

# RETURNING TIDES

*by*

RADCLYFFE



2009

The two figures on the deck were easily visible by the light of the three-quarter moon. From his spot on the deserted, storm-ravaged beach, he could make out the way their arms entwined and their mouths met in a long, passionate kiss. He watched *her* press herself against the other woman, pretending she was excited. Pretending she could be satisfied by someone like that. He knew better. He knew who she really wanted, what she really needed. He imagined her rubbing her hard-nippled breasts against him with the same abandon, her pelvis rocking on him, inviting him to fuck her. He heard her moans and whimpers, felt his cock gliding through hot swollen flesh. He heard her panting, begging, crying out for release. He smelled her excitement, tasted her arousal in the back of his throat. His cock twitched at the thought of her tightening around him as she came. Begging *him* to fuck her the way she needed to be fucked. Screaming when she came. Screaming for *him*.

With shaking hands, he raised the Rigel 2500 night binocs. The images came into focus, so large and so clear he might have been standing on the deck with them. He could make out her eyelids fluttering as the interloper kissed her and fondled her breasts, long fingers plucking at her nipples through her partly open robe. Her face contorted with pleasure and she let her head fall back, offering her throat—a sacrifice to the unworthy. Her mouth opened in a silent sigh as the other woman kissed her neck and slid a hand inside her robe to cup her breast. Her lids lifted, her expression languid and ripe as she flattened her palms against the other woman's chest and pushed her away, laughing. She

tilted her head toward the glass doors behind them. He knew what she was saying. Saying to him.

*Take me to bed. I want you to fuck me. I want you to make me scream. Make me scream. Make me scream.*

“I will, soon,” he muttered as she disappeared inside and closed the blinds. His head pounded with a mixture of rage and resentment, the pain a muted echo of the insistent throbbing of the erection that strained against his pants. He gripped himself and squeezed so hard tears blurred his vision. “I’ll give you just what you deserve. I promise.”

## CHAPTER ONE

At the sound of a knock on her office door just after nine a.m. on a crisp, sunny September morning, Acting Sheriff Reese Conlon happily shoved aside a pile of paperwork. In the past six months she'd gone from commanding Marines on the ground in Iraq to manning a chair for twelve hours a day. Even the recent hurricane had only given her an excuse to leave the office during the height of the catastrophe—she'd been back behind her desk coordinating the cleanup efforts ever since. The transition back to civilian life after having been deployed in wartime was harder than leaving active duty the first time, five years ago. Right about now, almost any interruption was welcome.

“Come in,” Reese said, easing her nearly six-foot frame back in the swivel chair.

The door opened and Carter Wayne, an ex-cop turned small-town attorney, walked in. She wasn't wearing the designer suit Reese had seen her in a few days before at Provincetown City Hall. Today she was dressed in faded blue jeans, an open-collared, rust-colored silk shirt, and brown boots the same color as her dark chestnut hair. A wide belt with a flat silver buckle circled her sleekly muscled waist. Hazel eyes met Reese's across the desk.

“Sheriff.”

“Carter,” Reese said, waving to one of the two wooden fold-up chairs in front of her desk. “Have a seat.” When Carter sat down, Reese pushed back from the desk and crossed one ankle over her knee. “What can I do for you?”

“How about a job?”

“Lawyering starting to wear on you, huh?”

Carter smiled. “I seem to recall you’ve been there yourself. Didn’t you do a stint as a JAG in the Corps?”

“A short one. I still can’t quite remember what made me think I’d rather practice law than drag drunk recruits back to base on a Saturday night,” Reese said with a shake of her head. “Of course, military policing is different than civilian law enforcement. An MP has a fair amount of leeway to interpret the rules and regs. We go by the book here, even when it’s less expedient.”

Reese watched Carter’s eyes as she spoke, but didn’t expect to see anything in them. Carter Wayne was an experienced undercover state police officer, at least she had been until her involvement with the daughter of a reputed mob boss cost Carter her career. Carter had come close to abandoning her duty while undercover investigating Boston crime boss Alfonse Pareto. She’d fallen in love with Pareto’s daughter, Rica Grechi, and run afoul of the FBI. Reese understood risking everything for the woman she loved. There was nothing she wouldn’t do, nothing she wouldn’t sacrifice, to protect Tory or their daughter. But she couldn’t have an officer serve under her who she couldn’t trust.

“I served twelve years, five of them undercover. If I told you I never bent the rules, you wouldn’t believe me,” Carter said, meeting Reese’s deep blue eyes squarely. She’d expected Conlon to lay her past on the line. Carter had spent her entire life working with men and women who believed that the distinction between right and wrong was clear, and who were willing to risk their lives in the name of justice. She’d been one of them, although the years she’d spent undercover working drug and organized crime cases had dulled the blacks and whites to shades of gray more and more often recently. She’d never met anyone with a stronger code of ethics or greater sense of duty and responsibility than Reese Conlon. She half expected Reese to tell her she didn’t measure up, and maybe by Reese’s standards, she didn’t. But she’d been a good cop, *was* a good cop. “You can trust me to hold the line. You have my word.”

“What I want,” Reese said, “is your promise that if anything comes up that might make you choose between honoring the badge and protecting your family, you tell me.”

Carter stiffened. “Rica has nothing to do with this.”

“Rica has everything to do with it. We both know who she is, and

just because her father's kept a low profile and stayed out of her life for the past six months doesn't mean he's going to continue."

"I won't let him drag her back into his world," Carter said. "And I won't let him contaminate this one."

"And if he tries?"

Carter set her jaw, knowing the answer would determine Reese's decision. "If Rica were physically threatened, I'd do anything I had to do to protect her. Short of that, I'd deal with problems through channels."

"Meaning advise me," Reese said flatly.

"Right." Carter sat forward. "Look, we live here. This is our community too. I want to do my part, and that isn't filing paperwork for a living."

"Tell me about it." Reese looked at her desk and winced. Carter laughed. "The hurricane has chewed this place up, and we've got more work than we can handle, and will have for half a year or more. I can use you."

Carter let out a breath. "Good. I'm ready to work."

Reese nodded. "There's a bunch of paperwork—in your case, all of it a formality. Fill it out, and I'll push it through." She riffled through a stack of papers and pulled out the duty roster, giving it a quick look. "You'll have the midnight-to-eight shift for the rest of the week. Starting tonight."

"Riding graveyard." Carter grinned ruefully. "Always great to be the rookie."

"We both know you're not, but—"

Carter held up a hand. "Hey, I get it. I'm the new kid on the block. I don't have a problem with that."

Reese stood and extended her hand across the desk. "Then welcome aboard, Officer Wayne."

Once Carter left to fill out the necessary forms in the front office, Reese went back to sorting through the incident reports from the previous shift, most of which were the ordinary run-of-the-mill occurrences common in any community—traffic accidents, drunk and disorderlies, assault and batteries, domestic complaints, thefts. The bulk of the work facing her department resulted from the hurricane that had devastated the entire Cape a week before. In its wake, the storm had left washed-out roads, untold property damage, injured and displaced civilians, and dozens of reports of thefts and suspicious fires, all of which needed to

be investigated. Most of the Provincetown residents who had evacuated were just trickling back into town. As the community repopulated, Reese expected to receive more reports of vandalism and theft.

She rubbed her eyes, her headache firmly in place even though it was only midmorning. She hadn't slept much in the ten days leading up to and following the storm, and although she was resting better than she had been immediately after her return from Iraq, she was still dreaming. Still remembering. When she felt the edges of her consciousness start to darken and a tightness settle in her chest, she reached for the phone.

"East End Health Clinic," a melodious male voice answered.

"Is she free?" Reese asked.

"Is she ever?" Randy, the clinic's receptionist, responded with a dramatic sigh.

"Two minutes."

"I'll be timing you."

Reese listened to the silence for a few seconds, and then the voice she'd been waiting to hear came on the line.

"Hello, darling," Dr. Tory King said. "This is a nice surprise."

"How's your day going?" Reese asked.

"The town may still be half empty, but we've got a full schedule. How about you?"

"I'm drowning in paper." Tory laughed, and Reese pictured her leaning against the front of her desk, the phone tucked between her shoulder and her ear, signing off on charts while they talked. She'd be wearing pressed jeans and a cotton shirt under her white lab coat. Her wavy, shoulder-length auburn hair would be loose, her sparkling eyes shifting between blue and green with her mood. Listening to her, remembering waking up beside her that morning, Reese's disquiet along with the band of tension around her chest eased. She took a deep breath and let it out, feeling the memories of death and horror slide away.

"What else is going on?" Tory asked gently.

"I just hired Carter Wayne."

"Good. You can use the help, and Carter is a pro."

"Agreed. Did you hear from Kate? Are they on their way back?"

Reese was thankful for more reasons than she could count that she'd reconnected with her mother after years of estrangement, and that they lived in the same town now. Kate and her partner Jean were not only

family and wonderful friends, they provided childcare for Reese and Tory's one-year-old daughter Reggie.

"Apparently the extended family isn't done spoiling Reggie quite yet. They're leaving tomorrow and will be back midday."

"Good. I miss her," Reese said. "Do you think she misses us?"

"I think she would, if she weren't with Kate and Jean. But she spends as much time with them as she does with us, so she feels safe and secure. I'm certain she'll be very glad to see us."

"Same here. Well, I should let you go, I promised Randy—"

"Are you okay?"

Reese sighed, embarrassed that she had disrupted Tory's always busy schedule because she couldn't deal with her own ghosts. "Am I that obvious?"

"Not at all, sweetheart. But you don't usually call me in the middle of the day."

"I'm okay. I just needed to hear your voice." And she knew if she shut Tory out the way she had done right after she'd returned, they'd both suffer. She'd promised she would try to reach out when she needed help, even though it went against her every instinct.

"I love you," Tory said. "I'm done at seven. Dinner?"

"I'll give it my best shot."

Tory chuckled. "You're an expert marksman, Reese. I consider that a sure thing."



"So what do you think that's all about?" Officer Allie Tremont whispered to her partner, Bri Parker.

"Huh?"

Allie was struck again how much Bri looked like a younger, slimmer version of Reese—thick, coal black hair cut long in the front and short around the ears, indigo eyes, and a break-your-heart smile. Aware that Bri was staring at her with a confused expression, Allie tilted her head slightly and Bri followed her gaze. "Check it out."

Carter Wayne leaned against the waist-high counter that separated the work area, where Bri's desk and three others were pushed together, from the real heart of the department—the communications center

presided over for the past twenty-five years by Gladys Martin, a civilian aide. Gladys screened incoming calls, relayed dispatch orders and information, and pretty much controlled everything else that kept the department running smoothly. Carter, a dozen years older and thirty pounds of muscle heavier than Bri, looked relaxed and casually self-confident as she rested an elbow on the counter and filled out forms. Bri knew as much of her story as anyone, but she didn't really know her. Carter was a lot like Reese—a seasoned cop, about the same age, and they'd both reached the top by being tough, and by being the best. Carter was Reese's equal in a way that Bri hoped to be one day. Secretly, she was a little bit jealous of Carter, even though she knew that was crazy. She couldn't help the way she felt.

"It looks to me like she's coming on board," Bri said tightly.

"Yeah," Allie said contemplatively, her soft Southern accent becoming more accentuated. "That's how I read it too. So, you think she'll end up partnering with one of us?"

Bri stiffened. "Why? You and I are partners. Reese won't split us up."

"I don't know. We're still the rookies, even if we have been doing this for a year. And Carter—well, Carter's gonna have rank on us."

"I guess it would be up to Reese." Bri stood abruptly. "Come on, let's get out of here. Take a tour around town."

"Hey, fine by me. I'll tell Gladys."

Bri watched Allie saunter over to the counter, knowing without being able to see her face that she would be cruising Carter. Allie cruised every woman, gay, straight, single, or married. With Allie's statuesque physique, her wavy mahogany hair, and her deep dark soulful eyes that promised fantasies come true, Allie generally got cruised back. Bri had only ever been in love with one girl, but for a few crazy weeks a year or so ago when her head was all turned around, she'd almost given in to Allie's charms. That was behind them now, and she and Allie were partners at work and tight friends. She was probably one of the only people who really knew that Allie was a lot more than just a beautiful flirt. Allie *was* both beautiful and a flirt, that was for sure, but she was also loyal and tender and, underneath her bad girl image, lonely.

Carter looked up when Allie approached, smiled and said a few words Bri couldn't hear, and then went back to her paperwork. From

where Bri was standing, Carter seemed to be immune to Allie's charms. But then, Carter was rock-solid married. Like Reese. Like her.

"All set," Allie said when she returned to collect her gun from her desk drawer.

"Learn anything?" Bri settled her hat low over her brows and slid her weapon into her holster. She held the door open for Allie as they walked out the side door into the small parking lot.

"Nope," Allie said, passing Bri and starting down the stairs.

Bri was right on her heels and when Allie abruptly stopped on the last step, she plowed into her and almost bowled her over. "What the fuck, Al."

"What the fuck is right!" Allie sounded both shocked and angry.

"Uh-oh," Bri muttered, finally noticing the redhead standing on the blacktop path ten feet in front of them, her face set and her eyes riveted on Allie. Bri hadn't seen Ashley Walker for the better part of a year, not since Allie and Ash had split up. Ash looked thinner than she remembered, the lines around her eyes a little deeper, her body pared down to tight muscle and bone. She'd cut her thick, slightly curly crimson hair to just above her collar, and the sleeker look accentuated the tight planes of her cheekbones and jaw. Ash's blue eyes flickered over Allie's body and then resettled on her face.

"Hello, Allie. Bri," Ash said in a low, throaty alto.

"Walker," Allie said coldly. "What are you doing here?"

"Working a couple of dozen cases down this end of the Cape." Ash slid her hands into the pockets of her khakis and swallowed around the dry, hard knot in her throat. She had known this first meeting would be tough, and she'd thought she was prepared for it, but she'd been wrong. She'd underestimated just how hard it would be to see the anger in Allie's eyes and hear the loathing in her voice. In the eight months since she'd seen her, Allie had changed. She'd cut her long, dark hair to collar length, but that wasn't it. She'd lost the sheen of innocence that had shimmered beneath the sexual allure that was as natural to Allie as breathing. She was still beautiful, even more so now because of the edge in the sculpted planes of her face, but she also seemed remote, untouchable. And that was right, wasn't it. Ash had been the one to walk away.

"That doesn't answer my question," Allie snapped.

“Courtesy call.” Ash tried not to wince when Allie snorted rudely. “I’ll just head in to see Nelson.”

“My dad’s out on indefinite sick leave,” Bri said. “Reese is chief now.”

“Oh, damn, I’m sorry,” Ash said. “Is Nelson okay?”

“He’s doing better.” Bri’s mouth thinned. “He had heart surgery about a month or so ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I didn’t know.”

Allie strode down the path directly toward Ash, forcing Ash to sidestep hurriedly or risk getting knocked on her ass.

“Why should you know?” Allie said as she passed, a slight hint of DKNY’s Be Delicious trailing in her wake. “You’re not part of anything around here.”

“Tell Nelson I said hello,” Ash said quietly as Bri hurried after Allie.

“Sure. Thanks,” Bri mumbled.

Ash heard a car door slam, then another, and forced herself not to turn around and watch Allie drive away. She’d already seen her walking out of her life every day for the last eight months, and she heard what Allie didn’t say. *You’re not welcome around here.*



“I can’t believe she just showed up like that. Like she could just walk right in,” Allie fumed.

Bri wheeled the cruiser out onto Shank Painter Road and headed toward Bradford, carefully keeping her eyes on the road although she could have driven it blindfolded. Allie sounded mad, but underneath the mad was a little bit of quaver that sounded like tears. Tears just ripped Bri up. “She said she was here on business.”

“Of course she is. When isn’t she?” Allie folded her arms across her chest. “That’s the only thing that matters to her.”

“She definitely screwed up when she—” Bri caught herself just before she said *dumped you*. Allie was usually the one breaking hearts, and she’d taken it hard when Ashley Walker had called things off between them. Like a good friend, she said, “She didn’t know how lucky she was.”

“Old news,” Allie said dismissively. “Ancient history. Hell, I would’ve been out of there in a few more weeks anyhow.” She stretched her legs beneath the dash and tilted her head back, staring at the ceiling of the cruiser. “I like variety. I’m not like you and Reese, Parker.”

Bri glanced over at her. “How’s that?”

“Pussy-whipped. Not my style.”

“Jesus,” Bri choked out. “You better not let Reese hear you say that.”

“I didn’t hear you denying it, though.” Allie tilted her head toward Bri and grinned. “Of course, you probably don’t have all that much imagination, seeing as you’ve been sleeping with the same girl for what—six years? God.”

“Don’t go there,” Bri said good-naturedly. Allie never passed up the opportunity to tease her about the fact that she’d only ever slept with one girl. She and Caroline Clark had been together since they were sixteen, and she knew she would never ever get tired of Carre’s kisses, or the sexy glint she got in her eyes when she woke Bri up in the morning wanting sex, or the way she cuddled in Bri’s arms after she came, sighing with contentment. Carre filled Bri’s heart with wonder. She made sense out of a crazy world. She was the one.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to pick on the afflicted.” Allie poked Bri’s arm. “Swing by the rescue squad station.”

“Why?”

“No reason. Just a friendly visit,” Allie said nonchalantly.

“Uh-huh. No reason like the new EMT in town? What’s her name?”

“Flynn.”

“So what’s her story?”

“Dunno.” Allie grinned at Bri. “Yet. She only got here a couple of days before the hurricane hit, and then we were all so busy with the casualties I barely had a chance to say hello. She did say we should drop by sometime, so I just thought it was time we got properly introduced.”

“Sure.” Bri headed over to Conwell. They worked frequently with all of the emergency personnel in town, and it wasn’t a bad idea to touch base with the new EMT, but she doubted that was the only reason Allie wanted to see the good-looking blonde. “Good idea.”

“Thanks.” Allie appreciated Bri not giving her a hard time just then. She wanted to flirt with a woman, laugh with a woman, feel the heat of a woman’s appreciative gaze on her skin. She wanted to *not* think about what Ashley Walker was doing in town. Or how long she would stay.