

The
Scandalous
Life of
Ruby
Devereaux

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*To my boys: Harry Jack and Finn Jude,
without whom I could never have written this book.*

'Every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works.'

Virginia Woolf

One

With a sense of expectation and a tinge of dread, Marina Keeve opens up her email inbox and sips at the palliative flat white by her side. *Thank God the office manager upgraded the coffee machine, she thinks, and not before time.* A bitter cappuccino with inordinate amounts of froth just doesn't cut it when faced with the demands of the British publishing world.

As feared, there's the one email she hoped might have been cast into cyberspace, marked with a star, as is his habit; Marcus Trent not only thinks himself important, he tells you so. Although she's alone in her office at Grantham & Harris, Marina looks around her before opening the document tentatively, with a sideswipe of her finger rather than a determined clunk of the key. Experience dictates that with a hornet's nest it's wise to tap it gently and stand back for the onslaught.

Marina

Lovely to see you at last week's launch, and I hope you are well.

Like hell he does.

I wonder, is there any progress on the topic we spoke about briefly? As you can appreciate, the market is terribly tight at present and I'm getting pressure from the board on contracts that are so far unfulfilled. I'm keen to secure a manuscript from Ruby asap, before events overtake us...

Say it, Marcus – before she kicks the bucket. Because that's what you mean.

It might be the flat white, or the affrontery that she feels on behalf of her oldest client, but Marina reaches for the phone instantly, punching the redial button with irritation. Uncharacteristically, because for those who know her, Marina Keeve is not a particularly forthright woman; she negotiates the publishing arena (gladiatorial often being the correct analogy) with a quiet charm, and – though her modesty means she would never advertise this – she's well thought of by her clients and publishers alike. People tend to like Marina. Today, though, Marcus may not warm to her. She will not be pushed around, not on the subject of Ruby M Devereaux, easily her trickiest client, but oddly her most favoured, too. Though she might never admit that to anyone, least of all Ruby.

'*Mon courage,*' she mutters. Big girl knickers are in situ.

'Marcus,' she trills as he comes on the line, the wheeze of his cigar breath oozing through the receiver.

'Marina,' he says flatly.

Battle lines are drawn, clearly.

'I've just opened your email. Regarding Ruby.'

‘Ah, yes. Dear Ruby. Any update on a work in progress?’

‘Not as yet.’ Marina draws in a breath – nerve and a good deal of resolve tucked into her knickers. ‘Marcus, perhaps I don’t need to remind you, since you were present, that our *dear* Ruby recently celebrated her ninetieth birthday. Her eyesight isn’t good, and she doesn’t get out much. To all intents and purposes, she’s retired.’

‘Has she communicated as much to you?’

‘Well, you know Ruby, she would never admit her writing days are over. Not even to herself, I suspect.’

‘She rather appeared to be all there,’ Marcus says. ‘Am I wrong on that score?’

Hard-hearted bastard.

‘No, Marcus, she is very much “all there”, as you put it. But is Phoenix Publishing really so keen to drag out another manuscript from her? You have plenty of other bestselling authors under your roof, several from this agency I might add.’

This time the cigar fumes are pushed with force down the line, weapons drawn. He intends to smoke her out. ‘Lawyers, Marina. Sadly. A contract is a contract, they say, and you know these bastards, they won’t be stonewalled. Not even by me. The fact is, she owes us a book.’

Lawyers, she thinks. Is he seriously quoting lawyers at me?

‘Liar,’ Marina mutters under her breath.

‘Sorry?’

‘Ah, nothing. I did have lunch with Ruby last week,’ she adds, ‘and I honestly think she’s done, Marcus. I mean, she is still writing – short pieces, the odd article about the old days, but...’

‘So, a memoir then?’ he punts with enthusiasm. With grotesque clarity, Marina pictures him leaning forward with a squeak of the leather under his copious behind, suddenly animated. ‘I think the board would be more than happy with that. She’s had a somewhat colourful life. I’m sure it would sell very well. Sex sells very well right now.’

This time Marina does sigh. Audibly and with the intent that he must register her frustration through the fug of his cigar. ‘Believe me, Marcus, I’ve tried that tack, many times, about a memoir. She won’t be drawn on it. Insists it wouldn’t be of interest to her, or her readers.’

The firm refusal from Marina’s client was actually intoned with far more verve and colour, but that’s Ruby M Devereaux for you – never one word where ten will embroider the point nicely.

‘I think, Marina,’ – and here Marcus pauses, drawing his voice down an octave, from faux friendly to a Mafia-style low growl – ‘that we will have to insist. Or it’s out of my hands and the money-men will come looking for their pennies. In court if they have to.’

Bastard. Marina swallows, bitter spit instead of silky flat white. He’s let the lions loose in the arena. ‘I understand, Marcus. I’ll talk to her again, and we’ll speak soon.’

‘Excellent. I look forward to it.’

No one beyond her office door will hear the frustration Marina takes out on her own desk, because she does it with relative decorum, her hand thudding down on the manuscripts and piles of admin just once, her anguish well controlled behind gritted teeth. *How dare he? Fucking dinosaur!* Marcus Trent started life as an editor back in the 1970s and still resides there, as far as she can tell.

Publishing is, inevitably, competitive and always has been, but in Marina's twenty plus years as an agent, a new breed of editors has gradually pushed out the cigar-toting, hard-nosed old guard. The new swathe are resolute and hungry, but younger and seemingly kinder (and dare she say it, but it's thanks largely to many women who are book-lovers rather than money-rakers). The market still dictates, and there's no fluffy sentimentality in the world of fiction. But there is compassion, too, and a certain loyalty towards Ruby and her legacy among the writing fraternity. Though not from Marcus, it seems, even if his career has been bolstered nicely by Ruby's previous offerings to Phoenix, the last five reaching the bestseller lists.

Bastard. Marina generally loves a good ferret through *Roget's Thesaurus*, but in this case, there's no better description.

She drains the last of her coffee and picks up the receiver. No time like the present, she reasons, driven by anger, fuelled by the dinosaur's blatant disregard, but also by a resignation that this dilemma will not go away. The sooner she sorts it the better, though that's not what people say when facing up to a firing squad. She can't tell if the slight tremble is down to trepidation or caffeine.

The phone rings more than ten times; Ruby's daily help must not have arrived yet, and Marina pictures cautious steps shuffling on the stripped floors of the Highgate mews house towards the phone table in the hallway. Who still has a phone table, complete with a clunky cream handset and a dial-up body? Ruby does, of course, and it's no retro arrangement, either – the real thing, circa 1980. Over the endless ringing, she can imagine Ruby's irritation spiralling.

'All right, I'm coming. Hold your horses. Who the hell is ringing me anyway?'

Except Ruby will know it's Marina. Because it's always Marina – no one else rings her on the age-old machine.

'Hello?'

'Hello, Ruby, it's Marina. Are you busy?'

'Yes.'

'Oh. I wonder, though, could you spare me some time this afternoon? There are a few things we need to discuss.'

'Hmm.'

'Important things, Ruby. I wouldn't ask otherwise.'

'I suppose so then. But, Marina, I haven't got any cake.'

'I can bring some if you like.'

'Well, if you're that keen, the village shop has some nice cream éclairs.'

'Fine. I'll stop by on my way over. Does two thirty suit you?'

'Yes, that will be all right.'

'See you later, then.'

Marina sits, trawling through the remaining emails, then scrolling the manuscript she left off yesterday, one of over twenty in her inbox, from new and young, eager, fresh-faced writers.

It's Ruby who hovers, though, slipping into her vision at the edge of the screen. She wishes she didn't like the old girl so much, but the fact is that she does, despite the complaints and gruff ripostes. Even with Ruby's standing in the publishing world, other agents wonder why she bothers so much. And yet, Marina has a sneaking suspicion Ruby likes her, too. No one else is asked to fetch and share cream éclairs.

And the fact is, Ruby is fascinating. One of the old school, though not in the heinous manner of Marcus. In the times when they do talk, and if Ruby is primed a little with good Scotch, the stories are enchanting, her memory sharp as a pin for detail; colourful is a dull understatement for the life so far reported in the press. More so, the tales never publicly revealed.

And now Marina just has to persuade Ruby to tell her story. Warts and all.

Christ. She marches towards the door and pokes her head into the outer office. 'Jenny, my darling, any chance of another flat white? Make it good and strong please.'

Two

‘The fact is, Ruby, they do have the upper hand in law,’ Marina says, hoping the cream oozing from the very expensive deli éclair will imbue some courage on her part, plus have a mollifying effect on Ruby.

‘You mean they have us by the balls.’ The cream lodges on Ruby’s top lip, before she licks it off like a child eight decades younger, under which sits – mercifully for Marina – a wry smile.

Mission accomplished. Ruby is in one of her better moods. ‘Yes, precisely. So, what do you think?’ Marina ventures. ‘I mean, it can be something from your bottom drawer, a manuscript we can breathe fresh life into.’

Ruby’s gimlet eyes stray from her plate to Marina and stay there. From years of practice, Ruby knows exactly what effect this has on people. ‘They are in my bottom drawer, Marina, for a reason. Because they are sub-standard. Shit, in plain English.’

‘Well, er...’

‘What does that old toad Marcus want?’ Ruby demands. The bird-like eyes bore like a diamond cutter. ‘Come on, Marina, spit it out. What did he say? I know

it will be brash and forthright, just like him. Tell me the worst.'

Marina swallows cream for comfort. 'He wants sex,' she says.

Ruby's raspy roar bounces off the parlour walls lined with books, and whips around the room like lightning. Ruby is genuinely amused. Marina is genuinely relieved.

Ruby chews. 'All right, Marina. Let's give it to him, shall we? If nothing else, I would pay money to see Marcus Trent squirm in his Savile Row pants. In fact, I would write a book for it.' She takes another bite of choux. 'I *will* write a book for it.'

'Really?' Again, unusually for an agent and lover of diction, Marina is lost for words. The power of patisserie.

Ruby reaches with her gnarly hand to wipe away chocolate. 'I'll do it. But with a few conditions.'

'Of course, of course,' Marina agrees. To almost anything. 'Fire away.'

Three

Much to Ruby's indignation, the demands under which she is to write this book are a necessity rather than a choice. Just lately, she feels every one of her ninety years, along with her aching joints and distorted, knotty fingers, the once-loyal tools of her trade. Even with the lighter touch of today's modern laptops, the typing of a whole manuscript is well beyond her reach these days. By contrast, Ruby's brain remains on a different physical plane, continually awash with ideas. Fired by that enduring image of Marcus sweating away in his underwear, she accepts Marina's strategy.

So, the tentative knocking at her door is expected, and the boy – he looks very much a boy in her eyes – is ushered into the kitchen of her mews house and the surroundings of well-to-do Highgate. He looks nervous because he is. 'I'm Jude. Jude Dempsey,' he says.

Ruby's head whips around. If she looks surprised, it's because she is. 'Well, Jude, perhaps you'd better put the kettle on,' she says, lowering herself into the armchair facing the small, neat garden. 'My knees are playing up today and I need to sit.'

'Is this all part of the interview?' he pitches uneasily.

'No, it's making me a cup of tea.' Reluctantly, she checks her tone, bordering on tetchy. Marina has cautioned that it's vital not to scare this one away, the third in a line of not many applicants. Ruby has pondered several times over how her agent will have phrased the job advert: *Grumpy old writer seeks Boy Friday for typing, IT skills and secretarial duties. Cooking essential.* Something like that. Ruby has specified male only, but of course in this day and age, you can't say it outright.

Instead, Marina has assured Ruby the candidates will be vetted accordingly. 'Ruby, I'll just send you the ones with...'

'Stamina?' Ruby had filled in, helpfully.

'The requisite skills,' her agent qualified. Of course, what she really meant was 'guts'.

In this case and on this day, Jude passes the tea test: hot and strong with a dash of milk. Crucially, he joins Ruby at the table with his own mug, and she likes that, always suspicious of those who don't indulge in a hot beverage, because how can you chat without liquid to make it flow amid a curl of steam? He loves to cook, too, and although Ruby's appetite is small, she adores titbits of a cosmopolitan nature. 'I do a mean phad Thai,' he says keenly.

'How old are you, Jude?' Ruby asks, remembering to show her teeth in a half smile so it's less like a grilling.

'Twenty-one. Well, next month.'

'You don't want to be a writer, do you?' Devoid of patience and time, Ruby has no truck with would-be novelists who picture her as some sort of mentor.

'No,' Jude says, in a way which invites belief. 'I'm just scouting around until I decide what to do.'

So, Jude stays, proving his skill first in the kitchen in whipping up a very acceptable lunch, and then at the screen when they move to the office, just a day later. Secretly, Ruby quite likes her new laptop, though she does lament the feel of heavy keys under once nimble fingers, a frenetic motor to keep her running and the words spewing. So, the specialist 'typewriter' keyboard newly acquired by Marina emulates the familiar tickety-tack, even if it falls short of a thundering machine. Another compromise in what Ruby frequently terms 'this bastard ageing process', and which means it's Jude's slim and lithe fingers now playing to her tune.

'Are you ready for this?' Ruby asks. If truth be told, she's not entirely prepared for what may come. And yet the thought of getting one over on Marcus Trent is too good a motivation to pass up.

Jude nods. He's more than a little trepidatious, but hides it well. He flexes his fingers; in time, Ruby will come to know it as an entirely natural gesture, but in that moment it feels truly theatrical. 'Let's go, Miss Devereaux.'

INTRODUCTION

As I've said many a time, I'm not entirely sure of the value of a writer's autobiography, especially when written by one in their extreme dotage. Being habitual storytellers, we fiction writers are notoriously unreliable – we make things up. It's in our blood. In any other guise, it might be called professional deceit. Or lying.

I've pleaded as much to my agent, Marina, who has for years fended off entreaties from publishers for me to wax lyrical about my life. 'It's all in my books,' I've told her each time the subject arises. But, of course, that's an enduring excuse – for laziness, apathy and disinterest. Authors have these indolent feelings in tidal waves, interspersed with spurts of furious activity. Occasionally, it may be touched by genius, though I always think it's up to the readers to make that judgement. Critics may offer their opinions, but with advanced age and twenty or so books in my personal library, I have the luxury of not needing to heed a critic's 'wise' words any longer. It's a rare benefit of being ninety.

So, this autobiography lark. Perhaps, finally, I am beginning to touch base with my own mortality, scraping my scalp on

the ceiling of life. Having not expected to live beyond the next decade for many years, I would find miraculously that I did. Again and again. Now, the odds of surviving into the next... well, a betting man wouldn't put his hand in his pocket, and I wouldn't blame him. So I have ruminated, cogitated and somewhat conceded. To a point.

The 'I was born into a shoe box in front of the scullery fire...' type of narrative doesn't interest me, not least because I wasn't. Born, yes, but not into stultifying poverty. My childhood was possibly even worse: dull and uninspired, only shaping the real me by instilling a desperate urge to flee. The points of infantile interest in the early life of Ruby M Devereaux could be etched on a matchbox and still leave room for the price. It is not my parents, my early life or even a dedicated schoolteacher that has moulded me into the woman you might imagine. On deep reflection, a surprising entity that has shaped my life is the opposite sex; I cannot, in all honesty, ignore the allure of men and masculinity – their attentions and sometimes an infuriating bloody-mindedness – in driving the years along. The mystery of men, too. For centuries, women have – quite rightly – kicked against the idea of men sculpting the female form into their desired ideal. The fact is, I have never felt chiselled, or at the mercy of an intensely masculine system. Were I younger and less curmudgeonly, I would certainly be out there, banner-waving with the feminist cause of today. And don't mistake me – the universal balance of power back then *was* uneven. But perhaps I was lucky (or short-sighted). In the moment, I saw it as largely weighted in my favour. I grasped at it and enjoyed it. Those men involved might dispute my version of events, but since all but two of my 'chapters' are dead, they probably won't – another advantage of being ancient and still conscious.

The two still living, well, they can decide to agree or disagree with my depiction, but much like me, at least one of them is probably too old and tired to fight out the details. Breathing is simply a bonus these days.

So, this is for Marina, who will no longer have to petition me annually for the so-say lurid details of my life. I have capitulated. I will tell. Though Lord knows who wants to read the ramblings of a grumpy old woman about to die. It may be feast or famine, but it is you, reader – always my eternal employer – who will decide.

Welcome to my life in twelve men. Enjoy. Because I very much did.