

*The inspiring story of a 19-year-old orphan who escapes human trafficking and finds her way to a small Southern town and into the lives of three of its citizens. Only two are happy with the girl's arrival, and in less than a year, the young woman transforms the lives of all four in a way reminiscent of To Kill a Mockingbird.*

# **The Girl on the Bench**

By Larry B. Gildersleeve

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*The girl  
on the bench*

a novel



LARRY B.  
GILDERSLEEVE

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Also by Larry B. Gildersleeve

*Dancing Alone Without Music*  
*Follow Your Dreams*

## One

*Every day, the devil whispered in her ear, "You're not strong enough to withstand the storm." This day, she shouted back, "I am the storm."*

~Unknown

“**W**hata ya starin’ at?”  
“I didn’t realize I was,” the man answered. “I apologize.”

“Yeah, I know what yer thinkin’,” she spat back at him. “But it ain’t gonna happen. Not with me.”

The late afternoon sun slipped ever-closer to nightfall as two strangers sat opposite each other on shiny black metal benches, the distance between them only a wide pathway of inlaid bricks winding through the small park in the center of the town square.

Over time, each would recall this first meeting differently. A chance encounter, or destiny, it didn’t really matter. It happened, and the lives of two people from vastly different worlds would be changed in ways neither of them could have imagined. A year and a day from now, one of them would be back again at this very place.

"If I understand the meaning of your words," he said, politely, "you've sadly misjudged me."

*Who talks this way?*

"Yeah, right. I know what men want when they stare at me. Yer no different."

"Again, I'm sorry. You appear to be a troubled young lady, but I didn't mean to stare."

*And just look at him.*

In his early seventies, he'd become accustomed over the years to people thinking him at least a decade younger. And when he spoke, his manner, turn of phrase and patrician Southern accent drew people to him like a magnet, putting them to mind of the late movie star Gregory Peck's portrayal of the small-town Southern lawyer Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The girl on the bench looked older than her nineteen years. Confident of nothing, she directed her hollow bravado at the only person she'd spoken to in her first few hours of newly found freedom.

"The only *trouble*," she said, "is yer probably not up to what's on yer mind."

Sitting ramrod straight, he wore a full-length grey wool top coat, unbuttoned to reveal a bespoke dark blue suit. He'd carefully draped a deep red cashmere scarf around his neck to frame the blue, handtied silk bowtie knotted at the top of a tailored white dress shirt. No special occasion on his mind or his calendar when he went to his closet this winter morning. On any given day, his seasonal attire could have easily earned him a place on the pages of *Gentleman's Quarterly*.

Her clothes looked ill-fitting and dirty. Shapeless faded green sweater underneath an over-sized parka. Jeans torn from wear, not style. Running shoes with barely a trace of their original white color. Dark brown roots in stark contrast to cheap blond coloring in her tangled wavy hair. A troubled life may have caused her unkempt appearance and combativeness, but it hadn't stolen the youthful beauty some men lusted after that led to her loss of freedom. And dignity. But not her soul. Not yet.

The seconds ticked by while he sat silently, his expression unchanging.

"Yeah, yer jus' like all tha rest," she taunted.

"Two out of three."

"Two outta three what?"

"I'm right about two out of three. That you're troubled. And young."

Her shouted "fuck you" attracted disapproving glances of two women seated on a bench quite a distance away. Several city workers also heard the outburst, distracting them from their work removing a Nativity scene and other seasonal decorations, activity that every year signaled the holidays ending and a new year beginning.

He ignored the stares of those around them. "There. You see. Still need to work on the *lady* part."

"Who the hell are you ta judge me?"

The small-town Southern doctor had offered a diagnosis, not a judgement.

"Old habits sometimes die slowly."

"What's that supposed ta mean?"

"Nothing, I guess." He shifted his weight on the bench's hard surface, leaned forward slightly and asked, "May we start over?"

His carefully-chosen words and nonthreatening demeanor were like a baker's hands kneading dough for bread, slowly softening her hostility into curiosity.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Good afternoon. My name is Michael McGinley. What's yours?" After a few moments, he added, "I believe it's your turn now."

"Turn for what?"

Her eyes were filled with fear as they looked not at him but to the street some twenty yards across the grassy area behind his bench. Someone wanted her. Wanted her badly. And she knew he'd be searching for her.

"Your name."

"Oh, yeah. Right. It's Lisa."

"Just Lisa?"

"Fer now."

"That's fine. Since you're not from here, do you need ..."

"How da ya know I'm not from here? Maybe I live right around the corner."

A slight breeze lifted the edges of his full head of carefully-groomed snow-white hair.

"Because I've lived here almost all my life, which as you can tell has been quite some time. My home is nearby, and we're in the park almost every day. If you lived right around the corner, we would have surely met."



*Well, he's got me there.*

"Ya said we're in the park every day. Got somebody hidin' behind a tree?"

His eyes followed his hand as it stroked the small dog sitting at his side. "I'm never alone when Jackson is with me."

"Oh."

Hearing his name, the little dog lifted his head to look up at his master, then over to the girl.

"What kinda dog is that? Looks like somethin' a woman'd have."

"A Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. And you're right, a woman adopted him many years ago. Now he lives with me."

"What happened?" she flippantly asked. "She die?"

"Yes, she did," he slowly answered, the image of a woman's face disappearing from his mind's eye as quickly as it appeared. He watched the girl nervously looking around in all directions. "Lisa, ..."

"What?"

"We'll be leaving soon, Jackson and I, but not before I finish what I was going to ask. Are you planning on staying the night here, or do you have another destination in mind?"

"You talk funny. Like some kinda teacher or somethin'. And why da ya care?"

"As I started to ask a moment ago, I thought perhaps you needed a place to stay."

"I *was* right! Fancy words and fancy clothes, but yer still tryin' to pick me up. Fuck you, and yer little dog. I'm outta here."

She reached down for the tattered backpack on the ground beside the bench. Lifting it as she stood, her body ached like that of an aging athlete twice her age. She hadn't slept in two days, longer since a shower, with hunger a constant companion.

He raised his right hand like a traffic cop.

"I assure you nothing could be further from the truth. While I respect your suspicions, I have a few things to say. Then you can decide to leave. Or not."

"No way. I'm leavin' now."

"Sit down for a minute and listen to me. I want to help."

The forcefulness in his voice surprised her. She dropped the backpack to the ground, but remained standing, arms crossed defensively. She looked away, casting her eyes down the brick pathway to the other end of the park, then up to the darkening western Kentucky sky. The setting sun quickly bringing the curtain down on an unseasonably warm Thursday in the first week of January.

"Sit down!"

Startled, she did.

All her life, she'd experienced people controlling her with threats. And worse. Much worse. But never by saying they wanted to help her. Still, she refused to wither under the weight of a stranger's scolding. Hunched over, she rested her arms on her thighs, clasped her hands together, tilted her head upward and defiantly looked across at him.

"Lisa, you have no reason to trust me. But after just a few minutes together, here's what I think I know.

You're passing through town. You're afraid. Running from something or someone, with no destination in mind. You may not have a friend in the world. You're hungry. You have little or no money, everything you own is in that backpack, and you have no idea where you're going to sleep tonight. Now, what part of what I've just said do I have wrong?"

*He nailed it. Every bit of it.*

"Nice speech ..."

A uniformed policeman she hadn't noticed interrupted her as he approached.

"Good afternoon, Doc."

Nervous perspiration, mixed with cold winter air, pasted her shirt uncomfortably to her skin as Michael McGinley rose and warmly shook the other man's hand. She couldn't hear what they were saying, and a minute or so later, the passerby continued on his way.

She watched the man's back until he reached the edge of the park and began to cross the street, then looked at the stranger with all the questions -- and asked one of her own.

"Yer a doctor?"

"For a long time, but not anymore. Back to you. Do you have somewhere to sleep tonight?"

Silence.

"I'll take that as a no. If you want, I have a place for you to stay."

They were sitting in a rectangular park bordered on the two narrow ends by State and College streets, and on the longer sides by Main Street and Park Row. All four streets continued on in both directions after intersecting

to create the town square, with Doc's Park Row residence out of sight two blocks away.

"But if you tell me you have a better alternative," he said, standing and stepping a few feet away, "we, Jackson and I, will be on our way and stop bothering you."

Jackson jumped down to join him.

*Better alternative? How 'bout none.*

"What kinda place?"

"An apartment above the garage behind our house."

"Who's our?"

"My daughter, Jennifer, and me."

"What da ya want from me? Ya must want somethin'."

"Nothing. Except to be a well-behaved guest. Think you can do that?"

*Okay, maybe he's not what I first thought.*

Despite being tired, dirty, hungry and broke, her suspicion of any and every man prevailed.

"Nah, I got my own plans, and they don't involve bein' well-behaved. With you, or anyone else."

She stood up and struggled to thread first one arm and then the other through the straps of the backpack, twisted her shoulders back and forth to balance the weight, and silently walked past him. A moment later, she sensed something at her right heel. Jackson kept pace with her while Doc remained two steps behind at the other end of the leash. At six-one, he towered over her as he came alongside. She kept walking -- and so did he.

"Tell you what. Let's make each other a promise. Me first. Jackson and I will be back at our bench every afternoon about this time in case your plans, whatever they are, don't work out for you."

"Do whatever ya want. Jus' leave me alone," she said, as she picked up her pace.

"Fair enough."

He stopped, allowing her to continue for several steps, his persistence rewarded when she turned and asked, "What's supposed ta be *my* promise?"

"That while we're apart, you'll think about trusting me."

*Maybe I should.*

"I'll think about it. If I do happen ta see ya again, what's yer name? I fergot."

"Michael McGinley. But everyone just calls me Doc. You can, too." He reached into his coat pockets to retrieve his black leather gloves. "Before we leave you, is Lisa your real name?"

"Yeah."

"And your real last name?"

"Higgins." A truthful answer, to which she hastily added, "But don't bother tryin' ta find me."

As she walked away, slower now, she doubted her decision with every step.

Jackson knew the way home and tugged at his leash. Doc McGinley watched the young woman disappear out of sight before allowing himself to be pulled down the brick pathway in the opposite direction. They walked beneath the commemorative Fountain Square Park stone arch, crossed the street, and with the park still in sight,

he turned and looked over his shoulder as the few remaining Christmas lights flickered on. They'd be gone by this time tomorrow.

He wondered if the same would be true of Lisa Higgins.

## Two

*Much unhappiness has come into the world because of things left unsaid.*

~Dostoevsky

As Doc and Jennifer ate their evening meal under an antique chandelier in the formal dining room of his home, Doc vividly recounted meeting the homeless girl during his afternoon sojourn in the park. He did such a good job Jennifer felt as if she'd been right there by his side. He'd anticipated a lively conversation, and paused frequently in hopes his daughter would comment. But she only listened until he finished.

"And you're sure you've never seen her before?" she finally asked, as she rose to begin clearing the dishes.

"Certain of it."

Doc stood, placed his chair squarely under the table and retired to the adjacent living room. Soon after, Jennifer joined him, bringing after-dinner drinks. Tawny port for her and bourbon neat for him. She settled into a facing chair near a warming fireplace framed by windows that looked across the front yard to the tree-

lined street. It had become an almost nightly ritual each time she stayed with him.

Doc doubted he'd ever tell his daughter he thought she should be living entirely on her own. For her part, Jennifer sensed increasing discomfort between them during her extended visits. She attributed it to his growing depression after the death of her mother three years earlier, dismissing any thought that it had anything to do with her.

"Dad, I know you're well-intentioned. You always are. But are you sure about what you're doing?"

"No, I'm not sure I know what I'm doing," he said, as he sipped from an engraved Glencairn whiskey glass and watched the flames devouring the small logs he'd stacked in the fireplace that afternoon. "Just something about this young woman, something I can't explain. Even to myself."

"But you've offered our apartment to a teenage vagrant you just met. Do you think that's wise?"

Jennifer's rhetorical question about *his* property rubbed Doc the wrong way and went unanswered.

The exterior of Doc's home might be worthy of a place on the pages of *Southern Living*, but the interior wouldn't. His meticulous attention to detail in selecting his daily attire nowhere to be found among the unmatched furniture, wall hangings and other furnishings acquired over several decades. The comfortable lived-in ambience pleased him and annoyed his daughter since he'd resisted all her suggestions that would have changed the décor from when her mother,



Emily, lived there. Where Jennifer saw *things*, Doc saw *memories*.

"I can tell you're worried. Don't be. I think I have a good sense of people. Not just what they say, or is said about them, but by looking into their eyes. Someone said, don't recall who, that eyes are the mirror of the soul. I believe this girl has a deeply troubled soul, and I want to help."

She hoped her father saw the disapproval in *her* eyes. He did.

"Jen, as I've said many times, I believe the Good Lord puts people in our path, and it's up to us how we respond. Nothing may come of this, but if it does, it was meant to be. Simple as that."

Jennifer silently wished the young woman would *simply* disappear. Things would be different, she told herself, if she could be a figurative moat around their castle to protect him. But she'd soon be leaving to resume her teaching position at Haylock University in England, not returning until the term finished in June. Their time together this evening had abruptly ended with Doc retiring to his book-lined study to read before going to bed, and a frustrated Jennifer heading to her upstairs bedroom.

The McGinley residence sat on a quarter-acre of land between the town square and the edge of the university campus. The two-story white stone colonial had been built in 1938 by another Bowling Green doctor as a wedding present for his daughter and her husband. The newlyweds were Doc's parents and he was their only child. In the mid-1940's, following the end of World War

II, two families new to town built larger homes on either side. Because of family pride and his love of reading, Doc regarded his home as a beautifully bound book in fine leather standing stately between unimpressive and out-of-place bookends. But he'd never shared this sentiment with anyone other than Emily.

Years after he inherited the property, Doc and Emily had the carriage house behind the main residence converted to a large apartment above the three-car garage that opened into an alley. Doc asked the workers to fashion a pathway in matching bricks across the large fenced back yard to connect the residence and the apartment, his inspiration coming from the footpath in the park he now visited almost daily. A small pile of left-over bricks had been stacked neatly beneath the exterior staircase leading up to the apartment. Although furnished and kept spotless, the apartment had never been occupied.

It would be difficult to imagine a warmer, safer, more comfortable place to be on a cold winter night in Bowling Green than this home at Eleven Park Row. But the young woman who'd created the father-daughter tension wasn't faring as well.

After leaving the park, Lisa wandered aimlessly but cautiously in the downtown shadows as winter twilight blanketed the town, alert for any sign of the man intent on recapturing her. Imagining the consequences of that encounter kept her on the move, searching for a safe place to sleep. Somehow, she'd find a way to eat again tomorrow.

Her luck changed when another street person on his way to a homeless shelter offered to show her the way. She followed him down the steps to the basement entrance of a church that every night provided free hot meals and overnight lodging. Without being asked, a matronly volunteer smiled cheerfully as she served Lisa a second helping of hearty chili and scratch biscuits.

After eating, Lisa staked her claim to a cot with clean sheets and a heavy wool blanket in a corner far from the entrance. She quickly fell into an exhausted sleep, one arm clutching her backpack; she awoke in a dimly lit room to the pre-dawn sounds and smells of breakfast. Disoriented by the strange surroundings, she looked around and noticed none of the other overnight guests were yet awake, many of them snoring loudly.

She carefully picked her way between the cots until she reached the unattended cloakroom and searched the purses belonging to the volunteers at work in the kitchen. She found the money she sought, and a surprise. A small handgun. Taking both, she shoved the money in her jeans pocket and buried the gun in the bottom of her backpack. She quickly ate the hot meal, knowing she couldn't return. But she also knew she couldn't survive long on the small amount of money she'd just stolen.

Lisa bundled up as best she could with what she had, and without speaking to anyone, opened the basement door to leave before discovery of the theft could detain her. Eye-level with the street above, she gasped as she thought she recognized the monster she'd been fleeing. She held her breath as she ducked down in

the stairwell, hoping he'd continue walking without turning around. Not wanting to go back inside, seconds seemed like minutes. When she peered above the ledge, she finally let out her breath. Nothing but an empty street. She couldn't be sure, but if it *had* been him, her worst fear had been realized.

*What now?*

A return to the park that afternoon would hold no assurance of meeting the kindly stranger again or protection against being seen by her pursuer. And that was hours away. Hours filled with danger.

Out on the downtown streets the day before, Lisa noticed others her age walking toward the university several blocks away. A few were out early, dressed casually in rumpled winter attire their mothers would likely disapprove of, each with a backpack. She could pull this off, she thought, and followed them at a distance up College Street to the campus, taking refuge in first one building, then another, trying not to draw the attention of anyone who might think she didn't belong. She succeeded in remaining inconspicuous and warm throughout the day, all the while struggling to think of a different plan. When darkness loomed less than an hour away, she cautiously headed back downtown, her backpack feeling heavier with each step as she thought about the possibility the old man wouldn't be there.

The park and its benches couldn't be seen from Doc's home. Still, as his grandfather clock chimed the passing hours, he rose frequently from a well-worn leather easy chair and walked across his living room to

look out the window, hoping the young woman would return. Unable to concentrate, he found himself re-reading pages in a book he'd long anticipated but now couldn't hold his interest.

Jennifer felt troubled the night before when first hearing his offer of hospitality to the young stranger, and that feeling remained as she stood in the living room doorway, watching her father at the window. She saw no point in continuing the conversation unless something more happened.

Despite the concerns Doc knew Jennifer had, he was determined to keep his promise. As the clock sounded the four o'clock hour, he walked down the hallway past Jennifer, opened the hall closet door and heard her scolding voice ask, "You're not going out in this weather, are you?"

"I am."

The prior day's delightful sun had been replaced by a blanket of clouds that earlier had unleashed a heavy downpour. The rain had ended, but wind still accompanied the much-colder temperature.

He'd dressed for the stormy weather in corduroy slacks and a heavy sweater, along with all-weather boots he'd ordered from the Orvis website. From the closet he pulled out a heavy fleece-lined coat a woman who lived a few doors away helped him pick out at a local men's store. The coat reminded him of the neighbor, but that pleasant thought was interrupted by his daughter's question.

"Why?"

"Why? Because I promised I'd return every afternoon, that's why. Just need to be certain."

Doc had diagnosed depression in countless patients over the years, and recognized it in himself. He knew it began even before the death of his beloved Emily just days shy of their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and increased as she slowly slipped away in the cruel and unrelenting grip of Alzheimer's disease. He'd retired earlier than planned to care for her, and after her passing he struggled to fill his days with anything meaningful. Nothing much seemed to interest him. Until now. But if asked to explain, he couldn't. Just something about meeting that girl had invigorated him in a way nothing else had.

Jackson understood an outdoor adventure immediately followed the fitting of his harness. When Doc attached the red leather leash, the little dog pulled it from his hand, his nails clicking against the hardwood floor as he ran excitedly to press his nose against the crack along the side of the front door he knew would soon be opened.

Jennifer frowned as she watched her father buttoning his coat.

"You're taking Jackson with you?"

"Of course, I am. He loves the wet weather. You know that. All spaniels do. He'd be mad at me if I didn't. Can't afford to have both of you upset with me at the same time."

Jennifer rolled her eyes and said, "Listen, Dad ..."

"No, *you* listen. Concern is one thing, but disapproval is written all over you. And I won't have it.

The weather's not ideal. I know that. I also know it's unlikely she'll return. But I have to be there -- in case she does."

She chaffed at his rebuke. "And if she does, and takes you up on your offer, what then?"

"Then we'll have a guest in the apartment, won't we?"

In an effort to dilute the air of discord filling the room, she picked up his favorite red scarf from where he'd laid it on the back of a chair, and as she draped it around his neck, asked, "How do you know she can be trusted? From what you told me last night, you don't know anything about her."

"I don't. But my gut tells me she's in serious trouble and needs help. Help I intend to give her - if she'll let me."

With a wide-brimmed hat in his left hand, and Jackson's leash now in his right, he kissed her on the cheek as she opened the door.

"Don't stay too long," she said, this time in a caring way. "And if it turns out you *are* going to bring her here, call me first."

"Will do," he answered, tipping his hat before stepping through the doorway onto the covered porch.

"Gloves," she called after him. "Did you remember your gloves?"

He answered with a wave as he followed Jackson down the walk to the street.

Bowling Green is an exceptionally welcoming community, home to immigrants from so many

countries that over fifty languages are spoken around town. As Doc hunched forward into a gusting breeze walking the short distance to The Square, he hoped and prayed one tiny refugee from within his own country would once again cross his path.

When he reached the park, he didn't see the solitary figure until he and Jackson were almost upon her. The sight of her sitting on the bench where they'd first met created a warming feeling inside him that quickly vanished when he saw her arms wrapped tightly across her chest as she shivered. With Jackson stretching his leash, the short distance between them closed quickly.

But then a disheveled young man, slight enough for Doc to mistake him for a girl, got up and hurried away. Disappointed his hopes had risen and fallen so quickly, Doc settled himself on his regular bench, his back to the wind, and waited. And waited.

Being in the park every afternoon with his dog had long been his routine, rain or shine, but Doc's obsession with once again meeting up with the runaway girl was something new he didn't understand. And that gave him something in common with his daughter.



## Three

*Do you take pride in your hurt? Does it make you seem large and tragic? Maybe you're playing a part on a great stage with only yourself as audience.*

~John Steinbeck

Over the next few days, Jennifer grew increasingly distressed with her father's fixation over once again meeting up with a runaway teenage girl. Her thoughts turned the clock back to her own childhood and adolescence, and she couldn't recall a single time when her father had been this obsessed with her or what was happening in her life.

As a child, Jennifer had longed for more attention from Doc, but he always seemed to spend most of the free time he had away from his medical practice doing things without her. Church activities. Civic involvement. His friends. Doing things with her mother that excluded her. She knew he had the time. He just didn't allocate as much in her direction as she'd craved.

Since she'd been unhappy growing up without siblings, Jennifer had long dreamed of marriage and at least two children. She'd nurtured an idealized dream of

how her family's life would be so much better than the one created by her parents. When she fell hard for a fellow university student during their senior year, Emily and Doc had misgivings about Doug, as parents often do. They sensed something wasn't as it should be and shared their concerns with their daughter. But their candor served only to drive Jennifer away from them. She made her choice, ignored her parent's cautions and became a June bride a few weeks after graduation.

Despite knowing how much her mother desired a time-honored Southern wedding for her only child, Jennifer eschewed tradition and chose instead to go along with her fiancé's insistence on a civil ceremony at the courthouse that lasted only a few minutes. It proved to be the beginning of a strained relationship with her mother that lasted until Emily's death.

The day after the ceremony, Jennifer took off with her new husband, following him around the world as he pursued his dream of being an award-winning wildlife photographer. While she delighted in travelling to far-flung places few have the opportunity to visit, it came at a price. She reluctantly had to accept Doug's view that children were out of the question until he'd exhausted his wanderlust. By the time he'd finally decided to settle down, though, another woman had taken her place.

Doug's revelation blindsided her as they sat at the Don Mueang International Airport in Bangkok ahead of their planned departure to their next destination. They'd been in Thailand for several weeks, with Doug often on his own for days at a time as he sought desirable creatures to capture with his cameras. Jennifer should

have been suspicious, but naively wasn't. Until his revelation he'd found something else desirable besides the animals he photographed. *Someone else* more desirable than her.

Jennifer had sensed something different about Doug as he stirred his coffee while they sat at a table on the concourse outside an airport restaurant. Before she could ask, he broke the news as matter-of-factly as if describing a magazine article he'd just finished reading. Jennifer learned he wouldn't be going with her on the flight to Kuala Lumpur, instead remaining with a young Thai woman he'd met in Phuket.

Stunned, Jennifer could summon neither words nor tears as she desperately tried to just breathe. The unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells of a congested Asian airport thousands of miles from home bore down on her, attacking her senses and leaving her head spinning. They'd been married for almost three years, yet until that moment, there'd been no warning signs from him, no hints of trouble. Or if there had been, she hadn't noticed.

She wanted to know more, but hesitated while organizing her thoughts. Doug used the silence as an opportunity to gather his carry-on bag containing his cameras and simply walk away, an act of cowardice and cruelty that wounded her in a way that had never fully healed, in part because as the years went by, she refused to *allow* it to heal. Jennifer watched helplessly as he disappeared from her life forever in the rush of passengers heading to their gates.

As if in a trance, she found her window seat in the middle of the plane that would carry her alone on their scheduled flight to Malaysia. There she claimed her luggage and purchased a ticket back to the States. She had no appetite and couldn't sleep during the eighteen hours she waited in the Kuala Lumpur airport. Another long wait for her connecting flight in San Francisco meant she hadn't slept in almost two days when her parents met her at baggage claim in Nashville, sixty miles from Bowling Green.

She'd returned home bitter and broken-hearted, quickly securing a divorce and changing her name back to McGinley. She never heard from Doug again, and never allowed herself to think any of what occurred might have been her fault. Although her parents welcomed her with open arms, she wrongly assumed they would forever hold it against her that she ignored their cautions about Doug. Nothing could have been further from the truth, but her entrenched feeling her parents were disappointed in her and would always judge her, shaped how she regarded them. And inevitably, how they regarded her.

And now, just days ahead of her return to England, she couldn't get her mind around this intrusion by a young girl who was taking over her father's life.

## Four

*I became angry and said to God, "Why do you permit this? Why don't You do something about it?" And God replied, "I did do something about it. I made you."*

~Sister Mary Rose McGready

“I didn’t think ya’d be here.”  
“Are you unhappy I am?” Doc asked.  
“Don’t guess so.”

A week to the day since their first meeting, and other than the stained baseball cap partially obscuring her face, Lisa’s clothes were unchanged, though more soiled. Her despair so obvious as to give lie to her effort at nonchalance when she pushed the hat back to reveal her rain-streaked dirty face.

“Did ya come back every day like ya said?”

“I did.” He gestured to the empty space beside her.

“May I sit down?”

She pulled her soaked backpack along the bench to make room and reached down to pet Jackson as he looked up at her, eagerly wagging his tail.

“How’d ya know I’d come back?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then why’d ya come?”

"A promise made; a promise kept," he said, sitting down, careful to keep a respectful distance.

A canopy of the still-green leaves of a large, beautifully shaped magnolia tree covered both of them like an unfolded umbrella, yet affording them no protection from the steady afternoon rain. All three were drenched, and the only one enjoying the experience had meandered his way through every sidewalk puddle between the Doc's house and the park, playfully splashing the water with his paws.

"Now what?" she asked.

"That's entirely up to you."

Doc reached in his coat pocket, retrieved a small chewy treat and handed it to Lisa for her to give to Jackson. As she watched the little dog slowly chewing, familiar knots of hunger painfully twisted in her stomach.

"Now that he's got his, can ya help *me* get somethin' ta eat?"

"Of course. But if you remember, our offer, Jen's and mine, also included a hot bath and a place to sleep."

"Fer how long?"

"I hadn't given that much thought," he answered, picturing in his mind a disapproving look from his daughter. "I guess as long as it takes."

"Takes fer what?"

"That'll be up to you."

"If I do, and I'm not sayin' I will, I'll do what I please, when I please. Get it?"

"No, my dear," he said, rising, "in my house, under my roof, eating my food, you'll do as you and I agree.

Otherwise, there's a bench somewhere out here with your name on it. Perhaps this one, or one of several behind the library. It's not as scenic back there, but you'll find it has less exposure to the elements."

"But ya said you'd help me."

Chilled to the bone, she shook all over as she spoke, and Doc lamented he hadn't thought to bring along an umbrella. He knew he had to get her off the bench and out of the miserable weather.

"And I will. But as it's my offer, it's also my rules." He turned his hands over, palms up, and asked, "Coming? Or did you want to stay here and get wetter than we already are? If that's possible."

She fought on, trying desperately not to completely surrender to this man she didn't know. The rain pelted her eyes as she looked up at him.

"What about money? Why not jus' give me some money and I'll be on my way? Won't bother ya no more."

"Sorry, Lisa. I'm happy to give you a hand up, but not a handout," he answered, extending his toward her.

She slowly reached up to place her small hand in his, and he effortlessly pulled her barely one hundred pounds to stand alongside him.

"How does tha shelter part work?" she asked, as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

He repeated his previous description of an apartment behind his home a few minutes' walk from where they were.

"You'll have the apartment all to yourself. If it doesn't have everything you need, Jen will help me get it."

"Tell me again who Jen is."

"My daughter. Lives with me when she's not teaching in Europe. She wasn't especially keen on the idea of us helping you, but she'll come around."

He wasn't at all certain his daughter *would* come around, and every afternoon he endured without comment Jennifer's disapproval when he left in search of the girl, only to return alone when darkness turned on the streetlights to illuminate his way home.

It had been a long week -- for all three of them.

Exhausted and hungry, Lisa struggled not to break down and cry, something she had yet to do during her first week as a free woman. She'd come to the park that day hoping he'd be there, but despite everything, still attempted to minimize her desperation in his eyes. She reached down to pick up her backpack. "Can I talk with Jen before I decide?"

"Of course." He pulled his cell phone from his pocket as his daughter had instructed a week earlier. "I'll let her know we're coming. She's leaving the day after tomorrow and will be gone for quite some time."

Lisa turned down Doc's offer to carry her backpack. Its weight strapped to her tiny frame slowed their walk. As Jackson guided them toward Doc's home, neither of them noticed they were being watched from a car a short distance away.



Jennifer stood in the open doorway and greeted her father with affection and his young companion with wariness as they walked up the steps and onto the porch. Lisa conveyed her response to Jennifer's lack of welcoming by brushing past her to enter the living room, dripping rain water on the polished hardwood floor.

None of this was lost on Doc as he followed Jennifer into the house, closing the door behind them. As he hung his wet coat and hat on the sturdy rack just inside the front door, Lisa said, "Where should I dump my stuff?"

Jennifer's look spoke louder than words.

Doc couldn't miss how his daughter and Lisa each silently took the first measure of the other. He'd anticipated some difficulty between them, and sensed each woman could hold her own.

"Jen, will you please help get Lisa settled in the apartment while Jackson and I dry off?"

"You'll be joining us for dinner here, won't you?"

"No," Doc answered, as he started to leave. "Lisa said her decision to stay or go depended upon talking with you. I'd just be in the way."

The expressions of both women revealed his answer pleased neither of them.

"But what about your dinner?"

"I can fend for myself. Jackson and I'll eat together here, and you can fix something for the two of you in the apartment."

After he left, Jennifer glared at the girl for a moment before asking, "Breakfast okay for dinner?"

"Anything. Beggars can't be choosers."

"I guess that's true. Follow me, and bring your stuff," Jennifer said, the word *stuff* spoken in a hateful way. She escorted Lisa through the house and out the back door to the porch steps leading down to the brick pathway. She pointed to the apartment. "It's unlocked. Go on. I need to get some things from our kitchen. I wasn't expecting company."

"Sure, ya were. I heard him call ya, and I bet ya jus' got back from unlockin' it. I may be cold and wet, but I still hear good."

Caught in a lie, Jennifer took a deep breath and answered dismissively, "If you say so. You need to wash your hands." Turning her back on Lisa, she added, "Towels in the apartment bathroom. Use them."

"Yes, ma'am," Lisa answered, emphasizing both words and adding an unseen middle-finger gesture as Jennifer closed the door behind her without looking back.

Ten minutes later, they were together again in the apartment kitchen.

"How do you like your eggs?"

"Any way'll be fine." Although Doc had said his daughter didn't share his enthusiasm for helping her, Lisa still asked, "Hey, how come yer doin' this for me? You and the old man."

Hearing her father referred to in that way, Jennifer suppressed the first caustic words that came to mind. "Don't ever say that again," she said, as calmly as she could manage. "Ever."

"Okay, okay. What *should* I call him?"

"What everyone else does. Dr. McGinley when speaking about him, and Doc when talking with him. He likes the informality. I don't. Especially from strangers."

"That's what he said. Ta call him Doc."

"I suggest you listen to him."

*Shove it up your condescending ass.*

"Oh-kay," Lisa drawled out in reply.

Neither woman spoke again until slightly burnt dry toast, over-cooked bacon and runny scrambled eggs had been set in front of Lisa, who easily understood the message.

"You're not eating?"

"Had a late lunch. Go ahead, dig in," Jennifer said, easing herself into the chair facing Lisa in the small breakfast nook.

Both women wished the other could be somewhere, anywhere, else. The ensuing silence became a test of wills that Lisa lost.

"He said yer some kinda teacher. What kind?"

"Is the *he* to whom you refer my father – Dr. McGinley?"

"Yeah, whatever."

Jennifer could see chewed food in the girl's mouth when she spoke.

"That's disgusting."

"Sorry," Lisa mumbled, though she'd done it on purpose. "What kinda teacher?"

"What *kind of* teacher?" Jennifer repeated, emphasizing the correct pronunciation. "University."

"Somewhere in Europe. Right?"

"Yes."

"Why Europe?"

"Why not?"

*She sure ain't makin' this easy.*

"Hey! What'd I do ta make ya treat me this way? I ain't done nothin'."

"Other than taking advantage of my father's kindness? And his generosity. No telling what lies you told him."

Her harsh words and even harsher tone conflicted with what her father expected. She knew it, but at the moment didn't care.

"He offered. Kept pushin' me. I didn't ask fer nothin'."

*Let's see if she can take what she dishes out.*

"Anyway, you got a husband, or jus'yer daddy? At yer age."

If looks could kill, Jennifer's would have launched Lisa out of her troubled world forever. But rather than a pointless tit-for-tat with an adversary she now realized wouldn't be easily intimidated, Jennifer tried a different approach – civility.

"Let's talk about you first, then me," she said, with strained politeness. "My father knows nothing about you."

Confused by the change, Lisa continued eating as she studied Jennifer.

"He didn't ask."

"I'm asking now. For both of us."

"My story? You wanna hear my story?"

"I don't see anyone else here, do you?"

So much for civility.

"You can't handle it," Lisa tossed back.

"Try me."

Lisa had practically inhaled her unappetizing meal and could have eaten a lot more. It wasn't offered, and she wasn't about to be the beggar Jennifer had earlier ascribed to her.

"I'm really tired. Can we do this later?"

She slowly wiped her hands on the soft cloth napkin and dropped it on her plate, her behavior rewarded with the annoyed look she'd hoped for.

"Of course," Jennifer said, as she gathered up Lisa's plate and utensils and walked to the sink. She picked the monogrammed napkin up off the plate, and even though it now needed washing, folded it and set it on the counter. "Just sit there for a few minutes, and I'll draw you a hot bath."

Lisa mistakenly assumed she'd somehow weakened her foe, but Jennifer had not been motivated by kindness. She wanted to keep a filthy stranger from sleeping on expensive bed linens. She thought about saying as much to put the girl in her place, but decided against it, regretting the amount of time already invested in conversation with the intruder.

It had taken less than an hour for Lisa to go from sitting in cold winter rain to reclining in the bathwater's soothing warmth. Before sleep she couldn't prevent consumed her, she decided to return to the main house, steal what could easily be pawned and leave during the night. What night that would be, she didn't know. But soon.

When the cold water awakened her, she realized she'd slept more deeply than she had in days. Her skin was all wrinkled as she dried herself off with the nicest towel she'd ever touched. A full-length white cotton robe hung on the back of the closed bathroom door and it practically swallowed her up as she put it on and tied the sash around her tiny waist. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been completely clean – a feeling that lightened her steps as she walked around the apartment looking for her backpack and her clothes. Both were missing.

The front door opened and Jen walked in with Lisa's backpack resting on top of neatly folded and freshly-laundered clothes in a plastic laundry basket.

"What time is it?" Lisa asked. "And whata ya doin' with my stuff?"

"About eleven."

"I fell asleep."

"I know," Jennifer answered, jealously noticing the girl's beauty that had been hidden beneath layers of trail dust and tattered clothing. "You didn't answer when I knocked, so I looked in to make sure you were okay."

"Why were you knocking?"

"Isn't it obvious. To get your clothes. To wash them."

"And my backpack?"

"Equally obvious. I took it because your clothes were in it."

"Searched it, I bet."

"That I did," Jennifer said, setting the basket down in the living room.

"Disappointed ya didn't find nothin'?"

"Oh, but I did. I found your ticket out of here. Dad's sleeping, so I hid your gun in a safe place until I can tell him in the morning."

"Oh, shit!"

"Very articulate. Now listen, you little ..."

"But I can explain," Lisa answered, her mind racing. "Ya see, what happened ..."

"Don't bother. I don't care – not one iota. Or in words you might more easily understand, I don't give a shit. About you, or anything you have to say."

*It can't end for me this way, this fast.*

"Your father. He'll listen ta me. Go get him."

"Not on your life."

"But I ..."

"Shut up!"

"But ..."

"Look. I'll let you stay the night since my father brought you here. If you're still around in the morning, which I hope you're not, it'll be up to him if he listens. Even if he does, you'll still be shown the door. I'll see to it."

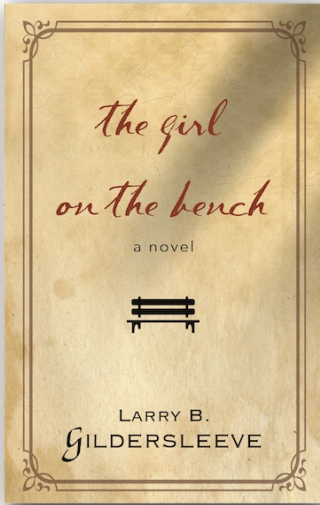
"Okay," Lisa answered, confident this battle wasn't lost. Not yet, anyway.

But her confidence evaporated when Jennifer said, "If you do talk with my father, make certain to tell him about Big John. If you don't, I will."

Lisa's shoulders slumped and her legs felt weak as she stood in the doorway watching until Jennifer disappeared back into the house. Despite the apartment's warmth and security, as she closed the door

she felt completely alone in the world. Only she wasn't.  
Her past was about to catch up with her.





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# **The Girl on the Bench**

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