

STOP DEAD

LEIGH RUSSELL



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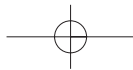
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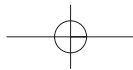
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Dedicated to
Michael, Jo and Phill





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Glossary of acronyms

- DCI – Detective Chief Inspector (senior officer on case)
- DI – Detective Inspector
- DS – Detective Sergeant
- SOCO – Scene of Crime Officer (collects forensic evidence at scene)
- PM – Post-Mortem or Autopsy (examination of dead body to establish cause of death)
- CCTV – Closed Circuit Television (security cameras)

Prologue

She dashed across the cold kitchen floor. The sound of his feet pounded in her ears as he raced down the stairs. It wouldn't be long before he caught up with her. Her thoughts spun wildly. She had to get away. Hide somewhere. Anywhere. As the back door swung shut behind her, the evening air felt cool on her tears. She stared around in terror at the darkness, searching for somewhere to hide. The garden was overgrown with scratchy brambles. Frantically she ran across the weedy lawn, the dry grass prickly beneath her bare feet, forcing her muscles to keep going, faster and faster. Any second now he would emerge through the door behind her.

She darted into the shed. Bent almost double, she struggled to catch her breath. Her chest was burning. Her lungs felt as though they would burst. She was drowning. As her breathing slowed, she became aware that her legs ached painfully from running. They were shaking so violently she could barely stand.

He burst in, slamming the door against the shed wall. With a roar he launched himself at her, dragging her onto the ground. She hit her head as she fell, but she didn't care. All that mattered was that he was there. She grappled feebly with him, but was no match for his vigorous assault. It was happening again and she was powerless to stop him.

Over his shoulder, through her tears she saw a figure hovering in the doorway, one hand raised in a futile gesture. But there

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was no point calling out for help. Scrabbling on the ground, her fingers closed on the handle of something very heavy. In that instant, she knew what she had to do. With a surge of adrenaline she raised the hammer as high as she could and swung it down.

There was a loud crack, like a window breaking, and he slumped forwards. Whimpering, she struggled out from beneath him. It wasn't easy. His inert body weighed down on her, but she managed to crawl free. Groaning, he rolled away from her, onto his back, exposing his genitals. Yelling in fear and ecstasy she raised the hammer again.

1

Amy glanced fearfully at her watch.
'I've got to get going. He'll be expecting me.'
She sat up and swung her slim legs out of the bed.
'Stay a bit longer. You only just got here. Stay.'
'You know I can't.'
'Of course you can.'

Guy propped himself up on one elbow and leaned across to pat her pillow with his free hand.

'Come back to bed. Can't you forget about him for once? What's he going to do? You're not his bloody prisoner.'

Amy twisted round and caressed his smooth chest delicately with the tips of her dark red nails. Blonde curls swung around her face as she shook her head.

'You don't know him like I do. You don't know what he's capable of when he's in a temper.'

Guy lunged forwards, grabbed her by the wrist, pulled her back down onto the bed beside him and kissed her, savouring her perfume and the smell and feel of her body still warm from lying in bed.

Guy had never met anyone like Amy before: on the surface so intimidating with her sophisticated, knowing manner, yet beneath that show of confidence more vulnerable than anyone he had ever known. At twenty-three his previous relationships had been short-lived affairs with shallow ignorant girls, mannequins with screechy voices. Amy was a mature woman, wealthy and classy, informed about life and the wider world. It seemed to him almost miraculous

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that she would treat him as an equal.

‘So who’s this mystery woman of yours?’ his mates clamoured to know.

‘I can’t say.’

‘She married then?’

When Guy shrugged the lads had chuckled and slapped him on the back. Only one had warned him to take care.

‘What about her husband?’

‘Don’t be a prick,’ another one chipped in. ‘He’s getting his leg over, isn’t he? She must be a looker at any rate, and that’s all there is to it. Guy’s not going to be banging her forever, are you? Get out before the problems kick off, and you’re alright, mate.’

‘It’s not like that,’ Guy had begun then stopped, embarrassed to admit that he was in love.

His mates had roared with laughter.

‘He’s got it bad.’

A few months earlier, Guy would have shared their amusement if any of his friends had turned soft but since meeting Amy his perspective had changed completely. He couldn’t stop thinking about her. Not having her to himself was driving him crazy.

Amy shook her head, pushing him away.

‘Stop it, Guy. I’ve got to go. I’m late.’

Extricating herself from his embrace she slipped out of bed and he lay back, watching her blonde hair skim the top of her round white shoulder. Her profile didn’t do her looks justice, emphasising her straight nose which was a shade too big and her pointed chin, while her long hair concealed the piercing grey eyes which were her most striking feature.

‘Maybe we should just forget the whole thing,’ he grumbled,

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watching the curve of her vertebrae as she crouched down to gather up her clothes.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked without turning round.

‘You’re never going to leave him, are you? It’s the same thing every week. I mean, what the hell are you doing, staying with him? What are you waiting for?’

She turned and looked down at him, her grey eyes troubled.

‘I’m working on it. I do want to be with you, you know I do. But you’ve got to let me deal with this in my own way. You just have to be patient. It’s the only way.’

‘Amy, I want you to come and live with me all the time, now. Why does it have to be so complicated? Just leave him. What are you waiting for? Pack a bag and come here. Tonight. In fact, don’t even bother going back for your things. We can get you new stuff tomorrow. I’ll take the day off and we’ll go shopping, I’ll buy you anything you want –’

She sat down again, cupping his shoulder in her hand. He seized her wrist and kissed her fingers, one after another.

‘Oh Guy, he’d take everything, the house, the car, everything’s in his name. He’d even take the dog from me. You don’t know what he’s like when he doesn’t get his own way. He’s vindictive. I’m scared of him, Guy.’

‘Why don’t you let me deal with him then? There’s nothing for you to worry about, trust me. I’ll take care of everything. We don’t need his money. I can take care of you.’

‘You don’t know him.’

She paused, watching his face closely, then looked away.

‘Sometimes he can be violent when he’s been drinking. He yells at me – threatens me – it’s happened more than once –’

Guy sat upright, gripping her hand so tightly she winced.

‘What do you mean he threatens you? Jesus, if he so much as touches a hair on your head – Just leave, Amy. Do it tonight.’

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His eyes shone with passion and she smiled.

‘Oh Guy, don’t be so naïve. I’m not worried for myself. He won’t hurt me, not really. But he’ll kill you if he finds out about us.’

Guy laughed uneasily.

‘Not if I kill him first,’ he blustered, flinging himself back on his pillow. ‘If he so much as touches you, I’ll do it. I swear I will.’

Amy perched on the edge of the bed without looking at him, her shoulders tense. Although she spoke softly, he heard every word.

‘You know what to do.’

She pulled on her shoes, stood up, smoothed her pencil skirt over her thighs and, with a flick of her blonde hair, was gone.

Guy lay on the bed gazing up at the ceiling, biting his lip. He wished she had the guts to leave her bastard of a husband. It was hard to ignore the nagging suspicion that she was never going to give up her affluent lifestyle to move in with him. What did he have to offer a woman like Amy? Turning his head from side to side on the pillow he considered her suggestion. She made it sound so simple.

‘The restaurant’s called Mireille,’ she had told him, warning him not to write it down.

She made him repeat the address until he knew it.

‘He leaves after it closes around one in the morning, earlier on a Sunday. All you have to do is follow him and– Well, just make sure he doesn’t get home, that’s all.’

At first he hadn’t been sure he understood. Finally she had grown impatient.

‘Oh do I really have to spell it out to you? Once he’s out of the way, everything will be ours. It all comes to me. We’ll be

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free of him, and you'll never have to work again.'

'A kept man,' he had laughed, not believing she was serious.

But she had leaned forward until her hair fell across his face as she whispered, 'You could do it for me. For us.'

He had kept silent, not knowing what to say. Thinking about it, he still wasn't sure if she was seriously asking him to kill her husband.

2

It was only three o'clock but Geraldine felt like going to bed, she was so tired. She wondered if she was going down with a virus, but decided it was more likely a reaction to all the stress she had gone through in recent weeks. It wasn't much more than a month since she had moved to North London. Her salary as a detective inspector on a Homicide and Serious Crime Command wouldn't have stretched to buying her new flat, but her mother's death a year before had left Geraldine enough money for the move to Islington. The flat was perfect, with two small bedrooms, one of which she would use as an office. It could double up as a spare room when her niece came to stay. After all her enthusiastic plans when she had first moved in, after six weeks she had barely finished unpacking. Arriving in London she had been thrown into a murder investigation, which had only finished a week ago. She had just completed writing up her final report. With nothing pressing to do, she succumbed to a numbing exhaustion.

When her phone rang, she answered it reluctantly. Although she loved her job, and always felt slightly depressed by the hiatus between cases, right now she was ready for a break. But her spirits rose when she recognised the voice of her former sergeant in Kent. They had worked together on several cases, becoming friends in the process.

'Ian, it's great to hear from you.'

Just for a second she felt like crying, she was so pleased to hear his voice. Her new sergeant, Sam, was great, but Geraldine missed Ian.

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'I was wondering if you were planning to come over this way some time to visit your sister, and fancied meeting for a drink?' he said.

On the spur of the moment she told him she would be in Kent that evening. Saying the words made it true.

Geraldine hung up, taken aback by the desperation of her impulse. She hadn't realised how lonely she was in London. But there was no time to question the sense in driving for two hours to meet an old friend for a drink. It wasn't as though she had anything else to do. Tidying her flat could wait. With a tremor of anticipation, she showered and pulled on jeans and a new jumper. Quickly she ran a brush through her short black hair, and flicked mascara lightly above her dark eyes to highlight her long lashes. The sky was overcast as she set off, threatening rain. Nearly October, the air had an autumnal chill and the evenings were drawing in. By the time she reached Kent it would be dark.

Two hours later she was seated in a pub near her old police station, not far from the estate where Ian lived in a maisonette with his fiancée, Beverley. They were reminiscing about a case they had worked on together.

'And do you remember his wife?' Ian asked with a mischievous grin and Geraldine laughed.

She gazed at his familiar features, blue eyes bright beneath neatly combed hair that would spring out of place as soon as he ran his hand through it. If she hadn't known the care he habitually took over his appearance, she might have suspected him of making a special effort to look smart for her this evening, with his well-pressed shirt and coordinating tie. Yet despite his efforts, he still managed to look awkward, seated at a low table that exaggerated his bulk. With his broad shoulders and huge hands, Geraldine had found his presence reassuring when he had accompanied her as her sergeant.

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‘You look well,’ she told him, although she actually thought he seemed downcast, and somehow older than she remembered him. Even in the poorly lit pub she spotted that he was greying around his temples. His shoulders drooped forward and he appeared to have lost his characteristic exuberance. She hoped he was tired, rather than bored with the evening. It had been his idea to meet, after all. He raised his glass.

‘Another one?’

‘I’d better not,’ Geraldine replied. ‘I’ll have a soft drink though.’

‘Cheap round,’ he grinned, standing up.

‘It’s good to see you again, Ian,’ she said as he returned from the bar and he smiled easily at her.

‘How’re the wedding plans coming along then?’

His smile faded.

‘My God, Geraldine, you have no idea. It’s more complicated than any investigation ... I wish we’d just gone off and done it quietly, but it’s too late now. Bev’s got the bit between her teeth and you’d think it was a bloody royal wedding the way she’s carrying on. The sad thing is, I don’t think she’s enjoying it, she’s so stressed, but when I suggested we drop the whole idea – of the big wedding, that is, not getting married – she went ballistic. Said we were too far committed to back out now, which I suppose is true.’ He sighed. ‘It’s crazy. But she had her heart set on this grand occasion. Cast of thousands. She wants me to wear a bloody penguin suit.’

Relieved to discover the source of Ian’s dejection had nothing to do with her, Geraldine gave what she hoped was a sympathetic smile.

‘I’m hardly in a position to offer advice. I’ve never been even close to getting married.’

That wasn’t strictly true. In her twenties, Geraldine had

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lived with a boyfriend, Mark, for six years. She had taken it for granted they would end up together until, without any warning, he had left her for someone else. With hindsight she should have noticed the signs. He was always complaining she put her work first, but she had been too wrapped up in her career to realise anything was amiss with their relationship.

She turned her attention back to Ian who was bringing her up to date with gossip about her former colleagues on the Kent constabulary. He expressed surprise when she asked about the detective chief inspector who had recently retired. He shook his head.

‘I’m not sure what happened to her. There was a rumour she’d gone off, travelling round the world, but then someone said they saw her in Margate. I can’t remember who it was.’

‘I really should get in touch with her.’

Ian gave her a quizzical look.

‘I never realised the two of you were close. I thought you didn’t exactly see eye to eye?’

Geraldine shrugged.

‘I wouldn’t say we were close, exactly, but –’

The conversation drifted back to Ian’s wedding plans.

‘Oh well, I’d better be off,’ he said at last, glancing ruefully at his watch. ‘Can’t afford to upset the future missus.’

‘It’s good to see you, Ian. Give my best to Bev, won’t you?’

He nodded and stood up.

‘Will do.’

Seeing his sheepish grin, Geraldine suspected he wasn’t going to tell his fiancée about their meeting. Bev had resented the close relationship that had developed between him and Geraldine when they were working together. Sometimes people outside the force struggled to understand the camaraderie that grew up between officers. Like members of other emergency services, they had quickly developed an

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absolute trust in one another. Without it their jobs, and at times their lives, would be in danger.

‘See you at the wedding, then,’ she said with forced cheerfulness, and Ian groaned.