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# Hidden

Written by Barbara Taylor Bradford

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# Hidden

Barbara Taylor Bradford

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# One

Claire dressed in a hurry. If she was late there would be questions, and she couldn't risk that today.

She pulled on black leggings, a black cashmere turtleneck jumper and tall, butter-soft boots. She had the sort of body that was easy to dress: tall, lean, flexible. She looped a scarf around her neck and secured it with a vintage brooch. A chunky bracelet, gold earrings and a basic black uniform was turned into something special and uniquely hers.

It was a gift, she knew, this different way of seeing fashion; one that had propelled her from sales assistant to head of the famous personal shopping department at Gilda, the most exclusive store in New York. It was said that she dressed everyone from the First Lady to Lady Gaga, but Claire would never confirm that.

She was a woman who knew how to keep secrets.

Claire examined her reflection in the mirror. Her skin was still flawless at forty-two. The

wide-set sea-blue eyes were steady as she studied herself. She knew, from hard experience, that the reddish tint spreading over half her face would soon turn a bluish purple, then green, and finally a sickly yellowish brown.

With grim determination, and a skilled hand, Claire set to work trying to cover the still tender bruises. A mixture of yellow and white cover-up first, the green, colour-correcting primer, then a coating of foundation, thick but subtle. She rarely wore makeup of any sort, and if the coverage was too obvious, a friend would notice. She added a bit of carefully placed blusher, and a bright lipstick to focus the attention. As an afterthought, she pulled out a pair of oversized sunglasses with pink lenses from the drawer, and put them on. People wore sunglasses inside all the time.

You don't, she reminded herself, and reluctantly removed the glasses, shook her mane of rich auburn hair loose from its clip and inspected her handiwork.

A sob caught in her throat. This time her skill had failed her. The carefully covered bruises looked like what they were – battle scars. She hit speed-dial on her mobile.

'It's just a slight fever,' she told Sasha, praying that her friend wouldn't sense that she was

lying. 'I'm going to crawl into bed and watch reruns of *Downton Abbey*.'

'Sounds decadent! Maybe I'll stop by after lunch and join you?'

'No!' Claire did her best to sound light-hearted. 'I'm a germ factory. Toxic.'

'If you recall, I have the immune system of a dinosaur!' Sasha laughed. 'I haven't been sick since your daughter shared her chicken pox with me fourteen years ago.'

Claire couldn't help smiling. Sasha always had that effect on her, even in the worst of times. They had been best friends since meeting on the train in 1992. Twenty years ago. Then they had been young brides filled with hope and excitement, and dreams of happily ever after.

Soon there were four of them who met every weekday on the 8:27 Westport to Grand Central express train. Julia and Paulina got on the train in Fairfield, and saved the four-seater in the third carriage back. Claire and Sasha got on in Westport, with coffee and croissants. On that train to Manhattan the four of them had shared their lives: the triumphs as well as the struggles to balance the careers they loved with family life. More recently, they admitted their mixed feelings now that the children they practically

raised together had left for college. Most discussed their marital troubles.

Not Claire.

Her husband, Mark, had long held important positions in the US government. Currently he was special advisor to the President on Middle Eastern affairs. Even a whiff of scandal would wreck everything he had spent his life working towards.

At least that's what he was always telling Claire.

So she kept her problems to herself, except where Sasha was concerned. You just couldn't lie to Sasha. The other women, too, sensed something was amiss in the seemingly perfect marriage of Claire and Mark Saunders. They said nothing out of love for their friend, but they worried.

'May I remind you, Sasha, that the dinosaurs are extinct? Go to lunch. Tell Julia and Paulie I'll be there next Saturday without fail.' She tried to keep her voice light. 'Same time, same place.'

Claire finished the call quickly. She drifted into the long gallery that ran the length of the house, and put a match to one of the fires that Mr Atkins, the caretaker, kept laid in each of the home's five fireplaces.

It was a large room; the house had been designed by a famous architect and all the rooms were airy and spacious and flooded with light. Claire had decorated the graceful space so that there were cosy corners for one or two, as well as ample space for the grand receptions that were part of Mark's job.

She curled up next to the crackling fire and studied the vases of roses that seemed to occupy every surface in the large room. So many roses. Too many roses, as always yellow and pink. The doorbell began to ring over and over, pulling her out of her dark thoughts. More roses, she thought, heading for the hall. She was limping a bit now from the falls she had taken last night. She pulled the door open, but instead of the delivery man from Petals there stood Sasha.

Sasha was as petite and blonde as Claire was tall and exotic. She was one of the few female producers working on television commercials. In that world many men had mistaken her Barbie-Doll prettiness for softness or, worse, lack of intelligence. Few made that mistake twice.

'Chicken soup from Gold's Deli,' Sasha announced, waving a shopping bag as she marched inside. 'Better than Lemsip!'

Claire stood frozen in the doorway.

'Where are we with *Downton*?' Sasha's words



trailed off as she entered the gallery and saw the flowers: vase after vase after vase.

Claire still hadn't moved.

'Dear God.' The words came out in a whisper. 'So many.'

Sasha turned back to her friend, fearing what she would see but knowing. 'It must have been bad this time.' Sasha tenderly examined her friend's damaged face. 'Very bad. Oh, Claire.'

'I told you not to come.' Claire fought back tears. She hurried past Sasha and into the gallery, trying to escape the worry she saw on her friend's face.

'Work again? He still wants you to give up your job, your career?' Sasha didn't wait for an answer.

'He worries about me commuting,' Claire murmured.

Sasha was following her. 'Are you limping? Claire, you're limping!'

'It's nothing. It was a small thing.'

'A *small thing*? You look like you've been through World War Three! What is *wrong* with him?'

Claire started to defend him, but stopped herself. She knew she was lying to Sasha – and to herself. 'You can't tell anyone. *Please . . .*'

'Shhhhh.' The words were muffled as Sasha

sat on the arm of the chair and put her arms around her friend, stroking her hair with tenderness. 'It's okay. It's going to be okay.'

They were both weeping now.

'We have to find a way to stop him, Claire. We *must*. It's getting worse. Each time, it's worse.'

'It's just this Middle East thing he's working on for the President! Things are out of control over there—'

Sasha cut her off, fighting to hide her frustration. 'It's not the Middle East, Claire! It's him! Mark is the one who is out of control. And if we don't find a way to stop him, one of these days he's going to kill you!'