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**Opening Extract from...**

# **First Ladies**

Written by Kay Burley

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KAY BURLEY

*First Ladies*

HARPER

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*To mum and dad  
I miss you every day*

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# 1

‘Tell me, have you met the Prime Minister before?’

It was a question that Valerie Jenson, the Prime Minister’s wife, had asked her guests a thousand times. She was hosting a Christmas lunch at Chequers, the Buckinghamshire weekend home gifted to the nation by the Lee family at the end of the First World War. Since then it had been a place to relax for the serving leader and now an absolute must-have invite for all of London’s 21st century media glitterati. They were certainly gathering in abundance to belatedly celebrate a landslide second term for Julian Jenson.

Valerie, a tall, slim, beautiful, 40-something sipped from her water glass. Dressed in McQueen couture, she was looking particularly stunning, even by her own high standards. The first lady mingled with her guests, feigning interest at the responses to her stock question about meeting the PM. She had little curiosity about those who had gathered there. Scanning the Great Hall she vaguely recognised the editor of *The Times*, the political editor of the *Sun*, that chap who had compiled the top 100 most influential names in media for the *Guardian* and so many others she simply didn’t care to know either.

Oh, how she hated the press. Why on earth couldn't her husband have invited David and Victoria Beckham instead, or Lorraine Kelly or Nancy Dell'Olio just as Tony and Cherie Blair had done during the Cool Britannia era? No, their guest lists had to be so turgid and dull.

In Valerie's view the most influential figure ever to have walked through the elegant oak front door of Chequers was her grandmother Betty. The 92-year-old was beside herself with excitement when invited to spend the weekend in one of the 10 bedrooms at the country retreat.

'Oh, our Valerie, you've done very well for yourself, love,' was Betty's first response as she walked into the French chateau-style home nestled in a fold of the Chiltern Hills. That seal of approval had guaranteed the 1,000-acre estate would always have a special place in Valerie's heart.

As she reflected on those happier times, Valerie allowed her mind to drift to a life before politics. She had been a successful businesswoman whose no-nonsense approach had struck fear in any member of the board who foolishly thought her Chanel LBD and killer heels meant she could be easily dismissed as frivolous.

Valerie was a grafter who had tirelessly and persistently hauled herself up the ranks to become managing director of non-fiction at First Stop publishing. Sporting biographies had been her speciality and the deal to sign Frank Lampard from under the noses of the bigger publishing houses was legendary. But the arrival of two babies and the demands of her workaholic husband who was completely focused on achieving the highest political office meant something had to give. Hopes of becoming chief executive at First Stop, a real possibility after the Lampard deal, faded. Instead they gave way to the high profile, but for her far less inspiring role of 'first lady', which meant swapping Civvy Street for Downing Street.

Valerie couldn't deny that she had found the initial

transition tough and as the years passed she was becoming increasingly frustrated. Julian was frequently away on business and the children had both recently been sent to boarding school. Alone, but trying very hard not to feel unloved, Valerie was living what she considered a neglected existence trapped inside a media goldfish bowl. Every smile, grimace or wardrobe faux pas was minutely analysed, even by the broadsheet press who frankly should know better.

Valerie continued to meander through the familiar, grand reception room. It had previously played host to such esteemed company as Indira Gandhi and Nelson Mandela but this afternoon was filling up with TV bosses and Fleet Street's finest.

Her glass half full, Valerie sauntered among the throng, a gentle smile reassuring her apprehensive guests. None of them realised she was half cut so early in the day. She had promised herself she'd stay away from the booze but succumbing to a tiny little shot or two of vodka was making the time-filling much less tiresome. Still, she wished Julian would hurry up and join the gathering.

He was as usual on the phone, this time to Washington. The already tense situation in Afghanistan was escalating and both leaders were anxious to avoid announcing the need for more troops just before Christmas. It was not a challenge the PM really wanted to think about right now, but it helped that the US president, the most powerful woman in the world, was always keen to break off from government business to chat and heap praise on his broad, handsome shoulders.

There was no doubt that Julian was a ladies' man but Valerie had always been safe in the knowledge that despite his occasional wandering eye he was at heart only ever this lady's man. She loved him as intensely as when they'd first met.

Realising she may have to keep the pre-lunch small talk

rolling for some time yet Valerie took another reassuring sip from her glass. She preferred gin but Ben had suggested that odourless vodka would need less explanation. He was an oppressive bully but either tippie did the trick for her, so no matter.

Ben Watson was her husband's uber spin doctor and widely credited for Julian Jenson's overwhelming re-election victory. Valerie had tried very hard indeed to like Ben but had failed miserably. As he caught her eye she returned nothing more than a watery smile. Ben was anxious that Valerie's history of heavy drinking should not become a problem. The staff had been warned, no top ups for the first lady, no matter what, and he was reasonably confident she would be no trouble today.

This Christmas buffet lunch was a big deal for Julian Jenson and nothing could go wrong. It had been meticulously planned as a political springboard to launch his next five years in office. Ben had personally drawn up the guest list of heavy hitters, with only one or two adjustments by the PM. The lunch was also a belated thank you to those whose support the Party had enjoyed during the marathon six-week general election campaign. Support the Prime Minister would need to rely on in varying degrees throughout the life of the next Parliament. Lunch simply had to pass without incident.

Ben scanned the room and noticing a well-known Fleet Street editor arrive with his wife and beautiful daughter, he strode across to greet them warmly. The paper's support during the campaign had been key, especially the deft handling of that little mix up involving the home secretary. That escort girl posing provocatively for photographs on the ledge of his duck house could have been tricky. To make matters worse she had woken several of his elderly neighbours from their slumber by squealing with excitement while swimming naked

in the freshly cleaned moat. Alarming, one of the Sundays had photographs and an interview with a disgruntled resident, but a timely chat with the friendly editor had ensured an obliging spoiler in his rival paper. Ben was relieved and suitably appreciative of the help. That was exactly the sort of valuable support that would guarantee the editor exclusive news of the latest government reshuffle planned for the following week. Ben couldn't count how many times he had warned the PM that the home secretary was a bloody liability. There was absolutely no doubt that he would be first out in the 'job swap' as he called it, when they were back in Downing Street tomorrow.

Valerie shuddered involuntarily as she watched Ben working his black magic by the door. Fixing a smile in place she walked towards the magnificent fireplace where two women she half recognised were nursing their wine glasses. They were admiring *The Lion and the Mouse*, a painting originally by Rubens but retouched by a 'relaxed' Churchill one evening when he felt the mouse too small for the expanse of canvas.

Finishing his conversation with the editor and his family, Ben Watson moved on to a TV executive he needed a brief but private chat with. It took only a couple of minutes for the tête-à-tête to reach a successful conclusion. Conversation over, he checked his watch again before glancing around the room, keen to keep an eye on Valerie until Julian made his entrance.

Ben noticed the perfect storm brewing just a moment too late.

He had warned Julian that inviting those two was a monumental mistake but the PM was still flushed with success at another five years in office. The country loved him, world leaders loved him, his family loved him. He was King of the World and could do no wrong. So, despite Ben's insistence,

Julian hadn't been prepared to listen and the invites had been posted.

Now all the strategy, the planning, the clever tricks and double spin over the last four years and particularly in the last few days of the general election campaign was about to come crashing down.

Ben stood motionless, paralysed at the realisation that even his superior talent could not prevent the calamity. He watched from the other side of the Great Hall as a meeting that would undoubtedly crucify the Prime Minister unfolded. There was nothing to be done. Valerie spoke first.

'So, tell me ladies, when have you met the Prime Minister before?'

July

## 2

### **Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBRA), five months earlier**

Julian Jenson slammed his hand onto the highly polished burr-walnut table.

‘Bloody Germans, don’t they know there’s a war on?’ he bellowed in the thankfully soundproofed room.

Shoving back his brown leather chair, he glared at the director of special forces. Julian’s temper was once again getting the better of him. Publicly he was always the suave, sophisticated PM with a cheery smile and a relaxed manner but on days like this he was finding it increasingly difficult to control himself. Ben had had a gentle word a couple of times about shouting at the staff. Personally, he didn’t give a monkey’s but hadn’t wanted them talking to the press, not after that nonsense with Brown and the bullying helpline. If necessary, he could spin it into pre-election tension, but he’d rather not have to.

Looking around at the roll call of familiar faces seated at the table, Julian was reminded that the situation in Afghanistan was dire. The heads of MI5 and MI6 were there as were the defence secretary and the foreign secretary, who

despite the benefit of expensive air-conditioning in the war room was still sweating profusely, leaving dark, wet patches on his hand-tailored navy blue Turnbull and Asser shirt.

The men and woman had been urgently summoned by Julian to the fortified, windowless bunker that is the Cabinet Office Briefing Room or COBRA where the British government meets to coordinate its response in times of emergency. In the past, such meetings had taken place in Room A, hence the acronym. Recently the meetings had moved to Room F. However COBRF didn't have the same ring to it, so COBRA it remained. The only item on the agenda was very much an emergency and the atmosphere was heavy.

The special forces director stood behind the high-tech lectern with its built-in computer screen bringing him the very latest developments from Helmand Province. An extremely volatile hostage situation involving several Britons was ongoing. The PM's loud interruption was not welcome and ignoring it the director continued with his briefing.

'As you are aware, Prime Minister, an elite team of my men had been part of a NATO mission to liberate four journalists, two of them British, the two others German women. I'm afraid the mission has not been successful. Three people have been killed, four others taken captive by the Taliban. It is of significant concern to me that there are British service personnel among them.'

The foreign secretary was attempting to use a monogrammed handkerchief to wipe away sweat from his brow but with little effect. Leaning forward, he spoke via a microphone from his seated position at the table.

'Prime Minister, we believe the Taliban has asked for a substantial reward for the safe return of the journalists. It has further demanded that Germany and Britain immediately remove all their troops from Afghan soil.'

So far the hostage crisis was being kept under the radar

by both governments. A news blackout meant the public was unaware that Britons and Germans were being held hostage. Enormous plasma screens around the walls of the bunker confirmed the blackout. The TVs were tuned to the country's 24-hour news stations which were speculating ad infinitum about an early general election. It clearly illustrated that the channels had no better news to bring their viewers. For now the crisis was still a secret, giving COBRA valuable time to discuss and plan. The foreign secretary continued.

'There has been no further update today on the fate of the British service personnel or the civilians. As the SF director has already said this is of significant concern. At this stage we are unclear what action, if any, the German chancellor plans to take.'

'Bollocks,' shouted Julian. He jabbed his finger towards a screen where the TV anchor was informing viewers of breaking news from Berlin. The volume was increased and the room fell silent.

'We're just hearing here at Sky News centre that Germany could start withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan soon. We're not sure what has prompted the German chancellor's decision or of time lines at this stage. We believe it would involve closing the Faizabad base in Northern Afghanistan and removing about 500 soldiers. The move is expected to come in for heavy criticism from the United States. The president had been expected to ask for more troops from Berlin. We're not yet aware of the British government's reaction to the news,' continued the TV anchor before the sound was muted.

'Oh yes we are,' growled Julian and reiterated his earlier statement.

'Don't the Germans know there's a bloody war on?'

Clenching his fists he turned determinedly back to the lectern, a signal for the director to continue his briefing.

'What's the plan?'

‘Well sir, our highly trained negotiators are being briefed as we speak. We are aware that the Taliban demand is not acceptable to our government and we are acting within that parameter. We are also formulating a liberation mission, but that of course would need your approval. I suggest a continued news blackout for 48 hours while plans progress.’

‘Done,’ agreed Julian, already marching towards the blast-proof, steel-reinforced door. He was keen to leave the room before his short fuse burned out. Stopping abruptly he turned to make a final point.

‘We need to get our people out of there as quickly and safely as possible. I am sure you remember Sierra Leone well, Director? That’s the happy conclusion I am looking for here. I want no more mistakes on this mission. Do I make myself clear?’

Operation Barras had been a successful SAS and SBS rescue mission carried out in the African jungle. Royal Irish Rangers, working on a UN peace-keeping mission had been taken hostage by ruthless and heavily armed thugs. All the special forces had worked supremely well together and the hostages returned home safely from the war torn country.

‘Indeed so sir, we are working towards the same outcome on this occasion,’ concluded the director, his confident tone disguising an uneasy concern.

Julian nodded curtly and headed off with Ben along the series of anonymous corridors which led back to Downing Street. As they emerged into the daylight inside Number 10, Ben was the first to speak.

‘You know what, boss? You should visit our boys pronto. This German bollocks will cause a wobble in the polls and we don’t want that so close to an election, now do we? I can just read the bloody headlines now: *Bring Our Boys Home. Why Are We There? PM Puts Our Troops In Unnecessary Danger.*

*It's A War We Can't Win.* I suggest you go instead of heading to Chequers. Tell you what, let's take the defence secretary with us as well. She can announce that her son is set to join the Armed Forces when he finishes his full-time education.'

Ben was warming to his theme and had little concern about the ramifications.

Julian laughed at Ben's ridiculous suggestion.

'But Judith's son is studying the sciences, Ben, and plans to go on to Bristol University. He wants to be a surgeon.'

'Not as much as his mother wants to remain in government,' responded his ever-scheming right hand man with a wry smile. Julian never ceased to be amazed at his spin doctor's Machiavellian streak but it was a discussion for another time as the pair walked along the plush carpeted corridor towards his office.

'OK, I agree we should go to Helmand and we can . . .'

but his train of thought was interrupted by an incoming text message on his mobile.

**Call vanessa URGENT.**

Vanessa Lewis was his personal lawyer. She rarely contacted the PM during office hours. It must be important. He looked up at the Downing Street grid which mapped out his schedule for the day and saw he had a 10 minute window.

'Have to take this, Ben. Tell Judith we're going by the end of the week, leave the announcement about her son for me to raise with her, please. I'll be back in a few minutes.'

Leaving Ben glued to his phone to make the necessary plans, Julian headed towards his private office and closed the door. He dialled Vanessa on a pay-as-you go mobile, the most effective way to make a secure call. He assumed her text meant she had important confidential information to impart.

'Hi Vanessa darling, what's up?'

The lawyer was used to her client's over familiar tone and really rather liked it.

'Hello Julian, I expect you have already seen page 22 of *The Times* today. I thought it may be of interest given your present predicament.'

Vanessa was referring to Julian's domestic dilemma. The Jensen marriage which had once been a happy union, built on solid foundations of love and respect, had slowly disintegrated into two individuals who shared little more than parenting duties.

Gradually, Julian had become frustrated with Valerie and his attentions were now very much focused on another. She was a rather foxy, glossy magazine editor by the name of Sally Simpson. Valerie was resisting any change, but Julian was determined. 'Of course I love you, but not in that way' had become his nocturnal mantra as a more and more distressed Valerie tried to convince him his enthusiasm could be reignited. But Julian believed that the passion with his wife was long gone and it was now only Sally who aroused his interest. Originally, he had hoped to continue in a lame marriage while nurturing a delicious but discreet relationship with Sally. Those hopes were no longer realistic, not least because of a worrying increase in Valerie's drinking.

Of course that wasn't the only reason. Desire played its part. Sally was smart, sassy and occasionally ever so slightly tempestuous. Their soirees were a welcome distraction as the charade of his marriage staggered on.

Fading beauty maybe, but always deliciously raunchy, there was nothing she wouldn't try. In fact, she had a rather persuasive way of illustrating to 'JJ', as she called him, what he would be missing on the nights he reluctantly returned to the marital bed. Sally was adventurous, insatiable and always thrilled to see him. It was temptation beyond endurance and with the children now safely away at school, Julian

had for the first time begun thinking the unthinkable: a divorce.

Vanessa Lewis was the best divorce lawyer in the business. She had handled both high profile royalty and celebrity break-ups with a deftness that only a few could muster. She was also very choosy about her cases, politely but firmly rejecting requests from several very well known would-be clients if she considered their behaviour somewhat crass, especially when they had seemed desperate to play out their break-ups in the full glare of publicity.

Julian was slightly piqued by the query about his morning reading. Did she really need to bother him with a newspaper review?

‘No darling, I haven’t seen the article you’re referring to quite yet, tad busy running the country. Is it really this urgent to call during the day?’

The silence from the other end of the line spoke volumes. Suitably chastised, Julian reached over to the pile of papers still sitting untouched on his desk and turned to the indicated page.

*Stop Giving Ex-Wives These Undeserved Millions, Urges Expert In Family Law* read the headline. It was accompanied by a photograph of Heather Mills who had received £24m after a three-year marriage to Sir Paul McCartney.

Vanessa was very aware that one of the major stumbling blocks to Julian divorcing Valerie had been the Jenson fortune. Old money and an ancestral pile must stay within the family. His father would articulate the same view more eloquently when Julian eventually plucked up the courage to broach the matter with him. Fine to party with show-girls but keep your hand on your wallet and the old girl happy had always been his watchwords. The family motto – ‘Never Surrender’ – came to mind as Julian skimmed through the story.

‘Most interesting, but I have been married to Valerie for almost 20 years. How will this help me?’

‘Well, Prime Minister,’ Vanessa’s formality suggesting the clock was running on her £800 an hour plus uplift fees, ‘the reason for my rude interruption during office hours is that today I find myself lunching with Bruce MacDonald from the Family Division of the High Court. As you may well know, he is an expert in all matters matrimonial.

‘After luncheon, Bruce is heading up to St Andrew’s for a few days R&R with several of his learned colleagues. I am sure that during their well-earned break they may well find themselves comfortably ensconced at the 19th. While there they will no doubt want to discuss the increasing injustices of a wife of however many years’ marriage, receiving half of her husband’s assets without any parliamentary legislation to that effect.

‘Indeed my learned friend may be keen to further increase his already impressive profile by subsequently taking to task some of my own colleagues. I refer to those representing spouses whose demands on a husband’s fortunes could be considered by any right-minded person to be unreasonable.

‘While you would no doubt accept that Valerie should most certainly be entitled to significant funds, the Jenson inheritance was quite obviously not built up during the course of the marriage. A claim against half of those funds could therefore be reasonably contested.

‘I assume I have your permission to broach the subject with Bruce, Prime Minister?’

Julian was only a second behind Vanessa’s razor sharp brain.

‘You’re brilliant.’

‘And reassuringly expensive,’ concluded Vanessa before replacing the receiver without another word.

Julian laughed. That was exactly the sort of conversation

that could hold the key to setting him free from these chafing matrimonial handcuffs and he felt his mood now lighten considerably. Julian swung his feet off the desk, threw *The Times* back onto the newspaper pile and headed for the lift to take him up to the Downing Street flat. He was optimistic that Valerie's Valium should have worn off by this time of the morning.

Entering the mirrored elevator Julian admired his matinee idol reflection as he waited the few moments it would take to reach the third floor. The pressure of high political office had taken little toll on his handsome face. With a rigorous exercise regime and bespoke Jermyn Street suits, he cut a dashing figure as he strode through the corridors of power at the Palace of Westminster. Confident, powerful and privileged, Julian Jenson feared little apart from the ire of his father which he went to great lengths to avoid.

As the lift doors creaked open he bounded up the last few thickly carpeted stairs to the family's apartment, a determined spring in his step, a potentially much more rosy future ahead of him.