

Bed of Roses

Bed of Thorns



Uta

Christensen

BED OF ROSES

BED OF THORNS

A NOVEL

BY

UTA CHRISTENSEN



Eloquent Books

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblances of my characters to persons living or dead are purely coincidental. Any names, persons, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Copyright 2009

All rights reserved - Uta Christensen

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, from the publisher.

Eloquent Books

An imprint of Strategic Book Group

P.O. Box 333

Durham, Ct. 06422

www.StrategicBookGroup.com

ISBN: 978-1-60976-493-7

Printed in the United States of America

Book Design: Roger Hayes

Cover Design by Kalib

For Ken, Marc, Andrea, Athena and Hedi

Also by Uta Christensen

Fiction

CAUGHT MIDSTREAM

Nonfiction

Her Father's Memoir

ZUM LEBEN ZU WENIG

ZUM STERBEN ZU VIEL

The Story of Five Years in a
Russian POW Hard Labor Camp
Published in Germany

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my husband, Ken, for his unflagging support, encouragement, feedback and insightful commentaries. I also thank my sister, Hedi Roethel, for her enthusiasm about my writing, her initial reading of my manuscript, her valuable suggestions and steady encouragements. I feel indebted and grateful to my keen-eyed editor, Geoff Aggeler, for his in-depth editing, his support and encouragement. I loved his sense of humor and his inspiring and lengthy email communications. Thanks and appreciation go to Josie Cowden, my dear friend and copy editor of the final version of the manuscript. My thanks and gratitude also go to artist and photographer Kalib for designing and creating the book's cover.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Ursula	1
2	Katia's Youth	13
3	A New Arrival	22
4	Bergblick	29
5	The Visit	37
6	End of a Story	42
7	A Sister Returns	54
8	The Village	63
9	Lidia's Visit	76
10	Zara's Youth	79
11	Bella	85
12	A Refuge Destroyed	93
13	Bad Reichenfels	99
14	Roman	112
15	Shandor	121
16	Year of Horror	131
17	Peace at Last	146
18	Changes	156
19	The Long Wait	174
20	Ruth	187
21	Postcard from Afar	200
22	Ruth and Laura	210
23	Still Waiting	226
24	The Homecoming	237
25	Reflections on a Dreadful Reality	245
26	An Uninspiring Change	253
27	Journey from Afar	261
28	The End and the Beginning	270
29	The Journey as a Dream	280

1

URSULA

Ursula remembers when she became keenly aware of her mother's contradictory nature. She was not yet six then, and everyone called her Ulla.

Who really is my mother? Ulla asked herself many times and pondered that question without getting a satisfactory answer. *Is she the beautiful, softly smiling woman who sometimes hugs me? Oh, that feels so good. Maybe that means she loves me.* At that early age, Ulla loved to be seen with her mother in the street, at the city pool, or during the afternoon walks in the countryside. Every time she went out with her mother, she noticed heads turning and was really proud of her.

Ulla could not yet see that her mother had a lovely figure with well-rounded hips, perfectly shaped breasts and fine legs; that her eyes were beautiful—of a deep, warm green with tiny honey-colored flecks strewn in; that her skin was light and, in contrast, her hair a very dark brown; and that she looked very feminine. Neither did Ulla notice the flaws of which her mother was very conscious—her overly prominent nose and her slightly jutting gapped teeth. She never showed her teeth when she smiled but kept her mouth closed in a soft Mona Lisa smile.

Or Ulla asked herself, *Is my mother the stern, heavy-handed, all-knowing, often cranky woman who always forces and imposes things on me? Sometimes she gets very angry; and, I think, she likes to hit me even for the smallest wrongdoing. She also criticizes me too much—my hair, my clothes, my dirty hands and cheeks, or when I don't clean my behind properly. I can hardly ever do anything right. For her everything seems to have to be perfect. She always forces these silly red bows on me. They are supposed to make my long, brown hair look nice. I hate them and feel that I stand out. No other girl wears these bows. I also have to wear a hat that I can't stand when we go out. I*

BED OF ROSES BED OF THORNS

want the wind to play in my hair. In her little, only fractionally matured mind, Ulla was confused to be alternately attracted to and repulsed by the person supposedly closest to her—her mother.

More than anything else, Ulla couldn't understand why her mother made her sit on the big, grown-up toilet, door locked, for long periods of time. At least they seemed long to her. *Maybe she wants me to be out of her way,* she thought.

The toilet was up a flight of stairs from the apartment. Ulla would cry at first, but then just gave in to her fate as toilet sitter. The more and the longer the sittings happened, the more she used her mind to occupy herself. As she braced herself so she wouldn't fall into that big toilet—that was her real fear—she wondered why she hardly ever saw her father and tried to find her own explanation. But a satisfactory explanation was hard to find. Maybe it was because of the war. Everyone talked about the dreadful war that had been going on for years. But Ulla could not yet grasp what war was all about. She didn't think her father stayed away because he didn't love her. She thought the people fighting the war must force him to stay away. That thought made her very upset. She yearned for her father to come home.

Also, Ulla tried in vain to explain to herself why her grandmother was such a crazy, wrinkled, white-haired woman who smelled bad and would not speak to anyone but just mumble to herself. She always shuffled around the kitchen but did not prepare or cook anything. She did not fix anything for Ulla or give her any food even though Ulla sometimes saw her grandmother chew on a piece of bread. She would not share even when Ulla stood in front of her with begging eyes. *Why was grandmother so unresponsive? Why would she sit at the kitchen table for long stretches of time, day in and day out, staring at the empty table top, twiddling her nose with her finger tips without stopping, always in the same way? Having done that for many years, her nose has grown into something like a small, pink, irritated cucumber, more downward pulled and bent than it surely used to be,* Ulla thought. The tip of her nose now almost reached down to her upper lip.

Thank goodness Ulla had a fairy godmother, Aunt Lidia, her mother's younger sister. Lidia was sweet, calm, and somewhat withdrawn, but always received Ulla in her arms when the girl came running toward her. She never criticized Ulla or imposed anything on

her. Ulla loved her. Unlike her beautiful but changeable, often bad-tempered mother and her crazy, unresponsive grandmother, Lidia was consistently warm and comforting. Ulla also thought about why she saw very little of her Aunt Minna, mother's youngest sister, with her stern, black, stabbing eyes and deep, gravelly voice. Minna was supposed to live with mother, Lidia, and grandmother, but was hardly ever around. At times, Ulla noticed serious, secret talks going on between mother and Aunt Lidia and sometimes heard the name of Minna, but she was always told to go into the kitchen when they started talking. They weren't talking in a normal tone but rather whispering to each other. Oh, she had a hard time understanding grown-ups. She was always sent away.

Sometimes, when Ulla was in her most elated moods—a little noisiness went with those moods—her mother would sternly admonish her. “Ulla, watch yourself. Tone it down. Children are supposed to be seen, not heard. You should know that by now. You are making a ruckus. Please, calm down and go into the kitchen and play.”

The kitchen was the only room Ulla could play in. There she had a corner next to the stove where she always had to keep her toys neatly put away before going to bed at night. Why did they have such a small apartment? It had a small living room, small kitchen, three bedrooms, and a toilet with a washbasin up one flight of stairs. That was not much room for four grown-ups and a child—five grown-ups when father came home. Her best friend, Erika, with whom Ulla loved to play in the courtyard of the apartment complex when Erika had time, lived with her parents and her brother in the same apartment building but in the opposite wing. They had a huge apartment. Erika had her own room with beautiful carved furniture, and there was a real bathroom inside the apartment. Erika's father was a high party official and didn't have to fight in the war. She had heard mother and Lidia talk about him. He came home every night. Ulla envied Erika because she had a really nice family; and she was one year older than Ulla and was more mature and knowledgeable. She already attended school and had many friends. Erika didn't really have much time for Ulla, but whenever she did make time, Ulla was in seventh heaven. She adored Erika, who was always self-confident—as opposed to Ulla who often felt shy and timid. For many years, Erika remained in her memory—even after Ulla had to leave Bavaria for good—as the most wonderful friend she

BED OF ROSES BED OF THORNS

ever had. Every time Erika took her upstairs, Ulla entered the apartment in awe. Erika had a sweet, soft-spoken mother who always prepared some special snacks for the girls—mostly home-baked cookies—when they came upstairs.

One day, while sitting on her miserable throne, pondering her life and the people in it, Ulla was prompted out of the blue to begin thinking about the great mystery. Though her mother had told her that she had born her, that she came out of her body, Ulla began to wonder where she really came from. It was a question her young mind wasn't yet ready to formulate clearly. But sometimes daydreams came to her, images of a long journey beginning in a distant place that had colorfully costumed people and lively music, before stopping where she was now to stay for a while. *Oh, if I could only find out where I really came from. I would understand everything around me so much better,* she thought. Maybe she would also understand mother and grandmother better. She told herself that she must be patient for the time being. Perhaps, when she was fully grown, like the others, she would then know where she really came from. In those moments, she yearned to be a grown-up; and she never stopped yearning to be free and in charge of herself.

Though she trusted Aunt Lidia the most because of her gentle nature, Ulla learned that even Aunt Lidia could not be trusted entirely. On one occasion she had disappointed Ulla and frightened her terribly. Yes, even her beloved aunt, pure and angel-like with her soft auburn hair, had failed her. How could she do that, scaring her almost out of her little mind? But it was wartime. Ulla seemed to understand that war meant strange, unruly, and scary times ahead. She observed that things were becoming more confusing, frightening and more chaotic as time went by. She heard the grown-ups talking about such things as rationing of food and fuel and of many German soldiers perishing in the unforgiving Russian winter. She also observed them clinging and listening to the radio at night with very serious faces. But she did not grasp all the hardships, suffering and fear a war would bring in its wake. Her country had recently legislated that women without children or with only one child had to work. That was made mandatory. The men were fighting the war and the women had to work to fuel the war machine and help keep it going.

So Aunt Lidia went out one day, against her will, to get herself a job in a munitions factory. Ulla begged to be taken along, and Lidia didn't think it would be a problem taking a child into the factory, which was hidden deep in the forest. Entering the lush green world, Ulla yearned to become part of it—the tall, green-leaved trees; the sunlight filtering through them that made the fluttering little leaves dance on the forest floor; the darker, somber pines, planted close together so that no sunlight reached the earth they stood on; and the ferns and blueberry bushes underneath the green-leaved trees. She even found some little blueberries that Aunt Lidia allowed her to eat. She loved the thick carpet of leaves and pine needles; and she listened to the chirping birds. She also thought of the other animals living in the forest—the sly fox, the slinky wildcats, and the elusive deer that Lidia had told her about. They caused her a little apprehension, and she held on very tight to Lidia's hand. Otherwise, it was a long and happy walk.

Eventually, they came upon a tiny house, more like a little shack, barely large enough to accommodate one or two persons. Ulla found it curious that there was such a tiny house in the middle of the forest with a long fence running on either side of it into the distance. She noticed a man in uniform with a big gun slung over his shoulder walking back and forth in front of the little house. He went some distance to the right of it along the fence, then turned, walked back, and went to the left of it along the fence and turned again. She watched him, as she and Lidia approached, repeating the same short walk over and over again like a little tightly wound-up toy soldier set loose.

When she and her aunt came close, Ulla noticed that the man was wearing a uniform like the one her father wore the last time she saw him. This man frightened her the way he looked down at her disapprovingly right away. Then Aunt Lidia started talking to him. Ulla did not pay much attention at first what they were saying, but then she heard the soldier reply in a gruff voice, "Absolutely not allowed, lady." She now listened carefully and realized that Aunt Lidia was pleading with the stranger. The answer came back, "Lady, you don't understand. I already said absolutely not allowed. We can't allow children in the factory. Either you go home and come back alone or you leave her here with me while you go to the factory. Suit yourself."

BED OF ROSES BED OF THORNS

Ulla felt tears welling up in her, tears of fright, because she understood what he had said. But she trusted Aunt Lidia and knew that she wouldn't leave her there with this gruff man to experience that kind of terror. But then she realized that she was mistaken when she heard her aunt agree to leave Ulla in the charge of this strange, uniformed, gun-toting man. She was now overcome by feelings of absolute terror and started crying and screaming fiercely and stomping her feet in protest.

"Ulla, my sweetheart," said Aunt Lidia soothingly, shaking her a little by the shoulders, "I will be back in a few minutes. Please calm down and help me. I must go to the factory but they won't allow you to come. If I don't go now, they will come and take me away and imprison me. Do you understand? If I don't go, they will take me away and you won't see me again."

Ulla stopped screaming momentarily and toned it down to a whimper. But the tears kept on rolling down her cheeks in fast-flowing rivulets. She was confused. Why couldn't Aunt Lidia, as the soldier had suggested, take her home and then come back alone? But how was she to question her aunt's decision? She hadn't heard all they had said to each other. Perhaps the soldier had threatened Aunt Lidia. But she still felt betrayed. Wouldn't her aunt know how it frightened her to stay with this stern soldier and his big gun in this huge forest? What if Lidia didn't come back? What horror! But then she trusted her aunt and knew that she would make every effort to return to her and take her home. So Ulla stopped making her whimpering sound and only let her tears run when her aunt passed through the gate by the tiny house.

"Be good, Ulla. I'll be back soon," Aunt Lidia told her. Then she started toward the factory but paused and turned around once more, smiled and waved at Ulla. The little girl gave no sign but watched her aunt hurrying down the path deeper and deeper into the forest while Ulla crumbled onto the forest floor. She stayed like that for a long time and paid no attention to the soldier who had resumed his walking routine. He stopped one time to talk to Ulla, but she paid him no attention. When he tried again, she still ignored him. She could be very stubborn.

Never again would Ulla go out with Aunt Lidia without getting her assurance that she would not leave her with a stranger. That much she swore to herself lying on the ground.

* * *

Then, suddenly, one day, father came home—still wearing the soldier's uniform. At first, he seemed like a stranger to Ulla. Too much time had gone by since she saw him last. He looked good—tall and slim with his handsome blue eyes and dark blond hair. He looked at her kindly, but she didn't really feel a connection to him. She couldn't physically get close to him because mother, Aunt Lidia, Aunt Minna and friends surrounded him almost continuously during the few days of his furlough. Mother seemed happier and more radiant than Ulla had seen her in the past year. She was now, in those few days, a kinder and more patient mother to her than she had been in the past year. Father could work wonders.

One afternoon, father, mother and Lidia took Ulla for a walk. They wandered along the Schwalb River that was most of the year just a playful mountain creek. Its water was crystal clear then and its big and small boulders could easily be seen resting on the bottom. Now it was springtime, snow-melting time, and the creek had swollen to several times its normal size. It ran fast and furious, noisily acquiring many rapids along its route. One could hear the rumble as its boulders were pushed along the bottom. To Ulla it was downright scary to be so close to this raging river. She knew if she fell in, she would drown, as the path they were walking on was dangerously close to the swirling current. Father sensed her fear and held her hand tightly. She was happy to connect with him that way. They came to a bend in the river where the raging water had almost washed away the embankment and most of the walking trail. The four hikers came to a halt and contemplated the damaged, partial path that was left. Mother and Lidia said that they should turn back, and Ulla knew she couldn't walk that broken-up path by herself. But father suddenly took action. He picked Ulla up and, holding her close to his chest, gave her a great thrill. With his heavy, shiny boots and youthful confidence he carried her across the eroded trail. Ulla was so impressed with her father's courage, strength and agility that she suddenly felt filled with love and admiration for him. He made her feel so safe. She laughed with happiness and excitement all the time it took to cross the ruined trail and even looked fearlessly down into the raging white water. Not one moment did she doubt that her father could perform this feat. She happily

BED OF ROSES BED OF THORNS

waited and watched on the other side while he guided mother and Lidia safely across the washout.

That evening, a group of mother's and father's friends came to dinner. Ulla knew about their coming and was excited. Father had brought with him some special, hard-to-obtain foods—sausages, canned meats and fruits—that mother normally couldn't get. Ulla had glimpsed his precious provisions as he brought them into the kitchen and was dying to bite into one of the sausages during the meal. Hopping and skipping along all day, she dreamt of the evening and being allowed to eat with the grown-ups and being all dressed up and feeling festive.

Late in the afternoon, Ulla said to her mother, "Mama, I am so much looking forward to dinner tonight. I know father brought some goodies. Oh, I can't wait."

"But, Ulla, you are not allowed at the dinner table. It's a meal for adults. There will be talk not suitable for your ears. And the food will be grown-up food."

"But, Mama, I would so much like to be there. Please let me be there."

"No, Ulla, be a good girl. You will be with grandma in the kitchen and have your own food. What we are serving for the guests tonight is adult food and not suitable for you."

"But, Mama, please let me taste a sausage. I have seen them and want a bite badly."

"Ulla, you are not behaving well. You do as I say and eat what is good for you. I don't want to hear any more," said her mother, obviously annoyed. Ulla recognized that voice and said no more. When mother became annoyed, she could be unpredictable.

The few days of father's furlough passed quickly. When it was time for him to leave, Ulla cried. He lifted her up and hugged her tight. He asked her to kiss him and she planted a big kiss on his cheek.

"Must you really go, Papa? I love you to be here with us."

"I do have to go, sweetie, but I promise you, I'll be back. Just be good and wait for me."

She had become very fond of him. She had come to love his maleness and strength, a rare presence in their all-female household. While thinking about her love for her father, the only significant male in her young life, Ulla suddenly thought of her Aunt Minna. From conversations overheard, Ulla gathered that Aunt Minna had men in her

life and must be in love with them. She thought it was strange that her aunt never brought a man friend to the apartment while she was supposedly living with mother, Aunt Lidia and grandmother.

* * *

Perhaps one or two months after father had left, mother became very ill every morning. No one in the family wanted to tell Ulla what was wrong with her mother, so she worried a lot. But mother still took her for the usual afternoon walks Ulla loved so much, and she seemed perfectly fine then. But Ulla was now certain that the awful sickness would be back in the morning, and it was. As time went by, mother put on weight. *How can she put on weight*, Ulla thought, *when there is food rationing because of the war?* They were just getting enough to survive. Everyone in the neighborhood was getting thinner. She became frightened one day when she observed her mother undressing and spied her big belly. She remembered immediately the small children she had seen in magazine pictures who were starving to death. Aunt Lidia had explained the pictures to Ulla. Mother's big stomach reminded her of the children's bloated stomachs, and she suddenly became afraid of losing her mother. In her state of fear, she turned to Lidia and told her what she had observed. To quiet Ulla's fears, Lidia told her the truth.

"Don't worry about your mother, Ulla; she is just expecting a baby which is growing in her belly. In a few months, that baby will be your brother or sister."

"But I don't want a brother or sister. It's fine the way we are. Why would mother want another child? I often upset her terribly because I'm stubborn and don't want to behave the way she wants me to. Why would she want to make herself more upset?"

"When your father was here, your mother and he decided that they wanted another child. There was also another reason. Your mother has decided that she doesn't want to work outside the house. If she has only you, she will have to work like I do and be gone all day. You would have to be with grandma for many hours every day," Lidia told her.

"I don't want to be only with grandma. But why hasn't anybody told me that I'm going to have a brother or sister soon? Shouldn't I have known? Isn't it important for me to know?" Ulla asked reproachfully.

BED OF ROSES BED OF THORNS

“Well, yes, we would have let you know very soon,” Aunt Lidia answered, trying to mollify her.

“Oh, please let me know how soon the baby will arrive so that I can get used to the idea and I can look forward to the baby.” Ulla was hoping that Aunt Lidia would tell her the truth and she did.

“The baby should be born in about ten weeks, Ulla. Now you can prepare yourself, and I will let your mother know that I told you.”

“If mother had told me, I would have loved her for that,” Ulla said with disappointment in her voice. “But thank you for telling me. I promise you I’ll think about the baby a lot, and maybe I’ll look forward to it.”

* * *

Shortly after the conversation with Aunt Lidia, Ulla’s mother talked to her about the baby. But even when she finally revealed that she was expecting, it didn’t diminish Ulla’s disappointment in her.

Her beautiful, dark-haired, green-eyed mother—why couldn’t she be more loving? Why couldn’t she have a closer, more open relationship with her only daughter who yearned for closeness with her? Mother was so good in keeping herself beautiful. She dressed well, even though all her clothes were self-made. She kept the latest fashion magazines somewhere in her bedroom like a hidden treasure. That’s where she also kept her sewing machine. Ulla was not allowed to touch it. Mother would just say that it was too dangerous for her to touch it. Mother spent many hours in her bedroom. Sometimes Ulla would listen at the door but be afraid to open it. She would listen to the whirring and spinning of the machine. Mother was a whiz with clothes. She could copy anything she saw in a fashion picture. In her teens, she was taken in by a kind, generous lady, a well-known dressmaker, tailor and fashion designer, who taught mother the trade. Mother could even tailor men’s suits. She was not just a seamstress. She was a real professional when it came to creating clothes for men, women and children. Aunt Lidia had mentioned a few details of mother’s talents to Ulla, who would have loved to watch her mother while she was working wonders with fabrics, but mother would not let her.

She always said, “Maybe when you are older, Ulla, you will be able to help me. You can then be my helper. But now you are too small. You make me nervous when you mess around with my sewing,

my fine fabrics. Let's wait a while, shall we?" What could Ulla have said? She knew from experience that when mother made definite statements, her mind was set. So Ulla had to be patient and wait. How she would have loved to cut into mother's colorful fabrics.

* * *

Everyone expected the baby to come any day. It was winter. Snow and ice had piled up in the courtyard down below. Everyone spent almost all day inside. One afternoon, while Ulla and Aunt Lidia were sitting next to the hot, potbellied stove in the living room and mother rested in her bedroom, Ulla asked Aunt Lidia a question she had always longed to ask but never dared.

"Lidia,"—now that she was older, her aunt had allowed Ulla to call her just by her first name—"I always wonder about grandmother. Was she always like she is now? I mean, was she born that way? Wasn't she a baby and a little girl once?"

"Oh, Ulla, that's a long story. When you are older, I will tell you that story some day. You will be astounded when you learn who she used to be," Lidia responded.

"But Lidia, I'm older now, and I will understand everything you say. Please tell me now. Please. I have wondered so long," Ulla said pleadingly and with urgency in her voice.

"I think it is too early to talk about your grandma's past. Maybe next year I will tell you," Lidia answered evasively.

"But, Lidia, I want to know now. Now, now is the right time. I'm thinking about grandma too much. I want to stop that, and I will once I know. Please, Lidia, understand." Ulla was pressing her hard.

"OK, Ulla. I will begin to tell you the story. But since it is a very long story, I will tell it to you bit by bit. I will stop when I have said enough and some other day I will continue. I am pleased that you have an inquiring mind. You are curious and want to find out the truth. Some things are kept secret, some stories never told, because they might be hurtful, but it is always best to seek the truth anyway. And you cannot imagine what fairytales you can unearth right in your own family. Do you understand what I'm saying, Ulla?" Lidia questioned her seriously. She wanted to test how well Ulla was grasping what she had just said.

"Don't worry, Lidia. I will understand everything or most everything. You are telling me that there is much in our family that will be

BED OF ROSES BED OF THORNS

interesting to know,” Ulla responded eagerly and tried to be very serious, too.

“OK, then. Since it is a cold, storytelling winter day, and while your mother is asleep and grandma in her own world, I will tell you the beginning of the story.”

Oh, how Ulla loved being able to convince Lidia to do something for her she hadn't originally wanted to do. *That would never work with mother*, she thought.

Buy the B&N ePub version at:-

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/bed-of-roses-bed-of-thorns-uta-christensen/1018886605?ean=2940013087446>

Buy the Kindle version at:-

<http://www.amazon.com/Bed-Roses-Thorns-ebook/dp/B003UHUGO0/ref>