

RISING STORM

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Conn Stryker strode into the cabin surrounded by redwoods and phoned Colonel Maggie Cunningham, her liaison to a world she had chosen years before and now wanted to leave. Ten years of cloak-and-dagger was enough. Then there was Leigh.

“Hi, Maggie. I’m checking in. Any news?”

“Yeah. The Highway 1 incident was reported as a one-vehicle accident. In fact, Caltrans is probably out there now trying to pull the truck wreckage out of the water. We’ve already cleaned up the accident site. It looked like quite a struggle took place. Jess said that your aunt Jen’s house was pretty messed up, too. How’s Ms. Grove?”

Conn felt her throat tighten at the mention of Leigh. She had never wanted Leigh associated with her other world. She’d almost gotten her killed in her effort to protect her.

“She’s asleep. It’s been a helluva few days.”

“I realize—”

“Do you know if they’re still after us? We stopped halfway up the coast for supplies. If Dieter or his thugs come looking, the teenage boy who rang us up will remember Leigh. She’s hard to forget.” Conn slapped her forehead as soon as she made the comment. She knew Maggie wouldn’t miss it.

After a brief hesitation, Maggie quipped, “So is a six-foot beauty with auburn hair.”

Silent, Conn barely registered the words, her heart and mind at war. She wanted Leigh for the rest of her life, but she knew their relationship could be a death sentence for Leigh and that she should end it while she still had enough determination.

Maggie moved on smoothly. “Our last intel reported Dieter and

the woman we think is his lieutenant, Georgia Johnson, have crossed into Canada. But with 3,500 miles of border, that might not mean much. I don't feel good about this, Conn. The people in charge of Dieter base their lives on revenge. They won't forget that a woman discovered their stock scheme and set the feds on them. If nothing else, Dieter will lose his job, and probably his life, if he doesn't seek retribution. Until we know more, we really should put Ms. Grove in a safe house. I know she refused yesterday, but think about it."

The thought of separating from Leigh so soon made Conn queasy. "We discussed it, Maggie. I told her... who I am. She wants to stay with me."

Was she being selfish? The memory of the previous night made her ache with desire. Perhaps their love for each other had clouded logic. She didn't really have a choice. As much as Conn wanted her to stay, Leigh needed to be safe, and Conn had to make the logical decision.

"I'll call you back, Maggie. Thanks for the advice."

She flipped the phone closed, leaned her forehead against the cool windowpane, and stared bleakly into the distance.

Leigh materialized by her side, slid into Conn's arms and held her close, then kissed her lightly on the ear.

The kiss sent a shock wave through Conn. *Dear God. Just tell her. Before you lose your senses.*

"I...I just talked to Maggie again. They don't know who, if anyone, might still be pursuing us, Leigh, but you need to be in a safe house until we have more details." She knew her tone didn't match her words, but she couldn't help it.

Leigh's face registered surprise and hurt. "I thought we'd discussed this, Conn. I won't be separated from you again."

"But you have no idea what these people can do."

Leigh's eyes narrowed and she moved away, folding her arms and staring intently at Conn. "I beg your pardon? I know *exactly* what these people can do. They tried to do it to me several times."

Conn fumbled for words. "No, I mean, I have to keep you safe, Leigh! If anything happened to you..." Her throat refused to let the words come out, but finally she managed to confess, "I don't think I could survive that."

Her words seemed to only steel Leigh's resolve. "No."

"Listen, Leigh. That kid that waited on us in the convenience store yesterday will remember you. All it would take is one slightly

underfunctioning goon to trace us to this area. I don't want to take any chances. I think—"

Leigh raised a hand. "Don't do this to me, to us. I'm safe when I'm with you, not someone else." She seemed to notice Conn's running suit and boots for the first time. "Have you been outside?"

Conn could only nod. The color of Leigh's eyes rendered her mute. They ranged from teal to indigo, but now they were gunmetal.

"Do you love me, Conn?" Leigh's voice was husky, her expression focused.

Conn was helpless to tell anything but the truth. "More than anything in my life. More than my life."

Leigh slid her arms around Conn's neck, and Conn reflexively embraced her as she forced herself to say, "The risk is more than—"

Leigh put a finger on Conn's lips and gently shushed her, her eyes bright with tears. "It's more risky to be separated again. My heart can't take it. I won't do it."

They kissed softly at first, but their passion was overwhelming, making Conn weak with need.

Leigh took her hand and led her to the couch in front of the fire Conn had made when she came inside. "Now," was all she said before she slipped her shirt off her shoulders to reveal her beautiful full breasts and a scorching invitation in her eyes. She untied the string holding up her sweatpants and they dropped to the floor. As she stepped out of them Conn reached for her, but she backed away. "Let me see you."

Leigh's body created a perfect storm in Conn, and within seconds, she stood naked before her, aware that her nipples were hard. Leigh's eyes on them only increased the ache.

Reclining on the sofa, Leigh opened herself to Conn. "Anything."

"All I want is you. All of you. Only you." Conn settled on top of Leigh and moaned in pleasure at the contact. Daylight revealed the flawless skin that she had touched all night, heightening her arousal. Their bodies undulated together as their kisses reflected the urgent need their words had created.

"Need you, Conn." Leigh sounded breathless.

As Conn slid her fingers inside, she gasped at how wet and open, how ready Leigh was. She stroked the delicate folds and found her center, hard and pulsing. Placing her thumb over Leigh's clitoris, she entered her and put her body weight behind her thrusts. "I want you

to look in my eyes when you come. When...we...come.” The words barely emerged. Her own body was already in overdrive.

She cried out as Leigh grazed her center and slipped inside, matching her strokes.

They held one another’s gazes as they moved, and Conn existed in a place of reverence and awe as she experienced the type of love and trust she’d always longed for. She stilled, tight and expanded at once, then crashed through whatever had held her back in the past, not knowing if their union lasted forever or a second, but she was sure of one thing: they would stay together until Leigh told her to leave.

CHAPTER TWO

The sun was high when Conn opened her eyes and looked down at Leigh sleeping in her arms. Hard to believe that less than forty-eight hours before, they had been running for their lives. Now here she was with the woman who had occupied her dreams for months. Without thinking, she kissed the head of blond hair that stuck out in all directions. After making love on the couch they had barely made it back to bed before lust claimed them again.

Leigh stirred, made a few small noises, and tightened her hold on Conn. Her eyes opened slowly. “Mornin’.” She turned over and pushed back into Conn, spooning her.

When Conn responded in kind and they gently rocked together for a moment, the fire threatened to reignite.

Leigh turned to Conn and kissed her, then kissed her again. But when Conn pulled her on top of herself, she winced.

“What’s wrong? Your shoulder?” Conn wouldn’t have been surprised if Leigh’s shoulder had stiffened. Some of their activities the night before had been athletic, not to mention the damage that had been inflicted on Leigh by the men who had chased them from San Francisco before Conn had rescued her.

Leigh kissed her lightly on the lips once more, then let her head drop into the crook of Conn’s neck. After staying that way for a few minutes, she met her eyes.

“Let’s just say I’m a little sore. It’s been a long time since I’ve had sex of any kind, and I have never, *never* had two nights like that. I just don’t think I can. I hope that’s okay.” She looked almost apologetic,

though she quickly beamed. “But I could make love to *you* all day, no problem. As a matter of fact, I would treasure it.”

Conn suspected her grin was slightly lopsided, but it was the best she could muster. “Well, now that you mention it, I’m in the same boat. To say it’s been a while would be an understatement.” She looked directly into Leigh’s eyes. “But the desire is there, believe me.”

Leigh moaned and rolled off her. “My God, you’re going to kill me. Give me your hand.” She placed it between her own legs.

Conn looked at her tenderly, then began to stroke her.

“I can’t. Please.” Leigh placed her hands over Conn’s. “I just wanted you to know that my body reacts to you all by itself. Now, no more sexy looks or I’ll never survive the day. And neither will you, by the way.”

“Promises, promises.”

“Let’s find some very soft, loose things to wear, and I’ll make breakfast. Maybe you could warm the place up. Without you as my blanket, I’m freezing.”

Conn marveled at her extraordinary fortune to have Leigh return her affection. She was not only beautiful and intelligent, she was a passionate, caring lover. And she seemed to think Conn was, too. Leigh could have anyone, male or female, but had chosen Conn and repeatedly shown her how much her choice was a fact, not a possibility. Conn even dared to trust that choice. The idea quickly raised a red flag of self-protective caution in Conn, but she consciously chose to ignore the warning.

After she crawled out of bed, she found fresh warm-ups for both of them, then aimed for the thermostat and firewood. She smiled when she heard Leigh in the kitchen.



Conn gazed at Leigh as they ate, slowly sweeping with her tongue for any errant crumbs, real or imagined, on her lips.

“Oh...my.” Leigh couldn’t take her eyes off Conn’s mouth. She forced herself to take a sip of coffee, willing her body to calm down, but the tongue distracted her. As she watched Conn, her nipples began to ache, so she folded her arms and tried for a stern expression.

“I, ah, I don’t know how to explain this, so this is the best I can

do. I've never had a lover before, and you've opened a floodgate that I can't control. Please don't tease me right now." She unconsciously reached over and covered Conn's hand with her own, which felt like the most natural movement in the world.

Conn quietly studied their hands and nodded. "I apologize. I feel the same way about you. I just can't stop. It's so wonderful to care about someone and have her care about you, too. I'll be good." They sat quietly for a moment, Conn lost in their closeness.

"Leigh? You said you've never had a lover. You were engaged to Peter. Didn't you count him as a lover?" The thought of Leigh with anyone, man or woman, hurt Conn, but she had to ask.

Leigh looked away and seemed to consider the question. "I haven't thought much about it. He was my boyfriend, my boss, my fiancé. But I never thought of him as my lover. Ever." Her eyes drifted back to Conn's. "You're the only one."

Their hands parted as Conn sighed and sat back, still holding Leigh's gaze. "And now, *I'm* in trouble. I suppose it serves me right, but we'd better get out of the house or we're liable to hurt each other. Want to hang out in Mendocino, then go to a women's bar in Fort Bragg tonight?"

"That sounds like a plan."

"I'll clean the kitchen while you shower."

Leigh laughed, her eyes sparkling in the late morning light. "You think I need a shower? Well, you might be right. I don't want a pack of dogs to follow me around today."



As Conn dried the kitchen counters a thought occurred to her. After tossing the wet dishtowel onto a pile of dirty clothes in the utility room, she walked back through the house to poke her head into the bathroom.

"Hey, Leigh. Did you know that, um, the—" The words died on her lips.

Leigh was naked, leaning over in the shower and apparently trying to figure out the nozzles and faucets. She raised her head when she heard Conn's voice and smiled. "Yes?"

"What? Oh! I came in here to...let's see." Thought was impossible.

“Oh yes, did you know that the shower also has a steam vent? I could, um, show you how it works.” Her composure was rapidly dissolving. *Control yourself, Conn. You promised to be good.*

Leigh straightened up and smiled at Conn. “A steam vent? Oh, those are great. Sounds perfect. How does it work?” With a sexy smile she opened the glass door wide.

Conn hesitated but, enticed by Leigh’s almost-palpable body heat, she stepped into the shower, still in her sweats. “See, two showerheads, one at each end, and the steam vent up in the ceiling. Press this button and turn the lever to regulate the steam. It’s easy.” *There, you did that without drooling. Good girl.*

Feeling at least honorable, she turned to find Leigh right behind her. She smiled deliciously and pulled her into a slow, deep kiss.

“Why are you still in sweats?”

“Because I...am...trying...to be...good.”

Leigh grinned. “Show me how to turn on this shower over here.” She backed away and indicated the one behind her.

Reaching around her, Conn pointed the head down so Leigh wouldn’t freeze while the water warmed. The temperature of the room rose when Leigh leaned into her.

“Uh-huh. Now the steam vent.”

Conn pushed the button in the ceiling of the shower and then adjusted the lever to a medium setting. Before she could drop her hands, Leigh had eased under Conn’s sweatshirt and caressed her breasts, then pulled the shirt off in one motion and tossed it over the shower enclosure.

Conn swayed as Leigh ran her thumbs over her nipples. Already puckered from being so close to Leigh, they were now hard and erect. “But I thought that we—”

“Now the other showerhead. Here, let me.” Leigh reached behind Conn, brushing her breasts against her body, then stood upright again, her arousal obvious, and placed her hands on Conn’s sweatpants.

“Oops, these are getting wet.” She pulled them down, kneeling with them, then urged Conn to step out of them and flung them on top of the sweatshirt. After she wrapped her arms around Conn’s hips, she lightly kissed her pubic hair.

“My God, Leigh, I can’t stand up.”

Leigh quickly stood and leaned Conn against the wall between the two showerheads.

“Better?” She directed the hot water from both heads toward her, then squeezed shower gel into her hands and rubbed them together before lathering Conn’s body.

Conn nodded and tried to breathe as steam enveloped them and she heard Leigh’s husky voice in her ear. “I’ll be gentle, don’t worry. And, Conn? Sorry, but I really can’t help myself.”

The steam and water and lust made reality fade, and she let Leigh caress, suck, and kiss her, gently bringing her to a powerful orgasm within minutes. When she could gather her senses, she was sitting on the built-in bench in the stall, completely spent.

She watched Leigh smile and sing to herself as she soaped her own hair and body, pointedly avoiding the same area she’d just ravished on Conn. Managing to stand, Conn allowed Leigh to bump into her as she put the shampoo bottle down.

“Oh, hi. You okay?” Leigh continued to scrub her scalp as she ginned with her eyes closed. She looked beautiful.

“Yeah. Great, in fact. I was about to help you finish your shower. Let me get some gel.”

“You know, Conn, I’m not sure I could—”

Conn gently slid a hand between Leigh’s legs and slipped through the swelling she knew was there. “You can’t walk around like this all day. And if you don’t let me, I’ll tease you every minute. Understand?”

Leigh gasped as Conn went inside her. “Okay. Whatever...oh... yes.”

Conn lowered her onto the bench, then spread Leigh’s legs, knelt, and found her center with her mouth, kneading with her tongue and thumb until Leigh cried out in surrender.

They finally gazed at each other, tepid water streaming over them.

“You know,” Leigh managed, “you were right. I wouldn’t have made it all day, not after making love to you. Just promise me we don’t have to take the motorcycle for a few days. Really.”

Conn helped her up. “You got that right.”

They finished their shower without too many more distractions.



Leigh carefully picked the loosest pair of jeans she had brought with her. The weeks she and Conn had been apart and the stress she'd been under had taken a few pounds off, so most of her clothes would qualify as loose.

When she looked up, Conn stood there in black jeans, shining black boots, and a periwinkle and black sweater.

"You. Are. Gorgeous."

Conn rolled her eyes and turned pink. "I swear I almost said, 'Aw, shucks.' I must be losing it."

"Are we ready to go? I've got our jackets."

Conn pulled out a small gadget from her pack. Satisfied with the settings, she walked over to a table by the great room's sliding door and positioned it so that only a tiny part was visible between a silk plant and the lamp on the table.

"What *is* that thing? It's so little."

Conn looked up briefly. "Remember that motion detector I used at your apartment after someone had bugged it? Well, this is one step better. It's a digital camera with a security function. It'll take a picture of any movement it detects, and if the movement becomes more active, it'll take more pictures. I can download it onto the laptop and check to see if we've had any visitors."

She saw concern on Leigh's face. "Don't worry, sweetie. I'm a gadget freak, if you haven't noticed. It's new and I'm just trying it out. If we do get any pics, they'll probably be of inquisitive deer or raccoons. I want to know how it works in case we really do need it. The security around here is good because I designed it. This is just a toy."

"Do you think they're close?" Leigh's voice was just above a whisper.

"It's only been a short while, and we still have time before we need to be on alert. They may have decided we aren't worth it. I hope so. But from now on I want to be totally prepared. That's all. This is practice." Conn tried to sound casual.

But Leigh obviously wasn't fooled. "Oh, so that's why you strapped on your trusty skin-diving knife. To be prepared."

Busted. "You noticed. Yeah. You never know when some damned giant squid might leap out of the water and attack. And I'm taking the magic cell phone, too. I aim to take care of us, madam. Oh, and I'd better call before we leave and see if there's anything new on Dieter and Georgia."

The mention of their names deflated what had started as a playful conversation, and Conn didn't know how to restore their light mood. She knew how ruthless Dieter was, as was his co-conspirator and lover Georgia Johnson, who had been Peter's secretary. According to Leigh, Georgia was a calculating bitch, so Conn planned to be extra careful. She couldn't take any chances, not with Leigh.

After Conn phoned in their destination and discovered there was no word from Canada—Dieter and Georgia's last known location—Leigh hugged her, and Conn returned the hug fiercely.

"We should hear something soon. Let's call Paris later and see if we can connect with Aunt Jen. She'd like to hear from us, I'm sure. Maybe Marina is still there, too."

Aunt Jen had flown to Paris to rendezvous with her partner, Marina Kouros, who had taken a break from her assignment in Pakistan. As one of the world's most famous faces in broadcast journalism, Marina often had to meet Jen in faraway places so they could be together, but that had never interfered with their devotion to each other or Conn. Knowing how close Aunt Jen and Leigh had become, Conn was hoping to distract Leigh from the terror Dieter's name evoked.

Finally leaning away from their embrace, Leigh regarded her steadily. "I'd love to talk to them. Conn, I can deal with anything as long as I have you. Don't ever sugarcoat the truth or try to protect me from it."

Conn glanced away, but Leigh's voice called her back. "Hey. Look at me. We stand a better chance together. You don't have to do this by yourself. You've got me now. Don't shut me out."

Unable to stop, Conn blurted, "I just don't know—"

"Hush." Leigh pulled Conn into a tight hug. "Don't go there. I'll say this as often as I need to. I'm a big girl and I make my own choices. I choose you. Now, let's leave before the day is over."