

Chapter 1

If Ruby Bixler hadn't answered her husband's cell phone that day when she was in the kitchen making spaghetti carbonara and he was in an upstairs bathroom reading *Golf for Dummies*, she might never have found out that he was having an affair.

Ruby was standing at her beautiful, black granite center island at the time, cracking eggs into a bright yellow bowl. She had just taken a loaf of freshly baked bread out of the oven. It was sitting on top of a nearby counter, the soft fragrance of the bread filling the room. Ruby loved her kitchen, especially in moments like this when she felt completely happy.

Now had Ruby ignored her husband's cell, her life might not have taken the unfortunate turn that was about to happen. As it was, she stopped cracking eggs, went to the hallway and called upstairs: "Brad! Your phone!"

Brad didn't answer. As Ruby went back into the kitchen, the ringing stopped. She scooped up the eggshells and tossed them into the silver trash can. The phone began to ring again. Knowing this was a cell phone Brad used mostly for business, Ruby wiped her hands on a French linen tea towel and answered the call.

"Mr. Diamond's office," she said.

"Brad Diamond, please," said a polite male voice.

"I'm sorry, he isn't available."

"May I leave a message?"

"Yes, of course," Ruby replied as she reached up to lift down a large iron skillet hanging from a rack over the stove.

"I'm calling from the Sea Breeze Hotel. Would you let Mr. Diamond know he left his watch here today? We'll hold it for him at the front desk."

“Are you sure you’re calling the right Mr. Diamond?” Ruby asked, placing the skillet on the stove.

Now had the clerk been a little more on the ball, he might have swiftly but politely ended the call—and that would have been the end of it. But instead, he said: “Let me check the registration card. Here it is. Brad Diamond? 6215 Washington Street? This is his office, correct?”

“You’re calling his cell phone, actually.”

There was a horrible, awkward silence. The clerk must have realized that he wasn’t talking to Brad Diamond’s assistant and that he might have just put his colossal foot in it.

“Thank you,” he said and abruptly hung up.

Ruby paused for a moment. Her husband was in a hotel on a workday afternoon? Why? She pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen out of the ponytail that, as always, held her lovely, thick, dark hair in a tight grip and went back to her cooking. She turned on the flame under the skillet, cut a wedge of Irish butter and dropped it into the sizzling pan, then added cream and some crunchy bacon bits which she’d made earlier in the day before she left for work. As she stirred the mixture slowly with a wooden spoon, she wondered about the phone call. Even if Brad was in a hotel for some reason, why did he take his watch off?

Ruby looked up as her husband came into the kitchen—a tall, bulky man with the kind of friendly but not too handsome looks that had helped him with his career as a news anchor on a local TV station. There were billboards all over town with Brad’s big smiling face: “Brad Diamond: The Newsman You Can Trust.”

She glanced at his wrists. If the watch was there, this would all be one big mistake that they might even be laughing about in a few moments—but his wrists were bare.

“I answered your phone,” Ruby said.

“Who was it?” Brad asked, breaking a wedge off the freshly baked loaf.

Ruby winced at the rough way he was treating the bread.

“I don’t know why you go to all this trouble making bread,” Brad said. “You can buy great bread everywhere these days.”

“It was the Sea Breeze Hotel,” Ruby said, ignoring his comment.

“Oh?” Brad replied, reaching past her and scooping a couple of bacon bits out of the carbonara sauce.

It always bothered Ruby when Brad helped himself to ingredients when she was cooking. But as usual, she didn’t say anything.

“You left your watch there,” she said.

“I did?” Brad said, shooting her a glance. He decided to offer a preemptive explanation. “I had an interview with Grant Muldown. You know, that hot new actor. He was staying there.”

“But why did you take your watch off?”

“What is this Rube, the Spanish Inquisition?” he grinned.

“Just wondering,” she said.

He looked at her again. She was focused intently on whatever was in that frying pan.

“Grant said he liked my watch. He wanted to check it out.”

And there the conversation ended. Ruby accepted this rather flaccid explanation, not asking more of the questions that most wives would have demanded to be answered. It’s not that Ruby was stupid or gullible; it’s that she was a genuinely nice person who didn’t easily accept that others could be mean or deceitful—that her husband might be a cheat or a liar wasn’t a place Ruby went to easily.

“So how was your day?” Brad asked cheerfully.

“The usual.”

“Still no word on a promotion?”

“No.”

“You’ve got to stand up for yourself, rabbit,” he said, using the pet name he’d given her when they met seven years ago. “If you don’t, people will walk all over you.”

He opened a cupboard and took out a golf club and a small mesh bag of golf balls. “I’ll be outside,” he said, opening the back door.

“I’ll call you when it’s ready,” Ruby said.

Ruby didn’t know it at the time, but she had just taken her first step into the foggy realm of Denial—it’s a place many people go to when abruptly faced with an unbearable truth about their partner. The same happens when terminal patients first get the news that death is coming. Denial is a far more comforting place to hang out in than abject terror.