

How to Lose a Husband and Gain a Life

Bernadette Strachan

Published by Sphere

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain as a paperback original in 2009 by Sphere

Copyright © 2009 by StrawnyGawn Words and Music

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

*All characters and events in this publication, other than
those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious
and any resemblance to real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing
of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than
that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition
being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

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

ISBN 978-0-7515-4230-1

Typeset in Adobe Garamond by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Sphere are natural, renewable and recyclable
products sourced from well-managed forests and certified
in accordance with the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council.



Mixed Sources

Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SGS-COC-004081
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

Sphere

An imprint of

Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

PROLOGUE

Ruby Gallagher finally woke up at dawn on a rat-coloured January Monday. It was hard not to, with three CID officers built like sofa-beds hammering on her front door, but Ruby also awoke in the metaphorical sense. The complicated expression on her husband's face jolted her out of almost a decade of deep, deep matrimonial slumber.

'Manny . . . ?' Ruby tugged the duvet up to her chin as law-enforcing feet thundered up the new stair carpet.

'I can explain, babes,' rasped Manny, as insistent hands dragged him from the bed.

Ruby hated being called babes. Manny had never realised this in all the years they'd been together, and now, as he was manhandled into the ensuite with only a Homer Simpson hot water bottle to dent his nakedness, didn't seem the right time to tell him.

'Call my lawyer!' yelled the now fully dressed Manny as he was folded into the back seat of a Ford Mondeo. 'Call Simon!' The door slammed, but Ruby could hear his final, '*Now*, babes!'

I

It had been a mistake to let Manny name the house. Ruby knew he meant well, but the snooty neighbours sniggered up their bespoke sleeves at Château Rubes.

The art deco mansion's front door key, along with its fourteen remote controls and a panic button, had been handed to Ruby at her wedding, an event which triggered a tulle shortage in the South-East. Refurbished to Manny's brief of 'a palace fit for my princess', he believed it fulfilled his ulterior ambition to 'make Esher puke with envy'.

Since that day nine years ago Ruby had lived in a fog of luxury. The personal gym, the walk-in wardrobe and the account at Tiffany were head-turning for a nineteen-year-old fresh from the drab-hued family semi. Ruby's parents, Marjorie and Stan, were throwbacks to an austere postwar Britain that smelled of cabbage and was painted varying shades of 'bleurgh'. Sofas came with antimacassars, meals were eaten in silence, and Val Doonican was considered pretty near the knuckle. Panic-stricken by their only child's unaccountable red-haired beauty, they had regarded Ruby's looks as an unfortunate

modern malady, such as homosexuality or Jonathan Ross. Their over-protectiveness discouraged friendships with girls her own age and ensured that Ruby entered sixth form with no girls' nights out under her belt, a complete ignorance of ITV, and less sexual awareness than a Victorian maiden aunt.

Marjorie found it impossible to call a spade a spade. Periods were 'monthlies', Ruby's panties contained her 'front bottom', and the word 'sex' was replaced by the more mundane (and confusing) 'relations'. One event in Ruby's life confounded even Marjorie's creative way with a simile, and she could only refer to it as 'the thing'. As in, 'Darling, we'd love to let you go to the cinema with the girls from school but since *the thing* . . .' Here a momentary closing of the eyes and a flutter of the hands would provide a full stop to the whole distasteful idea.

Ruby loved her parents, she really did. She understood them. To a point. When, not long after her marriage, they both died within three months of each other, she'd been plunged into a deep, blank sadness. Like the well-behaved girl she was, she'd gritted her teeth and waited for the grief to subside; questions an older, wiser Ruby might have asked had no hope of an answer now. Ruby didn't care to unravel how much bitterness there was in her mourning.

That sad year had seen her husband's generosity triple as Manny eyed her constantly, gauging her recovery. Ruby was accustomed to being watched, she'd had a lifetime of it, and she tried to be grateful. 'Marjorie and Stan were diamonds,' Manny would say, rolling a brandy glass in one of his huge paws. 'Salt of the earth.'

'They were,' Ruby would agree. She remembered how relieved her parents had been when her shop-worn Prince Charming had turned up. 'Now there's a *real man*.' Marjorie had stressed the term approvingly. 'He'll look after you.'

Not a lot of men would take you on. You know what I mean, darling.'

Darling knew exactly what Marjorie meant. That phrase 'take you on' had rankled, but Ruby had been a dutiful daughter and repressed it: no GCSEs but a dab hand at repressing.

'At least they saw you living the dream before they . . .'

Manny too had trouble with certain words. 'Before they *passed away*.' This sentimental side of him would have amazed his employees. The burly build; the rough-hewn accent; none of it pointed to a man who couldn't say 'died'.

The day before the CID entered stage right on the dream she was living, Ruby had got up early to put in a punishing hour on her treadmill. Rushing off to the local nail bar to have her talons burnished, she returned just in time to oversee the erection of a gazebo Manny had ordered that was a fraction higher than the neighbours' gazebo. Much of her afternoon was spent squinting at a Jamie Oliver cookbook in her dazzlingly glossy kitchen. She followed the fish pie recipe with the kind of baffled concentration a Neanderthal might bring to a sat nav. 'This time, maybe this time . . .' she whispered hopefully, sliding it into the only one of her four ovens she knew how to switch on. 'Maybe this time it will be edible.'

There was barely time to shower, dress, make peace with her shoulder-length russet tangles and pull her stomach in before she heard Manny's key in the door. Ruby froze, waiting for the front door to close.

There it was – a gentle clunk.

Ruby relaxed. She was a scholar of her husband's moods, and had many methods of judging them. The front door was a reliable barometer. A gentle clunk meant a relaxed Manny, one who would find a disastrous pie funny. A slam meant a

Manny who would push the pie away roughly. A slam and a grunt meant that the fish pie must be hidden with more urgency than Anne Frank.

Rushing down the stairs like a chic puppy, Ruby jumped into his arms. She loved doing that. It felt so sexy that Manny didn't even rock backwards when she launched all five foot nine of herself at him. He was built to last, her husband, and he smelled good too. 'Always smell posh,' was one of his maxims, and today he smelled posh but slightly sweaty, a combination that beckoned Ruby's pheromones out from their hidey-holes.

'All right, all right, let me get in the door.' Manny was doing his best to sound testy, but his wife knew that he was in good spirits and delighted to see her. Peeling her off, he twisted his head away, refusing to kiss her. 'Later, babes, later,' he admonished her, depositing her on the marble floor. 'I'm starving.'

It was a valiant try. Ruby felt for him as Manny rolled a forkful of her pie around his mouth, and came up with various noncommittal noises. Finally, though, he had to give up.

'Chinese?' asked Ruby, reaching for her mobile.

'Chinese,' confirmed Manny, frowning down at a prawn.

'I thought we'd watch a DVD,' said Ruby lightly. She knew better than to push: Manny was not a man to be pushed.

'Sure. No Ben Affleck shit, though.' Manny, jacket off, tie loosened, landed like a sack of Savile Row spuds on the white leather banquette. 'Nothing with that cross-eyed cow Sarah Jessica whasit either. And nothing foreign language. Those subtitles do my head in.'

Settling down to a film where the body count reached

double figures before the credits, Ruby nestled in to her husband's hard contours. He held his arm wide to make her comfortable and she snuggled against him with a comfortable sigh. Ruby marvelled at the wild beast that her net had somehow snagged and civilised; pretty good going, she reckoned, for a girl who hadn't even realised she *had* a net.

Trying not to yawn at the predictably bloody swathe Wesley Snipes was cutting across the plasma screen, Ruby entertained thoughts of bed. Rather rude thoughts.

Beside her, Manny stirred, looking at his watch. 'Budge up, babes,' he whispered. 'Gotta few calls to make.'

The rude thoughts sighed, buttoned their coats and left. Ruby translated Manny's announcement as, 'I'll be in my den until 2 a.m.' 'Sure, darling,' she said, softly. 'Don't work too hard.'

A big bed is even bigger when you're alone in it. Ruby curled up beneath the downy duvet and closed her eyes. How long she'd been asleep when the bed suddenly lurched Ruby couldn't tell, but she half woke with a marshmallowy feeling of pleasure as she felt her husband scoot over and lay his warm arm across her.

'Babes,' he murmured, close to her sleepy ear.

'Mmm?' Those thoughts were back, tearing off their coats opportunistically, and Ruby half turned to burrow in to Manny's neck.

'You took your pill today, didn't you? Like a good girl?'

Her face invisible against his chest, Ruby nodded.

'We don't want any horrible little accidents, now do we?' Manny's lips started at her forehead, then slid down towards her mouth.

Blocking out his clumsy words, Ruby gave her husband the benefit of the doubt. He couldn't know how it made her

feel, to be talked to like that. She surrendered and all was right with their small world.

Until the door was hammered down an hour later.

Like Sleeping Beauty, Ruby had dozed and snored and dribbled through her adult years. Listening to Simon made her long for the comfort of yesterday's drowsy innocence: 'Blah blah blah tax evasion blah blah blah illegal gambling blah blah blah money laundering.'

Her sheltered upbringing had groomed Ruby for just the kind of cushy existence her wealthy, older husband provided. Today was raw and real and demanding, not Ruby's style at all.

'Money laundering?' Sitting in Simon's orderly office in wrinkled jeans she'd ransomed from the washbag, Ruby examined a phrase she'd only ever encountered on TV shows such as *The Bill*. Vague notions of Manny washing and blow-drying fivers flitted across her mind as she said, 'Obviously Manny didn't do all those things, did he?'

It was less a question, more a statement, but Simon's bland, 'We will vigorously defend all charges,' didn't reassure her. 'Look, Ruby,' Simon leaned forward, as if spilling a secret. Pink cheeked and curly haired, he looked far too young for his dull suit and dull desk, as if he'd strayed from a school production of *Bugsy Malone*. 'Life is about to change. Manny's assets are being frozen.'

Another phrase from cops 'n' robbers TV. In response to Ruby's dumb look, Simon explained, uneasily, 'There'll be no money. No credit cards. Manny's nightclubs will have to be sold. The house might – will – have to go.' He looked far more upset than his shell-shocked client as he told her, 'The fairy tale is over.'

There was no need to tell Sleeping Beauty that. Ruby's

ears were ringing with the crash of castles in the air collapsing. The most pressing problem in her teeming mind wasn't money, cars, houses, or anything you could touch. It was her faith in Manny. 'Manny will sort this out.' Her voice wavered. 'He'll know what to do.' Her husband was strong. Resourceful. Dynamic. He was also ruthless, harsh and laughed until he wet himself at her belief in feng shui, but that didn't matter right now. 'It's all some stupid misunderstanding.' More pertinently, Manny was honest, the kind of man who made a song and dance about people being 'straight' with him.

'Manny is in a lot of trouble.' Simon was talking carefully, and with peculiar emphasis, as if trying to pass a message in code to an elderly foreigner. 'Ironically, you are now in a somewhat better financial position than your husband.'

'Me?' laughed Ruby. Manny had been careful never to burden her with a personal bank account. 'All I can get my hands on is the loose change down the back of the sofa.'

'Actually, you're the owner of a penthouse apartment in London.' Simon reached into a drawer and produced a bulky padded envelope. He was enunciating carefully in that meaningful way again, as if he suspected that the cheese plant was bugged. 'Manny signed it over to you some time ago. For tax purposes.'

Or tax evasion purposes? Ruby was stung by her own disloyalty as she took the envelope, her fingers encountering the hard contours of keys.

'It's *yours*,' said Simon pointedly. 'It's worth about a million and it's yours.'

'A million!' yelped Ruby, her voice up with the polystyrene ceiling tiles. Recovering slightly, she said, 'What's mine is Manny's.'

'Of course.' Simon nodded solemnly.

‘We’ll get through this together.’

‘Of course you will,’ said Simon. ‘Of course.’

The day got more and more *Bill*-esque. Hoping that a taupe trouser suit was appropriate garb to bail out your husband, Ruby kept her head down as she signed forms at the police station reception desk, her flaming wavy hair shielding her freckled face. An ex-Brownie, a prospective organ donor and a card-carrying member of the RSPCA, she had never been on the wrong side of the law before. ‘I’ve got a Waitrose account, goddammit!’ she thought, scrawling her name on the last dotted line, too mortified to meet the eye of the bored constable dealing with her.

Creaking double doors delivered Manny to her. ‘Not here,’ he snapped, sweeping out of the building when she raised her face to his. He strode off across the tarmac with Ruby trailing him and didn’t stop until he reached their four-by-four.

‘Darling . . .’ Ruby hobbled to a stop in her heels. Unlike his wife, Manny didn’t look mortified. He looked furious. Beneath the impeccably cut pinstripes his body vibrated. Anger crackled from piercing blue eyes set deep in his broad, inscrutable, *über*-masculine face. Ruby looked up at him. She never tired of looking at him, of admiring the neat, sooty shape of his close-cropped dark hair. Maybe it was the fairy tale thing again: Manny was the Beast to Ruby’s Beauty. Or maybe she was just kinky for blokes who looked like boxers. His earthy physique battled with the finesse of his tailoring: the tension created was potent. ‘It’s going to be all right.’ She stole his line, the words she’d been waiting for him to say. Hoping to diffuse some of his fury, she reached up and wrapped her arms around him, laying her head on his chest. He was her rock.

Ruby's rock was silent all the way home in the passenger seat, staring down at his hands writhing in his lap. The stormy bad humour seemed to be receding, and Ruby silently prescribed a long bath for her husband, followed by a long talk. A very long talk.

As she slowed the car, waiting for the automatic gates of their rambling spread to inch open, Manny finally spoke, his voice like gravel on velvet. 'Not here.'

'Not here?' echoed Ruby, with a laugh. 'Then where, darling?'

'Tania's.'

'Eh?' Tania was manageress of Manhattan Nights, Manny's swishest (and, Ruby privately believed, tackiest) nightclub. 'Tania's?' She felt a stab of unease, possibly triggered by a sudden memory of Tania's push-up bra and its contents. 'What's at Tania's?'

'My kid,' sighed Manny.

Later, much later, when she was able to tell the tale without banging her head off the coffee table, Ruby would express amazement at her ability to coolly deliver her husband to his mistress like a minicab driver.

There was no goodbye from Manny, no attempt at an explanation, just a, 'This is killing me, babes.'

'Really?' asked Ruby, crunching the car into gear. 'Cos I'm loving it. *Babes*.'

Simmering in the hot tub like a boil in the bag ready meal, Ruby hoovered up another enormous glass of wine and laughed sardonically, the way she'd seen bad actors do. She was hot, and more bothered than she'd ever been.

This was her inaugural dip in the outdoor Jacuzzi. She'd argued against installing one, but it had appeared anyway. Tonight was an opportune moment to give it a whirl, before

the police froze it. She'd flicked on all the other expensive gizmos that would be covered in icicles before long – the underfloor heating, the hi-fi wired into every room, the plasma screens, the swimming pool's underwater lasers. Every light in the house burned. Upstairs in Ruby's dressing room her remote-controlled wardrobe doors slid back and forth as if deranged, and the gates at the front of the property clanged open and shut with metallic grunts.

Château Rubes was probably visible from space. Ruby was surprised that the neighbours weren't complaining. But then, she wouldn't be able to hear them over the concert-level music and the high-pitched whinge of Manny's Alfa Romeo car alarm attempting to alert its AWOL owner to the fact that his missus had caved in the windscreen with his rowing machine.

A lifelong good girl (sleepwalkers tend to be well behaved), Ruby was surprised by the satisfaction her rampage brought. The alcohol, she guessed, helped. A novice at drinking, she was taking to it like a duck to wine. Bashing open the lock on Manny's temperature-controlled wine cellar with a heavy bronze statuette proclaiming him 'Esher's Brightest Businessman 2001', Ruby had contemplated inviting her friends over to join in the carnage. The only snag was her utter lack of friends: princesses are traditionally rather lonely figures in their ivory towers.

'Mug,' Ruby had chastised herself while manipulating the super dooper vacuum thingy Manny insisted on to open his precious wine. 'He *bought* you, you mug,' she enlarged on her own foolishness as she tossed the super dooper vacuum thingy in a high arc into the swimming pool. 'And your price was this pile of tat!' She'd wobbled across the lawn, taking in the sprawling white house. Every detail was the best that money could buy, and every detail was, as Ruby roared, 'NAFF!'

Up to her chin in bubbling water, Ruby tortured herself with random thoughts of what Manny might be doing right now, with Tania and their child. The mention of his 'kid' had been the turning point. Now she could believe anything of Manny. The tacky crimes all seemed plausible, now that his – she gulped at the tabloid phrase – *love child* had come to light.

Manny had 'baggage'. Not his matching Prada holdalls, but an ex-wife and two teenage children. 'Been there, done that,' was Manny's shorthand whenever talk had turned to babies. 'You're my family now, babes,' Manny had told her, again and again.

Presumably he was telling Tania just that in their love nest over the Pang Wang all-you-can-eat buffet. Ruby slumped in the hot tub, torturing herself with images of Manny cooing over a tiny version of himself, a foot-long bruiser in a pinstriped nappy. 'Been there, done that,' she slurred bitterly. 'But what about me, Manny?' Ruby started to cry. 'I haven't been there. I haven't done that. I haven't done anything!' Prone to melodrama, Ruby reckoned she deserved a histrionic wail or two.

Replaying her last moments with her husband, Ruby was perversely glad that she'd been sarcastic with Manny, what he would call 'mouthy'. Why the hell hadn't she been mouthy more often? she wondered, wrinkling her slender nose. Something about Manny made people tread carefully. That repressed air inhibited folk, as if he might tear off his suit and start howling like a werewolf. Ruby had tiptoed around him through their entire marriage.

'Twat!' she shouted. 'Baldy twat,' she added, amazed by her own daring. Manny's bullet head, with what was left of his hair cut snugly to the contours of his skull, was a tender subject. 'Erm . . .' Ruby scrabbled around for swear words.

She wasn't good at this being angry stuff. 'Cow,' she shouted, blushing at her lack of finesse with a curse. 'BASTARD!' That was more like it. Ruby squeezed her eyes shut and shrieked, bouncing in the water with the sheer effort of it, 'BALDY TWATTY BASTARD PIG MAN!'

'Err, hi.'

'OhmyGod!' Ruby opened her eyes and slid off the Jacuzzi's tiny underwater bench. Spluttering to the surface again, her wine glass floating away, she focused with difficulty on the small figure on her patio. 'Maria. Hi.' She pushed tendrils of damp hair away with a clumsy hand, attempting to look composed in front of one of Manny's bar staff, raising her voice to be heard over Elvis giving it loads from the speakers.

'Do you know your house has gone mad?' asked Maria, childishly small in her combats and sweatshirt. She was dark and Mediterranean looking, with a neat olive face that always seemed to get a joke Ruby didn't know had been cracked yet.

'Oh that.' Ruby nodded in the direction of the floodlit house of horrors. 'It'll be frozen any minute.'

'I see.' Maria righted one of the aluminium garden chairs that Ruby had carefully knocked over, and sat down. 'I wanted to make sure you were OK.'

'Did Manny send you?' Wine and hot water evidently made Ruby suspicious.

'Hardly.' Maria sneered at the mention of her boss's name. 'I'm homeless thanks to him. Two of his heavies chucked me out of the flat I shared with the other bar staff over the Vegas Rooms.' Maria leaned forward, hands on her knees. 'Just thought I'd pop by and see how you are. This must be a shock for you.'

'You sound as if it isn't a shock for you' isn't easy to say

when you've been knocking back vintage claret for hours, but Maria must have had some sort of bartender's degree in drunk-speak, because she understood.

'Not really. He's a bad 'un.' She sat up suddenly, perhaps aware she'd gone too far. 'Sorry. I mean, he's your husband and everything.'

'No, no, don't apolo-, apol-, say shorry.' Ruby exonerated her visitor with a regal wave of her rescued glass. 'He is the baddest 'un I've ever met. Shomehow I never noticed.' Ruby did another of those mirthless laughs. Through the fug of Jacuzzi steam and priceless wine, she squinted at Maria. 'Where will you live? What will you do?'

'Don't worry about me. I'm always all right,' said Maria, briskly. 'I'd better, you know, get away. I just wanted to make sure you were coping.'

'Thanksh.' At the girl's kindness, Ruby felt tears threaten but then, with the abrupt changes of mood common to drunks, toddlers and serial killers, she grinned. 'Let me see you to the door.'

Creating a tsunami that lapped over the patio, Ruby stood up. Maria goggled up at her, amazed. 'I assumed you had a bikini on . . . ' she gasped.

'Nope.' Ruby swayed as she stepped out of the tub in killer heels. 'I've got all my deshigner gear on. All presents from my loving husband.' A chic sumo wrestler, Ruby could barely walk in the layers of Gucci, Chanel, Roland Mouret and Stella McCartney. Manny had good taste in clothes and the sodden leggings under the trousers under the skirts under the dresses were all exquisite, none more so than the top layer, Ruby's strapless satin wedding dress embroidered with Swarovski crystals. Waddling back through the house after waving off a perturbed Maria, Ruby caught sight of herself in one of the mirrored walls of the James Bond-style living

room. Mascara down to her chin, her hair a knotted beehive and her newly size 28 body swathed in a dripping wedding dress, she murmured, 'Shame Manny's not here. He loves me in white.'