

FIRST INSTINCT

by
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CHAPTER ONE

That bastard! How dare he treat me like this?" Leigh Grove muttered, staring into her bathroom mirror. She shook off the memory of her ex-fiancé Peter's recent infidelity and hastily applied fresh pink lipstick with a trembling hand, careful of her healing lip. She checked her makeup. She had covered the bruises well, but her cheek was still puffy.

Running late, she left her third-floor apartment and hailed a passing cab to the Pacific Heights Diner on Union Street. It was upscale and hip, just right for the kind of snotty nouveau millionaires Peter liked to be around.

Her stomach knotted as the pretentious maître d' greeted her and showed her to Peter's table. She followed him through the mirrored bar into the dark and dreary dining area, where Peter Cheney sat at his usual table in the middle of the room. The better to see and be seen by his buddies. He was sipping what she guessed was his first or second Grey Goose martini. Leigh had never liked this place, primarily because of the phony clientele.

"Darling! I was worried when you were late." Peter rose and held the chair for her, waving off the waiter. He sat, rubbing the back of his neck, and immediately took another slug of the martini. "What can I order for you? A glass of wine? A cocktail?"

Leigh stared at him, then busied herself with the wine menu. He seemed nervous, solicitous to the point of fawning. He hadn't tried male manners on her since their first date. "A glass of the Wilson Zinfandel, please." She was surprised to see him order another round. He was

perspiring, too. He was definitely nervous and maybe even guilty about something. Leaning back in her chair, she waited for him to speak.

Peter winked at her, as though they were sharing a secret. “I’ve ordered the oysters. They’ve just come in from the Chesapeake Bay.”

Leigh fought the urge to slap him.

When the waiter arrived with their drinks, Leigh ordered a Caesar salad. The appetizers in the restaurant all tasted the same. She took a sip of her wine and watched Peter toss back more of his cocktail. He was jittery, but she wondered if it was because she’d left him. *Not likely. He hasn’t even noticed the bruises on my lip.*

“Peter, I can’t believe you’d treat me so shabbily.”

He reddened slightly under his tan. “Leigh, I’ve already apologized for that little indiscretion. Can’t we just forget it? I’ll see that my ‘mistake’ is fired. Would that satisfy you?”

“My God. Does she work at the brokerage? What are you trying to do, set up a harem?”

He gave her his best hurt-puppy expression. “Now, Leigh.”

Leigh leaned closer. “Don’t ‘now, Leigh’ me, Peter. I walked in on you two in bed having sex. And the drugs, was that cocaine? Do you blame me for being upset? You’re my—correction, you *were* my fiancé, for God’s sake!” Leigh was feeling more the fool by the minute. How could she have been so blind?

The oysters and salad arrived, and they fell silent. Peter ordered yet another martini and sloshed down the rest of his current one. “It was a mistake. A misjudgment. I’ll never do it again.”

Leigh took a sip of wine, then tried to have a bite of her salad to calm down. This evening was turning out to be just as miserable as she’d thought it would. And Peter was smugly slurping down oysters and drinks without a care in the world.

“The only reason I came over to your condo was that I was worried about you. You hadn’t answered my calls in over twenty-four hours. And your front door was ajar. I thought something had happened to you. Then I discover you rutting away in the bed that we’d shared. How *could* you?”

She pushed her plate away and reached for her wine. Willing her hand to stop shaking wasn’t working, so she concentrated on not throwing her drink on Peter’s hand-tailored suit. Why waste good wine?

Peter seemed to reluctantly turn his attention away from his plate.

“Leigh, I’m sorry. I...wasn’t thinking. Let’s put all this behind us. Darling?”

She was willing to bet his apology was fueled by vodka. Disgusted, she said, “Eat your oysters, Peter.”

He instantly returned to his food.



In a corner booth of the main dining room, Jen Stryker watched Leigh and Peter. They seemed to be arguing. Her attention diverted to the tall redhead who was walking in her direction, Jen grinned in welcome as the blue eyes that were so like her own sparkled in recognition.

Her niece slid in next to her and gave her a hug. “Hey, Aunt Jen. It’s been a while.”

Jen returned the affection. “Yes, Constantina, it has been a long time.” Watching Conn flinch at the use of her full name made her silently vow not to tease her sensitive niece so often.

“Aunt Jen, you know I hate that name. I only let Marina call me that because she’s Greek. I have no idea what Mother was thinking when she came up with it.” Conn studied her menu. “I know, I know, it’s been too long. But at least this assignment has brought us together. Please forgive me and call me Conn.”

“I’m sorry. I like to tease you, and it *has* been too long. Hell, I would have accepted any excuse to get you here. To that point, our possible informant is having dinner with her fiancé right here in this restaurant.” She nodded in the direction of Leigh Grove and Peter Cheney. “Lucky us.”

Conn appeared to be looking for the waiter, but Jen knew she was studying her quarry. Jen poured her a glass of Pinot Noir from a bottle she’d ordered earlier. Conn Stryker had grown into a beautiful woman. No longer the gawky thirteen-year-old who used to spend her summers with Jen in California, she was now the CEO of a large software firm that provided forensic software to not only financial institutions, but to the government as well. And Conn was not just the CEO, either. She was a trained field operative and had enlisted Jen’s help in a case she was working on.

Conn picked up her wineglass. “Well, she’s just as gorgeous as her photographs. Can’t say too much for her choice in men. Now the question is, will she turn against her own fiancé.”

“I have a hard time believing she’s involved in this scam. She’s been nothing but intelligent, fair, and informative with me.” Jen shrugged. “Maybe a touch naïve, but I don’t know her very well. She could be one of those women who just does what her man tells her to do.”

Conn eyed Leigh Grove noncommittally. “What has she told you about herself?”

“Well, let’s see. She got a Wharton MBA in finance and was a sorority girl at Harvard before that. Popular, I would guess. She’s very outgoing. But you probably know more than I do, Conn. What did the background check say?”

“She’s from a moneyed Boston family. Wealth from her mother’s side of the family. Mom is very socially connected. Daddy is a well-known attorney in Boston. I’m sure the social connections haven’t hurt his career. Little Miss Debutante, though, did make over a 3.5 grade point average. She’s no dummy. But I’m sure her parents thought an MBA wasn’t necessary. After all, she could meet Mr. Right at one of their soirees, right?” Conn took another sip of her wine.

“Anyway, I bet she went against their plans for her when she split for California. But then she was swept off her feet by Peter Cheney. Ten years older, some would call him handsome, has his own investment firm. Probably fits the bill as acceptable to the folks. I don’t know what kind of person she is, other than the kind I usually avoid like the plague.” She turned her attention to the menu. “How about some fried artichoke hearts? I’m hungry.”

“None for me, sweetie. I’ve been here before, and their fried food takes two days to digest. And don’t eat too much. I’m making dinner later. I think I’ll go over and interrupt the happy couple, see if I can get a read on them.”

“Okay. Hey, how did you know they’d be here tonight?”

“She once told me this was his favorite place. When she called to reschedule our appointment she said something about meeting him for dinner. I connected the dots and we got lucky.” Jen scooted out of the booth. “Be right back.”

She walked straight to their table. “Hello, Leigh. I thought I recognized you.”

As Leigh automatically smiled at Jen, surprise and embarrassment written on her face, Jen tried not to stare at the subtle bruises on her face and her healing lip.

“Ms. Stryker! What a pleasant surprise. Have you met my...Peter Cheney? Peter, have you met Jennifer Stryker? She’s a large investor in some of your funds and a wonderful client.”

Peter Cheney was struggling to his feet to greet her. To Jen’s practiced eye he was drunk, or getting there. His expression was close to a smirk before he sat down abruptly, and Leigh seemed upset.

Jen reached over the table to shake Peter’s offered hand. “Careful, Mr. Cheney. These chairs can be a little precarious. You must be so proud of Leigh. She’s been a terrific help to me. Beauty and brains. You’re a very lucky man.”

Gazing hazily at Leigh, Peter said, “Yes, she is a beauty.”

Jen noticed with interest that Leigh colored at the comment and diverted her eyes.

“Well, I won’t keep you from your meal. I just thought I’d say hello. Nice to run into you, Leigh. See you soon.” She waved and returned to her table.

As Jen settled into the booth, Conn said, “Seems our Ms. Grove isn’t having as good a time as her fiancé is. She won’t look at him, and her jaw muscles are working overtime. Interesting.”

“I saw bruises on her face. And her lip’s been injured recently. I’m concerned about her. Cheney is drunk and was barely able to be polite. I don’t blame her for being upset.”

Conn’s gaze drifted back to the silent couple in the middle of the room. “Bruises and a split lip. Not something I would envision for a sorority girl and a debutante. Guess she hadn’t planned on real life having a few bumps along the way.”

“A little cynical, aren’t we? If she agrees to go along with this, how are you going to work with her? You’re going to have to keep your opinions to yourself.”

“It’s part of the job.” Conn shrugged slightly and returned to her now-delivered appetizer. “If she agrees, I’ll have to tolerate her plastic insincerity. Big deal. I’ve put up with worse.”

She glanced at Leigh Grove again. “I’ll say one thing for her. She *is* a knockout. Those magazine covers didn’t do her justice. She’s just about got it all. But those gregarious types, the ones that seem perfect, are usually only skin deep. Eye candy. Evidently that’s what Cheney wanted, and that’s what he got. And she got her perfect match.”

Spearing one of the fried artichoke hearts, Jen caught the surprise on Conn’s face and grinned, unapologetic. “Well, I’m hungry. You

know, you might be underestimating Ms. Grove. Keep in mind, Conn, that she was raised to be gracious and politically correct. She probably says all the right things and makes small talk automatically. That isn't much of an indicator as to who she really is. Just my humble opinion, of course." She realized that, typically, her favorite and only niece wasn't listening but still studying Ms. Grove.

Jen sighed. Conn had always been a loner, courtesy of a brilliant mind, height developed too early, and an alcoholic mother. Only once had she confessed that she was afraid to bring anyone home during her childhood for fear of finding her mother passed out, naked, on the floor. Evidently the one time it had happened was enough for Conn.

Conn had spent every summer with her from the time she was thirteen until after undergraduate school. Jen loved her as her own and treasured every moment of watching her grow into an accomplished, strong woman.

But Conn never let anyone too close. Jen and Marina were thrilled when Conn came out to them, then saddened that she had yet to bring a woman home to meet them. Marina even wondered how Conn had figured out she was a lesbian. It seemed like all she did was work. So they practiced patience. And practiced, and practiced, and practiced.

Marina! Jen glanced at her watch. "Hey, I have to go. Marina should be calling from wherever in the world she is, and I want to be home to talk and get dinner going. Are you ready?"

Conn seemed a million miles away. "Huh? What? Oh, um, no. I'll finish my food and wine and be out shortly. Give my love to Auntie M."

Jen stared at her for a moment, wondering what had Conn so distracted. But now was not the time or place to ask. She gathered her things to leave. "Okay, see you in a bit."



Leigh had given up on her salad and the evening. Peter kept repeating himself about the offer to fire the woman with whom he'd been caught. He clearly thought that was all she was concerned about. Either that or his martini-soaked brain could only concentrate on one topic. That topic would, of course, be him.

"Peter, I am *not* interested in you firing the woman you had sex with. I doubt she even knew you were engaged." She watched him

register vague surprise and perhaps even a trace of guilt. On second thought, the guilt was probably in her imagination.

“I *am* concerned about my clients’ portfolios. The companies you’re pushing don’t have sound financials. We both know that. It’s smoke and mirrors. Some of them are okay, but you’re moving more and more into really risky investments. The clients you assigned to me are single older women who live on the income generated by their portfolios. Most of them can’t recover if their investments bomb out.”

Peter sloppily dropped his fork on the tablecloth and set his jaw. “I’ll worry about what stocks they should invest in. I’m the expert. What exactly do you want, Leigh?”

Somewhat surprised by the shift, she pushed on. “I want more discretion in handling their money. I want to be included in deciding what funds they should invest in.”

When he shook his head she continued. “Look, Peter, I may not have a lot of experience, but I do have a good education. I know how to do my research, and I know how to read financials. These aren’t the right choices for my demographic. I want a say in how they’re invested.”

He stared at her blankly, then his eyes narrowed. “Leigh, the other members of the strategic committee won’t go along. You don’t have the chops to even sit on it. Don’t be upset. There are just other people to consider.”

“Strategic *committee*? When was this committee formed? Who’s on it, and why am I *not* on it? What’s going on here? My business ethics prof had plenty to say about the type of activities I’ve been noticing at the office.”

When several of the diners around them stopped their conversations, Leigh realized that her voice must have grown louder. Peter was noticeably sweating, his eyes darting over her shoulder in the direction of the bar. She lowered her volume.

“Listen. I’ve tolerated your patronizing attitude, your buddies hitting on me, and you putting me off about my concerns. But I will *not* tolerate being told to advise my clients based on a mysterious committee that needs to decide if I can be a member!”

By the time she took a breath she felt as though her face was on fire. Peter sat back heavily in his chair, evidently surprised by her words.

The silence between them was palpable, and Peter regarded her

with increasingly cold eyes. “Leigh, listen to me carefully. The strategic committee is my own concept. I recently decided to ask Bradley and Dieter and Scott to be advisors to the business. You may call them my buddies, but they’re all wildly successful fund managers and have a lot of power in this market. They can make companies or break them, and they’ve decided to allow the brokerage, me in particular, to be a part of their success.” He drained his martini, dribbling some on his chin and swiping at it.

“Anyway, I can’t just go in there and tell them what to do. I won’t say, ‘Leigh says she wants to be in on the decisions.’” He regarded her evenly. The smugness had returned.

“You’re serious, aren’t you? You really are going to turn over your clients and your reputation to these guys. Peter, what do you know about them? They aren’t ‘wildly successful.’ They’re middle managers who’ve ridden the success of a few stocks, but how long have they been around? What’s their track record?”

She tried to get through to him. “It’s not just your money you’re risking! Many of the firm’s clients, like Jen Stryker, the woman you just met, rely on their portfolios for credit, income, and retirement. Others have cashed in bonds or borrowed against their homes to be able to buy more, all because they trust you. And me. I’m guilty of taking your word on most of this. Now you tell me that the foxes are in the henhouse. When were you going to let me in on that piece of information? If I hadn’t caught you with that woman, would you have even mentioned it?”

The waiter hesitantly approached with their entrées, and Leigh busied herself with her napkin until he had served them, poured a glass of wine for Peter and refreshed her glass, and quickly left.

Peter took a few gulps of wine and cut a large bite of his porterhouse steak, cooked rare. After stuffing it into his mouth, he stared at her belligerently while he chewed. He washed it down with more wine and said, “Leigh, I’ve made all of the investors a lot of money recently, including you and your parents. One of the perks of my success is meeting and doing business with the movers and shakers of Wall Street. They want me to be one of them. It’s something I’ve always dreamt of doing. Now it’s here, and I intend to be a part of it, all of it. I may be a midlevel fund manager now, but the big time is just a few months away.”

His voice took on a patronizing tone. “You were going to be part

of it because of our personal relationship. You could have a cozy setup with plenty of time off to coddle your rich lady clients like that Jen Whatsername, who just wants someone to go to lunch with and hold her hand.

“If you stick with your choice to end it, you are just another employee. The fund will continue to be managed the way I want it to be, with the advice of the committee. You will take direction from me, or you will not be with this company. Am I clear?”

Peter was different than Leigh had ever seen him. Her stomach was in knots as she put her fork down. “I guess I have to think about this.” She placed her napkin on the table. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Peter took her hand as she started to rise and squeezed it a little too firmly. “I’m not finished. Please sit down.”

His expression and the ache that was approaching pain in her hand made her sit. When he released her, she resisted the urge to rub it, not wanting to let him think he had intimidated her.

“If you decide to leave, don’t even think about contacting any of your clients to give them your opinion about how their money is being handled. Those clients are mine, and any information comes from me alone. And one other thing—I gave you the names of the committee members in confidence. You are not to mention them or the existence of the committee to anyone. Not one soul. Understand?”

His tone was menacing and his eyes flat. “Tell me you understand, Leigh. Tell me now.”

Leigh was dumbfounded. Who *was* this man?

“You really are an ass, Peter. I’m fed up with your patronizing attitude and pretentious lifestyle. I’m out of here.”

He took a breath and leaned back, all smiles. “What, no dessert? You’ve always loved their Grand Marnier soufflé.”

She grabbed her purse and stood up. “Correction. *You’ve* always loved their Grand Marnier soufflé. No, thank you.”