
Prologue

It was the end of February 2000. Laura Bush sat in the backseat of a black SUV and watched through tinted glass as people jostled one another while coming and going from the *Dallas Morning News* office building. On Young Street, traffic was jammed, as was usually the case in these parts. Laura's vehicle was double-parked, a typical demonstration of entitlement by the Secret Service not at all appreciated by impatient drivers trying to get by while leaning on their horns. Behind her car were two more vehicles, also Secret Service agents, all part of a convoy. Laura glanced out the window and shook her head in dismay.

According to photographs taken on the day, Laura was dressed conservatively, as was her way, in a navy blue wool day suit with a long skirt. She also wore a matching tailored jacket cut to her waist, which appeared to be made of merino wool, over a white silk blouse with a high neck. Her hair was a glossy chestnut color. At fifty-three, she was stunning, with her flawless complexion and eyes so deeply blue they were almost violet. Thin creases around her eyes and some at her mouth, too, just made her look more real, more authentic. Her beauty was austere and somehow even autocratic. She was also a powerful woman, as she'd demonstrated many times over the years. Sometimes it felt like the best was yet to come for Laura Bush . . . but was it? In her lap was a tabloid newspaper with the startling headline

“Revealed! Bush’s Wife Killed Boyfriend.” As the agent watched in the rear-view mirror, she nervously rolled the paper into the shape of a tube and then flattened it out again.

It had to happen eventually, and she knew it. How long could any scandal of this magnitude be kept out of the public view? After all, it had been thirty-seven years. It was amazing that this particular story hadn’t come to light yet considering the high-profile nature of her life. Her father-in-law, George H.W., had been Vice President for eight years and then President for four. Her husband, George W., had been governor of Texas for the last six years and was now campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination. How was it possible that no reporter had uncovered this scoop before now? She’d been dreading it for so long, maybe she should’ve been grateful that, finally, some writer she didn’t even know had relieved her of this burden. But why did it have to be a tabloid reporter, and why did he have to work for something called *Star*?

Sighing deeply, she folded the newspaper in quarters and quickly stuffed it into her purse, as if making the decision to stop obsessing over it. To hear her recall this time many years later, her primary concern was how the story might affect George’s campaign. He’d worked so hard and, as far as she was concerned, was by far the best candidate. The idea that she could ruin things for him now was crushing. Her next thought was obvious: How would it affect her family? Most people, even close relatives, didn’t know about this misadventure. It had taken her years to come to terms with this *private* heartache. Finally, she had come to understand that in no way did this terrible event—which had happened when she was just seventeen—define her. Still, it was mortifying to now have the whole world read about it, and, making it worse, many of the details weren’t even accurate.

What might people think of her in light of this story? As she sat in the backseat of her car, surrounded on all sides by the maddening cacophony of bustling Dallas, she must have felt completely and utterly trapped. She tried to lower the tinted window to get some air. It was locked. “Can we put this down just a bit?” she asked the agent. He pushed a button and the window lowered about an inch. “A bit more?” she asked. He gave her another half inch. “Any more’s not safe, ma’am,” he told her. “I know,” she said with a

sigh. "I know." She asked him to turn on the air. When he did, she tilted her head back and fanned herself with her hand.

The campaign had been a real roller coaster, down one moment, up the next. George was now on top with fresh primary wins in the states of Washington, Virginia, and South Carolina. Yet neither he nor his opponent for the nomination, Senator John McCain, had the momentum for a landslide victory, especially after McCain took New Hampshire. For months, these two men had been viciously attacking each other, and it had gotten very personal. For instance, McCain authorized advertisements that branded George as being anti-Catholic. George was furious, but no more so than his wife. Laura knew that George's unwavering Christian faith was the rock upon which his whole life was built and that he would never have a pejorative word for anyone else's religion. It was a low blow, and the senator had to know better, or at least Laura thought so. "You have to fight back, Bushie," she told George, using her pet name for him. "You can't let him walk all over you. Show strength for goodness sake!" Even as the words came from her lips, she had to have been astonished by them. When did she become such a brawler, this woman who had once so eschewed politics that she'd made George promise upon marrying him that he would never make her give a speech? Now, a little more than twenty years on, politics was pretty much in her bones, and, she had to admit, that was a pretty scary thought.

Over the last year, Laura had been making stops with her mother-in-law, Barbara Bush, usually flying on the official campaign plane with George but sometimes off on their own. Right now, she was waiting for Barbara to emerge from the *Dallas Morning News* building, where she'd been giving an interview. The Bush women would then be taken to the Dallas airport. Barbara was headed home. Laura was scheduled to board a flight to yet another tour stop, where she'd meet up with her husband.

Laura was so lost in thought, it had to have jarred her when the door was flung open and Barbara quickly slid into the car. One of the Secret Service agents closed the door behind her. "Fiddlesticks," Barbara exclaimed as she organized herself next to Laura. "What a waste of time." When Laura asked what happened, Barbara said she hadn't even done the interview.

As the car slowly lurched from the curb, soon to be followed by the others, Barbara explained that the designated reporter had called in sick and that his replacement was late showing up. She didn't feel like waiting. With a malicious gleam in her eyes, she recalled telling them, "Here's an idea: *Next time, plan better.*" Then she turned on her heels and walked out. She said a gaggle of anxious people trailed her all the way down the hall. The way she described the scene, it called to mind mallard ducklings following their mother, all the while making quacking noises that sounded like *Mrs. Bush! Mrs. Bush! Mrs. Bush!* But she just kept on walking, she said, straight for the elevator, down to the lobby, and then right out the door. "And that's the way the cookie crumbles," she concluded with an airy wave of her hand. Laura gasped, her eyes wide. She would never have handled it that way. No, she would have waited until the last possible moment, and then she would have waited a little while longer. But she and Barbara were very different in how they dealt with impatience, and Laura had always admired that about her mother-in-law.

Upon hearing Barbara's story, the Secret Service agents seated in the front of the vehicle turned to each other and smiled. "Very Barbara Bush," one said to the other. He nodded. "*Very* Barbara Bush."

And she *looked* "very Barbara Bush," too, with that snowy-white hair of hers, those large, expressive gray eyes, and the signature creamy pearls, three strands and fake, of course. She was seventy-four and didn't mind that she looked every bit her age. She felt she'd earned each wrinkle and was proud of the life she'd thus far lived. As a former First Lady and Second Lady, too, she was always self-assured, in public anyway, exuding an aura of undeniable power. There was also an undeniable grandmotherly quality about her. People would actually come up to her and, instead of paying obeisance to her as they might other First Ladies, ask if she enjoyed baking apple pies for her family. She would chuckle and say, "Oh, sure." In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd baked a pie. Her skills in the kitchen were practically nonexistent. "But disabusing people of harmless notions is such a bore," she would say. "Why can't we just let people be happy, for heaven's sake?"

Barbara was nothing if not a real patriot; some might even call her an American icon. She loved her country, and no one doubted it. She had been

deep in the trenches of many a contentious campaign, including the presidential race in 1992 between the current incumbent, Bill Clinton, and her husband, George H. W. Bush. It, too, had gotten vicious. It wasn't always easy for Barbara to parse out her feelings about what should be taken personally and what should just be chalked up to political combat. While one side fended off attacks and the other launched more, all she could do was try not to be hardened by the warfare. "As the wife, it's easy to become jaded if you're not careful," she once said. "But it's the husband running for office who has the greater burden. After all, no one really understands what it takes to govern."

Unfortunately, George H. W. Bush lost that particular race in 1992, making him a one-term president. But what were the chances that not only would he have had the great honor of serving in high office but that now his son might, as well? That had only happened once before in American history, back in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when John Quincy Adams became the sixth president after his father, John Adams, had been the second. And to think that Barbara's daughter-in-law Laura might also find herself in the White House? It seemed impossible to imagine, but, as she'd long ago learned, there was no limit to what could be expected from anyone with the last name of Bush.

On the way to the airport, Barbara and Laura didn't say much, both seeming lost in contemplation. Generally, they got along well these days, though they'd traveled a long and sometimes difficult road on the way to their present *détente*.

Had Barbara known Laura's secret? Laura figured she must have known, yet not once in the twenty-three years Laura had been married to George did Barbara ever mention it. So, Laura never knew for sure and, truth be told, she didn't want to know. Communication between the two could sometimes be challenging under the best of circumstances. What would *that* conversation be like? Now, she felt Barbara had to know everything. *Everyone* knew. The phone at George's campaign headquarters had been ringing off the hook with requests for comments. Her spokesman was working on a statement to give to *The Dallas Morning News*. She'd also just learned that the Associated Press had been trying to obtain the police report. It was just a

matter of time. There was no telling how any of this would turn out for her, for George, or for their family, which included twin daughters, Barbara and Jenna.

“We’re calling ahead to say we might be late,” the agent who was driving said as he glanced in the rearview mirror at the Bush women. “There’s some kind of tie-up ahead, I’m afraid. No telling what’s going on.”

Laura knew Barbara well enough to know she’d never put her on the spot and mention the tabloid report, not while two Secret Service agents in the front seat listened in on every word. Instead, Barbara just sat silently while biting her lip and looking out the window to her left. As traffic moved slowly along, Laura stared straight ahead, her eyes seemingly laser focused on the back of the driver’s head. The silence was deafening.

After about ten more minutes of awkwardness, the agent who wasn’t driving noticed something in the rearview mirror. Barbara, as if reacting to a flash of intuition, suddenly reached out and gently touched Laura’s cheek. Laura took Barbara’s hand, held it in her own, and squeezed it. It was an unexpected moment of tenderness. But then Barbara pulled her hand away, completely breaking the spell. It seemed harsh—unkind, even. From her expression, Laura was surprised and maybe even a little hurt. Barbara then slipped off her heavy wool glove. She opened her large knit handbag, placed the glove inside, and refastened the kissing-lock closure. Then, she reached over again and, this time with her bare hand, took Laura’s into her own. It was as if she’d wanted only warmth between them, nothing else. For just a second, Barbara’s eyes rested on Laura before she turned and, once again, stared straight ahead. Laura bit her lip, striving for composure. She blinked a few times.

They continued to hold hands, Barbara and Laura, with no words spoken between them. But, then again, they didn’t need words. Not these two. Not after all these years.

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