

Home Front Lines

by Brenda Sparks Prescott
(Excerpt)

Betty Ann worried as she planned for the afternoon's VIP visit. Word of a White House dress would fill her appointment book for months to come, but then, no dice if Mrs. H. acted up. Betty Ann had to think of something, but she couldn't sit idle. She picked up her tablet and ran through her list. *Dust*. The studio was spotless, tabletops and cabinets clear, but she tied a blue scarf over her French-curl hairdo, got a feather duster from the closet, and began the rounds.

A picture painted by Lucy Saunders, another NCO's wife, hung above the hi-fi set Ray had bought secondhand. Betty Ann flicked the duster over the frame of the oil painting, which captured the romanticism of a real Parisian atelier. Warm light refracted across half-sewn dresses and played in a spill of royal blue velvet. Betty Ann liked to think that her studio was as genteel as this imaginary room, but she might have a real cat fight in it if the general's wife turned nasty. Mrs. H. could call her out in front of everyone and threaten Ray's livelihood, or even force her to do the dress for free! She needed reinforcements, someone who could stand with her against the clout of Mrs. H., if she was going to go through with this meeting. She tapped the handle of the duster against her chin.

Betty Ann had few true women friends, since she preferred the company of men, but Lucy was quiet, didn't ask too many questions, and she listened when you wanted her to. Lucy was about as good a friend a military wife could have. They lived on the same block and their husbands worked together, but they hadn't really gotten to know each other until they had both been volunteered by their husbands for the Air Force Fifteenth Anniversary Committee. Betty Ann felt comfortable with Lucy to the point that she had almost told her about Martin as they made flag place card holders for the anniversary gala on Armed Forces Day. Yes, Lucy was the right choice.

Betty Ann propped the feather duster on a straight chair and went to her work table. She took a deep breath. She knew Lucy's number by heart.

A young voice answered. "Master Sergeant Saunder's residence, Erica speaking."

In the background Betty Ann heard, "Erica, give me that phone and get ready for school." A moment passed before Lucy's voice came in more clearly.

"What are you doing around three this afternoon?" Betty Ann said.

"God, I thought you were Sonny."

"Come on, what are you doing?"

"Minding my own business—I said NOW, little miss—if I know what's good for me."

"I need you down at the studio. Mrs. Hepplewhite's dressmaker can't finish the gown for her White House invitation, so she called me."

"No, sir!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're kidding me. How'd that happen?"

“Fill you in later. Bring your portfolio—this will be great for you too.”

“You don’t need me there,” Lucy said.

“Yes, I do. I’ve had a little run-in with Mrs. H. before and . . . it’ll just be easier if you’re here.”

“What happened?”

This was not a story to tell over the phone while her friend was urging her daughter to get ready for school. And Betty Ann’s assistants could arrive at any moment. This was certainly not a tale she wanted them to overhear.

“I’ll tell you when you get here. About two thirty. And Lucy?”

“What?”

The resigned tone of that one word told Betty Ann that her friend would show. Her dimples deepened. “Wear something nice, hear?” Lucy was an artist. Nothing wrong with that, but sometimes she forgot she was going out into polite society and showed up in an old, paint-smudged man’s shirt half-tucked into her dungarees.