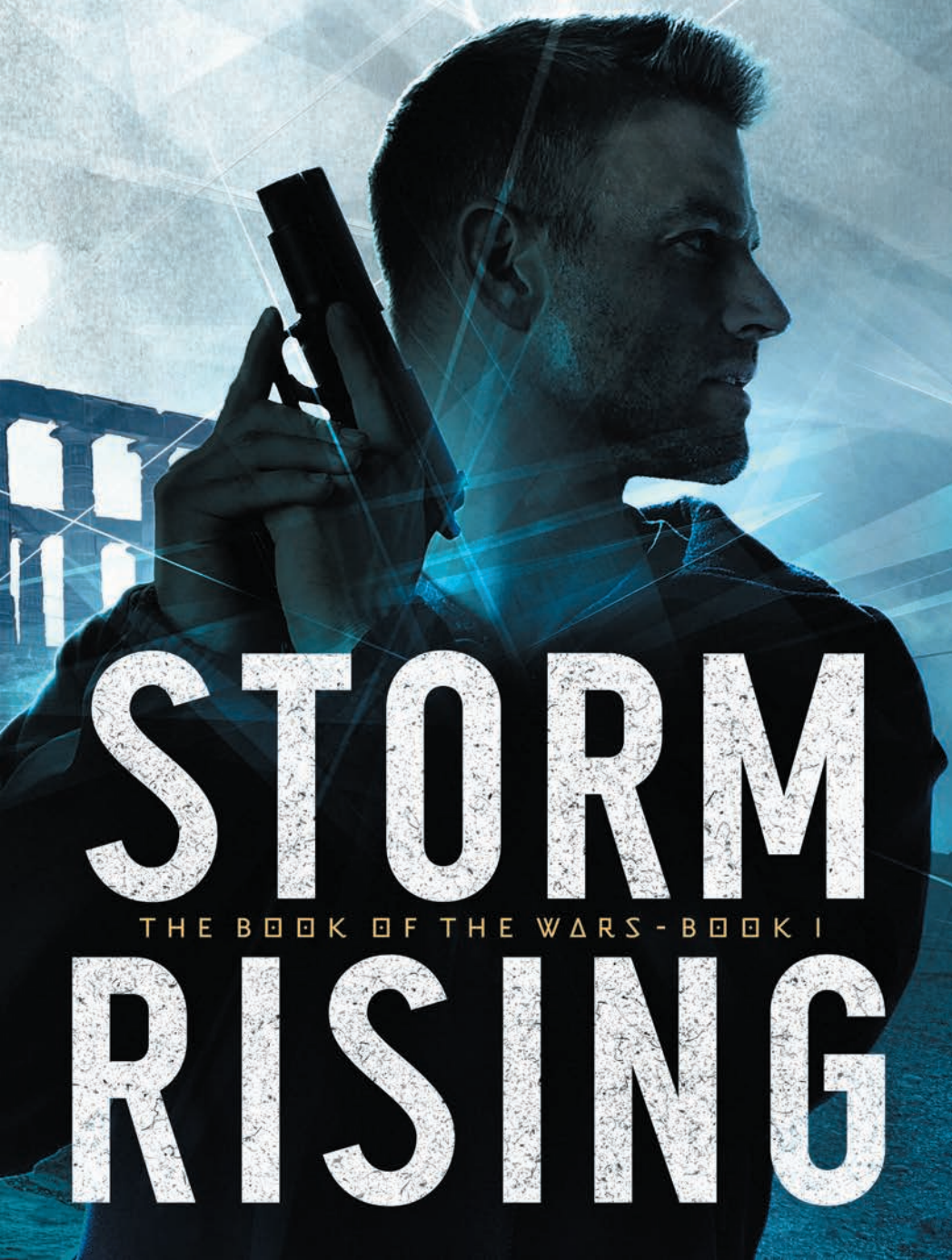


BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE TOX FILES

RONIE KENDIG



STORM RISING

THE BOOK OF THE WARS - BOOK I

THE BOOK OF THE WARS ♦ I

STORM RISING

RONIE KENDIG



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Prologue

UNDISCLOSED LOCATION NEAR CUBA

He'd never killed a woman in cold blood before, but now was as good a time as any.

Boots pounding the concrete as he sprinted through the bunker, former Special Warfare Operator Leif Metcalfe knew he could not let her escape. Not again. He'd never live it down. The guys wouldn't forgive him. Everyone was sick of her ability to slip through their fingers like a well-oiled serpent.

"Runt," came the tight, controlled voice of Director Iliescu through the comms, "I don't have to tell you—"

"Nope"—*huff-pant*—"you don't." Nobody had to tell him what would happen. What letting her get away meant.

"Get her and get out. Radar's lit up with a storm. AWACS is heading back. Personnel are evac'ing. GTHOOD ASAP."

Curious. Storms had happened the first time he'd chased this chick in Greece. But it had to be big for the Airborne Warning and Control System plane to turn away. "Copy," Leif grunted between breaths, focused on one spot—the end of the bunker tunnel where he'd seen the operative vanish. Shuffling to a slow jog, breath heavy in his lungs, he snapped up his M4A1 as he closed in. He needed

Iliescu's warning like he needed to eat another bullet. He'd get out of Dodge as soon as this operative was down.

His huffs rang loud through his comms as he slid up to the juncture. He plastered his spine to the wall. Glanced back in the direction he'd come, seeing the bobbing approach of a half dozen more men. He couldn't wait for them. It was only thirty, maybe forty-five seconds, but that was plenty of time for her to give him the slip.

Not this time.

Peering down the length of his weapon, he eased into the turn. *Crack! Pop!*

Feeling the sting of concrete shards on his face, Leif jerked aside. Out of her line of sight. He cursed. Grunted a few more breaths and mentally jotted down what he'd seen: Her frame. The light behind her. Water rippling.

She'd been to his eleven. Moving away?

He heard frantic steps. Running.

"Entering tunnel," he radioed as he stepped in. Shoulder to the wall, he kept his head swiveling. Adrenaline jacked.

"Careful," came the warning growl of former Army Ranger Adam Lawe. "This one's not afraid to force-feed you lead."

"No kidding," Leif hissed, sure he had tiny pieces of wall embedded in his cheek from her attempt to shove it down his throat.

Releasing a shaky breath, he advanced. He did not want to die here. Each plant of his boot, each exhale, felt like a homing beacon for her. "Come to the island, they said," he murmured. "It'll be safe, they said. . . ."

He snorted. This was a remote military location full of elite operators carrying out training exercises and maneuvers, and somehow the Wild Rose of Peychinovich slithered through it. This chick had to be out of her skull to tempt the trigger fingers of SEALs, Green Berets, and Pararescuemen.

And yet she'd handed them their butts. Taken off with ease and the prized Book of the Wars.

Following the trajectory he recalled from that split-second recon of the tunnel opening, Leif slowed. Drew on the memory of the maps on the wall. To his ten, a small terrace overlooked a drop-off into the sea. To his three, a curtain of water. The placid pool that engulfed the rest of the area was easily fifteen, maybe twenty feet deep.

So, left. Unless she'd drowned herself in the pool or waterfall.
If she didn't, I'll help her.

Something moved in his periphery.

With the M4A1 pressed to his cheek, he snapped to his nine. Firmed his grip. Relaxed his stance. Scanned the sparkling water that tossed light and spray in his face. He blinked but advanced, tense.

She blurred around a passage of jutting rock winding up a cleft in the wall.

Leif eased back the trigger. Fired a short burst. Which she'd anticipated.

He felt more than saw the ambush as she came at him.

Her booted foot flew at his face. He released his weapon. It bounced against his chest, thanks to the strap. Deflecting the strike, he shoved her leg back. Drove a fist into her side.

With the roar of the waterfall and his adrenaline, he didn't hear the air leave her lungs. But the way her shoulders hunched in . . .

She landed smoothly. Effortlessly. Dropped into a fighting stance. Something in her gaze tempted him to stand down. Think back to what she'd said. What she'd done.

Made a fool of me—twice. Because he'd bought her story.

Not this time. Leif snatched his thigh-holstered handgun. He had to end this—end *her*.

Viorica was already there with a cadence of strikes and kicks. Knocking away his weapon. Advancing. Pushing. Forcing him to surrender ground. Rock dug into his spine.

He ducked her next blow. Slipped under her swing and pivoted, flipping their positions. With a roar, he threw himself at her.

Jammed his forearm up against her throat. Used his weight to pin her. "Where is it?"

She remained focused and calm, not an ounce of worry in her expression as she cuffed his wrist with one hand and his elbow with the other. She'd twist it if he gave her the chance.

Not happening. He leaned in, arm pressed harder into her throat. Cut off her air. Trained his Glock on her cheek.

Her eyes widened marginally. Aware—finally—of what he was willing to do.

"Where's the book?" he demanded.

She coughed, her face reddening.

"Runt, what's going on?" Iliescu commed. "We've lost visual and audio. Do you read? Over."

The waterfall must have been interfering, blocking his transmission. Hopefully they'd figure it out. "The book!" Leif shouted, applying more pressure. His shoulder right on her breastbone squeezed off what little air remained in her lungs, refusing her another breath.

"Yo, Golden Boy," came the teasing voice of combat medic Dai Saito through the comms. "She finally pop you for us? Report your position so we can retrieve your corpse."

Viorica shoved him. Leif stumbled, gravity trying to yank him into the pool. He skidded around it, then came up straight. All that remained of the operator was a shadow.

The cleft!

He bolted after her. Slowed when she appeared at the edge of the cave structure, her silhouette framed in the setting sun.

Cradling his Glock, he closed in. "Nothing there but ocean, Viorica. Give up. Or let me shoot you in the back, and the sharks dine on prime assassin." He shortened the gap. "The book. Give it up—tell us where it is."

Even as he erased the distance, the blood of the sun drained into the water and turned gray. The sky darkened. What? His gaze skipped over the horizon.

“—ack here!” a voice crackled in his ear. “There’s—all—storm. Now!”

Facing the churning waters, Viorica glanced over her shoulder and smirked. “Letters of Marque,” she said, twisting her wrists.

“Don’t!”

She bent her legs and shoved off the cliff.

PART ONE

ONE

ONE MONTH EARLIER VOLGA DISTRICT, RUSSIA

“Weak!”

With a grunt, Iskra Todorova threw another hard right, followed by an uppercut.

“You are weak!” Ruslan growled as he held the bag. “This—*this* is why you fail him. This is why he thinks to send you back.”

The pointed truth stung, because she heard the gloat in Ruslan’s words. He’d warned Hristoff she couldn’t be trusted, that she would let him down.

After a left hook, Iskra followed up with a round kick—nearly nailing the bodyguard in the temple.

He flinched back, eyes wide with shock, then glowered at her. “Do that again, I’ll teach you a lesson you won’t forget.”

Iskra hid her smile but savored the small victory. Ruslan had always been hard on her—hated her, hated that Hristoff Peychinovich, their employer, kept her in luxury and showed her favoritism. She didn’t want for anything—as long as she kept Hristoff happy. As long as she did what he said.

The door to the training room flung open. Face pale, chest rising and falling, Iskra’s assistant, Lesya, stopped short, clinging to the knob as if it could somehow protect her. She gathered herself and straightened. “He wants you.”

Hristoff hadn’t spoken to or acknowledged Iskra since she’d failed her last mission to retrieve a priceless Cellini sculpture.

“And,” Lesya gulped, “they’re here.”

Ruslan stalked toward her, shoulders drawn. "Who?"

"ArC—Mr. Veratti."

"You mean his people," Iskra said, steadying the bag.

"No." Lesya moved farther into the room. "It's *him*. Mr. Veratti himself."

"Veratti never *visits*," Ruslan gruffed. He pointed a meaty finger at Iskra. "This is your fault."

Though she didn't want to admit it, didn't want to give Ruslan that pleasure, he was right. Her failure, the same one that had angered Hristoff so much that he gave her the cold shoulder for two weeks, had brought *Ciro Veratti* to Russia.

"This is bad," Ruslan warned.

Iskra unraveled her wrist bindings as he started for the door. "No," she said, tossing aside her gloves, "it's *very* bad."

Veratti held more sway over Hristoff than anyone else and evoked more fear in him than all his enemies combined. On several occasions the Italian billionaire had brought Hristoff to his virtual knees. Though her boss gave lip service to the Armageddon Coalition, his loyalty stopped there. Hristoff had one master: greed.

Ruslan's phone buzzed, and he looked at it. Then at Iskra. "He wants you."

With a nod, she said, "I'll shower—"

"No." He held up his phone. "Now."

She thought of the Lycra pants and tank top she wore. Sweat plastered her dark hair to her face and head. Would Hristoff beat her again for appearing before power players in "inappropriate attire"? Or would he want them to see her toned body, a sign of her physical prowess?

They hurried through the palatial mansion that had been her residence—never would she call it home—for the last twelve years. Iskra glanced out the windows that lined the hall. On the helipad, a sleek black helicopter lurked with two guards.

As they approached the main gallery where Hristoff entertained guests, voices filtered across the marble floors. She slowed at hear-

ing a pleading, placating tone. She almost didn't recognize it, but that was Hristoff's voice.

Dread churned in her stomach as Ruslan gave a light rap on the wooden door and stepped in. He said nothing but inclined his head to Hristoff, who was perched on a settee.

Hristoff's hair was cut short around his temples and crown but curled along his collar. The goatee, which he'd added in recent years, somehow gave him a dignified air. Enough women fawned over him to keep his ego large and healthy. But she had never been able to think of the man who held her leash that way. He was an animal.

Swirling a snifter of amber liquid, Hristoff did not seem happy. Then again, when had he? He speared her with a look that warned her to behave. She crossed the room, sensing more than seeing the other man, who instilled fear as easily as plants gave off oxygen.

"Ah." Veratti's tone was neither amused nor pleased. "There she is." He did not seem dwarfed by the large fire roaring in the floor-to-ceiling hearth. In fact, the flames seemed to amplify his dark persona.

Iskra walked behind the settee and stood at Hristoff's right. Out of trained habit, she let her hand rest on his shoulder. When only his jaw muscle moved at her touch, she lifted her head.

"I've seen photos of your Wild Rose, Hristoff, but you oaf! She's half your age."

Hristoff slowly came to his feet, and Iskra feared what he would do. He had never been known for restraint. "She's here."

The way he said it startled her. Pushed her gaze in the direction she'd avoided—toward Veratti. He was terribly handsome with black wavy hair, a chiseled jaw—no surprise in Italian nobility—and broad shoulders that taunted the stitching of the suit he'd probably spent more on than most did on a car.

Why had Hristoff said "she's here" that way? It held meaning. As if Veratti had asked for her. Or . . .

Veratti's gaze raked her body. "Well, at least there is one area she's not lacking."

Disgust thickened her thoughts, but she'd learned long ago to

bury those feelings. She considered giving Veratti a lesson in exactly where she wasn't lacking, but one thing held her back. His handsome appearance was coupled with dark eyes that held a dangerous glint, and they were still locked on her. She'd seen the same look in Hristoff's eyes the first time he saw her, when Papa offered her in repayment of a debt. Barely a teen, she had become his property. Later, she had become more.

Chin tucked, Veratti seemed especially amused. He strode to the nearby high-backed chair. "You're putting a lot of trust in a woman, Psychinovich."

Fury reddened Hristoff's face as he too recognized the predatory look. But perhaps he saw his own vulnerability in this situation, as he merely tossed back a gulp of liquor. "Because she can do it." Though he stood and swaggered to the bar, there was a hesitancy in his actions.

Sliding his hands into his pockets, Veratti gave a cockeyed shrug. "She didn't last time."

Again, he studied her. Assessed her. Left her with the distinct feeling of being played over an open flame. If it did not come with such a high price, she would leave. Be free. Not the prized working cow these two were verbally sparring over.

"She *will* do it," Hristoff growled, slamming the snifter down on the marble counter. He hated being questioned or contradicted. Years tethered to him warned Iskra that he would not hold his temper much longer. Surely he wouldn't lose it with the Italian billionaire, the founder of the notorious organization ArC, which had been described as worse than ISIS.

Iskra went to the bar and opened the fridge. She retrieved a water bottle, then stood beside Hristoff. He'd told her before she was a calming presence, and he definitely needed that right now. But was that still true after her massive failure with the Cellini?

Hristoff flicked the glass across the counter. Iskra caught it, preventing it from crashing into the sink. He gave the billionaire a smug smile. "What is the artifact? Tell her, and she will get it done."

Veratti again considered her.

Annoyance flared, and she itched to make him look away. But that penetrating gaze left a deadly impression on her psyche, a warning. Her life depended on this mission, that was clear. So she stowed her irritation and remained implacable.

"There is a book," Veratti finally intoned as he returned to the fireplace and stared into its dancing flames. "It is called the Book of the Wars, and it is imperative that I recover it."

"*Recover.*" Bringing his attention back to herself wasn't what Iskra had intended, but his word choice was significant. "Then you had it at one time?"

He hunched over the fire as if protecting it. "No." He downed some liquor before facing them. "Not in its entirety. We had only a page. Discovered a few decades earlier, it is but a clue that the book exists. It had been thought lost to history."

"And it's not now?" she persisted.

"Iskra," Hristoff hissed. "Quiet."

"No," Veratti said, wheeling around. "It is good that she asks. Unlike you, Hristoff, she seems interested in cooperating with ArC, which makes her a very clever, beautiful woman."

Iskra skidded a glance at Hristoff, sure he would be livid by now. Fists balled, he was reaching below the counter. The Ruger.

She drew in a breath at the thought of him challenging Veratti. Nobody challenged the Italian prime minister.

"If she intends to succeed and remain alive, then she will want every vestige of knowledge about the Book of the Wars."

Her mind snagged on his last sentence. Remain alive? Her understanding of the relationship Hristoff had with this man radically shifted with those words. Hristoff owed Veratti a sizable amount of money, and her failure with the Cellini had greatly impeded his ability to repay it. But since when was he subordinate to Veratti?

"It is not a question of *if* it will be found," Veratti said. "The first leaf has been decrypted and revealed where the book's journey began."

"And you're a cryptologist or linguist that you know this?" Iskra's stomach tightened. She'd gone too far with that, teasing in sarcasm, and she saw the same thought darken his expression.

"I am not," he said, his words controlled, "but someone who owed ArC a great debt was part of decrypting the leaf." His black gaze ensnared hers again. "You want to live, yes, Iskra?"

"I prefer it." Going after this was her last hope. Her last chance.

"And you would do everything in your power to stay that way, yes?" He wanted to taunt her. Make her squirm. Which was why he was inching closer, peering at her from beneath those thick brows.

"Yes."

But not for the reason he believed. That was her secret alone, and one that fueled a treacherous thought. It hung in her mind, taunting, tempting—Hristoff's fear and submission, Veratti's anger. A plan hatched in the fertile soil of desperation. She might—just maybe—have the answer she'd been looking for. But it would be the most dangerous mission she'd ever taken. Her heart thundered.

"And you would do anything to get the Book of the Wars back, yes?" He crossed the room. Towered over her.

"Yes." She felt his hot breath fan her cheek. And she saw his meaning and intent. Did he see hers staring back?

"Good. It's in the salt mines of Israel."

She gave a sharp nod.

He grabbed her ponytail and jerked her head back, forcing her to look up at him.

Her fists and anger coiled.

"Fail *this* time, and *I* will own you."