

Changing the Rules

Chapter 3[2,262 words]

CHAPTER THREE

“Do we really look young enough to pass for high school seniors?” Claire stood with a pool cue in her hand and waited while Cooper took his turn.

“I still get carded all the time,” Jax said.

“Even if we look the part, we know next to nothing about American high schools.”

The local bar was a dive. Dark corners and burned-out lights. But the place was clean, and the drinks were decent.

Jax took up space on a stool next to a high-top table that held their drinks.

“What’s to know?” Cooper asked. “You have the cool kids, the mean kids, jocks, and geeks. You have the emo group and the outcasts. The party kids, the popular ones. And they’re all on their phones twenty-four seven.”

“Oh, damn, that’s right.” Claire and Jax were the exception to the twentysomething rule when it came to social media accounts. Claire didn’t have her own cell phone until she moved to the States after her years at Richter. And once they started working for Neil, he made it clear that social media was contraindicated when you worked with him. Private security was just that, private. Social media didn’t fit.

Cooper bounced his solid ball off the bumper, but missed the shot.

“We don’t have accounts,” Jax added.

“As soon as you get your identities, you’re going to have to change that. It’s the way kids communicate,” Cooper said.

Claire walked around the table looking for a shot. “I wouldn’t know what to post.”

“Selfies,” Jax said.

“How self-indulgent.” She lined up her ball and pulled the cue back.

“Yeah, but no one will think twice if you’re taking pictures all the time. And when we learn who the players are, we’ll have images,” Cooper said.

“I wonder how long this assignment is going to take.”

Claire angled her shot and sunk the ball. “Takes time to earn people’s trust and start knowing their secrets,” she told Jax.

“It didn’t sound like a quick job to me,” Cooper said.

“I always thought I’d do undercover work, but didn’t think that would mean I’m going back to high school,” Claire said.

“I know, right? I saw myself on the coast of Italy following someone who jacked all of Neil’s money.”

“How does Neil have that bank account, anyway?” Jax asked Cooper. The man never seemed without funds. And in cases like this one, he had a steady stream of organizations that funneled money into worthy causes.

“I heard he invested a lot when he was a bodyguard for the Harrisons. And Gwen has family money.”

“A lot of family money,” Claire added.

“Why work, then?”

“Can you see Neil on a golf course enjoying retirement?” Cooper asked.

The image had them chuckling. Neil didn’t idle well. None of them did.

“I guess not.”

Claire and Cooper switched places at the pool table, and she changed the subject. “Are you glad to be back?” she asked him.

He stopped concentrating on the game and looked her in the eye. “Yeah. I am.”

“So what did you do for six years? I’m surprised you didn’t pay us a visit once in a while.”

He blinked away, took a shot, and missed. “Neil had me busy. I helped set up the new team. Coordinated different things that will make it easier if we ever find ourselves with a Richter situation again.”

The Richter Situation was a hell of a lot more than a “situation.” Assassins and murder disguised as a military boarding school where the bad guy recruited kids to do his dirty work. Now that Claire had a moment to think about it, she realized it wasn’t so different from the case they were about to dig into. People being manipulated and eventually blackmailed into doing something they didn’t want to do. Only the punishment for murder

was a hell of a lot more than for prostitution. Both would mess up a person no matter how you looked at it.

“Is it awful of me to look back on that and miss the adrenaline rush of it all?” Claire found herself asking.

“You wouldn’t be a part of the team if you didn’t.”

She sighed.

“We’re going to be seeing the inside of the classroom again, not jumping around on rooftops and crashing parties,” Jax said.

Cooper went back to playing pool. “What self-respecting high school kid didn’t crash a party or two?”

Claire and Jax looked at each other. “Never happened.”

Jax shook her head. “Not once.”

“Well, you’re going to get your chance.” Cooper took his aim and sunk a ball.

“Hey, wasn’t it my turn?”

“No.” Cooper narrowed his eyes, looked at the table.

“Yes, it was. You missed on the six ball.”

He glanced at Jax, who pointed a thumb to Claire. “She’s right.”

“Whatever. Makes up for the cheap shot to the groin yesterday.”

She placed a finger to his chest and pushed him away from the table. “Yesterday you were the bad guy running away with stolen gems. A knee to the goods is expected. And since you were wearing a cup, it doesn’t count as a cheap shot.”

“That was Sasha’s suggestion.”

Claire laughed. “We were taught by the same instructors.”

“Nothing polite about a fistfight,” Jax added, sending a fist bump to Claire.

“I’m not singing soprano today, so I’m thankful for the advice.”

Claire winked before scooting one of the stripes into a corner pocket with her hand. “One free for me and the next two turns.”

Cooper sent her an indignant look. “Changed the rules of the game while I was away?”

She pointed her cue at him. “Or we could call it and you just pay up your twenty bucks now?”

“Not in this lifetime, Yearling.”

She winked and leaned over the pool table, pulled her pool cue back. Right as she took the shot, Cooper did his best to interrupt her concentration.

“You hold that stick like you enjoy it.”

Her eyes moved to his, the smile that teased lingered on her face. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Neil handed out driver’s licenses and cell phones like he was dealing cards.

“You are no longer Claire Kelly, you’re Claire Porter. Cooper Lockman is now Cooper Mitchel. Jax Simon is now Jax Livingston.”

Claire looked at her driver’s license. They’d done a good job of making her look like she was sixteen. The age she would have been if she’d been in California when she’d obtained her first license.

“Both your addresses are out of the area to coordinate with a new student transfer. We’re working on a location that we’ll use as a base. You will not be driving directly from your home to the school. Claire, your aunt is a flight attendant.” He pointed to Sasha, who looked bored. “Jax, your parents are newly divorced, and your dad works nights.” Lars waved. “These roles are contingent. The desire is to avoid parental involvement altogether, but we have it in place should we need it.

“Jax, you’re the quiet one. Pissed your dad obtained custody. We want you blending with the kids that won’t be missed if they don’t show up for school. Claire, you’re rebellious.”

“Yes.” Claire put both palms in the air.

Neil stared her down, completely unamused. “If you’re done . . .”

She purposely frowned. “Sorry.”

“Rebellion means your aunt is making you play a sport.” He then pointed to Cooper. “Track.”

“The school is working on your schedules now. You need the broadest range of contacts you can get. Be popular enough to be invited to parties, but blend enough so you don’t stand out and have your covers blown,” Neil told them.

“Your cheerleading aspirations will have to wait,” Claire teased Jax.

She shook her head with a laugh.

Sasha handed out portfolios and continued where Neil left off. “Inside is a wide range of known victims. Along with their pictures are those of their friends. Study these and find potential patterns. Either with the victims or their friend base.”

Claire looked at the first photograph. “Jesus, how old is she?”

“Fifteen,” Jax said, waving her copy to show the details on the back.

At Claire’s side, Cooper sighed. “This is disgusting.”

As Claire sifted through the pages, the victims grew older. When she came to a girl that looked twenty, she turned the paper over and read the bio. Eighteen, but dropped out of school six months before graduating.

“Claire, you and Jax are leaving tomorrow for the Bay Area. You will go to the schools you transferred from, take pictures, and fill up your Instagram accounts.”

“Can we hack Instagram to avoid the date stamp of the photos?”

“Not worth the effort,” Sasha said. “Find an excuse for your parents to have taken you off of social media. Right before you transferred, you earned the phones and accounts back.”

“In your packet, you’ll find a case study done down in San Diego. Some of it is unique to that city and its proximity to the border, but most of it mimics what Warren and his team found before the area organized. Plenty of intel in those pages. Some of the main similarities are the victims themselves. Newly transferred in with a history of neglect and abuse.” Neil stood up. “Jax, you are solo at Bremerton in the beginning. The last time you saw Emma was shortly after you moved in with Claire, and she doesn’t remember you. Everyone else in this room she’s more familiar with. She knows nothing about what we’re doing. I’d like to keep it that way. I’m working on recruiting a second player now. You will take no risks. If you need backup, I will have a need to visit my daughter. Understood?”

Jax nodded.

“Good.” He moved to the whiteboard. “Your main objective on campus: identify the biggest risk. The principal at Bremerton is the only administrator that knows you’re there. I have personally vetted him, and he is not involved.”

Claire chuckled. “Is that your way of saying you know the brand of toilet paper the man prefers?”

“It’s Emma’s high school,” Neil said, deadpan.

Cooper leaned over. "That's his way of saying yes."

Neil continued. "I do not know how deep or fluid Detective Warren's staff is. They could be pushing a broom or be the resource officer. In each of your packets you have a list of current teachers and their tenure." He pointed to Claire. "Auburn High shuffles staff throughout the district, so you'll find plenty of new or newish teachers. What I don't have is all the ancillary staff information. These are district employees, which could easily fit into the profile of perpetrator."

". . . or undercover cop," Sasha pointed out.

"As far as I see this, no one on either campus has privacy until we are off this assignment. Both campuses have security cameras, and Sasha's working on access to Auburn High this week. There will be enough equipment available to plant audio in as many places as we need."

"At Bremerton, too?" Jax asked.

Neil stared at her.

Claire cleared her throat. "Emma," she said as she pretended to cough, guessing that Neil had already tapped into the audio at his daughter's school.

Jax shook her head. "Oh."

"This is fluid. I want you both tracked. Once we obtain decoy housing for you, audio and visual monitors will be in place in all areas but the bathrooms. When friendships are formed and deeper intel is needed, direct those conversations to your decoy home when you can. You will stay at your base if your cover is at risk of being blown. Otherwise go home."

That seemed reasonable to Claire.

"And for the duration of this assignment, surveillance is live in Tarzana."

Much as Claire didn't like the lack of privacy, she understood the need. "No audio," she told him.

For a second, Neil said nothing.

"Inside the house," she clarified.

She held her breath, fairly certain he was going to come back with a rebuttal.

"We'll install voice activation for audio." His words were measured.

Silently, Claire waved her hands in the air, doing her best jazz hands impression. Getting Neil to go along with her didn't happen very often.

Sasha handed her and Jax each an envelope. "Your flight leaves in the morning. Go shopping. Learn the areas. We don't want you tripping over geography or the weather. Spend a day in the city. Do what teens do. Get carded because of your behavior."

"Good idea," Claire muttered in Russian.

Sasha acknowledged her words with a nod.

"Cooper, I have you at Emma's school this week. I spoke with the head track coach. He'll bring you up to speed. He doesn't know why you're there. If nothing else, if something heats up at Bremerton we can move you," Neil said.

"You got it, Boss."

Neil pushed away from the wall. "Unless there are any questions, we're done."

They all started gathering their paperwork to leave.

"For the record, I'm not old enough to be Jax's dad," Lars said.

They laughed.

"That's debatable," Cooper dished out.

"Says the kid that didn't shave until last year."

Claire found her eyes lingering on Cooper's face. The extra facial hair he let peek out since he'd returned from Europe gave him a ruggedness that wasn't there before.

Cooper stood taller and rubbed his chin while looking at Lars. "You're just pissed because yours is turning gray."

"Just wait, buddy."

While he laughed, Cooper turned toward Claire. The laughter faded, but his smile stayed.

And for some strange reason, her stomach warmed. She liked the slight five o'clock shadow. Not to mention the way his jeans fit. Maybe Jax had something there.

Jax cleared her throat, breaking the silence that fell over the room.

Claire blinked out of her unexpected trance.

“Girls’ trip,” Jax said, grabbing her arm.

Claire fist-bumped Jax. “Frisco, baby.”

Jax turned to Lars as she looped an arm over Claire’s shoulder. “I won’t be home tonight, Dad.”

Lars groaned.

Right before they exited the room, Claire glanced over her shoulder and found Cooper quickly looking away.

She stared at his back, some of the humor faded.

Jax tugged her attention. “We have a plane to catch.”