jax spoke from where she sat on the edge of the bed. “Neil knows you get bored. I think that’s why he arranged a decoy.”

“He’s right. Things need to pick up or I’m going to be signing up for those weekend murder mystery things for a little excitement.” Claire used a washcloth to work the mascara off her eyelashes.

“Those look lame.”

“Better than sitting at a computer all the time.”

Back in her bedroom, she climbed onto her bed and faced her best friend.

“It’s crazy how much stuff Richter taught us that we never use,” Jax said with a sigh. The more tired her best friend got, the more her German accent showed up.

Richter was a military-style boarding school in Germany where they both went to high school. Emphasis on military, right down to arms training and hand-to-hand combat. The school housed many secrets inside of its halls. From murderous faculty to recruiting for special agents and covert assassins. All that changed thanks to Neil’s team. Not that the team had any real recognition for their efforts. No, they moved in, exposed the wrongs, and moved out. “That was an exciting night,” Claire said, reminiscing about the evening Richter changed its ways forever.

“Feels like yesterday.”

It had been six years. Jax had had a semester to go before she could graduate from Richter, and Claire had moved with her new chosen family to Southern California.

Neil set her up in the Tarzana home, and Sasha paid for her to go to college. Sasha had attended Richter years before Claire landed there. When Sasha had returned, searching for direction, Claire had taken their mutual understanding of each other as a sign. A sign to liberate herself from the walls of Richter and venture out on her own. Only she hadn’t been on her own. Sasha had been there, along with AJ, her now husband. Claire had always viewed Sasha as an older sister. Sasha made sure that Claire had what she needed, but didn’t helicopter and assume the role of parent.

Claire looked up to the woman. Respected her.

Claire worked for the security business nights and weekends when she was in college. The summer after Jax graduated, she moved in and joined the crazy. The difference was, Jax returned to Europe a couple of times a year, since that’s where her family lived. Claire spent her holidays with Neil and his family, or Sasha and her chosen family.

Neil, the big, stoic dude, busted her ass all the time. He was half father, half boss. And Claire did whatever she needed to to earn the man’s respect.

Jax unfolded from the bed. “I’m exhausted.”

“Me too. Good night.”

“Night, Loki.”

There was nothing formal about her work when Claire wasn't on a personal detail. She arrived at nine thirty and was dressed to go for a late-morning run once the meeting was over. Which meant she wore running shorts that hugged her legs, a pair of Adidas, and her hair pulled up in a ponytail. She would have loved to say she wore some kind of special running bra, but since nature teased her in that area, the garden-variety sport top did the job.

She walked into their main headquarters and straight to the surveillance room. Up on the wall of monitors were views from cameras on many of their clients. Most were angles from front doors, or backyards. But all of them could be expanded with the flip of a switch. Security was a serious business for the rich and famous.

"Good morning," she said as she walked into the room.

Rick turned around in his chair and offered his signature smile. "Hey, Yearling."

She rolled her eyes at the nickname she couldn't shake, regardless of the fact she'd been on the team for over six years. "I'm surprised to see you behind the desk." Rick was Neil's right-hand man on many occasions. He was almost the size of the other man, but with an easier smile. The two of them went back to their days in the Marines. They'd been to hell more than once, from the stories Claire had heard.

"Favor to Neil," he said.

"Is this about today's meeting?"

"Yup" was all he offered before changing the subject. "Judy told me everything went like clockwork last night."

"Did your wife tell you about the false heist?"

Rick laughed. "I heard about that from Lars."

Claire moved to the coffeepot that never seemed to empty. "It's probably wrong for me to crave that kind of excitement."

Rick glanced back at the monitors. "It's normal for people like us."

"I'm not sure that applies to me or Jax. We never saw combat."

"No, but you both trained for it."

She supposed that was true.

The door to the room opened and Neil popped his head in. "Good, you're right on time," he said to her.

“I’m a half an hour early.”

He looked her dead in the eye, blinked. “Like I said, right on time.”

She shook her head. In the early years, she had to arrive fifteen minutes early, and then somehow, after she graduated with a degree in criminal justice, Neil pushed that fifteen minutes to thirty.

She could lie and say she hated his expectations.

The truth was Claire liked the boundaries and structure.

“You gonna tell me what today is all about?” she asked.

He looked at his watch. “In about twenty-five minutes.”

Claire returned her attention to the coffee, smelled it, and decided to put her effort into a fresh pot. “I don’t know how you guys drink this stuff,” she said as she walked out of the room to find water.

“Grows hair on your chest,” Rick called out behind her.

“Not my goal,” she called back.

By the time she had a cup of drinkable coffee in her hand, half the team had arrived. By quarter to, everyone was there, including Cooper.

She motioned a hello and stood back while several others quizzed him on his time in Europe.

Jax sat beside her, similarly dressed since they planned on doing their workout together. “He’s even cuter in jeans and a T-shirt,” Jax whispered in Claire’s ear.

“Are you thinking of kicking Lewis to the curb?” Jax had been dating Lewis for a good six months. The man was finishing up his law degree and prepping to take the bar exam.

“I’m not married.”

Claire looked up to find Cooper smiling at her. It was nice to see him back. She’d been surprised when he left, but that was when Jax moved in, taking Claire’s mind off his departure.

Neil walked in the room with another man and cleared his throat. “Have a seat, guys.”

Chairs scraped against the floor as the team turned to give Neil their attention.

“I see everyone had a chance to welcome Cooper back,” Neil started. “With him here, I’m likely going to be replacing him overseas. After today’s meeting I’ll be looking for volunteers, if any of you are interested.”

“It’s a cush job,” Cooper announced.

“Stupid cold in London this time of year,” Jax said.

“Neil had me all over the place. Not just London.”

Neil cleared his throat a second time and they stopped talking among each other. “Details on that later.” He turned to the man standing beside him. “This is Detective Thomas Warren.”

Detective Warren looked around the group with a slight smile.

“He is the lead on a local task force that is targeting human trafficking. I’d like you to give him your undivided attention.” With the introduction made, Neil stepped back and leaned a hip on one of the many desks in the room.

“Thanks, Neil. I appreciate you all coming in. Like Neil said, I’m part of a larger group of detectives that has been working on identifying and apprehending the organizations that are responsible for human trafficking in our area. Specifically, child sex trafficking.”

Claire glanced at Jax, who sat silently beside her.

“Our team uses outside help on a continual basis. That’s where you come in, if you choose to take on the task. There has been an increase in child sex traffickers finding their victims in several local high schools. While many believe that this only happens in the inner city where the income and poverty level among the community is a factor, that wouldn’t be entirely true. More and more private schools and Title One schools are reporting kids dropping out and seemingly disappearing as well. There appears to be a much more organized effort to target younger and younger teens across the board.” Warren indicated Neil. “Neil and I became acquainted through a mutual friend. I know each and every one of you in this room has a special set of skills that would soar your rank if you ever decided to join the force.”

“Most of us are retired military. We’re not interested in being cops.” Lars spoke for many of them.

Warren shook his head. “And I don’t blame you. The rules we have to abide by tie our hands more often than not. But you guys don’t have that. What you do have are skills to infiltrate the local schools, help us identify at-risk teens, and point us to those who prey on them. More importantly, you’re able to keep yourselves and the victims safe should they ask for your help.”

“This sounds like something your department can do undercover,” Claire said.

“And we have. In the past we’ve managed to identify several victims and those that pulled them into the sex trade.”

“Then why do you need us?” Claire asked.

Warren took a second to look at all of them. “We need fresh eyes, young eyes.” He looked directly at Claire and Jax. “My department has successfully gone undercover acting as teachers, office staff, and the occasional student. All of which turned up the gangs involved. Only now our resources are coming up dry. And no one believes these self-proclaimed ‘entrepreneurs’ have stopped manipulating teens into prostitution.”

“Entrepreneurs. Really?” Isaac asked.

“That’s a stretch,” Cooper added.

Warren kept talking. “The pimps we’ve managed to take down claim no gang affiliation. Of course, many of them lied to keep face with their people. And by gang, we aren’t talking anything as big as those we see in downtown LA, or any of the bigger cities. Some of these guys have a small culture, some as small as a half dozen, or as large as several dozen. Not very organized, but even then, they recruited and pimped their victims independently.”

“You mean the money didn’t go into the gang,” Lars said.

“Exactly. But, as our sting started outing these dirtbags, some formed bigger organizations and changed the way they operate. And that’s the issue we’re having now. Our crisis in over twenty schools has seemingly gone underground almost overnight.”

“The unorganized became organized,” Cooper stated.

Warren pointed at him. “Right. And I’ve been asked to go out, hire a team, and flush out the problem. We still have dropouts, runaways, kids that fit the profile, and some that are just flat-out disappearing.”

“Flush out the problem,” Jax repeated. “That sounds as if you’re questioning your team.”

Warren lost any amusement in his face. “I’ve had solid men and women on my task force.”

“That wasn’t a denial,” Claire said.

The room grew silent, answering the question.

“My superiors want to rule out a team issue within before an internal investigation led by the feds occurs,” Warren admitted.

“So you’ll be telling us who your men are if we take on this task?” Cooper asked.

Warren shook his head. “No. I don’t want you following my team around and waiting for them to fuck up. I want you to go in and find the scum that are behind these kids disappearing or being sold. If in that investigation you uncover any of my men”—Warren’s words broke off, his fist clenched at his side—“any of my men with dirty hands, it won’t be because you’re profiling them. My team is sharp. They’ll know if they’re being followed. As any of you would, too. If they’re dirty, they’ll hide. Nobody wants that.”

It took a minute for Warren’s words to register.

Neil cleared his throat. “What Detective Warren is asking of us is to put together a team to have eyes and ears at two schools. Jax and Claire would be on the inside, different campuses. You’re both young enough to pass as high school seniors. We put Cooper at the higher risk school as an assistant coach and substitute teacher. I’m actively searching out a new member for the team to go with Jax. The details will be hammered out later.”

“This sounds extensive,” Claire said. And not at all like the Hollywood party detail they normally handled.

“We’ll be putting those new PI licenses to work.” Neil directed his comment to both Claire and Jax. They’d wrapped up their degrees in college and licensed themselves in six states so far. Along with a concealed carry permit, it gave them license to protect themselves, and others if needed. Legally.

“Will the school administration know we’re there?”

“Limited. Only the principal and vice principal will be aware of who you are. And we want to keep it that way. There is speculation that there might be someone on staff directing the perps to the kids most likely to fall for their lies.”

“That’s fucked up,” Lars voiced.

“No more than a dirty cop,” Cooper pointed out.

“Dirty cop is worse.”

“I’d rather it be staff than the other. Even better, I’d like the connection to have nothing to do with the people that say they’re there to help.” Warren looped his thumbs inside the pockets of his slacks and rocked back on his heels. “If you choose to work with us, you’ll report to Neil, and he will report to me. We’ll have a deeper briefing if you take this on.”

Claire rubbed her thumb against the palm of her other hand. Nothing ticked her off more than someone preying upon kids. A look around the room told her the rest of the team thought so, too. That aside, the job sounded a hell of a lot better than babysitting celebrities.

“Okay. Thanks for your time.” Warren moved to shake Neil’s hand. “I’ll be in touch.”

There was a chorus of goodbyes as the man exited the meeting room.

“So we’re working with the cops now?” Isaac asked once Warren left.

“Not completely,” Neil answered. He pushed off the desk and moved to a giant whiteboard in the front of the room. He drew a box on the board and then an identical box a foot away. “This is Bremerton, Emma’s school.”

“Your daughter?” Claire asked.

“Yeah.”

“This shit is happening at a prep school?”

Neil silenced them with his hand. He put an X in the other box. “Most of the known cases have been outside of Bremerton. The file Warren briefed me with indicated three positive victims that spent time at Bremerton before getting wrapped up in this. By the time the police caught up with these girls, they were nineteen, twenty, and wanted nothing to do with leaving their pimps.”

“How old were they when they were pulled in?”

“Two were sixteen, one was fifteen.”

Claire could practically hear Neil’s teeth grinding together.

“That’s sick,” Lars said.

Neil drew a line between the two boxes. “This is the school we’re targeting, Auburn High.”

“They’re rival schools?” Claire asked.

“Not directly.”

“Private schools and public schools don’t compete as a rule,” Lars said.

“True,” Neil said. “But it isn’t uncommon for kids to move out of the private schools and into the public schools when they show athletic ability. Especially if the private school doesn’t have an organized team. As an example, Bremerton doesn’t have a football team, Auburn does. Many parents cave to the pressure of letting their kids go to public schools so they can compete and possibly earn athletic scholarships for college. And therefore there are plenty of kids here . . .” He pointed to Emma’s school. “Who know the more vulnerable kids here.”

“Emma’s too smart to let this kind of thing happen to her,” Isaac assured him.

“This isn’t about Emma.” Neil dropped the marker.

“The hell it isn’t.” Claire flat-out called bullshit on Neil’s words. “If there are dirtbags gunning for young girls at Emma’s school, you either flush them out or send her off to a boarding school. Which everyone in this room knows doesn’t guarantee safety.” As Claire voiced her opinion, some of the reasons why Neil would even consider this assignment made sense.

Neil narrowed his eyes, stared directly at Claire. “This is about teenage rebellion being exploited and used for the purpose of financial gain for everyone but that teenager.”

And Emma, Claire mouthed silently.

Cooper laughed. “If anyone so much as looked at Emma wrong, Neil would simply eliminate him.”

Neil didn’t confirm or deny that.

“You were the one who said you needed some excitement,” Lars reminded Claire.

Yeah . . . that had happened yesterday.

Claire broke eye contact with Neil and glanced at Cooper and then Jax.

Jax shook her head. “Looks like we’re going back to school.”