

Just Rewards

Barbara Taylor Bradford

Published by HarperCollins

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HarperCollins*Publishers*
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2006
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins*Publishers* 2005

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ISBN 0 00 719759 4

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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CHAPTER ONE

Furries of silvery snowflakes were blowing in the wind, sticking to the plate-glass windows of Harte's and on the faces of the two pretty young women gazing so intently into those windows.

Evan Hughes brought a gloved hand to her cheek and wiped the dampness away. Then she drew closer to Linnet O'Neill, shivering and hunching into her dark-green loden cape, feeling the sharp bite of the intense cold.

Instantly, Linnet glanced at Evan, and exclaimed, 'I'm so thoughtless, dragging you outside to look at our windows on a day like this! You're freezing. Come on, let's go inside. We've seen enough.'

Linnet took hold of Evan's arm and hurried her towards one of the double doors leading into Harte's.

'I'm all right, honestly,' Evan protested as she was propelled across the floor of the cosmetics department, adding irately, 'I'm not a cream puff, you know, I'm not going to melt away.'

'You've got guts of steel, I'm very well aware of

that!’ Linnet shot back. ‘It just became frightfully cold all of a sudden, and if you catch a cold, or get sick, Gideon will have my guts for garters.’

Evan burst out laughing, as usual amused by Linnet’s penchant for quaint, rather odd sayings; she was frequently startled by the other girl’s bluntness, as well as her pithiness, which could be quite stringent at times. Evan considered her recently-discovered cousin to be unique. She had never met anyone quite like her, and in this past year of working together they had become close, the very best of friends.

Moving through the eye-catching, glamorous displays of cosmetics and perfumes, Evan felt her icy limbs beginning to thaw in the warmth of the store, and she loosened her scarf, opened her cape. Smoothing her hand over her huge, bulging stomach, she confided, ‘I feel like an enormous beached whale, Linny. I can’t wait to give birth.’

Linnet’s expression was sympathetic. ‘I know. But just imagine, Evan, you’re about to have twins. TWINS! You’ve certainly given Tessa, India and me pause for thought. We forgot that twins run in this family, that they’re quite the norm. Grandy had twins, and so did Mummy the first time around, when she was married to Jim Fairley. It’s only just struck *us* that we also might be candidates, have the same fate as you.’ Linnet smiled engagingly. ‘What do *you* think?’

‘We share a lot of the same genes, I guess, so you’re probably right.’

‘Julian’s hoping so, and actually so am I. It

makes life easier, having twins. Two children born together . . . an instant family and less time off work!’

‘Very well put,’ Evan responded softly, laughter filling her eyes. She couldn’t help thinking that Linnet’s inborn pragmatism inevitably came to the fore, but she admired her for being so down to earth.

By now the two women had arrived at a bank of elevators, and they stepped into one as soon as its doors slid open. Falling silent, they rode up to the management offices and hurried down the long corridor.

When they reached the alcove in the centre, where the famous portrait of Emma Harte hung, the two of them automatically came to a standstill, looked at each other, smiled, and then briskly saluted their great-grandmother and moved on. It had become something of a ritual with them of late, whether they were together or alone. It signified their pride in being her progeny and of working in the renowned store she had founded.

A few minutes later, settled comfortably in Evan’s office, Linnet said, ‘So, give me your opinion about the windows.’

‘I have to agree with you, they *are* a bit outdated. Oh, they’re beautiful, Linnet, of course. So well dressed. And they do evoke the kind of image we want for Harte’s, but they could be a bit . . . *fresher*.’

‘Not enough pizazz, perhaps?’ Linnet suggested.

‘Not pizazz, that’s not quite right for Harte’s, is it?’

‘I suppose not,’ Linnet agreed, sitting back in the chair, her eyes on Evan, whose opinion she valued.

Evan bit her lip, then shook her head. ‘I think the word I’m looking for is . . . *glamorous*. I’m talking about the fashion windows *per se*, Linnet, and they ought to be just a tad more eye-catching and inviting. Listen, they should say something to the customer . . . they should say *come in, try me on, buy me*.’

Linnet nodded, her face lighting up. ‘That’s true. You’ve put your finger on it.’

Evan said, ‘You’ve only recently come back from New York, and you’ve seen the store windows there. I believe you’re now finding our windows somewhat flat.’ Evan’s grey eyes rested on Linnet thoughtfully. When Linnet made no response, she asked, ‘Am I not correct?’

‘I think you are . . . but I’m not sure Mummy would agree.’

‘Have you discussed the windows with Paula?’ Evan probed, sounding anxious.

‘No, I haven’t had a chance, and she and Dad are staying in Yorkshire this week, recovering from Christmas, the New Year and all of their entertaining. Anyway, they’re taking a week off from work, and they just want to stay put, potter around at Pennistone Royal. They enjoy being at home with each other, doing what they’ve always done since they were kids growing up together.’ Linnet shook

her head. ‘Anyway, I’m not going to say a word until she’s back here at work. Actually, Evan, there are some other things I want to discuss with her, certain changes I believe we should make at the store.’

Evan sat up straighter but said nothing, merely raised a brow quizzically, her eyes full of questions.

‘You look surprised,’ Linnet exclaimed, eyeing her carefully.

‘I am. What kind of changes do you have in mind?’

‘I’ll get to those in a minute, just let me say this first. As you well know, the fashion retrospective was a big success last summer. We gained lots of new customers, and we did terrifically well, but eventually sales dipped. What we need to do is keep our customers coming in, and we need to garner those important new ones as well. I truly believe we’re in a new age of retailing. We have to make shopping a unique experience, and offer other services.’

‘Obviously you’ve studied this carefully, and come up with some fresh ideas,’ Evan ventured cautiously, wondering if Paula would permit any changes at the Knightsbridge store.

‘I have,’ Linnet asserted. ‘For example, Harte’s ought to have a day spa, a really beautiful spa offering every kind of treatment.’

‘That would be great!’ Evan was swift to agree, and then thought to ask, ‘But where would you put it?’

Linnet grinned, and explained, ‘I think one of those boring departments such as *mattresses* would

have to go. But seriously, we could carve out space. I know this store inside out and we *could* do it.'

'I guess it doesn't have to be a huge spa, just unique.'

'That's it exactly. Evan, listen, don't you think we ought to have more places to eat? Snack bars, for instance. Especially on the ground floor near the food halls. We could feature shellfish, pizza, hot dogs, deli sandwiches, and pastas. The kind of fast food that's actually tasty. I'm sure they'd be successful, and they would appeal to people who work in Knightsbridge and the areas nearby, as well as our customers.'

'That's a great suggestion,' Evan agreed, 'and the bars *would* be popular. I can feel my mouth watering just at the thought. What I wouldn't give for a plate of oysters right now.'

'And ice cream on top, I've no doubt,' Linnet said, grinning at her. 'Isn't that your favourite lunch these days?'

Evan shook her head. 'Not quite, although I have had a few peculiar longings for some very strange food combinations.'

Linnet leaned forward, her expression intense. 'I'd appreciate any ideas *you* might have, Evan, you're always so creative, and I do think we really *have* to revamp the store. A little bit anyway.'

Evan nodded. 'I agree . . .' She paused, hesitating, and then confided, 'I did have an idea a while back. A floor devoted to brides. Called . . . BRIDE. Naturally we would feature bridal gowns, bridesmaids' dresses, page-boy suits, and all those things. But we

could also sell bridal shoes, jewellery, gifts for the bridesmaids, and even bridal lingerie. And there's another thing: in the States wedding-planners are very popular, and we could offer that kind of service as well. People would welcome it.'

'Evan, I love it! What a brilliant idea. And what about the Evan Hughes Bridal Collection? You know you'd love to design bridal gowns. How about it?'

Evan considered Linnet's words. 'I think I'd enjoy that. I guess I've been itching to design again.' Evan's enthusiasm was apparent. 'Actually, the store has had inquiries about your wedding gown. There were lots of photographs in the newspapers, and women seemed taken with it.'

'I don't blame them, you created something out of this world. So, let's sell it to them,' Linnet replied in a rush, and at the same pace she continued, 'Also, I think your idea for an entire floor for brides is inspirational. I'd really appreciate it if you could give me something on paper. As soon as possible.'

'I've got a lot of stuff on my computer already. I'll print it out for you before I go to Yorkshire.'

'Thanks. When are you going to Pennistone Royal?'

'In three days. Gideon and I are driving up on Saturday. I'm glad. I'm already a bit panicky to tell you the truth, I feel as if I'm about to give birth at any moment.' She said this lightly, laughing as she spoke, but she was genuinely worried that this actually might happen.

So was Linnet, although she also laughed and

tried to reassure Evan. 'You'll be fine, darling. Julian and I will be there for the weekend, so I can help with any last-minute details for your wedding.'

'That's lovely, thanks for offering, but there's not much to do. It's only the family, after all.'

'Your parents are coming over though, aren't they?'

'Oh yes, and my sisters. My mother's already here, she arrived several days ago, and the others will be flying in next week. Robin's being wonderful, very kind, and he's invited my parents and sisters to stay at Lackland Priory.'

'Well, that's nice of him, of course, but don't forget you've given him a new lease of life, Evan. Mummy says he's never looked better. And India tells me that Great-Aunt Edwina is bursting with *joie de vivre*, at the top of her form.'

'So I've heard, but that's surely because India is going to marry Dusty at Clonloughlin this summer. A big fancy wedding is just up Great-Aunt Edwina's alley,' Evan pointed out with a huge grin.

Linnet agreed, then pushed herself to her feet and picked up her coat. 'I'd better go, I've loads of paperwork to catch up with. Thanks for listening, and for your input. It was just what I needed.' She paused at the door, blew a kiss. 'I'll see you later.' Smiling, she was gone.

Evan gazed at the door, her face already clouding over.

She was fully aware that Linnet's nonchalance was assumed, that in fact she was concerned, worried what her mother's reaction would be to her

ideas for the Knightsbridge store. Although they were not particularly radical, Evan knew they would fall flat. As a newcomer, she saw Paula O'Neill from an entirely different viewpoint from her daughters and India Standish, Paula's niece. Evan was aware that their boss was a woman who had become a trifle set in her ways. She was also determined to keep Harte's in its traditional mode, to keep its image intact. What Linnet wanted to do wouldn't destroy Harte's image. On the other hand, Paula would be upset. She was Emma Harte's granddaughter and heiress, and she never deviated from the rules set down by Emma. Having run Harte's in exactly the same way for well over thirty years, since before Emma's death, she wasn't likely to make any changes now.

There'll be trouble between them, Evan suddenly thought with a sense of foreboding. Real trouble.

Endeavouring to brush this irrational feeling aside, she turned to her computer, went to her plans for the bridal floor. She hoped to lose herself in her work, but this did not happen. That peculiar sense of uneasiness persisted, and it disturbed her.