

Changing the Rules

Chapter 37[3,037 words]

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Tony pulled the car into an abandoned warehouse.

Claire was told to get out of the car first.

He dragged Elsie across the seats, waved his gun in the direction he wanted Claire to walk, and kept Elsie close to his side.

Outside, the brightness streaming in from the sun was a complete contrast to the darkness unfolding in front of her.

Tony pushed Elsie away from him, causing her to trip and fall.

She scrambled away on her hands and knees like a hand-shy dog looking for shelter.

Claire stayed standing, presented a calm she didn't completely feel. "What do you want?"

He tossed a pair of handcuffs on the ground. They skittered to a stop at her feet. "Put those on her."

Claire reached down.

"No." He directed his gun at Elsie. "You, put them on her."

Tony obviously knew Claire was the biggest threat.

Elsie scurried over to the handcuffs and picked them up. She slowly got to her feet.

Claire brought both hands out in front of her.

Tony inched forward, yelling, "Do I look like I was fucking born yesterday? Behind your back."

Shit. Keep it cool, Claire. You've practiced hands-tied defense before.

"Claire," Elsie said.

Claire turned around and backed up slowly. "It's okay. Just do what he says."

Tony smiled as the cuffs clicked around her wrists. "Let me see," he said.

She shifted on her feet, lifted her arms behind her, and pulled at the cuffs. Much too tight to slip out of.

Claire stood in front of Elsie.

"You're so tough, aren't you?" Tony growled.

Claire kept quiet.

"Stand over there."

Claire walked several yards away from Elsie, hating the distance.

"Sit down," he yelled at Elsie. "Move a muscle and I'll pop you. You understand?"

Tony walked over to Claire, waved his gun around. "Face the wall."

Handcuffed with a hostage and a pissed-off cop with a gun.

She turned toward the wall.

"Spread your legs."

She steadied herself, feet at hip distance apart.

He moved in fast, kicked her legs wider, and shoved her head into the concrete wall. Her head buzzed with the impact.

She felt the gun on the base of her skull as his other hand ran up the inside of her shirt. "What else are you hiding?"

"Nothing."

She ignored his hand as he grabbed at her chest and ran the length of her bra.

Bile rose when he ran his fingers over her tight shorts. Groping her was a fear tactic. A successful one.

Claire did everything she could to hide any emotion. Showing fear would only encourage him.

"You like that, bitch?"

Tony squeezed the most private part of her body until it hurt.

She bit her tongue.

He wouldn't be searching her if he planned on just killing her, so she kept quiet and prayed to God the team had found the third tracking device disguised as a clip in her hair.

"Stop fucking the girl."

Claire turned her head to see the face behind the voice, was rewarded with a palm pressing her face into the hard surface until she felt her skin break and blood trickle down her cheek.

Cooper stood over Claire's discarded phone and watch. One in each hand.

She could be anywhere. The residential neighborhood emptied out close to a freeway and they were twenty minutes behind her if they were on the run.

He spun in a circle, looked at the houses. Or she could be feet away and he didn't know it.

"Tell me you have something," he said into the phone.

"Her receiver's offline."

Eastman . . . or Grant, as it stood, was talking to his people.

"Who is left? Who isn't in custody other than Tony?"

"Milo and Russell."

"How the hell did they mess that up?" Cooper asked.

Grant looked over with a shake of the head.

Cooper stared at the broken screen on her phone. "C'mon, Claire." Damn thing still worked, but he didn't know the password.

The watch pinged and so did the phone.

"Can you get into Claire's phone? I need a password."

"Try Loki," he heard Jax suggest.

He used the keypad, typed in the numbers associated with the letters.

It opened to a home screen.

"Perfect."

He found the app they used as a team and opened it.

Sure enough it was a slow signal feed from a noncomputerized tracker. “Are we tracking anyone on the H system?” he asked the team.

“No.”

Clearly Claire had considered the possibility of being without her phone, watch, or car. Each blip on the screen was like her heartbeat. Every beat gave him hope. “God, I love this woman.”

“What do you have?” he heard Neil ask.

Cooper forwarded the information to the team and put the car in drive.

Claire had been shoved on the floor next to Elsie.

The girl clutched onto her as if Claire were a life raft on the Titanic.

Milo knelt down, far enough away to avoid a shoe to the face. “I remember you. The paranoid one with the busty blonde friend.”

Russell stood to one side, his gaze just as awestruck as Elsie’s had been.

“Private investigator. I didn’t see that. What does that make her?” Milo asked.

“A scared little girl,” Claire told him. “Nothing more.”

Elsie’s hands were free, but the girl was too scared to use them.

Russell spoke up. And he did so in Russian. “We should go before anyone comes.”

“We’ll leave,” Milo said, again in Russian. “After we clean up a few loose ends.”

“What the hell are you saying?” Tony asked.

Milo took to his feet, walked back to Tony. “I thought I told you to keep all the cops out of my home.”

“She’s not a cop. Has never been to the station.”

The two of them started shouting at each other, giving Claire an opportunity.

“Elsie?”

The girl was whimpering.

“See the pin in my hair?” Claire watched the men fighting. Felt Elsie’s nod.

“Take it out and put it in my hand.”

Too scared to move.

Russell looked at them, briefly, then back to his uncle.

Claire spoke slowly. “You can do it. Trust me.”

Elsie’s hand moved up Claire’s back, stopping every time the voices grew louder.

Finally, Claire felt the pin leave her hair.

“You’re the one who skipped the line and gave her friend a green light,” Tony screamed, pointing the gun their way for a second before tapping his own chest with the thing. “I have a system that keeps all of us safe . . .”

Relief flooded Claire’s body when she felt the pin in her fingers. She worked as fast as she could and still stay in control. She bent the end and found the keyhole to the cuffs.

“. . . you and every damn family sidekick you bring in. How do we know he didn’t narc us out?”

Milo turned to his supposed nephew. “Any of that true?” he asked in Russian.

“I don’t know these people.”

Milo looked at Claire right as she felt the lock go.

She made a noise to disguise the click.

“Good. Then you won’t mind removing one.” Milo removed a gun from the inside of his coat, cocked it, and handed it to Russell.

At first the kid didn’t take it.

“Do it.”

As Russell reached for the gun, Claire started talking. Her Russian was so rapid it took them both by surprise. “You don’t have to do this, Russell. We don’t have anything on you.”

His eyes opened wide.

“What the hell . . .” Tony took a step forward.

Claire inched up the wall, hands still behind her back. “It was Tony we were following. He led us to your house and the storefront,” she lied. All in Russian, which was pissing Tony off.

“What the fuck is she saying?”

“Don’t do this, Russell. You don’t want to go to jail. You have the rest of your—”

“Enough!” Milo yelled.

Cooper knew the team was three minutes behind him.

They heard voices in the warehouse. Men, arguing.

Where are they? He mouthed the question to Eastman, who was on the other side of the entrance.

The man pointed one finger, signaled left. Two fingers, signaled right.

The voices rose and finally, Cooper heard Claire’s.

It took everything not to storm in.

“Taking position,” Neil’s voice informed him.

Eastman pointed to his watch, lifted five fingers twice. Ten minutes? Was he kidding?

Cooper shook his head. Pointed to the ground. Then held out a hand holding him off.

Voices in the warehouse grew louder.

“Russell, in my sights,” Jax reported.

Cooper hoped she didn’t have to squeeze that trigger.

“Tony’s moving in and out,” Sasha reported.

“I have Milo.” Neil’s voice was last in Cooper’s ear.

“Tony’s moving.”

“Go!”

Cooper gave the signal and Eastman yelled the loudest. “Federal agent, put—”

Claire caught a glimpse of a shadow in the upper reaches of the warehouse.

The second she heard a voice, she moved, reached for Elsie to drag her away.

But Tony was too close and he was swift.

Claire was in a headlock with Tony's gun pushed into her temple.

She grasped at his arm and tried to lodge her chin into the space between his arm and her windpipe. Her sparring partners at Richter had always held on hard, but this was a different level.

Around her, everyone had shifted.

Russell had fallen to his knees, the gun he'd been holding on the ground in front of him.

Milo, the cocky son of a bitch, stood there without a care.

"Everyone, calm down." Cooper looked Claire in the eye, raw nerves close to the surface.

"Drop your guns!" The barrel of Tony's gun ground into her skull.

"Calm down." Eastman, who had burst into the warehouse with Cooper, stood with a gun pointed at Tony.

"Drop your guns now, fucking drop 'em. I'll fucking kill her." The more Tony yelled, the closer he sunk into the shadows.

Cooper lifted his hands, slowly placed his gun on the ground. "Okay. It's cool. We're good."

Eastman carefully made the same movements.

Claire knew he wouldn't have done that if there weren't other guns pointed at Tony.

"Kick them over here."

They both did. But Tony didn't reach for them.

"Come on, Tony. Let's talk about this," Cooper coaxed.

"What are you waiting for?" Tony yelled at Milo. "Pick up the gun."

Claire felt the tension surging through Tony's body by the way she was being held. He probably didn't realize that she was gasping for air.

"Pick it up."

She needed the barrel to leave her temple to escape with her head. Or she needed to know the team was watching her every signal.

Milo turned to Cooper and Eastman. "I want to see my lawyer."

Tony's body shifted, dragging her with him. "Fuck you!" He took a step closer to Milo. The gun was no longer pressed right up against her head, but it was still pointed directly at her.

Cooper's eyes glued to Claire's.

Too much more of this and she was going to lose consciousness. If she didn't make a move, she might not get a chance.

I love you, Cooper mouthed to her.

She felt the words in her soul.

"It's over, Tony," Eastman told him.

Claire looked up to the rafters, prayed someone saw her lips.

One hand let go of the grip he had on her neck and settled at her side.

One.

"Let her go."

Two.

"Fuck, fuck."

Three.

Claire went completely limp and shots were fired.

Cooper couldn't get to her fast enough.

When Tony went down, his fall took her with him. And for a brief moment, Cooper couldn't tell if the blood was hers or his.

"Claire? Talk to me." He was on his knees, hands on her shoulders. "Where are you hurt?"

"Everywhere." She looked up at him, coughed, and crawled into his arms.

"Oh, baby." Cooper clenched her tight, didn't think he would ever let go.

There were sounds of footsteps running toward them and sirens in the distance.

Jax ran to Elsie. "It's okay. We got you. It's over."

Cooper looked around, saw Russell lying on the ground, arms spread out. He was pretty sure the kid was crying.

Milo was on his knees, hands behind his head, Eastman standing over him with a gun out, a phone in his hand. "Two injured, one fatality," he was saying.

Neil walked past Milo on his way to Claire's side. As he did, he stopped at Milo, brought him to his feet with both hands. "No one hurts my family." And with one beefy punch, the man was back on his knees, holding his face.

"Three injured and one fatality," Eastman corrected himself.

Hours later, when the paperwork was filled out and the bandages had been placed, Claire stood beside Leo Grant in a private meeting room at the hospital shaking her head. "You have no idea how happy I am that you weren't the dirty cop."

Cooper hadn't left her side for hours. She was pretty sure he hadn't even gone to the bathroom. His arms were around her, on her, holding her, or simply never far away. And she was happy for it.

"I'm pretty pleased I didn't have to rearrange your boyfriend's face for the way he was looking at you."

The three of them laughed.

"What finally tipped you off?"

He folded his arms over his chest. "Remember yesterday, when you talked about the day you would be old enough to make me buy you a drink and reminisce?"

Was that just yesterday?

"You got me thinking. I seem to remember a couple of pretty girls at the end of a bar, one came over and the other slipped away."

"You saw us?"

"I didn't put it all together until yesterday."

Claire laughed, although smiling hurt. "That was pretty epic."

"Weren't you speaking German?"

“I’ve been speaking German since I was eight,” she told him, in German. “Isn’t that right, Cooper?”

He replied in a less practiced accent, but she’d certainly give him an A for effort. They had plenty of time for him to practice.

“I’ll be damned.”

“She speaks five languages,” Cooper said proudly.

“What?”

“Six, actually. You have to count English. Classic overachiever,” she said.

“And your aunt?” Grant asked.

Sasha had left the scene without ever showing her face.

“She’s my aunt.”

“Really?” The man had a little too much hope in his eyes.

“Put it away, Grant, she’s happily married.”

“That’s a shame.” He paused, looked around. “Your team is good. Your decoy home, the fights with the aunt.”

“Your decoy home is a pigsty,” Claire informed him.

“You’ve been inside?”

“Not me. My hot aunt.”

Leo shook his head. “Good thing I never had company over.”

They laughed at that.

“Tell us what you know about Tony,” Cooper said.

Leo sat back, arms folded over his chest. He looked less like a teacher and more like a cop. “I was brought in at the end of last year, right before Tony’s ‘graduation.’ I got to know him and the kids he spent time with at Auburn. I saw the reports he gave to Detective Warren. Things didn’t match up. Tony gave bogus leads, had his team running in circles. He used his position to keep the cops from busting teenage parties.”

Claire looked over at Cooper. "I remember Milo being surprised when his party was broken up."

"I watched Tony all summer. He'd spend every other weekend at a party, playing the role of Tony the teenager. My boss was going to pull me from the school until we realized that Tony was still showing up. He'd convinced Warren there was something brewing and gave him a reason to be there. I knew he was dirty. I just couldn't find the mud. After the first of the year, I told my boss we needed more people. I was never going to find the dirt as a teacher at the school."

"What happened then?"

Leo looked between the two of them. "You guys showed up."

"But Warren is the one that came to us. Not the feds."

"Warren needed to flush out his own cop with a new team. When he took that approach, my boss knew Warren wasn't on the take."

"You didn't know who we were?" Claire asked.

"Not directly. At first I thought you were just a pain in my ass. The kind of pain that ends up on the wrong side of the law if led the wrong way. I wasn't kidding when I said I wanted to help the kids. I pumped them for information when I could. Made sure they could tell me about their weekends without judgment. I planted that bug at your house when I started to wonder if you were really a high school senior."

"You planted the bug in a bush. Not much you're going to learn there."

"I would have gone farther if you'd done one single thing to be someone you weren't pretending to be. But you're good, Porter. Really damn good."

"It's Kelly. Claire Kelly."

"Of course." Leo looked at Cooper. "You were too much of a coincidence to me. I'm guessing Tony was watching you, waiting for a slip or some kind of a link."

Cooper nudged Claire's arm. "Kyle mentioned you early in the week, when Tony was there. Told him you were going to tutor Elsie. He went on to mention the party where you first encountered Milo."

"Someone had to tip him off about today's arrests," Cooper said.

"When did you find out?" Claire asked Leo.

“Last night. Only when I didn’t see Tony’s name on the arrest report, I knew he’d go off. That’s why I was at the shop and on the field today. I figured he’d go after you,” Leo told Cooper. “If he went after anyone.”

“He knew what was going down. Must have tipped off Milo. Another bad cop at the station?” Cooper asked.

“Or Tony has extra ears of his own. Our internal investigation will figure it out. We always do.”

Claire leaned her head on Cooper’s shoulder, exhaustion finally catching up with her.

“I’m sure we’ll be talking again soon,” Leo said as he pushed away from the wall he’d been leaning on.

Claire smiled. “Damn right. You owe me a drink.”

Leo smiled, looked at the bandage on her cheek and likely the bruises surrounding the cut. “I’m sorry this happened,” he said.

“I’m glad it wasn’t worse.”

Cooper’s arms slid around her shoulders as he pulled her in tight.

Cooper shook Leo’s hand. When it was Claire’s turn, she gave the man a hug instead.

After he left, Cooper dropped his forehead against hers gently.

“I thought I was going to lose you today.” His voice was unsteady with emotion.

She knew the adrenaline had finally dumped and now reality was setting in.

“Gonna take more than one bad guy to take me out.”

Cooper pulled back, placed his hands to each side of her face. His thumb traced lightly over the bandage. “I love you,” he whispered.

Claire let a smile spread over her face. “That became pretty obvious a while back.”

He smiled, nodded a couple of times. “I guess it did.”

She waited for his eyes to find hers. “I love you, too.”

“I was starting to think maybe that was the case. But it’s nice to hear.”

“Let’s go home and sleep for a week.”

