

Daniel believed there were no do-overs in life. No second chances masquerading as firsts. Fate would prove him wrong when he fell in love with Paula twice, decades and a thousand miles apart, yet he was a total stranger to her both times.

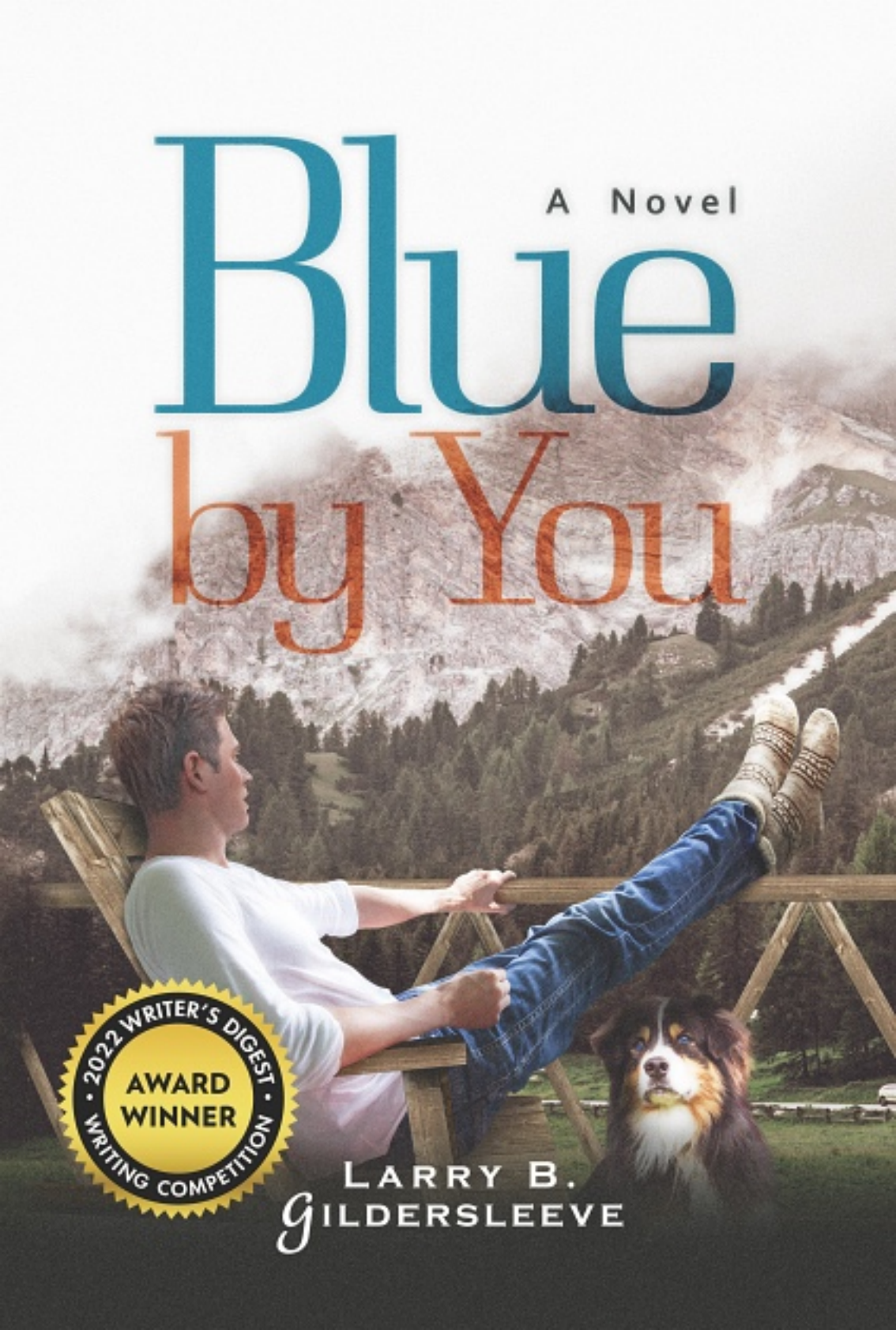
Blue by You

By Larry B. Gildersleeve

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A man with short brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, is sitting in a wooden Adirondack chair. He is leaning back with his feet propped up on the chair's frame, wearing patterned socks. He is looking out over a vast mountain landscape. In the foreground, a Bernese Mountain Dog is sitting on the grass, looking towards the camera. The background features steep, rocky mountains with patches of snow and dense evergreen forests. The sky is hazy or misty.

Blue by You

A Novel



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*G*ILDERSLEEVE

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One



December 4th, 1998
Tuesday, Day One

“I’m lost.”
A woman in her late-thirties, tall and slender, flowing auburn hair bouncing off her shoulders, strode confidently up a stone walkway toward a large, two-story log cabin home. It was tucked away at a hillside crevice yet plainly visible from the gravel road where the dust kicked up by her late-model European roadster began settling back down. A man relaxing on the porch touched the head of a pure-bred Australian Shepard at his side as he rose from a sturdy wooden rocking chair.

“Perhaps we can help.”

He started down to meet her at the edge of the walkway. She waved him off and he stepped back to watch her effortlessly climb the six wide steps with no hand railing. Had she been shoeless, as he was in heavy wool socks, they’d be about the same height. Her fashionable stilts, better suited for cocktail parties back home in Nashville than outdoors in nowhere Colorado, gave her the advantage. If the difference troubled him, it didn’t show. He held her confident handshake a second or two longer than perhaps he should. If it troubled her, it didn’t show.

“I’m Daniel. This is Blue.”

Blue continued to wag his tail as he had the moment he saw her approaching.

She hesitated a moment, as if trying to remember her name. “Paula,” she said, slowly. Then with greater assurance, “Paula Chandler,” adding, “what a beautiful dog.”

Tiny freckles dotted her flawless complexion, the rest of her hidden beneath a white turtleneck sweater, unbuttoned brown cashmere coat and cream-colored slacks with a crease that mostly held despite hours sitting in the car. In time, he’d know she had freckles elsewhere.

Daniel had the healthy, clean-shaven look of a man who spent a lot of his time outdoors. He motioned toward a matching rocking chair and thought she settled into it as gracefully as an actress performing on a Broadway stage.

“Now that you’ve found *us*, what were you really looking for?” he asked casually as he sat back down.

His surprise visitor looked straight ahead at the snow-capped mountains off in the distance. Her delicate features, in profile against the canvas of a cloud-streaked early winter sky, began to melt away his nonchalance, yet he struggled to pretend otherwise. He rarely had guests, invited or otherwise, and never one as easy on the eyes as the woman sitting beside him on an unseasonably warm December afternoon. If he’d had a tail, it would be wagging.

“I’m trying to find Three Oaks Manor House. It’s supposed to be some sort of meeting place.” Her eyes shifted to meet his. “This *is* Three Oaks, isn’t it? I mean, if there were signs anywhere, I sure missed all of ‘em when I drove in.”

Her Southern accent as captivating to him as her countenance.

“Manor House. Nice place. Staying there?”

“I am. Made the reservation months ago. Since you know about it, how do I find it? I mean, I have no idea where I am, so how do I get there from here?”

He did his best to appear thoughtful as he put one foot on the porch railing and crossed his ankles.

“Here would be a good place to start.”

He wants to joust, she thought. *I’m tired, but totally up for it.*

“Are you making fun of me, Daniel? It is Daniel, right?” He nodded. “Wait. We’ve just met.” She feigned seriousness with a wrinkled brow and pursed lips. “Let me ask someone who’d know.”

He nodded again when she gestured toward the dog lying between them with his head resting on his paws, his tail stilled by sleep. Her eyes, and Daniel’s, followed her hand.

“Blue,” she asked, as she began to slowly stroke his back with her fingertips, “is your friend here making fun of a damsel in distress? A sojourner at her wits’ end in a foreign land. And here I had such a good first impression of him. Have I misjudged him so severely? Please say it isn’t so.”

The faint sound of Blue’s snoring accompanied her smile as she dropped both hands to her lap and turned her silent gaze back to the man in the rocking chair.

She’s good, he thought.

“Sojourner, eh?” he asked, holding her gaze.

Her turn to nod.

“Point taken.” His tone conciliatory. “I apologize.”

“Apology accepted.” She guessed him to be about her age. “Now, please begin again. If there’s one thing I really love, it’s new beginnings.”

Still trying for an air of indifference, though he didn’t know why, he acted as if he didn’t see her wink or hear the flirtation in her voice as he raised his arm and pointed in the opposite direction her car faced.

“Back down the road you came. At the big red barn, take a left. Downtown’s a few miles.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep. One main street. Manor House is white and green. Big sign in the yard. Can’t miss it.”

“Sounds easy enough. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Wanting to prolong the sojourner’s departure, he leaned forward as his feet found their way back to the porch floor. He pointed again. “Don’t see many cars like that around here. Mercedes?”

“Beemer.” She cleared her throat. “Sorry. BMW.”

Her eyes followed his cupped palm as it moved along the sleeping dog’s back.

“She’s a kindly lady, Blue, she truly is. Making citified jargon easy for simple country folk like us to understand.”

She lifted her head when he lifted his, their eyes met, but only one of them smiled.

“Guess I deserved that,” she groaned.

His raised eye brows challenged her attempt at pouting.

“Okay. Maybe I *was* being just a tiny bit smug.” She paused, then hastily added, “Without meaning to be, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Still, my turn to apologize.” She paused, and he returned her wink from a few moments earlier that wordlessly brought back her smile. “Seems like I’ve met my match, haven’t I?”

He added a slight shrug to his smile.

“Right. Now then, before I go, one last question. Once I’m downtown, on that one main street, which restaurant serves the best lunch?”

“The Diner.”

“Does it have a name?”

“It does. The Diner.”

“A diner named The Diner.” She slowly rocked back and forth, softly tapping the fingers of her left hand on the arm rest. “Who’d have thought?”

“Legend has it a big-time ad agency in Denver.”

“You don’t say. Well, that answers that. And why do you recommend it?”

“Only one in town.”

He was messing with her, was good at it, and she didn’t mind. What he had no way of knowing is their spirited exchange might someday inspire a magazine article in a distant city.

“I see. Can you give me directions to The Diner? You know, after I’ve arrived all the way downtown. From here.”

“Sure.” He was delighted her questions were delaying her. “Across the street from Manor House.”

“I think I can manage that.” She hooked an index finger to slide a tan leather driving glove down to look at her watch. “Well, I better get going. Got an early start this morning and skipped breakfast.” She looked out at the seemingly endless expanse of peaceful rural surroundings. Nearby trees swayed in a sudden stiff breeze, and she saw a few remaining stubborn leaves twist and swirl as they fell to the ground. “Wouldn’t want to get caught up in rush hour traffic and find out they gave my room away.”

“Wouldn’t want that,” he said, hoping she didn’t notice he was staring, but not at the leaves.

Realizing her departure had been delayed as long as possible, Daniel rocked forward and stood. Paula planted her feet firmly and held his hand longer than she needed to when he helped her up. Blue scrambled to join them.

“Does Blue shake hands?”

“No. Sorry. Nothing personal. He only got a certificate of attendance at obedience school.”

I know I can't stay, but there's something about this man.

“Good one. I can see you're both handsome *and* clever.” She bent down to scratch Blue behind his ears. “Did he get his name from his eyes?”

“He did.”

“Time for me to go.”

When they shook hands, the name of the movie star he favored from years gone by eluded her.

“Thank you, Daniel. Thank you very much.”

She had her back to him as she began her descent.

“Elvis.”

She stopped on the third step and turned to look up at him. “Elvis?”

“Yeah. He said that a lot.”

“Said what?”

“Thank you. Thank you very much.”

“He did?”

“He did. Always said them together.” He answered her quizzical look. “When the audience applauded. Every Elvis impersonator does it.”

“A wild guess. You're a fan.”

“Guilty.”

Reaching the edge of the walkway at the base of the porch, Paula performed a nimble one-eighty pirouette and took one step back. “Thank you. For the directions, and the dining recommendation.” She

bowed slightly, kept her eyes fixed on his, and with emphasis added, “Thank you very much.”

This time, he made no effort to subdue his staring. In a few seconds, she’d be gone.

“Good-bye, Mr. Elvis Fan.”

“Good-bye, damsel in distress.”

Paula’s fancy shoes slipped twice on the rounded cobblestones, marring the flawless departure she’d hoped for since she knew he’d be watching. Reaching her car, she gave a casual wave to a man she had no expectation of ever seeing again. He waved back.

Daniel wrapped his arm around one of the rough-hewn posts supporting the porch roof and watched her car with Tennessee plates disappear down the unpaved road. He lingered, regretting her intrusion into his solitude had been so fleeting. He wished there’d been more. More what, he didn’t know. Just more.

“Handsome woman,” he said aloud, as he retraced his steps back to his chair. Blue looked at him. “Tall, too.” Blue wagged his tail.

They both remained in place the better part of an hour, Blue sleeping, Daniel consumed with thoughts painting the portrait of a man hopelessly adrift. He’d been pretty much a loner all his life save for his friendship with a girl, and his love for a woman, and they were the same person. When cancer took her from him, he ran away, drawn to the one place he knew would keep her memory alive. Until, he told himself, he could hopefully get on with a life without her.

A year and a half later, he knew he’d crossed over from being alone with memories to being desperately lonely, the loneliness accounting for the ache he felt as he looked down the empty road that had carried his surprise visitor away. He stood, walked to the edge of the porch, leaned against the post and wondered if he’d still be alive come spring when the last snow of the season began to thaw. Doesn’t matter, he thought. Nothing will matter once Blue is gone. It’ll all be over.

Paula watched the log cabin home grow smaller in her rear-view mirror until it disappeared from sight. Her husband had urged her to fly rather than drive, but she'd told him she needed time away. To think. To reflect. To clear her mind. To pray. But it wasn't time away from her job, which is what she'd told him, rather from her childless, loveless marriage that in her mind had reached a tipping point. She was seeking something to guide her in taking the next right step.

Paula followed Daniel's simple directions and it wasn't long before she steered her car onto the only main street in the small mountain town. She parked around the corner from the front door of Manor House and turned off the ignition. She sat for several minutes, looking around at nothing in particular. What are the odds, she thought, that somehow, in some mysterious way, I've been tipped in that stranger's direction?

Could he be my next right step? Maybe I should turn around and go back.

She stepped out of her car and shook herself, hoping it might dislodge thoughts of a man who'd made her feel as if they'd known each other for years instead of minutes. The only thing dislodged were her keys. She felt them slip from her fingers and heard them fall to the pavement. She bent down, snatched up the key ring, fumbled it and it fell again. "There's my sign," she muttered under her breath as she looked across a white picket fence encircling Manor House. She picked up her keys, dropped them in her purse with a flourish to dramatize an end to her delusion and headed toward the door.

An early evening curtain of darkness, as dark as his mood, descended outside the window as Daniel stood at the sink preparing Blue's dinner in a kitchen any gourmet chef would praise. After arriving from D.C., he'd begun a self-guided culinary journey he hoped would both help pass the time and heal the hurt. Country music,

a staple in his life as long as he could remember, filled the house, but not so loud it drowned out the knock. When he opened the front door, a familiar face looked back at him. Her captivating beauty, undiminished by dim porch light and screen-door mesh, left him speechless.

“Hi. Remember me?”

“Of course,” he stammered. It took him a moment to recover. “Come in. Please.”

Paula pulled open the screen door. Her arrival brightened his mood as quickly as the imposing chandelier illuminated the living room when he flipped the switch on the wall just inside the door. When her eyes adjusted, she realized the home’s rustic exterior belied the refined interior.

“This is unexpected.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say, but he’d soon discover he needn’t have worried.

“You’re telling me! This has *not* been my day.” She caught herself. “Oh, I didn’t mean that the way it must’ve sounded. I’m sorry. I meant it hasn’t been my day apart from meeting you. And Blue.”

“Paula, we feel the same way.”

She liked that he’d remembered her name, at least the name she’d given him, and how it sounded in his resonant voice without a trace of accent. A feminine voice and human scent other than Daniel brought Blue trotting from the kitchen. He made straight for Paula, tail wagging, and she knelt to pet him.

“You can’t be lost,” Daniel said, closing the door. “We took care of that. Or did we?”

“We did. But you’d know that because I found my way back.”

“What then?”

“Well,” she answered, standing, “I guess you could say I’m lost in a different way this time.”

“Because ...?”

“Because my reservation somehow got messed up, and by the time

I got there just a few minutes after I left you, all the rooms were taken. Can you believe that? Every last one of them. A woman named Marlene was nice about it, and I tried to be nice, too. But I'm afraid I became a little unpleasant with her, okay, maybe a lot unpleasant, when I asked for directions to other places where I might stay and she said there weren't any. At least not any within, what did she say, oh, yes, within any reasonable driving distance. I asked her what reasonable is around here and she said about an hour. I don't call that reasonable, do you? I ..."

"On the bright side ..."

"Oh, there's bright side to all of this? That sounds promising. I can't wait to hear what it is because ... why are you looking at me that way?"

"May I finish?"

"Oops."

"You'd be out at the interstate, an hour closer to where you're going tomorrow."

"True," she said, quickly regaining her jousting footing and the breeziness with which her words seemed to effortlessly spill forth. "If I was *going* somewhere else tomorrow. I'm not. You see, believe it or not, I came all the way out here on purpose. To attend a writer's seminar. Three days. To make matters worse, they said on the radio they're expecting snow. Just my luck. And why would anyone schedule an event like this in the mountains in winter unless it's to go skiing? Which we're not. At least I don't think we are. And if we are, I didn't know about it and therefore didn't plan for it. You know. Clothes-wise."

She stopped, anticipating he'd join in. Curious about what she'd say next, and how she'd say it, he didn't. Undaunted, she continued.

"Since you're the only person I've met besides that woman at the Manor House, I thought, hoped really, you'd know a place, any place,

a condo, perhaps a house, I can rent for a few nights, you know, until the seminar is over on Friday, I'm guessing probably around mid-day, and I can be on my way home, getting at least as far as one of the hotels she mentioned out there by the interstate an hour away before it gets dark."

Paula paused to take a breath while Daniel marveled at the number of words she'd streamed into a single sentence.

"Then I decided to drive back out here to ask you if you could help me. You know, with any ideas you might have before I started off again on my own searching around in the dark in a place I've never been before and know nothing about. I would've called, but I didn't have your number. So here I am."

He waited until he was certain she'd finished.

"No."

"No? That's it? Just no? Nothing more? That's all you've got to say after all I've said?"

"A longer answer won't change things." Daniel saw frustration clouding the face of an alluring woman standing a little more than an arm's length away. He thought for a moment. "Hungry?"

"Oh, I am! That's another thing. I forgot all about lunch at that place you told me about. Got myself all tangled up and sideways thinking about where I could find a place to stay. Guess I should've thought about that before I came all the way out here again. You know, over the river and through the woods to, well, to wherever this is."

The reclusive Daniel found himself in unfamiliar territory. Awed and intimidated by her appearance, he'd been more at ease sitting with her on the porch in the great outdoors that afternoon than standing so near to her inside. He felt closed in somehow, but the more she talked, and she was clearly the most loquacious person he'd ever met, the more he relaxed. He slowly pulled his hands from his front pockets where he'd nervously shoved them and loosely clasped them behind his back.

“Oh, well, since I know the way, I’ll go back to town first before starvation sets in and I fade away to nothing. Then I’ll find my way out to the interstate to a hotel. You said it would only take about an hour or so. Now, about food.” She narrowed her eyes, pretending to search her memory. “What *was* the name of that place you mentioned? Something memorable, as I recall. Oh, that’s it! The Diner.”

“No.”

“Again, with the no?” Her voice lingered on the last word. “Really?”

“Sorta. You got the name right. The no is to evening meals. Locals do that at home.”

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful, really I don’t,” Paula said, hands on her small waist above shapely hips. “But did I also drive past a sign saying I’d left civilization behind when I arrived here?”

The corners of his mouth turned upward.

“What?”

“No offense taken.” He paused. “In case you’re wondering.”

Despite a smile confirming he had a sense of humor, she realized she’d overstepped and offered a chagrined look in reply. Daniel spoke his next words matter-of-factly and with the disarming ease of a skilled trial attorney at summation knowing with absolute certainty he’d won his case.

“Would you like to join us for dinner?”

Caught completely off-guard, she hesitantly asked, “Us? Us? Is there a lady of the house?”

Paula thought she saw a slight change in Daniel’s expression before he shook his head.

“Just Blue and me,” he said, as her eyes were drawn to his. “You’ll be a welcome third.”

She made no effort to hide her relief. And that’s when the realization came to her. It’s not just his words, few as they may be, or the ease with which he spoke. Or his relaxed, non-threatening demeanor. It’s

his eyes. She'd read somewhere they're the windows to the soul. *He's soulful. Even though I barely know him, that's why I feel so comfortable, so safe, being with him.*

"That's very kind ... and I accept. Gratefully. What a surprise. To tell you the truth, and I'll always tell you the truth, I couldn't help noticing the wonderful smells as soon as you opened the door. Are you sure they'll be enough for both of us? Not that I'll eat that much, mind you."

"Certain of it."

Paula unbuttoned her coat and Daniel draped it over one arm. With his other, he gestured in the direction of the wonderful smells. Aware her host still wasn't wearing shoes, she stepped out of hers and set them by the front door. As her eyes swept the room, she noticed the expensive designer furniture and was fairly certain about three things. It had all been selected by a woman, arranged by a decorator, and appeared to be almost untouched since the day it arrived.

With Blue at her side, Paula headed across the highly polished hardwood floors toward the kitchen, and without turning around, said, "I love country music." She paused for a second, then parroted something he'd said moments earlier. "In case you're wondering."

He carefully hung her coat in the hall closet.

She's quick. Might've been a worthy courtroom adversary.

When she entered the oversized kitchen, Paula looked around and saw four hand-crafted wooden stools, two on each side of a long center island. Her back was to him as she made her selection and sat down, allowing Daniel to continue to admire her shapely figure when he followed behind her.

"Excellent choice," he said, then asked, "chardonnay?"

"Yes, wine would be wonderful. Thank you." When she heard the refrigerator door close, she asked, "And what did you mean excellent choice? All I've done is sit down on this stool. Nothing special about that. Or is there?"

“You chose the one on the end.”

“And?”

“Perfect for a left-handed diner.”

She looked at her arm as he opened the wine.

“And you know I’m left-handed how? Are you gifted with clairvoyance?”

“Your watch is on your right wrist.”

Daniel’s courtroom success had been due, in part, to well-honed discipline noticing everything about everything. Jurors, witnesses, opposing counsel. An innate part of him that remained years after leaving his profession. But along the way, he’d shed a trial attorney’s stock-in-trade. Being long-winded.

“Well, it’s obvious you don’t miss a thing, so I better dig deep for my best finishing school table manners.” She paused when she heard the sound of the cork leaving the bottle. “Actually, that’s not true. And I told you I would always be truthful. I never went to finishing school. I was just turning a phrase. Making conversation.” Her host was busy at the impressive gas range, his back to her. Broad shoulders, tapering to a narrow waist. “I feel like I’m being such an imposition. May I at least help in some way?”

“Thank you, no. Everything’s ready. We try to eat the same time every evening. Blue can be demanding that way. Your arrival, though unanticipated, timed just right.”

An array of copper pans and skillets hung from a rack suspended above them as Daniel set cinnamon-colored stoneware plates on the center island before taking the opposite stool. Poached salmon with dill sauce. A medley of colorful steamed vegetables. Garden salad with homemade blue cheese dressing in a small tureen with matching ladle. Freshly baked rolls wrapped in cloth to keep them warm in a woven-straw basket.

A ringing of expensive crystal as she reached to touch his already raised wine glass, her manicured fingernails in one of a hundred shades of pink.

“To our sojourner guest,” he toasted, above the sound of Blue eating in his corner, “and keeping her starvation at bay. At least for now.”

He thought her radiant smile lit up the kitchen as much as the chandelier had illuminated the living room.

She sipped the wine. “This is excellent. What is it?”

“Meiomi.” He turned the bottle’s label toward her. “California.”

“May-oh-me.” Repeated slowly in an unaffected Southern drawl. “And this is all so amazing! Now *you* tell *me* the truth. You don’t eat like this every night, do you? I mean, you weren’t expecting me. Were you?”

“I do, and I wasn’t.”

“Pardon me?”

“I do eat like this every night, or try to. I enjoy cooking, even if it’s just for me. Leftovers are lunch the next day. And I wasn’t expecting you. Why would I?”

The man who noticed everything about everything saw the slow creeping of scarlet into her fair complexion. He’d embarrassed her and rode to her rescue as he topped off her wine.

“What part of the South do ya’ll call back home?”

She recognized the conversational lifeline he’d cast her way and grasped it. “Cute. Real cute.” The flush on her neck began to fade away as quickly as it appeared. “Did my accent give me away? Well, of course it did. When did you notice?”

He sipped his wine and pretended to think. “Your first two words.”

“Really?” She shifted her weight on the comfortable stool, unable to remember and unwilling to ask. “Just two words, huh? That quickly?”

“Maybe not. Might have been later when I heard river with an *ah* at the end. Or when you stretched wine into two syllables. Or when ...”

She exaggerated her interruption. “Are ya makin’ fun a me *agin*, Dan-yul?”

“Not for a minute. The only thing more charming than your accent is ...”

“Is what?” she impatiently asked, hungrier for a man’s compliment than he could’ve imagined. He had no way of knowing how much she longed to be loved, or for a man to think she was at least loveable in the moment. “What’s more charming than my accent?”

Her charisma so natural and unaffected, her every move and mannerism so sophisticated, his answer was both effortless and genuine.

“You are.”

The wine, and the closeness of their relaxed dining, kept flirtation on the menu as a second entrée, something neither of them had dined on seriously for a long time. The food was as delicious as Paula anticipated, and she savored each bite. But satisfying her hunger was soon overtaken by a desire to get to know the chef. Her meal mostly eaten, she laid her fork, prongs down, on her plate alongside her knife, laced her fingers together as she laid her arms across the edge of the island, leaned forward slightly and looked across at her host.

“If you’ll tell me your story,” she said, invitingly, “I’ll tell you mine.”

A worthy courtroom opponent, perhaps. But it appears I have more experience.

“Ladies first.”

Unprepared for his return volley, Paula played for time, gathering her thoughts while pink fingernails tapped out a cadence on the island’s granite surface. Her other hand reached for the wine glass.

“It’s all so interesting,” she said, her response slowly coming together. “My story. So much to share. And, of course, so much to leave out. At least until we’re better acquainted. Honestly, Daniel, I wouldn’t know where to begin. I ...”

“May I help?”

Having no idea what he had in mind, she nodded.

“Begin at the beginning.”

Two



Tuesday, Day One ... Continued

Oxford, Mississippi was Paula Chandler's beginning, a birthplace where lifelong friendships can be ushered in with deceptively simple yet probing questions asked on park benches beneath spreading magnolia trees on hot summer afternoons. Questions like where are your people from, or where do you go to church? As he listened, Daniel assumed the third glass of wine contributed to her candor.

Tentatively, then hurriedly, Paula unfolded her story, one with all the makings of a Southern coming-of-age novel filled with an abundance of tension and conflict, especially between her and her mother. And in the Cinderella-like relationship with her two jealous

sisters, one younger, one older. When her father bothered to notice, and he rarely did, he usually only watched the four-woman family drama from afar, never writing himself into the script if it could be avoided. And it almost always could.

By the time she reached high school, Paula was aware the effect her beauty and maturing had on boys, yet it didn't diminish her popularity with other girls because they'd already learned she didn't pose a threat. Homecoming queen and Miss Anything would have been hers for the taking, but her mother wouldn't allow her middle daughter any recognition based on appearance. Paula told Daniel she knew it also had to do with the certainty neither of her sisters would ever be considered, let alone selected.

"I also wanted to be a cheerleader, but Mother nixed that in a nano-second."

"Why?"

His first question. One she knew he could answer himself.

"The uniform, silly."

His look begged for more.

"Okay, I can tell you wanna hear the naughty details."

A widening of eyes accompanied his nod.

"The skirt would've barely covered my bottom. And I developed earlier than most of the other girls. Mother would have no part of it."

"Why?"

A dinner roll from the basket landed on the floor by Daniel's stool after Paula bounced it off his forehead. He reached down to retrieve it, and when he encouraged her to continue, he could hear resentment in her voice when she talked about life with a domineering mother and distant father.

Her parents owned a small grocery store that consumed most of her father's waking hours. When he was home, he kept to himself, although Paula thought things would've been different if he'd had a

son. Limited money was the reason given when their mother denied all three daughters anything, large or small, deemed to be “nice, but not necessary.” An oft-repeated phrase Paula came to hate.

“Your sisters. How’d they feel about your mother?”

“Well, let me put it this way. Their life ambition was to get married and have children. Nothing else seemed to matter. At least not the things that mattered to me.”

“Sounds like you were complete opposites.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“And after high school? No finishing school, right?”

A man who actually listens to me.

“Right. Thought being an Ole Miss Rebel right there in Oxford suited me better. Studied hard and got a full ride. Majored in English and Journalism. It really pissed Mother off ... oops, sorry.”

“Saying it, or pissing her off?”

“You’re not helping.”

He steepled his hands together as a silent gesture of apology.

“A sorority had all the things Mother disapproved of. I joined one and *that’s* when I pissed her off. My parents weren’t paying for college, and I had savings from summer jobs, so she had no say.”

“Where’d you see yourself going after graduation?”

In his former life, opposing counsel would have objected to Daniel’s leading questions as he lifted the bottle of Meomi.

“Only one place. New York City.” She placed a hand over her wine glass. “Had enough, thank you. Probably more than enough, as you can tell. Now, where was I?”

“New York City.”

“Right. I papered the walls of my sorority house room with covers of magazines I dreamed would publish my writing.”

“How long were you in New York?”

She looked away, then back. “Never got there.”

“What happened?”

“I guess you could say Winston Chandler the third happened.”

“Your husband.”

“How’d you know I’m married? I’m beginning to think you *are* clairvoyant.”

“Two things.”

“Yes?”

“Well, this afternoon you introduced yourself as Paula Chandler. I used every ounce of my deductive reasoning to ...”

“And the other?”

Paula’s hands had been gloved when they first met, and she’d taken her rings off at Manor House before driving back. Daniel rested his elbow on the island, held up his left hand, palm toward her, rubbing his thumb underneath his ring finger. “Ring imprint. Tan line.”

She looked at the back of her left hand. “Well, I’ll say this. Thin mountain air certainly sharpens one’s eyesight.”

Paula was aware from the moment they met Daniel’s eyes had taken in far more than her finger, and she didn’t mind. She’d have minded otherwise. Her husband’s lack of interest contributed mightily to reaching her tipping point long before she left Nashville. She’d been the one to initiate flirtation with a stranger and rationalized it as innocent jousting. But now she knew he knew she was married.

“One thing the air here also does, for sure,” she continued, “is make my skin dry. Took my rings off in town to put on hand lotion. Didn’t want to stain my gloves. That’s all. They’re in my purse.”

He knew he’d embarrassed her and caused an end to her storytelling, not knowing later on he’d read the rest. She looked at her watch while stifling a yawn.

“Tired?”

“More than,” she answered, with uncharacteristic brevity. He thought she appeared pensive as her fingers tugged slightly at her

lower lip. “Daniel, I have to tell you something so I can ask you something.”

“Sounds intriguing.”

“Don’t know about that. But in our few minutes together on your porch this afternoon, I felt a sort of connection with you. A kindred spirit kind of a thing.”

“Sure it wasn’t Blue and not me?” he asked, standing. “He’s been known to have that effect on women.”

“Well, he certainly helped. No denying that. And tonight. I don’t know, Daniel. I think that’s why I felt safe coming back. Staying for dinner. And that’s so strange because I don’t even know you. And here we are, out in the middle of nowhere. At least for me it’s the middle of nowhere.”

Daniel had been in enough courtrooms, listening to enough witness, to often intuitively know what people were thinking before they spoke. An hours’ drive at this late hour, hoping to find a room in an inn somewhere, wasn’t an option for her now and they both knew it. He leaned against the kitchen doorway and crossed his arms.

“Paula, you wanted to ask me something. Don’t get me wrong. I’ll happily listen as long as you wanna talk, but a moment ago you said you were tired and ...”

“Yeah, well, about that,” she answered, a faint attempt to smile. “I know this is going to sound, well, I don’t quite know how it’s going to sound, so I’ll just ask. Any chance I can sleep on your couch tonight? I won’t be any trouble, really I won’t. And I’ll leave first thing in the morning without disturbing you. Promise.”

Daniel uncrossed his arms and shook his head.

“No. But ...”

She made sure he saw her eyes rolling as he passed in front of her. Liquid eyes a portrait artist would paint blue-green.

“I’ll say this for you, Mr. Collins. You sure have a comfortable

relationship with that word. I'm sorry I pushed your hospitality too far. You and that Marlene woman said there was no other place around here for me to go. Okay, I'll just get in my car and drive an hour or more back out to the interstate and hope one of those motels has a room left. Otherwise, I'll be sleeping in my car somewhere tonight. And in case that happens, may I borrow a blanket or two? It *is* rather chilly outside, you know. Being winter, and all. I promise to bring them back before I leave." The tinge of sarcasm softened with, "I'll even treat you to breakfast one morning at that place. The Diner. Deal?"

He regretted her anxiety, but she *had* interrupted him.

"If you want." A theatrical pause sharpened to courtroom perfection accompanied Daniel's clearing of their dinner plates. "Or, if you'd let me finish, I was going to say you're welcome to stay in the guest suite upstairs. First door on the right. Has its own bathroom. Tub. Shower. Towels. The works."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Didn't expect this."

"Neither of us did," he said, finishing his chores, wiping his hands on a towel before draping it back over the handle to the stove. "But that shouldn't matter, should it?"

Paula was quiet for a moment. But only a moment.

"Rescued from hunger *and* homelessness, all in one evening. And I do apologize for interrupting you. It's a shortcoming of mine that needs more work. Along with my over-reacting at times. And probably some other things."

She slid gracefully off the stool to follow him from the kitchen.

"No worries. By the way, we bunk down the hall there," he said, his back to her, pointing to his left. "If you're worried we might wander up during the night, there's a lock on the door."

Relief at having a place to stay the night emboldened her to return his flirtation.

“Do you think that might be necessary?”

“Not for me,” he said, turning around. “Can’t speak for Blue. Always suspected he roams at night when he has a lot on his mind. You’ll be his first sleepover.”

“And you?”

“Mine, too.” She didn’t believe him. They reached the bottom of the staircase. “Blue will show you the way while I retrieve your luggage. Keys, please.”

“It’s unlocked.”

Paula admired the rear view his tight black jeans afforded as he walked across the living room. He closed the front door behind him as she got down on both knees and hugged Blue’s neck.

“Show me the way?”

The tri-colored dog, mostly black mixed with streaks of rust and white, figured out where they were going. Although the breed is known for its herding instinct, and despite his age, Blue bounded up the stairs ahead of her, slipping twice, recovering quickly. He waited at the landing and followed a half-step behind as she pushed open the first door on the right. Paula barely had time to survey the large room’s tastefully appointed western décor before Daniel joined them and set her bags down.

“Will it be a problem if Winston tries and can’t find you?”

“Oh my, yes! I totally forgot. Wouldn’t want him to think I’d been kidnapped or fallen in with a band of outlaws. Don’t quite know how to explain this, though,” she said, spreading her arms apart. “I suppose it would be easiest if I fib a little bit and tell him I had to change to a rental house after the reservation mix-up thing.”

“I suppose,” he repeated. “Phone’s there by the bed.”

Paula looked at the nightstand. “Do you have an alarm clock I can borrow? I need to wake up by six and don’t want to disturb you.”

“We’re early risers. I’ll knock on the door until you tell me you’re awake.”

“Okay, if you’re sure it won’t be a bother.” He started to leave. “Say, do you have big day planned tomorrow?”

“We’ll find out together.” He answered her questioning look. “I’m going where you’re going.”

“Why?”

“That seminar. Same as you.”

“I gathered that. But why? It’s quite the chivalrous offer, but having made the journey to town once, I can find it again on my own. Really, I can. And I certainly don’t need a chaperone. Or are there early-morning dangers out here in the wilds I’m unaware of? You know, me being a city girl and all.”

“Paid my fee.”

Her head tilted slightly. “You’re a writer?”

“Poet’s more like it.”

“Really? Anything I can read?”

“Maybe. Sometime.”

Much as she would’ve enjoyed talking with her handsome rescuer well into the night, travel fatigue had taken its toll.

“Is this a full-service bed and breakfast?” She laughed when she saw his surprised look as they stood at the edge of the bed. “Breakfast. I *meant*, does your early rising mean breakfast here? Or should we leave in time for me to make good on my offer at The Diner? I’m asking because I’m certain it’ll take me a lot longer to get presentable than you, and six o’clock might not give me enough time.”

“Here.”

“Perfect. Then six works.”

He started to leave again.

“Say, I just realized. You know my last name. We’ve broken bread together, thank you again. We’ll be sleeping under the same roof. Different floors, of course. Don’t you think I’m entitled to ...?”

“Collins,” he answered from the doorway.

“Daniel Collins. I like how that sounds.” She paused. “You said there was no lady of the house. Since you haven’t told me your story, was there ever a Mrs. Collins?”

The pained expression she earlier thought she’d only imagined spread across his face.

“There was.”

“Did she leave you?” She scolded herself silently before saying, “Daniel, I’m truly sorry. Sometimes I just can’t help myself. I ...”

“Yes,” he answered softly. Then he was gone, Blue trailing behind.

When she could no longer hear them, Paula sat at the top of the stairs, hugged her knees, and felt a flood of emotions come over her as a few tears trickled down her cheeks. Happy to have met a handsome stranger, unhappy to have spoken without thinking. Sad for him without knowing why. Wondering what lay ahead in the few days before she left Three Oaks, Colorado at the end of the week.

Downstairs, Daniel’s body stretched out fully clothed on top of a bed he made every morning, but Paula’s question had sent his mind to another place and time.

Three



1996, Nineteen months earlier
Washington, D.C.

What do you get your wife for her birthday when you both know it will be her last?

The question tumbled into Daniel Collins' thoughts as the room filled with early morning sunlight through a bedroom window framed by heavy white curtains pulled-back and tied in place. More acutely aware of clocks and the calendar than at any time in his life, he knew without looking thirty minutes had passed as he sat in silence before Mallory opened her amber eyes and turned toward where she knew he'd be. He rose unsteadily from his chair on legs stiffened from lack of movement and leaned across the edge of the bed. She often

assured him their first kiss would be the highlight of her days, and he lingered to gently lift strands of chemo-ravaged hair away from the eyelashes ensnaring them.

Their morning routine before the arrival of the daytime hospice caregiver drew him to the medicine bottles lined up on the top of the dresser like so many toy soldiers waiting to be called into battle. He counted out the first of the day's assemblage and helped her steady the water glass she raised to her lips. He returned to the well-worn leather easy chair, a legacy from his bachelor days he'd moved from the study to wedge between her bed and the wall. A tight fit, but they both craved the closeness. Daniel would have slept there if Mallory hadn't insisted otherwise. She thought he was sleeping comfortably in their master suite upstairs at night, and none of the overnight hospice attendants ever betrayed his secret. He was on a cot a few steps down the hallway, close enough to hear her labored breathing until one of her toy soldiers relaxed her into a mercifully peaceful sleep. Then, and only then, could he drift off.

Not that long ago, their life together stretched out before them like a Wyoming highway with no curves, no speed limit, no end in sight. An oncologist's words had sent them careening down an unpaved country road, one that would too quickly narrow from months to weeks to one with but a handful of miles remaining. That first night, when they had no more tears to shed and with Mallory finally asleep, Daniel slipped away from their bed to make his way down the winding stairway of their Georgetown townhouse. Outside, cloaked in nighttime darkness away from the glow of streetlights, he paced back and forth on the cobblestone sidewalk. Hidden from prying eyes, he looked up at the sky and cried out, "I can't live without her. She believes in You. If You must take one of us, let it be me. Let it be me."

Disease and drugs caused Mallory to sleep much of the time. During his solitary daylight hours while the caregiver was there, she

insisted he write his poetry, though the effort was half-hearted, at best. She also encouraged him to read lawyer novels by Grisham and Turow, a luxury he lacked the time to indulge before. He hated what made it possible now, but welcomed the brief respite of getting lost in the fictional lives of others, while country music played in the background. But his thoughts always returned to Mallory and their life together.

Daniel's parents' tragic deaths in 1973 brought him from a Pacific Northwest farm to live with his grandparents in Arlington, Virginia. His first day at school he met Mallory, hands-down the prettiest and most popular girl in their sixth-grade class at Walter Reed Elementary. Their lockers next to each other and their paths walking to and from school intersected, each school day beginning and ending with them together. His shyness no match for her persistence as she eased his rural-to-urban assimilation among their ten-year-old classmates.

Mallory had her many girlfriends and their shared interests; Daniel a few pals and their activities, especially sports. Given their ages, the unique friendship caused envy among the girls and puzzlement among the boys. She asked him to call her Mel when they were alone together. It was one of the many nicknames for Mallory, and she denied this familiarity to anyone else, creating a special bond between them. Being together almost every day continued through high school until college separated them, Daniel to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and Mallory to Western Kentucky University, her parents' alma mater, in Bowling Green. If Hollywood ever wanted a script for *Harry and Sally – The Early Years*, screen writers could look to the true story of Danny and Mel.

While apart, they exchanged letters and talked by phone, and spent time together back home in Arlington during school breaks and holidays. They attended each other's graduations but lost contact in a pre-internet world when Mallory left on an extended church mission abroad and Daniel entered law school. Mallory's world was faith-

centered; without her, Daniel stopped attending church. He only went because she wanted him to, and he wanted to be with her.

Daniel's grandparents deeded him their North Nineteenth Street home long before their deaths within months of each other in their second year in assisted living. The modest, two-story, mid-century red brick residence was a short walk through the familiar Walter Reed schoolyard to the Westover shopping center where he often caught the downtown bus rather than self-navigate the insanity of weekday D.C. commuter traffic.

One crisp autumn Saturday afternoon as the decade of the eighties came to an end, wearing jeans and a cardigan sweater, Daniel sat outside Common Grounds, his favorite Westover coffee shop. At a nearby table, shaded by an umbrella from the sun's warming rays, a woman looking to be about his age wearing a headset sat down, closed her eyes, and rocked back and forth as she sang a song popular during his senior year in high school. He couldn't believe his eyes, but tempted as he was, didn't interrupt. When the song ended, she blinked and noticed him staring. She removed the earphones, swept back her thick brunette hair and called across an empty table and chairs separating them.

"Love that song. Hope I didn't ruin it for you."

He remained silent for dramatic effect before taking off his UVA college baseball cap with one hand and dark aviator sunglasses with the other.

"Danny? Is that you?" she blurted out.

"It is."

Mallory stumbled as she rushed to his table. After a long embrace, she stepped back. "Did you recognize me?"

"Of course. The moment you sat down."

"How embarrassing! Why didn't you say something?"

"Didn't wanna interrupt. And you were doing such a good job entertaining everyone."

When she looked around, patrons at other tables clapped appreciatively.

“Shame on you.” A punch to his arm. “Now I’m *really* embarrassed.”

“Shouldn’t be. You sing beautifully. Just as you did back in high school.”

“You remembered?”

“How could I forget?” He stared at her for a moment. “Join me?”

“Like you could stop me.” He pulled back the chair next to his at a table without an umbrella. He helped her peel off a multi-colored wool jacket, and as she draped it across the back of the chair, she asked, “Hey, speaking of music, as I recall, you liked country when absolutely no one else did. Correct?”

“Ahead of the times, it turns out. But I’ve lived long enough for it to get some of the respect it deserves from my elitist friends. And since we’re recalling things correctly, you were in that ‘absolutely no one else’ group.”

“Was I?”

“You were.”

“Did you ever try to change my mind?”

“I did. When you said it all sounded like bad garage band music with banjos and fiddles, I gave up.”

Her eyebrows arched. “I said *that*?”

“Uh, huh.”

“Kinda harsh, I admit. Hearing it now. And you remembered for a long time.” She rested her clasped hands on the table. “Too late for an apology?”

“Forget it. I’m sure back then I didn’t like everything you did.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“Not true. Let me think.” He rubbed his chin theatrically, then moved his hand away and lifted his index finger. “How ‘bout this one? You never got me to ballroom dancing class.”

“That’s right! But I did try, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“Okay, fair enough. Now, I don’t mean for this to sound like a character flaw. Do you still like country music?”

“I do. Not the new stuff so much.”

“What then?”

“The old guys. The country legends. As others have said, I’d pay good money to hear Ray Price sing the Nashville phone book. And then there’s Elvis. Not country. But he’s my guy.”

Only half-listening, Mallory was trying to fully grasp how her life had changed in an instant. She looked at the man sitting across from her as if she’d won the lottery. In a way, they both had.

“Danny, I have to say, you look fantastic!” She waited a few long moments. “Um, that was your invitation to tell me I do, too.”

“Not the word I was searching for.”

“Well ...”

“Hmm. At Walter Reed, I’d have said cute. High school -- attractive. Definitely, attractive.”

“Smooth. And college?”

“The word that comes to mind ... is beautiful.”

“Even smoother. And now?”

“Still searching.” In truth, he was. Their surprise meeting, and being with her again, impacted him as nothing else he could recall. “As a placeholder, how about ... beyond beautiful?”

“You always did say the nicest things, Daniel Colin Collins.”

Mallory was the only person in school who knew his middle name, the fruit of his mother’s offbeat sense of humor when her husband insisted their only child become a fourth-generation Daniel.

“Say, are you still writing poetry?”

“Now it’s you who remembered.”

“How could I forget.” She smiled as she repeated his earlier line.

“And the answer is yes. I’m still writing. Some. Not much. My time is all pretty much taken up with work.”

“Whatta ya do?”

“I ...”

“Oh, I remember! You went to law school. Is that it? Being Perry Mason and never losing a case?”

“Almost as good. The other side does prevail from time to time. Not often.”

“That being the case, I’ll wait, not patiently, while my Perry Mason searches for what lies *beyond beautiful*.”

Despite stellar grades and the law review, Daniel accepted a low-paying public defender job the month after graduation to give him trial experience he didn’t think a white shoe law firm would provide a newly minted associate. He wasn’t surprised his clients numbered among the worst of the worst on the lower rungs of D.C. society, and after three years of carrying the workload of at least two lesser lawyers, he felt he’d put in his time. Someone else could take a turn behind the battered, government-issued wooden desk in a cramped office with erratic heating and cooling he shared with other overworked and equally disheartened attorneys.

The long hours at low wages ultimately paid dividends as his courtroom prowess gained him notoriety, and when word spread he intended to make a change, several prestigious firms aggressively pursued him. He met with all of them, but at the end of the day, his loner bent prevailed and he went out on his own. A risky decision in a town with more lawyers than trees, but fate smiled favorably. After only a few years, he rang the success bell loudly as the all-important D.C. link to a cadre of Southern trial lawyers who’d launched the class-action takedown of big tobacco companies.

The “link” came about thanks to his grandfather’s impeccable reputation and connections, both of which extended after his death well beyond D.C.’s rectangular borders, and Daniel’s performance in his lengthy interviews sealed the deal. When tobacco companies settled the lawsuits, his share of the court-awarded legal fees assured his financial independence for several lifetimes. Unless fate intervened.

“Mel, where are you living now?” Daniel asked, returning to their table with coffee for both of them.

“In the District. Renting a townhouse at Hillandale across from Georgetown University. If I had the money, I’d buy it. Doubt I ever will, Congressional staff pay being what it is.”

“I know the place. It’s real nice. Been to parties there a few times.”

“Speaking of pay,” she said, smiling and pointing to his expensive leather shoes. “Doesn’t lawyering earn you enough to afford socks?”

“Don’t wear them on weekends. Say, what brings you out this way today?”

“The Westover used book store. Not my first time. Surprised it’s taken this long for us to run into each other. And you? Where do you live?”

“Same house you’d remember. Stayed put after my grandparents died. I like having some distance from the downtown lunacy. Helps keep me sane. Or at least I think it does. And it keeps memories alive.”

Her eyes pulled his into them. “Am I one of those memories?”

His pulse quickened.

“You are. Happens each time I look out a window and see the swing in the backyard.”

“One of *my* favorite memories! We made a lot of plans in that swing, didn’t we? Dreamed a lot of dreams.”

“We did. And I remember you telling me dreams never come true for those who never dream.”

“I said that?” she asked.

“You did.”

“Well, I continue to marvel at your memory. Must’ve been repeating something I read or heard someone else say. I’m not that articulate.”

“I beg to differ.”

“That’s very kind. Anyway, doesn’t matter. But now I have to ask. Are your dreams coming true?”

“Still working on ‘em, I guess. You?”

A warm feeling came over her. “One came true not too long ago.”

“Something you can share?”

“Happily. Being with you again. And Danny, beyond beautiful is just fine. I don’t deserve it, but I’m not going to let you take it back, either.”

“Not a chance.” He let a few moments pass. “Mel, do you have to be anywhere in the next hour or so?”

“I don’t. Why? What’ve you got in mind?”

“Our swing beckons,” he said, reaching for her hand.

Instead of an hour or so, from that day on they were inseparable. The rest of the world knew him as Daniel, but to her, he would always be Danny. She’d never made the change everyone else did to calling him Dan when they entered high school.

She was disappointed but unconcerned when she learned he’d stopped going to church, confident it wouldn’t be long before he was at her side on Sunday mornings at the Washington National Cathedral a short distance from her Hillandale townhouse. It only took a few weeks, and as the music began, Mallory said a silent prayer of thanks that the man she’d never stopped loving was worshipping beside her. He wore a suit and tie, and she smiled when she first noticed bare ankles between the cuffs of his trousers and his expensive leather

shoes. She found his explanation entirely sensible, as would another woman decades later.

Walking out an hour or so later, Daniel squeezed her hand to slow her as they approached a large object inlaid in the marble floor.

“Never seen one like that. What is it?”

“A Jerusalem Cross. It’s the cathedral’s emblem. Actually, as you can see, five crosses.”

“What’s the meaning behind it?”

She turned her program to the back page. He read that the five intersecting crosses symbolized each of the wounds Christ suffered at His crucifixion, with the four smaller crosses also symbolizing the spread of Christianity from its Holy Land origins to the four corners of the earth.

He folded his program and put it in his jacket pocket. The next day, Daniel spent his lunch hour with a specialty jeweler down the street from his office.

Mallory’s parents had known Daniel since he was ten, yet despite all his success and all his attributes, they couldn’t bring themselves to embrace him as a suitable husband for their daughter. Mallory knew the reason without them telling her, though they did anyway -- often, and at length. His ambivalence toward organized religion and how that might impact the lives of their future grandchildren. She asked Daniel not to be drawn into arguments, an agreement that gave rise to an uncomfortable truce between the two generations on the rare occasions they were together.

Despite misgivings about Daniel, Mallory’s mother accepted the inevitable and insisted on a big church wedding for her only child. She and Mallory’s father chose not to be among a dozen or so close friends who attended the civil ceremony and reception Mallory wanted the summer after the young couple found each other again at a sidewalk

coffee shop. It would be a setting that would repeat itself for Daniel in another city decades later.

Daniel often told Mallory he regretted causing estrangement from her parents, especially since he had no family of his own. Each time he did, she assured him everything would heal ... in time.

Mallory assumed it was her fiancés' heavy workload keeping him at the office late two nights a week in the months leading up to their wedding, and she never gave a second thought to it always being Tuesday and Thursday nights. Those evenings, before he arrived back at Hillandale where they were living together, Daniel was taking ballroom dancing lessons to surprise her the first night of their honeymoon at a hotel in Hawaii when he reached for her hand and led her to the nightclub's dance floor.

On the island of Kauai, a tropical breeze lifted Mallory's hair from her shoulders as they slow-danced on sunbaked sand at sunset the day before they had to leave paradise and return home.

"Someday," he said, pulling her to him even tighter, "we'll leave that zoo and move to where this all began."

"Back across the river to Arlington? Why?"

"No. Not at all. To Three Oaks."

"Ah, you're thinking of your down-on-one-knee, Rocky Mountain proposal during our hiking trip."

"I am."

"Romantic, yes. But my darling Danny, that's not where this all began."

"It's not?"

"You and I began that morning I showed you how to open your locker at school. Remember?"

"I do. I guess you're right. If you hadn't, there might not be a you and me now."

“There most certainly would,” she said, confidently.

“Why are you so certain?”

“I’d have found a way.”

“Why?”

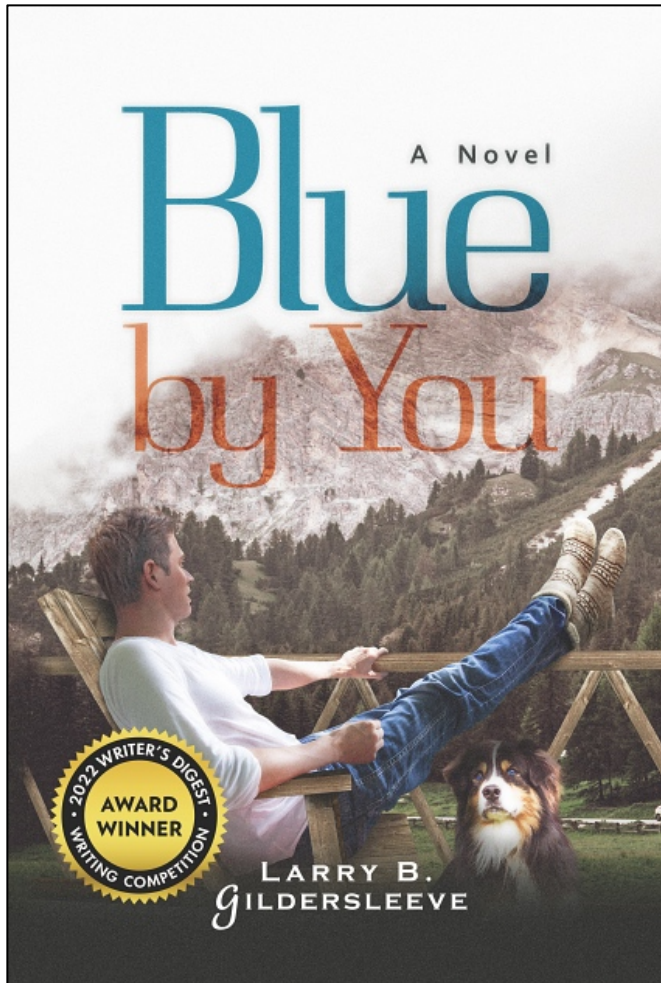
“Even sixth-graders can fall in love.” Mallory stopped their gentle swaying, reached her hands to each side of his head, drew him to her and kissed him passionately. “I did.”

As they had done every evening since their arrival, they held hands and watched the sun slip below the Pacific horizon. In the gathering darkness, Daniel wrapped his arm around Mallory’s waist as they slowly walked back toward their oceanfront hotel.

Mallory fingered the handcrafted, eighteen-karat gold Jerusalem Cross dangling on a gold chain around her neck, a Valentine’s Day gift, and asked, “Danny, when did you know you were in love with me?”

“It wasn’t the sixth grade. But honestly, I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t. And I don’t want to.” He wrapped his arms around her. “I let you get away once. Won’t ever let it happen again.”

“Good to know. And now, Danny Boy, we have all the time in the world.”



Daniel believed there were no do-overs in life. No second chances masquerading as firsts. Fate would prove him wrong when he fell in love with Paula twice, decades and a thousand miles apart, yet he was a total stranger to her both times.

Blue by You

By Larry B. Gildersleeve

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