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Ursula's Story

Sandra Howard

Chapter 1

Bill is marrying her today. I glance at the clock, clear and bright in my blacked-out bedroom, the red digits glowing like fireflies. It's on Bill's side. I still stretch across every morning to switch off the alarm. Only half-past five, I'll never get back to sleep.

Perhaps a new smaller bed might be good – like the one I saw in Brearfield with a card on it saying, 'The Occasional Two'. Or would it be better to move, to downsize, which would certainly help Bill. Still, round here, though, the girls have had enough upheaval.

A buyer shouldn't be too much problem with the wonderful garden and London little more than an hour away. I do love the house. The wisteria is always so glorious before the dry papery petals come fluttering down like confetti. I love the circle of gravel, the glossy-white front door.

I love the symmetry of the tall Victorian sash windows. They have folding casement shutters that usually help with sleep. I draw the curtains too, at night, but now the blackness feels constraining. Scrambling out of bed to open them I climb back in and lie hugging my knees watching the curtains lifting in the light breeze; both sashes are pushed up a little, as far as the window-locks will allow. The daylight is gathering, creeping in cautiously, gingerly, like a child who knows its parents won't enjoy being woken. Bill's lucky, it looks a perfect spring day.

His proprietor, Oscar Bluemont, who never does things by halves, is giving the reception, opening up his lavish Kensington home whose garden might be a greenhouse at Kew. It's not something every newspaper editor could expect, but then not many marry a government minister and ask the Prime Minister and half the Cabinet along.

The press will be back here again, after down-at-the-mouth pictures and quotes. They won't get them. 'His ex-wife Ursula, forty-three, was unavailable for comment.'

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It will be on the evening news. '... And now the wedding we've all been waiting for! Health Minister Victoria James and William Osborne, editor of The Post – better known, of course, from his current-affairs programme on television, The Firing Line.'

Bill is a tough operator, I think with frustration. Clever and charismatic in the way he presents that programme, lulling interviewees then homing in for the kill. He was a household name even before his great affair with Victoria James. Will she take his name and become Victoria Osborne at work?

Her teenage daughter will be pointed out: the girls and Tom too, probably. '... William's three children by his first marriage.' My children, I think angrily, imagining my mother glued to the set.

The day's tensions are already forming, tightening into a ball in my stomach. There'll be all the tacky headlines in tomorrow's papers, too. 'Editor and Minister spliced!' 'Victoria weds her slick Willie.' Endless photographs. It's so pissing-off.

The telephone rings and I reach across, fantasizing for one childish moment that it's Bill changing his mind. I don't even want him to. It's sure to be Julian; he will know I'm awake and all wound-up already and he'll be feeling resentful; it does really get to him. I suppose, though, it's hard for a man even to begin to understand the pain of losing out to another woman, the obsessive consuming quality of the jealousy. Julian thinks I'm indulging in an orgy of hurt pride and should rise above it. I have to accept he's right, but it's not that easy and very irritating of him, expecting it of me.

'Is that Mrs Osborne?' The sickly saccharine voice on the end of the line sounds ominous. 'I just wondered how you're possibly feeling about today's wedding ...'

It's the press. They've got a cheek, calling this early. Controlling myself with difficulty I answer through tight teeth, 'Sorry, no comment,' and slam down the phone. Lying across the bed I pull the phone out at the socket then I reach for my mobile and fall back breathing heavily, clutching it to my chest. My heart's thumping. I need Julian's call.

When it comes minutes later I'm still raging and tense. 'Hi,' I mutter, quite bad-temperedly.

'That's not very friendly – were you thinking it might be William having regrets?'

'God, Julian. I've just had the press on actually – at this hour! I don't see why I should be given such aggro when she's treated like Mother Teresa. So she almost lost her life in a riot, terrible obviously, but does that make her so wonderful and whiter than virginal white?' Why do I have to keep on endlessly repeating it all and souring up Julian? I'm like some automated message machine that everyone's heard till they want to scream.

'They forget the long deceitful affair, all the hurt,' I add, laying it on while I'm at it. 'Some ministerial example ...'

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'And were you so very pure, clinging on in a fake empty marriage?'

'It wasn't fake, we just grew apart.' I almost tag on 'because of you', which would have weakened my case, but instead go on piously, 'And it wasn't clinging, putting Emma and Jessie first. I wish they didn't have to go to this wretched wedding. And stay the night. Tom's coming for them. Victoria is driven round in that ministerial car so she lets him use her Mini Cooper the whole time, now. She's ingratiating herself, it's sick-making; I can't stand it.'

'Why? Why can't you just be grateful? Tom's an impoverished art student, it gets him home to you more at weekends.'

'He shouldn't be living in that basement flat of theirs anyway; he was fine in halls at college. She shouldn't be influencing my children so much, letting Tom drive that fast car.'

'She'll want to avoid being seen in it these days, I expect, it's not environmentally friendly. Tom's fine, he's got his head screwed on and he's a good safe driver.'

'Probably about as safe as eggs in a paper bag – and you're just trying to be soothing, you haven't got a clue either way.'

'Yes, I have. I used to let him drive quite often when I gave him lifts to London.'

'I don't believe it, your precious old Porsche? You're in love with that car!'

'No, only with you. I'll come round later, about seven this evening. If that's what you want.'

I've made him angry, I think, lying back with my silent mobile, he was sounding cold. I'm always spiky and showing my worst side then longing to undo it. It's so hard to relax at the moment. The edginess is no effort, as instinctive as survival – if having the opposite effect. Julian won't put up with much more. I need him; I need the sex. His body is lean and hard from some past other life; the slightest brush of his arm and my spine turns to jelly. He can plump up my shrivelled morale like a raisin in rum and make me feel sky high.

We first met at his father's funeral in Brearfield seven years ago. Julian had been away for years, living in Greece, Africa, wherever, and writing travel books, but came rushing back when his father was dying of cancer. A year or two before then he'd had the terrible tragedy of his mother and sister killed in a car crash: his father's death must have been extra heartbreaking.

After the funeral there were pub drinks and sandwiches and we'd talked. His face had held such anguish, like a wounded defenceless animal. His topaz eyes had been latched on to mine; his hair was unkempt. I had longed to take him into my arms.

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Julian's hair is well cut and tamed now and it's fairer than its natural mouse since he goes abroad a lot, on trips to Africa. He's always tanned. Good-looking in a quiet unassuming sort of way: just short of six foot, a lean well-structured face, straight nose, those steady golden-brown eyes – a touch of the Hollywood fighter pilot, perhaps. He hates conforming and leading a conventional life, but that's part of the problem, it's so ingrained in me.

His father, Sir Peter Bridgewater, had been a respected permanent secretary in the civil service who'd retired to Brearfield and opened an antiquarian bookshop. Julian kept it going, surprisingly, even moving in and creating an upstairs flat. It's a rickety Tudor building in the market square; the upper half hangs over the shop like a beer belly.

People were pleased. The shop was popular, particularly with Brearfield's retired old colonels – there are quite a few – whom Julian impresses no end with his knowledge of military history. Even so, and in spite of the travel books he's written, there were murmurings about his past. And his marriage to a local girl lasting less than a year didn't help.

I never went near the bookshop during the time he was married. It was completely irrational on my part. Our contact had been minimal. I was married too, with two small daughters, Tom was still at school.

Julian's books are good. I loved his wry account of an Englishman farming on a Greek island. He says his new book on Uganda, about a time when people's lives were cheaper than a bunch of bananas, is very harrowing and I shouldn't bother reading it. I was going to anyway but my copy seems to have got packed up with Bill's things.

Four years of guarded bottled-up attraction – until that extraordinary spur of the moment, split second of time at Val and Chris's party when I almost left Bill. Circumstances conspired, though, and it didn't happen. Bill started his affair soon after, which came as a shock and cut deep, but it was, as Julian well knows, more to do with hurt pride at that stage.

Then came the break-up. I could never have picked up with him in all the crippling glare of Bill's exposure, the ceaseless battery of humiliating press. Julian was sensitive to that and never once pushed it.

The media caravan rolled on. I had licked my wounds interminably like a cat, succumbed to more melodramatic outbursts than a hormonal top model, aged my mother by years and still felt blood raw. Julian took me out, we did things together, but he knew I needed time.

When we finally made love it had a rare significance, a grace even, after all the waiting; we had known it would happen for so long. It was of the moment and had needed no looks, no raised questioning eyebrows. I'd chanced on him in the market square one late afternoon when the girls were at a friend's for tea. We had gone into the bookshop, straight upstairs to his low-ceilinged bedroom with the small four-

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poster, undressed and climbed into the cool luxury of Egyptian cotton sheets. There had been no sense of awkward newness, every nook and curve of our bodies had felt completely familiar after five long years of abstinence.

And now I'm obsessed with the physical side, I think of nothing else and feel frightened that it's locking me in.

It wouldn't work. I'm in a total tangle. There's so much about Julian I don't understand. He's never talked marriage. I think he loves me, but how long would it last? I'm six months older, he'd get bored, push off to wherever, whoever ...

It's all about being starved of sex. Bill might have lied and let me down, but he never sexually dissembled. He maintained a distance in bed like parallel ships at sea.

'Mum, you asleep?'

'Hi, Ems. No, I've been awake ages, lying here like an idle slob.'

'Jessie's the slob, I went in her room and couldn't wake her – and she's got her legs flopped right back like giving birth. It's disgusting. And her mouth's open. If she was old she'd be snoring.' Emma's in Tom's old maroon-striped pyjamas and, giving the trousers a hefty hitch, she climbs on the bed on her father's side. 'Dad's so mean, getting married this Thursday instead of next, when term's started, we could have had a day off.'

'I'm sure he thought of that.'

'Jess wants to wear her stretch pants suit. I said she can't keep changing her mind and in any case Gran would see it on telly and die a death, but she thinks Gran will be far too busy ogling all the VIPs.' Ems is sitting cross-legged, carefully inspecting her toenails, her pearlized aqua varnish. 'Jess is not to cling all day, Mum. She crowds me, she's a pain.'

'Be nice to her, love. And try and talk her into the red skirt, trousers would be wrong.'

'You're as bad as Gran! Even loads of brides wear them these days. Will Victoria wear white, do you think, as there's the church blessing?'

'Not a white pants suit, I'm sure.'

'Can I ask something?'

'Depends what.'

'Are you and Julian going to get married soon, too?'

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'Certainly not! He's just a friend.'

'Oh, come on, Mum! He's much more than that. Tom says he's been in love with you for years. He says Julian reads you like one of those old books of his. Tom thinks—'

'Well, Tom can just jolly well keep his thoughts to himself!' It's infuriating of him, talking like that to his 12-year-old sister. I swing my legs out of bed and smile back at her. 'Time we got going, Ems – and wear the new tights, no ladders for Dad's big day.'

At the door she looks back with an evil grin. 'And Tom said—'

'Go and get dressed!' God knows what she'll come out with at the reception. Bill's drunken untrustworthy journalist mates might pick up quite a few little nuggets for their wretched columns.

Cleaning my teeth I think about Julian staying the night. He never has, even on Bill's weekends with the girls, but tonight they'll be in London and if ever there was a time ... Best just see if it happens.

I feel a cold wet nose pressing against my thigh. Emma must have gone downstairs and let out Misty. 'No walkies today,' I murmur, fondling his head. 'Shitty pressmen.'

Misty was a present from Bill, just before he starting commuting. One evening he had appeared with a tiny ball of golden fluff, the retriever puppy I had longed for, and said cheerily, kissing me, 'To guard and keep you company! It's only going to be a couple of mid-week nights. I shall hate being away, though.' At the time it had seemed sensible and his investment in a one-bedroom central London flat, shrewd and sound.

I let Misty out into the garden and pick up the papers from the front step: The Times and The Post. Why keep on with The Post and being constantly reminded? Why is it so hard to let go?

Victoria's face shines out. 'Health Minister marries The Post's editor today.'

Her accident set the seal. She had been Housing Minister then and on a private trip to see the proposed site for a controversial huge new housing development, quite close to Brearfield. Her visit sparked a riot of local protestors and more were bussed in. There were too few police, it got out of hand, and a random stone striking her head had caused life-threatening pressure of blood on the brain. They had operated just in time.

Bill threw caution and me to the winds and made a wild dash to the hospital where he stayed for hours. It was media open season after that. The press invaded and ransacked our lives; they feasted like medieval kings. 'Family values editor at minister's bedside.' 'William Osborne's vigil.' 'Editor and minister's secret tryst.' No

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sacking her over a deceitful affair; she was praised for her courage and made Minister of Health instead of Housing.

It was life-and-death drama and romance; people had felt fascinated sympathy. That my privacy was stripped away like the bark of a tree, that I was raw, unprotected and bleeding, meant nothing. And William Osborne was a well-known television personality, permitted to fail his wife.

I yell routinely to the girls to come for breakfast, still half reading the papers. Victoria is sharing the front page with a heart-gripping account of a young girl abducted from her garden. My skin crawls at the thought of it happening to one of mine; it's too awful to contemplate. A shiver runs through me, a shaft of icy stomach-clenching fear. I'm overwrought and being overemotional; I've got to smile through the next few hours.

My mother's on the phone when Tom speeds up and brakes sharply on the gravel. The kitchen has windows to the front and side of the house and lets me see people arriving. It's huge and light, two opened-up rooms, with a long pine refectory table at the garden end. There's a door leading off to a laundry area and a small study beyond that used to be Bill's. It's mine now.

The black Mini Cooper is giving off vibrations; good ones, obviously, to Tom, the music is at full pitch. I lose the thread of what my mother is saying: some rant at Bill coupled with absorbed fascination about the wedding. She has a split personality where Bill is concerned. Concern on my behalf, but she's always responded to his drive and television fame, her daughter married to a success story. I love her and we're close, but she drives me mad; even talking on the phone I can end up screaming my head off at her.

Letting in Tom, the phone still pressed to my ear, the sight of my tall dark angular twenty-year-old in his ancient jeans swells my heart. There's an eight-year gap between him and Emma. Having married and had him so young I'd felt tied, in spite of adoring him, deprived of downtime with girlfriends and sudden jaunts with Bill. My job on an interiors magazine had had to become part-time – with all Tom's fizzing energy he had needed a greyhound track, not a South London maisonette. Bill had been working long hours on the paper, it seemed folly to think of having another child.

Bill became Home Affairs Editor, then Deputy Editor of The Post. We moved to Brearfield, close to the downs. Bill was being loving, planning the garden; I had a beautiful new home and soon two baby girls in quick succession. Those early Brearfield years were really our happiest time.

Tom mouths 'Hi!' then goes to the banister to drape over the suit and tie he's holding before coming to give me a kiss.

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I need to get my mother off the line and thrusting the phone at him, whisper, 'It's Gran – say a quick hello, darling.'

He takes it a touch wearily. 'Hi Gran, how you doing?' He listens with his face screwed up in a pained quizzy grin. 'OK, OK, keep your hair on. Promise I'll be in a tie. But I have got this wicked silver ring through my right eyebrow now ...' I shake my head, frowning. 'Only kidding, Gran ... We're seeing you, Sunday? That's cool.'

Tom clicks off and hands back the phone. 'You do know the press are out there, Mum?' I shrug, as if to say, who cares? He carries on rather undiplomatically, 'We, um, should really be going quite soon. There's lunch first, you see, with Victoria's brother and family, her parents and Nattie—' He dries up then, more uncomfortably aware of my sensitivities.

I hate picturing the scene. And that daughter of hers, Nattie, is seventeen, she'll be giving mine ideas; they're only eleven and twelve. 'Ease up a bit, Mum,' Tom says, with a very endearing smile.

It's a madhouse getting them off. Emma raids my shoe-cupboard and stands clutching a pair of summer espadrilles. 'Please! I can tighten them to fit ...' In the high wedges and a fifties frock with blue cornflower heads, blue as her eyes, she looks at least fifteen.

Tom's shirt is missing a button. 'It won't show, don't fuss,' he insists. I sew one on.

Emma's holding her hair in a tail and letting it loose again. It's very fair like mine. Tom and Jessie have their father's dark hair. 'You won't mope or anything, Mum?' she urges. 'Victoria's so, so nice! If you could only just get to know her ...' I smile, a little tightly. Tom's glaring, but Ems isn't letting go. 'She's not stuck-up or a meanie, you really would get on ...'

Jessie is nodding, agreeing vigorously. It shouldn't hurt, but it does. She's Bill's secret favourite; she looks up at him with those big solemn violety-chocolate eyes and he smoothes her tumbling hair or tugs at her ponytail with an achingly melting expression.

The break-up hit her hardest. She put up walls, closed doors, there was no way in; she was always bottled-up and buried in a book. Bill was sick with guilt, but I saw it most closely. If Jessie is accepting Victoria now, he can relax, and that feels like a defeat. Jess has been an ally to me, a compatriot in adversity. She can't start liking her stepmother.

Books are her great love, one she shares with Julian. He is so good with her; they get on really well. He's made her see and feel the romance of old books and talks to her very adultly about pseudonyms, blocking and bindings. She absorbs it all with keen attention, which I can tell he enjoys.

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She was often with me the times I used to call at the bookshop on some painfully transparent pretext. Julian would give her beautifully illustrated old classics to look at while we stood gazing at poetry book spines, our bodies close, but not touching.

I write poems. It's my release: light years from the telephone research I do for an executive recruitment firm, school runs, the duty calls from Bill – all the small print of life.

The children are gone. Reporters on the doorstep repelled, I'm feeling hermetically sealed inside the house and fighting an urge to call Julian. Resisting the need for contact has become a habit and it's a hard one to break. An Irish friend once talked of the ecstasy of abstinence. I'm no Catholic priest, though, and those years of unspoken longings were painful. I'm free now, but still holding back. It's a fear of rebound, of making impulsive mistakes, of becoming engulfed, subsumed like an insect in a sticky tropical plant and then spewed out and discarded.

Thoughts of Bill swim in. Meeting him when I'd just started at Leeds University. He'd been on the Barnsley Echo and had come to cover a student demo. I'd gone to it out of mild curiosity and stayed at the back of the hall. Bill came close beside me and whispered I was beautiful. He pursued me keenly, if briefly, after that, chasing up and down the motorway in a ropey old banger before leaving to take up a new job in London.

A sensitive philosophy student had dried my tears. Three years later, though, and a year into my own job on the interiors magazine, I'd been buying a paper in a South London corner shop when Bill had walked in.

He'd looked confident, in charge: wonderful. His reuniting stare across the frozen foods chest had been compelling. 'Have you got a flat near here?' he asked easily. 'Come back to mine – come for breakfast. Can we get married? Whose flat?'

'Mine's full of sleeping flatmates.'

'Then there's nothing more to decide.'

My chest feels ready to burst. Racing upstairs and flinging on the bed, a few heaving orgasmic sobs do the trick. I get my hair washed then and make purposefully for the study to tackle some outstanding work for my executive recruitment firm. I do the very early stages and I'm presently whittling down a list of candidates to captain a cruise-ship based out of Miami. I'm on the outgoing line, calling up Scandinavians with impossible names, talking round the job, mentioning relocation, when my mobile goes and my heart leaps. It's not Julian, though, but Val.

As a solicitor Val is capable and friendly, a big-boned woman who fixes clients with a very level-headed gaze. As a close friend she's all. Warm, loyal, always ready with

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a healthy blast of common sense. We're a group of three; there's also Susie, who is blonde, trim, athletic and into aromatic oils and pyramid selling. She has other-women problems and I hate seeing those sad eyes of hers. Val and I play bridge, her husband Chris doesn't, and she and Susie play golf.

'Anything I can get for you?' Val asks briskly. 'I'm sure the press are hanging around and you'll want to stay put.'

I tell her Julian's coming this evening and what a favour it would be if she'd pick up a couple of steaks. She sounds pleased. She and Susie are showing clear signs of weariness at all my indecision.

Settling back to work I consider breaking into the case of excellent claret Bill left me. He was good like that, never mean. Wouldn't it seem a bit over-the-top, though?

And I'm cross with Julian, too; it feels like he's getting at me for being such a misery Minnie; the least he could do is be more gentle and ready with the tea and sympathy.

My mobile goes again, giving me another start. It's Bill, though, which I was hardly expecting. He knows I won't be answering the landline; my press problems should be tattooed on his conscience for life.

'Just thought you might like knowing they're here, safe and sound, and all's well.'

It was thoughtful of him, considerate. 'Thanks,' I say, feeling much warmer than minutes ago and saved from having to call Tom and sound overfussy.

'And from me, too,' Bill says. 'It means a lot, um, having them with me today.'

'Yes, well ...'

'Victoria's parents will look after them and I've warned them, Ems especially, about what not to say and who to watch out for!'

I resist a sharp remark. 'Well, hope it all goes wonderfully well – and good luck, I guess, in your second life.'

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