

Barbara Taylor Bradford

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A Sudden Change of Heart



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Author's Note

Two paintings described in this novel do not exist in real life. Tahitian Dreams by Paul Gauguin is part of the imaginary collection of Sigmund and Ursula Westheim, fictional characters from my novel The Women in His Life, who were victims of the Holocaust in that novel. Sir Maximilian West, their son and heir, and claimant of the invented painting, is another fictional character from the same book. Moroccan Girl in a Red Caftan Holding a Mandolin by Henri Matisse is part of the imaginary collection of Maurice Duval, a fictional character in this novel. I took literary license and invented the two paintings for the dramatic purpose of the story, and because I did not want to name real paintings by Gauguin and Matisse. I have no wish to make it appear that actual paintings by Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse are under any kind of dispute, or in jeopardy.

A Sudden Change of Heart



For Bob, with my love 🔊

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Prologue

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Summer 1972

he girl was tall for seven, dark-haired, with vividly blue eyes in an alert, intelligent face. Thin, almost wiry, there was a tomboy look about her, perhaps because of her slimness, short hair, restless energy, and the clothes she wore. They were her favorite pieces of clothing; her uniform, her grandmother said, but she loved her blue jeans, white T-shirt, and white sneakers. The sneakers and T-shirt were her two vanities. They must always be pristine, whiter than white, and so they were constantly in the washing machine or being replaced.

The seven-year-old's name was Laura Valiant, and she was dressed thus this morning as she slipped out of the white clapboard colonial house on the hill and raced across the lawns and down to the river flowing through her grandparents' property. This was a long, wide green valley surrounded by soaring hills near Kent, a small rural town in the northwestern corner of Connecticut. Her grandparents had come to America from Wales many years before, in the 1920s, and after they had

bought this wonderful verdant valley they had given it the Welsh name of Rhondda Fach . . . the little Rhondda, it meant.

Once she reached the river, Laura made for the drystone wall and the copse where giant oaks and maples grew in great abundance. Years before, when *he* was a boy, her father and his siblings had built a tree house in one of the giant oaks. It had remained intact, and it was Laura's favorite spot, just as it had been for other young Valiants before her.

Laura was a strong girl for her age, athletic, agile, and full of boundless energy. Within seconds she had scrambled up the rope ladder that dropped down from the fork in the branches where the tree house was built.

She crawled inside the little house, making herself comfortable in her leafy lair as she sat cross-legged, gazing out at the early morning sky. It was six o'clock on this bright and shining July day and no one else was up, at least not in the house, not her grandparents, nor her best friend, Claire, who often accompanied her on her visits to her grandparents' farm. She loved *everything* about Rhondda Fach, much preferred it to New York, where she lived with her parents and her brother, Dylan.

Imperceptibly, Laura's young face changed as she thought of her parents. Richard, her father, was a well-known composer and conductor; he was usually traveling somewhere to conduct a symphony orchestra, and her mother invariably went along with him. "Those two are inseparable," her grandmother would say, but she said it with a sniff and in such a way, it sounded like a criticism; Laura understood that it was. And it was also true that they were hardly ever around. When her mother, Maggie, wasn't traveling, she was painting her famous flower pictures in her studio on the West Side. "She gets good money for them," Grandfather Owen kept saying, making excuses for her mother because he was always kind to everyone.

And so it was that Laura and her brother, Dylan, three years younger than she, were frequently left in the care of their grandparents.

She loved being with them, they were her favorites, really; she loved her parents, and she was quite close to her father when he was there to be close to, but most of the time her mother was distant, remote.

Laura thought of the rope ladder that dangled down to the ground, and she moved toward it, intending to pull it up the way her father had shown her, then changed her mind. Nobody was going to invade her private lair. Dylan was too young at four to get much farther than the first few rope rungs, and Claire was afraid to climb up in case she fell. It was true that the rope ladder was a bit precarious, Laura knew that.

Claire was scared of other things even though she was twelve and much more grown-up than Laura. She was small, dainty, fragile, and very pretty, with deep green eyes and red hair. "A Dresden doll" Grandma Megan called her, and it was the most perfect description.

Laura loved Claire. They were the best of best friends even though they were so different. "Chalk and cheese" Grandpa Owen said about them; Laura didn't know if she was the chalk or the cheese. Her grandfather encouraged her to be athletic and adventurous; he had taught her to ride a horse, taken her climbing in the hills, given her swimming lessons, and instilled in her a confidence in herself. And he had taught her to be unafraid. "You must always be brave, Laura, strong of heart and courageous, and you must stand tall."

The problem for Claire was that *she* wasn't at all athletic and she shrank from most physical activity. But she was a master storyteller, inventive and imaginative, always weaving yarns, ghost stories, and other fantastical tales. The children played charades, wrote plays and acted in them, and they shared a love of movies and music and clothes. In certain ways Laura was in awe of Claire. After all, she *was* five years older and knew so much more than they did. Dylan didn't know much of anything, and he was very spoiled, in Laura's opinion.

Pulling the strap of the string bag over her head, Laura fished inside for the plastic bottle of orange juice that Fenice, the housekeeper,

left for her in the kitchen every morning. After taking a gulp or two, she put the bottle on a small ledge, took her diary from its secret hiding place, and began to write her private thoughts, which she did every day.

Soon it began to grow warmer inside the tree house, and several times Laura found her eyelids drooping; finally she put down her diary and pen and rested her head against the wall. And although she tried hard to stay awake, she began to doze.

Laura was not sure how long she had been asleep, but quite suddenly she opened her eyes and sat up with a start. A moment before, she had heard screams coming from somewhere in the distance. Had she been dreaming?

Then she heard it again, a faint scream, and an even fainter voice calling "Help!"

It had not been a dream; someone was in trouble. Crawling as fast as she could, Laura backed out of the tree house, bottom first, dangled over the edge until she found her footing on the rope ladder, and climbed down swiftly. She was well practiced in this descent and soon reached the ground.

The cries were increasingly fainter, and then they stopped altogether. But Laura knew they had emanated from the part of the river that was wide and deep, beyond the drystone wall, near the meadow where all kinds of wildflowers grew. Sensing it was Claire calling for help, Laura ran at breakneck speed, her long legs flying over the grass. It had to be Claire who was in trouble in the river, Laura was certain. Who else would be in the valley?

Coming to a stop when she saw the flower basket, Laura pulled off her sneakers and jeans and scrambled down the muddy bank just as Claire's pale face bobbed up above the surface of the water.

"I'm here, Claire!" Laura shouted, dived in, and swam toward her friend.

Claire's head went under again, and Laura took several gulps of air and dived once more. At once she spotted Claire floating underwater.

Swimming to her, Laura grabbed her under the arms and swam them both up to the surface as best she could. She was tall and strong and Claire was smaller than she, and lighter, and she managed somehow. But then, when she started swimming them both toward the bank, Laura was pulled back along with Claire, who was clinging to her.

"It's my foot," Claire managed to splutter. "It's caught on something." Terror etched her stark white face, and her eyes were wide with panic.

Laura could only nod. The girl glanced around frantically, wondering what to do. She had to get Claire's foot free from whatever was holding it underwater. Yet she could not let go of Claire, who would sink if she released her. Laura spotted the branch of a tree a short distance away from them. It was a large limb, half on the bank, half in the water, and she was smart enough to know it was probably too heavy for her to lift. But she decided she must attempt to swivel the part that was in the water toward them. If she was successful, Claire could hang on to it, use it as a raft.

Staring at Claire, she said, "I've got to let go of you, Claire, so that—"

"No, no, don't! I'm scared!" Claire gasped.

"I've got to. I'm going to get that branch over there so that you can hang on to it. Then I'll get your foot loose. When I let go of you, start flapping your arms in the water and keep moving your free leg. You'll stay afloat, you'll be okay."

Claire was unable to speak. She was terrified.

Laura let go of her, shouted, "Flap your arms! Move your leg!" Once Claire started to do this, Laura swam upstream in the direction of the branch. It rested on top of the water, and after a bit of tugging and