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Dead Rich

Written by Louise Fennell

Published by Simon & Schuster

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DEAD RICH

LOUISE FENNEL



SIMON &
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

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First published in Great Britain by Bedford Square Books, 2012
This edition published by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2012
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia
Sydney

Simon & Schuster India
New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-47110-192-2

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or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living
or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

*For my beloved family
Theo, Emerald, Coco, Mum
and, of course, for Susan*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From the moment I showed Ed Victor my first scribbled pages he has been herculean in his support and enthusiasm for Dead Rich. His faith in me has brought me more joy than I can ever convey – I will never be able to thank him enough. Huge thanks too, to my magnificent editor Susan Opie whose tact curbed my worst excesses, and whose warmth and humour made the editing process such a pleasure. I have my wonderful daughters to thank for all their enthusiasm and encouragement too; Emerald for her wise, patient and perceptive editorial advice, and Coco for her creative design skills. Thanks too to my fabulous, funny husband Theo, for the life we have together and the inspiration that life has brought me. My boundless gratitude to Susan Boyd for her lifelong friendship and encouragement. Thanks also to Maggie Phillips, Edina Imrik, Linda Van and all the team at Bedford Square Books. Mark Hutchinson, Christopher Jenkins, William Boyd, Sally Woodward Gentle, Poppy Cotterell and Leila Swift have all played their part in the journey of this

book. I also have Bear Grylls to thank for the Everest inspiration, and my lovely, kind, indomitable mother, Jenny MacGregor, for demonstrating that tenacity usually gets you there so never give up!

Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face.

JOHN UPDIKE

CHAPTER ONE

The black Mini hit the kerb and ground to a halt with a jolt.

Valentine Robinson flung the car door open and leapt onto the pavement. Music and laughter pumped out after him as he reached back into the smoky car and pulled out a very dishevelled young girl. His Oxford friends, Charlie and Art, helped him by pushing her from behind. Dusty stumbled and Valentine caught her gently. He gave her a brief hug. Then, in a blur of *Dolce & Gabbana* velvet and floppy blonde hair, he jumped back into the Mini and it sped off into the clear spring dawn.

Turning unsteadily, Dusty gave a desultory wave, then bent down to pull off her vintage Terry de Havilland shoes.

Dusty March didn't really look her age; she could have been even younger than fourteen. Skinny, with long, untidy blonde hair, she looked like a child who had raided her mother's makeup and wardrobe, which, in fact, she had. Her eyes were large black smudges in her delicate face. She looked wasted because she was. She set off down the London street, her bare

feet padding softly through fallen cherry blossoms that littered the pavement like marshmallows.

The day was beginning fresh and bright. The same could not be said for Dusty, who was feeling distinctly queasy. As she walked past the grand, dazzlingly white-pillared houses of Hollywood Road in Chelsea, she rummaged in her large Chloe handbag.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck!’ she muttered, unable to find her keys.

Gently sinking onto some polished granite steps, she pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit one and took a deep drag, trying to decide whether this made her feel better or worse. She had another listless look in her bag, noticing the time on her watch said 5.15a.m. Finally finding her keys she stood up, turned wearily, and opened the huge front door.

Once inside she dropped her shoes to the floor and walked quietly through a massive open-plan room. It looked as if it had been decorated by a colour blind lunatic: eclectic and expensive, it was a monument to Contemporary Art. One wall was completely covered with Damien Hirst butterfly pictures. The space was dominated by numerous huge sofas; in red, pink and yellow, with a coffee table by Philippe Starck, and a Mondrian kitchen. It was as if a neglected colour might somehow be offended if it was left out.

The only sound that Dusty could hear was a baby crying. She set off up the wide, ornate staircase, which led straight off the main room. Taking one last drag of her cigarette she casually stubbed it out in a precious orchid pot as she passed.

The baby was really bellowing by the time Dusty got to the

nursery door. She pushed it open and found her little sister standing in her cot wailing, taking huge gulps of air, then wailing again. The baby held her arms out and Dusty scooped her up.

‘Hey, Willow, what’s up? Calm down. Dusty’s here, Dusty’s here. It’s OK – let’s find Mama, shall we? It’s OK. Good girl.’

Dusty held the baby tight, stroking her soft curls, kissing her head. The baby pushed her snotty tear-stained face into her sister’s neck and gradually her juddering tears subsided. They set off up the next flight of stairs to the top floor of the house, where double doors stood slightly ajar. Dusty gently shouldered them open. The room was dark and messy in the gloom. Putting the baby down onto the bed she went to draw back the curtains. The early morning light flashed as it hit the framed gold and platinum albums that lined the walls.

She spoke softly. ‘Mama, Mama, morning. Time to wake up. Willow needs you and I need some sleep before school, Mama.’ Then, more loudly: ‘Mama – Georgia! Come on, wakey, wakey!’

As she turned towards the bed she saw that the baby had climbed onto her mother’s back and was bumping her cheek against her shoulder, quietly saying, ‘Mum-ma, Mum-ma.’

Dusty swiftly crossed the room and bent over her mother’s sprawled body. Georgia’s face was turned away from her. As Dusty leant across she felt her mother’s skin, cold against her wrist. She looked down and saw the face she loved – distorted, bloated, dark and dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. In horror, she pulled her baby sister from her mother’s back and sank to the floor. She could feel the floorboards beneath her, but Dusty

continued to fall – down into darkness and despair. Her eyes closed.

And so it began there, just like that. With Georgia's last little exhaled breath, a cool breeze had begun to whisper amid the charmed lives of 'Britain's Favourite Family'.

CHAPTER TWO

The early-morning sun was streaming into the vast library, spotlighting an old leather chair. Sprawled in it was a comatose man. His handsome face crinkled uncomfortably against the worn leather, his nose nearly touching an almost-empty glass of whisky. He wore a white shirt, which was crumpled and damp against his brown skin. An overflowing ashtray was precariously perched on his denim-clad crotch. Jake Robinson wasn't looking his best.

A solid mahogany door swung open and crashed into a small table, but Jake didn't stir. An exquisite but angry-looking woman stormed across the room towards him. She had obviously just tumbled out of bed; her pale silk dressing gown swirled around her. Jake glimpsed a flash of her perfect long brown legs as she leant over him. He pretended to be asleep – he sensed trouble. He was used to it, because frankly he was often in trouble.

Zelda Spender, his beautiful, famous, furious wife was not sounding happy. 'Jake, Jake! Wake up, wake *up*! Oh, for fuck's sake . . . Jake!'

Jake wisely remained lying doggo. When he didn't open his eyes Zelda became even more livid. She leant closer and grabbed a handful of his thick dark hair and pulled it, quite hard. Jake decided to pretend to wake a little, see how the land lay. He bravely reached out to put his hand on Zelda's tempting thigh. She slapped it away. 'Jake, you prat, wake up!'

Jake groaned, beginning to realise that this didn't sound quite like the usual bollocking from his wife. Somewhere, through the haze of his hangover, he detected something else in her voice, something that made him feel that he should make an effort to struggle back into a semblance of consciousness.

'Your bloody sister has finally done it! Can you hear me, Jake?' Her voice was softening, not something that would usually happen in these circumstances. Alarm and panic began to hum in his befuddled brain. He started to pull himself up in the chair.

Looking at his wife wildly, he tried to make sense of what she was saying. 'Wha . . . what? What're you . . .' he mumbled. The ashtray tipped from his lap onto the worn, but priceless, Persian rug. Jake flinched as if he was expecting a slap. But Zelda just put her hand gently on his forearm and quietly said, 'The Daily Mail just rang. Woke me up. She's been taken to Chelsea and Westminster hospital.'

'What? Who?' Jake was really beginning to feel panicked and sick. What was she saying?

'Georgia, Jake, it's Georgia.' Zelda was speaking very quietly now and Jake could see her eyes were starting to brim with

tears: a sight so unusual and unnerving that he almost screamed. He just managed to respond weakly, 'Is she OK?'

'No, Jake, I'm sorry, she's not OK. She's . . . she's dead, Jake. I'm so sorry.' She moved to hug him but Jake pushed her away, slurring slightly. 'That's a hor . . . horrible thing to say – just because . . .'

Zelda straightened up and walked over to the monumental fireplace, took a packet of Marlboro Lights from her dressing-gown pocket, lit one and inhaled deeply. She turned to look at her husband. No matter how dissolute he had become she was sometimes surprised when she noticed how very beautiful he still was, after all these years.

He ran his hands through his hair and looked up at her with his 'vulnerable child' face, which usually made her want to kick him – but today she couldn't help feeling a momentary wave of compassion for her wayward spouse.

Zelda knew that Jake really loved his sister, Georgia. She was arguably even more of a fuck-up than him. But they had shared a familial charisma, humour and talent that had brought them both fame and fortune and endeared them to millions. Well, it had to Georgia, anyway. Jake had long ago left his talent under a bar somewhere. Zelda suddenly felt furious with both of them for all the pain and chaos they had caused.

Taking another sharp drag on her cigarette she said, 'Jake, she bloody did it when Dusty was out, so that poor baby was left alone and crying. Thank God Dusty came home when she did – imagine if she had stayed with her friends for a few days?'

Christ, this is unbelievable, even by Georgia's appalling standards.'

Jake struggled to sit up. 'God, Zelda, what are you saying? She's dead? Are you sure? For Christ's sake, are you sure?'

'I spoke to Dusty, Jake. I'm sure, OK. I'm sure.' She looked despairingly at him as he sank to his knees on the floor, and let out a sob.

'Oh Christ! Georgia, Georgia!' He stared up at his wife with a desolate plea. 'What happened?' His voice was husky with emotion and hangover.

Zelda crossed the room and gently touched his shoulder. 'We don't know yet, but I think we can probably guess, can't we, Jake? We'll know more later. I need you to tell Ed, OK? I have to get dressed. Tell him we are going to the hospital to collect Dusty and Willow now. Jake, come on, we need to get going. I'll drive.'

As she swept out of the room Jake heard her mutter, 'Jesus, still pissed, fucking hell!' not quite under her breath.

Ten minutes later Jake came out of his bathroom, vigorously rubbing his hair and face with a towel. He walked along a wide landing, past a sculpture of a child by Jake and Dinos Chapman. He draped the towel over its grotesque phallic features and knocked on a door marked 'Fuck Off.' No reply. He knocked again, harder this time. 'Ed! It's Dad, I need to talk to you. Please, Ed . . . open the door, mate. C'mon.' Jake tried the handle but the door was locked. 'Ed . . . Ed!'

The door opened a couple of inches and a sweet-faced teenage boy peeped out sleepily. ‘What time is it?’

Jake looked bemused. ‘Christ, I don’t know, um, but there’s a . . . something . . . Ed, Georgia’s had an accident . . . er . . .’ He was lost for words, unable to break this terrible news to his youngest son.

But Ed only had to look at his father’s face to know what was wrong. ‘Oh God – Dad! She’s dead? She’s dead isn’t she? Shit.’ Ed paused, letting the door fall open. ‘Where are Dusty and Willow? Are they OK? Are you OK?’

‘They’re . . . they’re at the hospital. Mum and I are just going to get them’. Jake turned and started downstairs, as if he had suddenly been reminded of his mission.

He called back up to Ed. ‘Stay in the house, do not answer the phone.’

Ed moved to the edge of the banister and leant over. ‘Dad, Dad!’ But his father didn’t hear him. Ed turned forlornly and disappeared back into his bedroom, quietly closing the door behind him.

Jake ran down the wide staircase of his home, a massive converted church, St Bart’s, in Chelsea. It was irreverently known in the media, and therefore by practically everyone, as ‘God’s’.

He had always felt that the founding fathers would be turning in their graves if they knew what a truly godless future their beloved church was destined for. The Spender family had bought it in the early 90s, when godliness was at an all-time

low. No expense had been spared to turn it into the most lavishly comfortable home. God's house was very luxurious indeed.

Jake had always felt it was an insane place to live but it suited the family perfectly, not least because its stained-glass windows, set so high into its towering walls, afforded them the privacy and security that they craved; it was their sanctuary. God's House was this godless family's home, an irony that was mostly lost on their adoring fans.

Zelda was already waiting outside, sitting in the driving seat of a sinister black Porsche 4X4 with blacked-out windows, watching as her security guy, David, remonstrated quietly, but very firmly, with a few of the regular paparazzi who were always waiting at their gate. They were fairly subdued today but as Zelda opened her window the cameras started to click frantically.

Zelda ignored them. She knew she was looking vulnerable, not in full makeup. She hoped her huge Gucci sunglasses helped to give an impression of the grieving sister-in-law. She felt completely naked without lipstick. Her lucrative contract with Fabulous, the largest cosmetics company in the world, stipulated that she must never, ever be caught out in public without being fully made up in their products. But somehow she felt they would have to make an exception today; surely 'vain and heartless' was not a look they were trying to promote?

As David approached the car, Zelda felt the little thrill she so

often experienced when she was in the company of her security team. Like her very own personal cast of the Chippendales, all tight uniforms and taut muscles, they were always burning to serve. David was the Head of Security and the finest example of his type (ex-SAS) she had ever employed. Zelda opened the car window a little further and David leant in towards her. She spoke softly: 'David, do you think we should get some more of the guys to help today?'

David looked at her over his Wayfarer sunglasses. 'They're already on their way, but they won't be here for fifteen minutes or so. I think it would be wise to wait till they get here, then I'll leave them in charge and come with you to the hospital.'

Zelda shook her head impatiently. 'No, stay here, David, I'll have Jake with me.' She pulled her legendary beautiful mouth into a tight, somehow sexy, grimace. 'We'll be fine . . . but more than ten fucking photographers – call the police.'

Jake emerged. Slamming the front door, he flinched slightly at the noise and sprinted down the wide stone steps. The photographers went berserk. Zelda closed her electric window abruptly when she heard him coming.

As Jake plonked himself into the back seat, Zelda turned to him crossly. 'Get in the front, I'm not your bloody chauffeur!'

He hopped out again and into the front. 'Sorry, I thought David would be driving.' Zelda gave him a hard stare, which he couldn't really appreciate, what with the darkness of her sunglasses and the fuzziness of his vision.

David stepped back adeptly and watched admiringly as Zelda sped out of the gate, her hand pressed hard on the car

horn. The paparazzi had to scramble out of her way, like rats running from a burning building.

Lana turned away from her small bedroom window as the car sped off. Tears streaked her pretty young face as she wearily pulled a heavy suitcase onto the bed. She clicked the catches and it sprang open, revealing a jumble of clothes. She began to unpack the things that she had hastily stuffed into her case only a few hours earlier.

She didn't hear Ed until he burst through her door calling her name. He stopped on the threshold, suddenly embarrassed, feeling thirteen, shy and in need of a hug. A hug from his lovely Estonian au pair, in particular, was something Ed needed really badly. She didn't disappoint him. She put her arms around him, murmuring sympathetically, 'So sorry, Ed, so sorry.' He let her hold him. Unsure of where to put his hands, he lifted them tentatively and lightly touched her back; the soft cotton blouse she wore felt warm, comforting – and something else too . . .

'Is OK, Ed, is OK,' she said soothingly and kissed the top of his head. He began to feel better. He even managed a tiny smile. Then he noticed the suitcase on the bed and stepped away, distraught again.

'What's that, Lana? You're not going away, are you?'

She shook her head and sadly replied, 'No, no, Ed, just sorting some things out is all. I am here, I am here, no worry.'

*

Zelda drove fast and well through the London streets, occasionally glancing in the rear-view mirror, to make sure that the press weren't following.

She turned to look at Jake. 'Is Ed OK?'

'What do you think, Zelda? His favourite aunt just died. Of course he's not OK. He's only twelve. This is fucking awful – he is going to be so freaked out.' Jake took a deep breath. 'And his cousins have been orphaned – well, as near as dammit.' Jake gazed miserably out of the car window before he continued accusingly, 'You should've told him. You're his mother, it was your job.' 'I didn't do it very well . . .' His voice trailed off.

'You surprise me. Well, let's be clear, she's *your* sister so I think it was your job to tell him – and he's thirteen, *thirteen!*' Zelda looked exasperated.

'Really? Christ – how did that happen?' Jake, mystified, rested his head against the side window and closed his eyes.

'Wake up, Jake, you need to get hold of Elliot. Poor Dusty. Now all she has left is that irresponsible prick for a father!' She prodded Jake's thigh. 'Jake.'

Jake shook himself and pulled out his phone. 'OK, Christ. Elliot, yes. Where is he? Where is he!'

'Stop panicking. Jesus, I think he's in Iraq or – um – Afghanistan, Libya? Oh, I can't remember. Just try his mobile.' Zelda accelerated fast through a red light.

'What if he doesn't answer? Shall I leave him a message? What shall I say? Zelda, Fuck! What shall I say?' Jake's eyes were wild and really very red.

‘Just ask him to call you urgently, for God’s sake. Jake, are you still drunk?’

Jake looked a bit sick. ‘I need to stop at a shop. I . . . I need some fags. I do really, Tiger, please stop for a minute. I’m sorry about last night, I don’t know how it happened – can’t remember much. Sorry.’

‘Not now, Jake, we both know if you were sorry you wouldn’t do it. We are going to the hospital to collect your dead sister’s children. So you can forget stopping at a shop. Christ!’ Zelda jammed on the brakes; a bus narrowly missed them as it swept past blasting its horn.

Jake furiously punched the buttons on his phone, squinting at the screen. He put it to his ear and, not for the first time that day, a look of panic crossed his face. ‘Sssssh, ssssh, Elliot’s phone is ringing . . . definitely abroad. Shit. Answering. Elliot, Elliot – can you hear me?’

He could only just hear Elliot’s faint reply through the static. ‘Hello, Jake! Can you hear me?’ There was a pause, and then both men tried to speak at once.

Jake: ‘Yes, yes, I can hear you.’ Which wasn’t strictly true, but he could vaguely make out, ‘Heard this morning . . . rang’ from Elliot’s reply. So he ventured, ‘Oh God, they got hold of you?’ He could just hear some tiny snatches of phrases: ‘Terrible . . . devastated . . . details . . . get back.’ But the rest was crackle and buzz. Jake just had to improvise his responses. ‘OK, I know, man, I’m sorry, God, mate. I know, it’s a shock.’ He could just understand, ‘the girls’ and replied, ‘Yeah, yeah, we’re on our way to the hospital. Don’t worry. We’ll take them

back to ours.’ He didn’t hear the next thing Elliot was saying because Zelda butted in, ‘Where is he, when’s he coming home?’ Jake, very stressed, demanded, ‘Where are you?’ as Elliot shouted, ‘Top secret . . . lines too bad, Jake . . . landing tomorrow . . . spoken to Dusty . . .’ Jake heard the line go dead but he still said, ‘OK, man. Be careful, Elliot. Bye.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He said he couldn’t say.’

‘Christ! Elliot March, international man of mystery! God help us. Did he say how long he’ll be home for? Will he take responsibility for Dusty now? And Willow? Who will have her? Elliot? I mean, what a mess – I hope your stupid moron sister has left instructions – like who Willow’s father is for a start. So typical, so selfish – where on earth are they going to live?’

‘Whoa there, Tiger, they can live with us, can’t they? That huge bloody house. Lana’s got nothing to do. It’ll be fine.’ Jake started to look rather pleased with himself – problem solved!

‘You are unbelievable. What about . . .?’ Zelda’s voice trailed off. Up ahead was the entrance to the hospital. She could see that the main area had been blocked by a seething mass of photographers and rubberneckerers. As Zelda ploughed through them there was a terrifying noise as cameras and fists banged on the car roof and windows. Zelda was used to it. She ignored them and screeched to a dramatic halt on the double red lines of the hospital forecourt.

She turned to Jake. ‘Ready?’

They both reached for their door handles. ‘Yep – go!’

Jake and Zelda flung themselves out of the car and raced up

the steps, just as the first few photographers pursued them. Fortunately they were then intercepted by hospital security, stopped and pushed back into the unruly crowd.

Zelda and Jake tumbled into the main foyer of the hospital to be greeted by the surprised faces of staff and patients who clearly couldn't quite believe their eyes ... because there, standing in front of them, was Zelda Spender and her husband Jake What's-his-name, The most famous actress in the world – well, almost – and her husband. Just like that! Right there.

Later they would proudly, but not at all originally, observe to everyone they knew that, 'Zelda and Jake are much taller than they look in their pictures, odd really, because we thought famous people were supposed to be smaller in real life!'

Zelda and Jake walked briskly up to the reception desk and whispered that they were there to speak to the doctor dealing with Miss Georgia Cole and to collect her children. After a certain amount of panicking from the receptionist they were shown upstairs by an orderly who seemed very relaxed, until they realised he had no idea who they were. Which was a novelty that made them both smile. They thanked him as they left the lift and found themselves being greeted by a harassed, slightly sweaty-looking man who introduced himself as Dr D'Angelo.

Only two hours earlier, when Dr D'Angelo was coming off the night shift, all hell had broken loose at the hospital with the arrival of the body of Georgia Cole. Everyone was in shock –