

# **Rusty**

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## Chapter 1

The sun beat down relentlessly from the cloudless sky as I stepped down from the bus just a short distance from Paphos harbour. The simmering resentment I had felt as I stormed out of the hotel room had dissipated into mild irritation. Why were men so stubborn I asked myself, as I looked up and down the road, trying to decide which way to go? Why can't they accept they're not always right? That sometimes, mostly, I reflected, women know best? Well, he knew now, though his macho-pride wouldn't allow him to admit it. He was suffering, and for the moment, I thought it served him right.

My name is Rusty Simmonds, aged thirty one then, (although people said I looked much younger), and a comfortable size 10. I'm told I have a pretty face with a small upturned nose, a small mouth and short dark hair that had a tendency to curl at the edges. I was wearing a light blue, loose fitting, sleeveless top, a lightweight, dark blue wrap-around skirt that reached just above my knees and a pair of light blue flat shoes that I'd bought especially for the holiday. They were the most comfortable shoes I'd ever had. I had been looking forward to this holiday, my first abroad, for weeks, months even, and was determined I was going to enjoy it. Jake, my husband's stupidity, notwithstanding.

I stood where the bus had dropped me. On one side of the road there were shops, lots of them and I was determined to spend today. That would serve him right. The other side of the road ran along the sea and back to the harbour. My watch told me it was still ten minutes before midday and I wasn't hungry yet. I'd promised myself I'd eat at the harbour, but first, I'd shop.

Already the sun was making my skin hot and I knew I'd done the right thing in liberally applying a factor 30 sun cream. There was more in my bag to apply later. The one regret I had was not having the courage to leave my bra off. I could just about go without one, but my top was loose and I was conscious of what I might be showing if I leaned too far forward. Now it felt tight and hot. There was an occasional breeze that I was convinced would cool my sweaty breasts. Then I laughed inwardly, remembering that ladies don't sweat, they glow.

There were a few gifts I needed to buy for friends and family back home. For Neeta, my best friend, I bought a fridge magnet, and for my mother and Jake's mother I bought a tea towel each. The shops provided some shelter from the heat and I wandered into several just to cool off. Several shops claimed to be offering cigarettes at cost price and much cheaper than back home. I didn't smoke, but Jake's father did, so I bought 200. Jake's mother would be cross with me as his father was supposed to be giving up. Let Jake sort that one out, I told myself. I hadn't decided yet what to buy for my grandmother, Granny Wise. She was old, and neither a fridge magnet nor a tea towel would be appropriate. Never mind, there was still plenty of time.

Further along were jewellers. One had diamond rings and bracelets without displaying prices. Oh how I would love to have the bracelet right at the front. It had three intertwining bands of gold and three diamonds set into each band. I sighed. If you had to ask the price, you couldn't afford it; I'd learned that lesson long ago. Definitely too expensive. The display in the next window did have prices and a bracelet that was marked as £250 appealed to me. It took me a while to convert the price (in Cyprus pounds) into sterling. It was still too expensive. But I decided a topaz ring for £120 would look pretty on my finger. And it fitted perfectly. I paid by credit card and left the shop wearing it.

A few minutes later I crossed the road and made my way slowly towards the harbour. The pavement was wide at this point and there were many street vendors displaying their wares. I was impressed by the artist who would produce a creditable portrait in about 20 minutes for £15 and amused by the cartoonist who would produce a caricature in only 15 minutes for £10. I passed both. I was invited to take a trip on one of several boats for various lengths of time, all of which I declined. Young men and women were offering other people scratch cards, but never to me. Was there something about me that singled me out as one who wouldn't have been interested anyway?

In the bay, two people were racing in jet-skis and someone was just ascending on a para-sail. It fascinated me, but I knew I wouldn't have wanted to try it myself; I wasn't adventurous enough and I occasionally had symptoms of vertigo. As I returned my attention to the street vendors I saw one who offered to create a necklace with your name written in the Greek alphabet, a maximum of ten letters for £7.00. I had some difficulty in making the man understand I wanted 'Rusty' as my name. It wasn't a name he recognised and I had to write it for him. Once he understood he expertly bent the wire into the required shape. I had no way of knowing if what the letters said was correct. "What the heck, it's only a bit of fun," I told myself as I fastened it around my neck.

The tables outside the restaurants were filled with the lunch-time trade as I made my way along the harbour. What did I want to eat? I was determined not to be a stereotypical British tourist looking for British comfort food. I wanted something authentically Cypriot or Greek. The menus outside each restaurant promised mouth-watering choices, but I really wanted to sit and eat my meal at the water's edge, where I could hear the water gently lapping against the moored boats and the sea wall. As I stood studying the menu of one restaurant I felt as if someone was looking at me, appraising me. The feeling was intense and yet I couldn't see anyone. My back was towards the tables along the sea wall. How could I have such a strong feeling if it was someone behind me, someone I couldn't possibly have caught out of the corner of my eye? Was I mistaken? Without making it too obvious I slowly turned round. There were six tables along the sea wall, all occupied - three by families and two by groups of women. At the sixth table was a man wearing dark glasses so I couldn't see his eyes. At the same table were two

women, or perhaps, more accurately, two girls. One looked about sixteen and the other perhaps a couple of years older. They could have been sisters. Both girls were tanned and wearing bikini tops consisting of little more than two small triangles. The younger one wore shorts and the older one a very short skirt. How I envied them their confidence. Even if I had a figure as good as theirs I'd never have the courage to go out with so much of my body exposed to view. The man was talking to the girls. Maybe they were his daughters, although I could see no family resemblance. I decided I must have been mistaken and walked to the next restaurant and studied the menu there.

Reaching the end of the harbour I still hadn't decided what to eat or where. I started to walk slowly back. As I neared the table where the man sat with the two girls, the girls stood up and with a final word to the man, left. The man was alone and there were now seats at the water's edge. Expecting him to be leaving soon, too, I asked if I could sit at his table. His voice was warm and pleasant as he politely said it would be his pleasure if I joined him. He was dressed in good quality, probably designer, bottle green shirt and khaki shorts and, if he had two daughters, I reasoned it would be safe. The waiter took my order of Greek salad with prawns, a side dish of olives and a fruit juice. The man ordered another fruit juice but nothing to eat.

"Is this your first time to Cyprus, Rusty?" the man asked as the waiter disappeared. How could he know my name? I didn't remember having met him before. He sensed my confusion. "Your necklace says 'Rusty'. I assumed it was your name. I apologise if I'm wrong. I'm Oliver, by the way." Relieved that I hadn't made a fool of myself by not recognising someone I knew, I confirmed my name and that it was indeed my first time on the island. His voice was educated and without accent. Instinctively I felt I could trust him, and I relaxed. Apart from my row with Jake, and the shop assistants, I'd not spoken to anyone all morning and I welcomed conversation with someone, almost anyone. He was easy to talk to and I found myself telling him how much I was enjoying my holiday, even though it had only been two days. He asked what I wanted to see during the rest of my week and all I could think of were the 'Tombs of the Kings', which I'd passed on the bus, and Coral Bay. He warned of the dangers of getting burned, simply and without being condescending. And then I told him about Jake.

Jake had refused to wear any lotion as he has a tendency to tan quickly anyway. He ignored all my attempts to persuade him the sun was much hotter than at home and to cap matters, he'd fallen asleep while sun bathing. When he woke up he was as red as a lobster and that morning the thought of even a shirt on his sore parts sent him into spasms of pain. He had learned a very harsh and painful lesson but I doubted he would learn from it the next time. He was stubborn and claimed he'd have been OK if I hadn't let him sleep so long. It was his claim that it was my fault that had led to the row. Telling Oliver made me see the funny side of it and I felt so much better. Oliver said his situation wasn't all that different. His wife was a sun worshipper, although she didn't burn. She already had a golden tan. All she wanted to do was sit by the pool and sun bathe. He laughed when he told me

she insisted on having a pool but never ever went into the water. We all had our oddities, he said.

“How come you attract all the good looking women, Olly?” the waiter asked as he came to remove my salad plate and I ordered a strawberry crepe and an iced coffee with two scoops of ice cream. “Not that I’m complaining,” he added. He explained that Olly, as he called him, spent three or four hours at the same table most days when he was in town. And there was hardly a minute when he isn’t accompanied by some of the best looking women around. He implied he included me in this category which boosted my ego enormously. The waiter hailed from Hartlepool. “No monkey jokes, now,” he insisted. I didn’t know what he meant. I wondered how many of the women who sat at the table with Oliver had been chatted up sufficiently to meet them later. He was quite handsome and had a good patter, I admitted to myself, and I was certain I wasn’t the only woman to think so. Oliver smiled, but didn’t answer the question. He ordered iced coffee, too, but without the extra ice cream.

"You looked puzzled by the waiter's reference to 'Monkey jokes'. Do you know what he was referring to?" Oliver asked. I didn't. "Many years ago a monkey was washed ashore near Hartlepool. Obviously he couldn't understand what the locals were saying and they didn't understand him. Never having seen a foreigner before, the locals thought he was a French spy and hanged him. People from Hartlepool are now known as 'Monkey hangers'.

"Poor monkey," I smiled. "At least that waiter can speak a foreign language. I heard him talking to someone else in what I assume was Greek a few minutes ago."

"He speaks quite good Greek, and French, and a little German. He's not your normal Brit. That might sound rude. Do you speak any languages?" I had to admit that I was a typical Brit in that respect.

“Would your husband be interested in the Tombs?” Oliver asked as I finished my crepe. I laughed. Jake would only be interested in the Tombs if there was a football match being played there. Or perhaps a ritual sacrifice of a virgin. He loves movies with lots of blood and gore. “Would you allow me to show you the Tombs?” he asked, adding that his car was parked just across the road. Was this his reason for spending so much time at the restaurant, I wondered? Was he just waiting for the opportunity to pick up women who might be just a little lonely? As if sensing my unease he apologised immediately. “Perhaps it wasn’t such a good idea. You have no reason to trust me. I’m sorry if I put you on the spot.” At that moment he took off his dark glasses. His eyes were pale blue, like the sky above, and his face was free from any trace of duplicity. Instantly I knew I could trust him. And that was odd. I’m not the sort of person who can assess someone immediately. When I’d tried in the past, I was more often wrong than right. But this time I was confident in my judgement. I accepted his offer.

On the way to his car we stopped at a kiosk and Oliver bought two bottles of water. He was adamant we would need them and he refused to

allow me to pay. His car was a black VW Golf convertible, and the leather upholstery was hot to my bare legs. He found a towel in the boot and placed it on the seat so my thighs didn't stick and burn. The Tombs were only a ten minute drive away. As we parked, he suggested I put more sun cream on if I had it. It seemed strange having someone other than Jake rub the lotion on my back, but his hands were firm, gentle and his behaviour very proper. He again insisted in paying my entrance fee.

Once inside, I realised why I would need water. The landscape was parched scrubland with a few scattered low bushes. There were no real trees to provide any shade. It seems the tombs were not those of kings either, but of noblemen. Tombs often housed generations of the same family. If that was the case, the first two tombs must have been of low ranking noblemen who had small families. Walking down the steps and entering the first tomb, I was suddenly grateful for the shelter it provided from the sun. It was also much cooler. The tomb wasn't very complete and there were many other tombs around that were in a much worse state. Maybe these were overspill tombs for the nobleman's family. The next three tombs were much bigger and in a much better state of repair. Steps had been built, quite recently it seemed, down, and the tombs resembled houses from the outside, with pillars and inscriptions over doorways. Inside, there were further rooms leading off, and many more recesses in the walls cut at different levels. The ceiling was domed. Surely these must have been for families of higher ranking noblemen. Returning from the relative cool of the tombs to the heat outside I was glad of the water.

It was almost two hours later that we completed our exploration of the tombs. I had found the experience fascinating. One day I hoped I might be able to visit the pyramids. I'd heard there was one you could go right into the burial chamber. I thanked Oliver and was prepared to catch the bus back to my hotel. He would hear nothing of it. He had enjoyed the day immensely; driving me back to my hotel would be his pleasure.

As Oliver had been such a gentleman throughout, I felt I couldn't reasonably refuse him without appearing rude, but I would much rather have returned to the hotel on my own. What if someone saw me and mentioned it to Jake later in the week? But as before, Oliver was a behaved perfectly, and he dropped me just before the hotel entrance. He wished me a pleasant time for the rest of my holiday and drove off without making any attempt to arrange another meeting.

As I walked back to my room, I knew I had enjoyed his company also.



## Chapter 2

“So, did you have a great time?” Neeta asked excitedly the evening after we returned from Cyprus. “You’ve got a good colour. Lots of sun, sea and sex, eh?” I told her I’d had a great time, despite Jake getting burned the first full day we had and not really leaving the room until the Thursday. “That sounds like Jake,” Neeta laughed. “Stubborn as a mule, just like all men. So what did you do while lover boy was cooling himself in a cold bath?” And that was when I told her about my day with Oliver. “Sounds like you fancied him rotten.” Trust Neeta to lower the tone of any conversation. I tried to explain it wasn’t like that. Oliver was very polite, very gentlemanly and just good company. “But you did fancy him.” It wasn’t a question but a statement. “With Jake out of action I bet you wouldn’t have said no if he’d made a move.”

“I’m married.” I said indignantly. “He’s married. The situation would never have arisen. But,” I hesitated briefly, “if we’d both been free, I probably would have fancied him.”

“If I’d been you and Jake had been such a jerk, I’d have gone for it. I’m sure he wouldn’t have needed much encouragement.” That was Neeta. “So, did you tell Jake about your Oliver?” I hadn’t, of course. I’d told him I had lunch at the harbour and went to the Tombs. Jake didn’t ask if I went alone and I didn’t offer any other information. When I’d left Jake in the morning, I was feeling extremely annoyed with him. By the time Oliver had dropped me off at the hotel, I no longer felt even a little annoyed. I felt relaxed and forgiving. I knew Jake would get angry if I told him I spent the day with another man. He wouldn’t believe I hadn’t given Oliver encouragement or that Oliver made no move on me whatsoever. In some ways, he was more like Neeta than me. I felt recharged and ready to nurse Jake. The fact that Oliver knew which hotel I was at and still made no attempt to contact me reinforced my opinion that he was just a very kind man with no ulterior motives. For me, that confirmed my decision to say nothing. Even Neeta admitted it was probably for the best.

Neeta was my best friend – tall (a little over five feet ten inches), slim with boobs most men lusted after, and long blonde, shiny, hair. She was younger than me and was dreading her thirtieth birthday in a month’s time. Life was passing her by, she complained. She wanted to be married like most of her friends, like me. She was beginning to feel like an unwanted guest when out socialising with her friends and their husbands. But for a slightly large mouth and a small flat nose I thought men would have described her as ‘beautiful’. Due to these small blemishes, I considered they would reduce their assessment to ‘very attractive’. She had no difficulty attracting men, but they always seemed to be the wrong sort. They were either afraid of commitment, confirmed bachelors or, most often, married and wouldn’t leave their wives. She liked the effect she had on men; enjoyed the flirting and the thrill of the chase. Whether she felt she was doing the chasing or being chased wasn’t always obvious, but she enjoyed the period when the chase

was over even more. But few relationships lasted more than a few weeks and none, to my knowledge reached even reached the six month mark.

We had met when Neeta joined the window replacement company I was working at. She was 19 and had just finished a secretarial course. She loved the way the men lusted after her and was always ready with a quick reply when they passed comments as she walked through the factory, which, for her first two years there, was at least twice a day, collecting details of the progress on outstanding orders. It was little more than a week after she'd started that we were having our lunch together in the little kitchen we had. Her lunch was a salad with a small pot of olives. "Want to try one?" Neeta asked when she saw me looking at the olives. I'd never tried them, but other friends I knew didn't like them, so I assumed I wouldn't. "You'll never know if you like something until you've tried it," she continued, pushing the pot towards me. Hesitantly, I picked an olive and put it in my mouth. She was so right. If I hadn't tried it, I'd never have enjoyed one of my favourite foods. It was slightly bitter, slightly vinegary, but so delicious. I stopped at the supermarket on the way home and bought a big jar.

At the time, I was going through a bad patch with my then boyfriend and, a few weeks later, she found me in the loo one afternoon in tears. He had told me we were finished. I was devastated. Neeta was brilliant. She made me smile, then laugh and then convinced me I could be better off without him. "Go and get yourself a new man," she advised me, "and screw his balls off. You'll soon forget the loser. It doesn't really matter who the man is. The point is you forget the last one and get your confidence back, just like falling off a bike." She kept my spirits up during the week and invited me out with her and several friends on the Friday. I had a great time. I didn't take her advice even though two men invited me to go home with them. It boosted my ego no end, but I just couldn't, I wasn't that sort of woman. However, over the years that I've known her, she had never failed to heed her own advice.

It was indirectly through Neeta that I met Jake. One of the girls I'd met through Neeta was having a birthday party and I was invited. I thought Jake was the best looking man there and when he caught my eye and came across to talk to me, I couldn't believe my luck. He was witty, flattering, chatty and it was as if we were the only two there. When I wouldn't go home with him, he seemed shocked, as if no one had ever turned him down before. He phoned me the next morning and we went out together for a couple of weeks. When I still wouldn't have sex, he stopped asking me out. Neeta couldn't understand my attitude. If I liked the guy, what was wrong with sleeping with him? He phoned again several weeks later. He couldn't get me out of his head and wanted to meet up again. For the next couple of years, we couldn't stay together and we couldn't stay apart. We would have some great times together and then for almost no reason, we would have a blazing row and split up. There was no pattern to what caused, or who started, the rows. It seemed the smallest incident could escalate in an amazingly short time and it could take days or even weeks for peace to be restored. Slowly

we realised that we could always get over the rows and making up was one of the best parts of our relationship.

It was on my 26<sup>th</sup> birthday that he proposed to me and suggested he should move in with me. I had my own place, while he rented. The rows still happened, but less frequently. Neeta was my matron of honour. The wedding was held eighteen months later in a registry office, as neither of us were the least bit religious and we honeymooned in Cornwall. Three years later, following a substantial bonus at my work, we decided to go on holiday abroad. Jan, the girl at whose party I met Jake, had been to Cyprus for her honeymoon. She was so enthusiastic I booked the holiday without even discussing it with Jake. I quickly realised that wasn't a good idea when we had another blazing row over it. The next day, he came home from work telling me what a great place Cyprus was.

## Chapter 3

At the beginning of October my car failed its MOT. The cost of making it roadworthy again was more than it was worth. I had to resort to the bus to get me to and from work. It wasn't too much of a hardship – the bus stopped less than a hundred yards from my front door and dropped me just round the corner from work. I only had to change once. The Monday after bonfire night I was sitting on the top deck of the bus looking at nothing in particular out the window. The bus was stopped at the traffic lights and on the opposite side of the road, a van was waiting to come out from a driveway. The lights changed to green and the van shot across the road just as a motorcyclist was approaching. At that moment, the van was out of my sight, but I heard a screech of brakes, a bang followed the sound of metal being bent into some abnormal shape. No vehicles moved and in a few minutes a police car had arrived at the scene. The van had seen the motorcyclist too late, tried to avoid it, clipped the back of bike and slammed into the bus. As a witness to what had immediately preceded the accident, I was required to wait and give a statement. I phoned into work to say I would be late. Sally, the girl who had replaced Neeta when she left three years previously, assured me she could cope.

By about ten, I had given my statement to the police and made my way into work. The factory was unusually silent and empty. There were no workmen and the office was empty except for Geoff, the owner. He looked embarrassed and glum. The company had gone bust. There had been a meeting at 8:30 that morning to tell everyone they had lost their jobs and how to claim redundancy from the government. Within an hour, everyone had removed their personal belongings and left. Geoff gave me a potted version of the speech he had given to the workforce and then broke down and cried. He felt guilty for having let down the workforce, but he had lost almost all his money. One of their biggest customers, a local house builder, had gone bust, owing a quarter of a million pounds and there was little likelihood of getting any of it back. Geoff couldn't pay his suppliers and they were refusing to make any more deliveries. The bank wouldn't provide any more finance and there was no alternative but to close the business. I gathered my belongings, packed them in a carrier bag I found at the back of my desk and trudged wearily and dejectedly away. It had slowly sunk in that I now had no job and wouldn't be getting paid, yet the bills would still be almost the same. Council Tax, electricity, insurance and all the other costs didn't reduce in line with my income. We would have to tighten our belts quite considerably.

The bus was leaving as I rounded the corner. It would be another twenty minutes before the next one. I was still feeling sorry for myself when the realisation hit me. I would need to get another job. And quickly. It was obvious really, but my mind had been temporarily kidnapped by the loss of my current, or rather, my last job. And if I needed a job, I'd need to register with at least a couple of agencies. It was only a ten minute walk into town. There was no time like the present.

The board outside the 'Jocelyn Adderkins Agency' indicated urgent requirements for a chef, a fork lift truck driver, an HGV driver and an accountant. Not particularly encouraging, but I went inside and enquired about office jobs. There were none at present, but the pleasant fifteen year-old (well that's what she looked like) asked me to fill out an eight page registration form and they'd be in touch if anything suitable came up. I wondered at the relevance of many of the questions, and there was next to no space to write what I wanted to write if I thought the question important. After twenty-five minutes I'd completed the form and the fifteen year-old gave it the once over and proclaimed it satisfactory. I was about to leave when her colleague, who must have been all of two years older, asked if I was interested in a job that had just come in. It wasn't exactly an office job, it was working in a bookmaker's, and the pay was almost three thousand pounds a year less than I was last earning. Politely I declined. I really did want an office job. The teenagers seemed put out.

I fared little better at 'At The Office'. They supposedly specialised in office jobs, but it seemed that any job that wasn't in the open air and involved at least one piece of paper qualified. Fortunately, the registration form was shorter and more relevant to my skills. Neither Marjory nor Alicia were teenagers and both seemed friendly and helpful. There were still no suitable jobs, but we had quite a chat. It seems that Alicia had a cousin who went to the same school as me. The same class even. Wendy, her cousin, had married an American, had two children, one of each, and was now living in New Jersey. Alicia didn't really keep in touch with her cousin, so there was no point in passing on my regards. New jobs were coming in all the time, they told me, and seemed optimistic they'd find me a suitable job.

Their optimism raised my spirits a little, but not enough to lift the depression I felt on my journey home.

## Chapter 4

I hadn't expected to see Jake's car in the drive. He hadn't said he would be coming home for lunch. Perhaps he'd forgotten something and nipped home to fetch it. I was pleased. I needed to talk about what had happened; needed a sympathetic ear. We needed to discuss the financial implications. Geoff had said it could be a few weeks before we got any money from the government. Even if he couldn't stay long, if he had to get back to work, just telling him would make a difference. I was about to call out to him when I heard voices.

The actual words were muffled, but there were definitely two voices. And one of them was female. There was also a lot of giggling. For a while I stood rooted to the spot in the doorway. There was no doubt where the voices were coming from – our bedroom. Neither of them was aware of my presence. My mind went numb. I didn't feel anything. I had suffered enough already that day. I couldn't take any more. But the lack of feeling lasted no more than a few moments. I tried to imagine a scenario that did not include Jake being unfaithful, but couldn't. I felt angry and betrayed. I closed the door quietly and climbed the stairs. Just before the top I stopped. I could make out the words now and I knew what was happening. What was worse was I recognised the female voice. The door to the bedroom was slightly ajar and I could now see them. My best friend was naked and sitting astride, and on top of, Jake.

"You disgusting, despicable pair," I screamed as I flung open the door. "Get out of my house. Get out, both of you." Neeta seemed embarrassed by her nakedness and position. She grabbed a pillow and held it in front of her as she gathered up her clothes. "Don't bother getting dressed in my house," I spat at her, "get dressed in the gutter. That's where you belong." As she ran past me, I could see she was frightened. She had every right to be. I felt like murdering the pair of them.

So far Jake hadn't said anything. "Get out, you bastard, before I do something you'll regret" I hissed. He looked at me as if I was mad. I was!

"It was all her fault," he protested. "She's been after me for weeks. She knows when you're out and she's been coming round. She says you've been telling her I was great in bed, and she wanted me to prove it. You've got to believe me." Part of what he said was true. Neeta always discussed her current partners' prowess in the bedroom, and she'd asked me a while ago whether Jake was any good. I laughed and told her I didn't have as many men to compare him with, but that he was great. And she did know when I was going to be out, mostly. We were always texting each other, telling each other how our days were going and what our plans were. My immediate anger had degenerated into a numbing tiredness. The shock of losing my job had made me unable to maintain the anger I knew I felt.

"I don't care whose fault it is," I said wearily, "I want you out of my house, and out of my life, for good." He laughed spitefully that it was as much his house as mine. But it wasn't, I replied. I'd owned the house before

I met him. There had been no mortgage, so he hadn't contributed to its purchase and in the time we'd been together we'd had no maintenance done. Even the decorating I'd done and paid for myself. He whined that he had nowhere to go. "Why don't you go to Neeta's?" I sneered. "I'm sure her bed is as good as ours." Strangely, I believed him when he said he didn't want to be with Neeta. He wanted to be with me. He begged for another chance. He swore it was a one-off and it wouldn't happen again. I could feel myself weakening. I was so tired. I told him he'd hurt me badly and I needed time on my own. He would have to find somewhere else for a few days. Maybe then I'd reconsider things. He stopped protesting then.

It took him a couple of hours to pack sufficient clothes for the rest of the week and to make arrangements to stay at a friend's house. But it could only be for a few days. His friend's girlfriend was away on a course at present but she'd be back on Friday night. I agreed we'd talk again on the Friday night.

As soon as he left, the dam burst and the tears I'd held back gushed forth. It had been the most miserable day of my life. Normally, if I'd been upset, I'd have phoned Neeta to come round and, well, just be there for me. She'd have hugged me, told me I didn't deserve this to happen. She'd have told me I was wonderful, boosted my confidence. But I didn't have that comfort. Not anymore. "Neeta, how could you do this to me?" I screamed out loud. Nobody answered. I opened a bottle of wine and drank it alone. I couldn't sleep in my bed that night, not after what I'd seen. I'd have to wash the bedclothes before I could even think of sleeping there again. The bed in the spare room wasn't made up. I'd washed the clothes after my parent's visit almost two months ago and they were still waiting to be ironed. In the end, I slept downstairs on the sofa, with the spare quilt wrapped around me.

I ached when I woke from a restless sleep. It was still dark. The clock on the DVD recorder glowed. It was two minutes to five. My head maintained a steady bass drum beat. For a few moments I wondered what I was doing downstairs. Then I remembered. And I cried again.

Twenty four hours ago I was a happily married woman with a job that I enjoyed but wasn't too demanding. I had a small circle of friends and colleagues, and an extra special friend with whom I shared many of my innermost secrets. Had I missed some signs that all was not well? Shouldn't I have realised at work that there were financial problems? I'd been delaying payments past their due dates for so long, it seemed like normal practice. Suppliers had been demanding payments and I prioritised them based on who shouted loudest or most often. I could see those signs now. Why hadn't I seen them earlier? What if I had? Would I have looked for another job, got out before the ship sank? Probably not.

The phone rang several times in the next few days. I didn't answer it. Eventually I listened to the messages. Both Neeta and Jake rang several times, begging for forgiveness; pleading for another chance. They left me depressed rather than angry. Depression feeds off itself. In my case, it was having a feast. It was a glutton. I felt worthless. I began to feel it was

somehow my fault all this had happened. There was a little part of me though that every now and then would rebel against these thoughts; would give me a little hope. But the depression was slowly winning.

The other calls were from my mother. She seems to have some sixth sense when things aren't going well. "Is everything all right?" was her first message, followed by instructions to call her. Subsequent messages from her were more insistent that I should call her. I didn't. The thought of admitting what had happened was unbearable. Telling her my marriage was over was unthinkable. It wasn't that she would be appalled or critical in anyway, it was admitting I had failed. Failed her, who's own marriage seemed to be unmitigated happiness, and failed myself. Listening to her calls just added to my depression.

I hardly ate or drank anything apart from bottles of wine. They dulled my feelings for a while but the depression always returned, seemingly invigorated by the alcoholic intake.

I didn't undress or change my clothes for several days and I didn't wash or shower. Even to my own senses, I was beginning to smell but I couldn't care. I wasn't thinking about anything except the hurt I felt at what I had seen. The only respite I had was when I eventually fell asleep. It was a relief - until I woke up again.



## Chapter 5

I had forgotten I'd agreed Jake would come round and discuss the situation. Since I'd found him with Neeta, I'd done little except cry and sleep; sleep due to exhaustion. I'd hardly eaten; just a few biscuits. The post was still on the mat. I had no interest in whatever it contained. My life no longer had meaning. There was nothing to look forward to, and of the memories, only the most recent could be recalled, and these were the most bitter.

I didn't understand what it was when the door bell rang. It seemed as though it was somewhere in the distance; somewhere totally outside my world. It was only when it rang for the third occasion that I connected it with me. Blearily, I made my way to the door.

Jake was carrying his suitcase and marched in as I opened the door. "About bloody time," he said sarcastically as he pushed past me and dumped the suitcase at the foot of the stairs. "God, you look awful. And you smell. Get me a cup of tea and then sort yourself out." Like an automaton, I went into the kitchen. Slowly it dawned on me that Jake was moving back in. Not so slowly, my anger began to rise and the virtual stupor I'd been in dissipated in an instant.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I demanded as I went back to the living room where Jake had plonked himself down in his usual chair and turned the TV on. He was of the opinion we'd agreed he could come back on the Friday and this was Friday. "I said we'd talk about it."

"I've got nowhere else to go. This is my house, so I'm coming back. There's nothing to talk about." He looked smug. Sitting in his chair he assumed it was a fait-accompli.

"You're right about one thing," I almost shouted at him, "there is nothing to talk about." I opened the front door, picked up his suitcase and threw it onto the driveway. I was surprised at the ease with which I had thrown it. Anger can give you strength you never knew you had. "Now, get out. This is my house! Do you understand, mine!? Get out and stay out." He complained he had nowhere to go. "You can sleep in the gutter for all I care. In fact, that's where you deserve to be."

"What are you getting your knickers in a twist for?" he asked, trying to sound reasonable now. "It's no big deal. I'm not short changing you, am I? Tell me, when have you've ever gone wanting? Have you ever even hinted you weren't being satisfied?" I was still seething. He took my failure to reply as agreement. "Never, eh? So why should you get upset?" He looked more self assured, almost cocky. He'd defused the situation, or so he assumed.

"Forsaking all others'," I quoted "or don't you remember your wedding vows?"

"One little mistake and you go act as though I've committed murder. Once, that's all it was. Once. You'd throw away all we had for one mistake? Don't I deserve another chance? Don't we deserve to try again?" He was trying to be conciliatory, but failed miserably.

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