

# Rough Diamond

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## Extract

### One

So I'm standing at my front gate and I'm soaked and it's been the worst day in history. Everything's gone wrong since I got out of bed. The milk was off. I put a finger through my brand-new tights and I don't even have fingernails. I left my umbrella at home knowing full well a storm was coming and now I can't find my keys and the rain's stinging my face.

I booted the gate open and stumbled through it, wondering why I'd forgotten to lock it. My old veranda gave no shelter. I dumped my bag on the ground and squatted over it, gazing into the abyss, hoping for a glimpse of silver, cursing the broken light and my stupid boss and the late, crowded, smelly train. 'And,' I shouted at my bag, 'that stupid goddamn police barricade!'

Thunder crashed and I jumped. I whipped my head around to yell at the black sky, but something caught my eye. Something snug and dry by the front door. My stupid yellow umbrella! I swiped at it, launching it into the night, and watched it land with a splat in the middle of my courtyard garden. But the sunny yellow seemed so wrong in this new, strange scene. Which contained a human shape. Lying on its side. Facing me.

Lightning lit the walled space. I thought the guy looked pretty much dead.

I squatted stiff on the doormat, gaping at the dead guy's dark form.

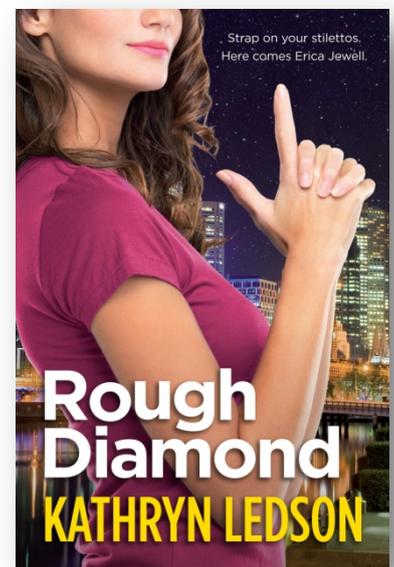
He lifted his head and said in a hoarse whisper, 'No police. Please.'

'Not dead,' I whispered back.

Fitful flashes of light froze the scene. He squinted at me through the rain. I stood slowly and glanced at the gate, which suddenly seemed a long way away. I let out my held breath in a long slow trickle, trying to be invisible, and edged towards the gate.

'Please help,' he groaned.

But I dashed for the gate, wrenched it open and ran through. I stood in the gutter between parked cars, watching the gate swing shut, peering back through the wrought iron rails at my sprawled bag. *No. This is not happening.* Rain pounded my head. I gulped breaths and shaded my eyes, looking over the roofs of parked cars at the blurred flashing lights at the end of my street. I looked back at the gate, breathed in – *should've gone to the pub* – breathed out.



The lights from the police barricade flashed at the edge of my vision. In my mind I heard the man's plea. Could see his eyes. Hear sirens. One more glance down the street and I sucked in a great, deep breath as some invisible force pushed my feet forward, through the gate and up the path to my handbag. I picked it up, hugging it to my chest, and turned slowly to look at the man. He was watching me. I shuffled closer. His face was ghostly white under long straggly black hair and a beard. Dirt streaked his face. I leant in, staring at him in the erratic light as he squinted back at me. Not dirt. Blood. Watery blood seeped from his head and joined a black river that flowed from his body, across the pale pavers and into my geraniums.

'Shit!' I groped for my phone. 'I'll get help!'

'No!' he gasped, his hand stretching towards me and I stepped back. 'No doctors. No police. Please!' The man's fingers held a small white card. I stared at it. His hand started to shake and his breath came in quick puffs. I reached out slowly and took the card. He groaned and rolled onto his back, his head flopping to one side.

'Are you all right?' No response. I poked him. The storm was retreating; rain stopping as abruptly as it had started an hour earlier. A dark puddle formed under the man. I tilted the card towards a street light. Through bloody fingerprints I could just make out a mobile phone number, embossed in gold. No other details, just the number.

*No doctors, no police.* I found my phone and pressed 000. I looked at the phone and back at the card, my thumb hovering over the green button. The man's hand closed suddenly around my wrist. I jumped and tried to pull away but he was strong. In the weak light, his dark eyes held mine for a long moment.

'I can't just let you die,' I whispered.

He shut his eyes and his head rocked from side to side. 'Don't call police. National importance . . .'

I could barely hear him. I leant closer.

'Death is better. Trust me, please, *Erica.*'