

A nine-year-old girl grieves the devastating loss of her brother. Three years later, she visits her father and his new family and disappears. Search teams comb nearby mountains, unaware she is struggling on a life-threatening journey.

Chasing the Blue Boat

By Connie Kallback

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**CHASING
THE
BLUE BOAT**

CONNIE KALLBACK

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Chapter 1

For as long as Dana could remember, Luke turned every day into a challenge, especially in summer when they had more time to roam free. Swinging from a piece of hemp rope suspended from a branch. Scaling picket fences. Climbing the stone wall around a sinister house for a glimpse of a bandit hideout. He teased her to chase him, swooping through the back yard to raid Mom's garden where they ripped carrots from the earth, wiped the dirt off on their pants and ate them whole. Then they'd lie on their backs on the grass, imagining their futures in the clouds. She wished her mind spiraled the way his did.

School ended, yielding to another round of adventures. Her anticipation grew when Luke hinted at something big that had to be kept secret from Mom. She listened while he explained every detail of the plan.

"Got it?" He barked as though he were commanding a whole platoon instead of one nine-year-old girl.

She nodded, narrowing her eyes.

"When we get there, I'll go first."

Nothing new about that. Being two years older gave him the right to set the rules.

He laid out the next step. "You tell Mom instead of me. She always believes you."

Like a soldier assigned to scouting duty, she hopped from the front porch, pushed through the lilac bushes and squinted through slats of the fence at their mother hanging laundry. "We're off to the library." The words sailed through her cupped hands.

Mom turned to the fence, took a clothespin from her mouth and swept her chestnut hair aside. "Why? School's out now."

Dana faltered, a sign to her brother to take over.

"Getting a jump on summer reading." He grinned.

Mom waved a thumbs-up, "be safe" signal in their family and bent to her basket. The clothes hung limp on the line until a breeze released invisible beings inside to dance.

They sprinted three blocks to the Carnegie Library, the centerpiece of Fenton, New York. She paused at the base of the grand stairway and lifted her face upward, hoping to conquer it and the ledge beyond by judging the distance from the ground. To give herself time to build some courage, she dallied a few steps away by the cornerstone. The year 1895, chiseled deep into the stone, prompted her to trace the incised numbers with a finger. She hoped the action could take her back to any time before today. She could stay in the same place and slide backward through time to relive last summer's big library celebration.

The whole Foster family—Dana, Luke and their parents, Jesse and Rachael—reveled in a festival attracting a good part of the town's population to the expansive grounds. A banner proclaimed in huge red letters, "75 Years of Reading: 1894–1969." From makeshift booths dotting the grass, people bought hot dogs and soft drinks while a three-legged race, an egg toss and other contests offered trinkets to the winners. Dana pulled a number from a goldfish bowl and won a tiny aluminum horseshoe with the imprint, "Good Luck," wrapped around a penny. Even though Mom disapproved of wishing on objects, Dana didn't see any harm in keeping it. She brought it with her everywhere, especially on this risky trip to the library. Reaching into her pocket, she gave it an extra rub.

The bottom of the wide stairway led to an open-air foyer where two massive columns announced the entrance. She and Luke took the stairs at the nonchalant pace of visitors checking out books.

Instead of heading for one of the heavy doors at the top, Luke sneaked behind a column and peered from behind it, smirking like Peter Pan. Waist-high sidewalls, wide as picnic benches, flanked the foyer. He straddled the one beside him. Bending his chest toward the surface, hands gripping both sides, he jockeyed his hips sideways and dropped his feet to the outside edge. In another diagonal move that took mere seconds, he stretched cat-like across the diagonal space to the building's adjoining ledge. It rimmed the outside of the library to form a shelf, projecting outward enough for child-sized shoes to fit with plenty of room.

Heart thumping, she followed his every move. The ground lay twenty feet below. If she slipped, the grass would cushion her fall, even

though it wasn't as soft as her mattress at home. She didn't dare look down again. The first glance made her stomach want to bring up her lunch.

Luke sidestepped several yards in front of her, pressing his belly against the wall and straining his eyes toward the corner. He hesitated only once to swing his head back to her. "Let's go all the way around!"

She froze. The world around her stopped. No dog barked. No horn honked. Not one bird left a pattern on the horizon. To ensure a firm foothold before her first step, she leaned into the wall. Hugging its hard comfort gave courage to her outspread arms. She focused on the corner ahead and caught Luke's profile against the sky, his close-clipped hair colorless in the sun. His shadow on the stone left a permanent image in her mind.

Feeling the way with his feet, he negotiated the corner. On the other side, a series of towering windows framed a spacious office inside. He passed by the first set as Dana approached them.

Inside, a woman behind a desk raised her eyes to a pair of skinny knees. Jumping from her chair, she nearly tripped as she ran to the door.

"She saw me!" Dana's intended whisper became a hiss.

"Go back! Quick!" Luke reversed his steps. "Move!"

Forgetting their earlier caution, they flew around the dangerous corner to the sidewall and the top step in what seemed a second. Skimming the whole flight of stairs, they raced for home, feet barely touching the pavement.

Safe at their own block in the oldest neighborhood in the center of town, they slowed to an ambling pace to catch their breath. Branching maples created a quilt of shade on the sidewalk, giving relief to their all-out dash. Up ahead, their cottage-like home seemed out of place, squeezed on the corner mansion's side lot. Defying its small size, their house featured a columned veranda with a knee-high wall spanning the entire front and wrapping around one side like a vigilant serpent. The porch covered more square feet than the three bedrooms inside.

"What a bummer! We just got started." Luke jammed his hands into his pockets. "But wasn't it great?"

She bobbed her head. "We saw the whole town up there!" A large dose of enthusiasm ensured her role in his next wild idea.

“You know you’ll need a disguise to go to the library from now on, don’t you?” He slowed his pace to rip a sucker sprouting from a grooved tree trunk.

“Won’t Mom think we’re crazy masquerading when we want to check out a book?”

“No problem for me. I’ve been going by myself for years.”

His not-so-subtle reminder of being older stung, but at least he didn’t call her a baby this time.

A bird feather on the ground helped her resolve the disguise problem. “I know! I can wear my Sacagawea costume from the school play. I’ll wear the black braided wig and headband. With feathers.” A triumphant pirouette flung her hair in long honey waves across her eyes.

“Don’t be stupid.”

Fist on her hip, she countered him. “What if there’s a special program and Mom wants you there?”

“I’ll figure it out.” He snatched another twig from a tree between the walkway and curb and snapped it in two.

His action took little effort, like everything else he did. She’d practice it later by herself.

#

Their daring spirits flagged for a few days, but without school to keep them busy, they needed to test their limits. Luke hinted about the library again.

“What about costumes?” To give him time to think, Dana refastened a loose sandal strap.

“Aw, everyone’s forgotten.” His nose wrinkled, showing his teeth. He confessed to asking his best friend Teddy Olson, who lived a quick bike ride up the road, to join them. “His mom won’t let him. Crumb. Bet he didn’t even ask her. I think he’s scared.” He plucked a rock and kicked it ahead of him on the sidewalk. “He doesn’t recognize fun when he’s tripping over it. He’s chicken, isn’t he?”

“Uh huh. Not brave like us.” She marched beside him, straight shouldered.

“Nothing scares us. And we’re more careful than he’ll ever be.” He seized the rock and flung it across the empty space between two houses to punctuate his point. “There’s no way we’ll ever get hurt.” The stone flew into a distant tuft of weeds.

“We’d only fall on the grass.” Her sandals didn’t have rubber soles like her sneakers to grab the edge.

His eyes fixed on a far-away point.

What was he thinking? Did he want Teddy to be there in her place? Some thanks after her show of courage and pretending to enjoy it. She swept her eyes toward him without turning her head. “Do you think Mom knows?”

“Nah. She doesn’t need to.” He pointed at her, almost touching her nose. “And don’t you tell her.”

In the block before the library, they passed a small city park and its long rectangular pond, the pride of the grounds, stocked with plentiful goldfish. Luke cut across the manicured lawn. “Let’s go find that fat one. Remember its splotchy white marks and the streak by its mouth?”

“The freaky one?” She followed where his footsteps flattened the grass. He was doing it again—launching their next venture, but by the time she talked herself into it, he’d change his mind. Her ideas, when she suggested them, thinned in the air before reaching his ears.

Slabs of thick slate framed the pond, a foot and a half above the surrounding pavement. She crouched on the edge and poked her head out over the water to see moss speckling the bottom and sides. Fish ventured from beneath lily pads. The curious ones kissed the water as they waited for crumbs. “Too bad we didn’t save some crust from our sandwiches.”

Luke plunged his hand in and wiggled his fingers to tease the fish. Quickly tiring of it, he arched his back, making himself tall to ease an imaginary kink. “Too hot out here today.” Pretending to lose his balance, he fell against her into the pond. Legs and arms flailing, they splashed hard and came up sputtering. In hip deep water, they soaked every hair on their heads.

Her knees scraped the slate as she climbed out. When she wrung out the wadded hem of her shirt, water formed a puddle on the tiles. “The water felt so good. I wish we could stay and swim.”

“Not a good idea.” He sat on the side and yanked off his sneakers. “The groundskeeper threatened to report Teddy and me to the police if he catches us here again this summer.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“Didn’t need to. Nobody’s here now.” He tied the shoelaces together to throw the sneakers over his shoulder. “Helps them dry quicker.”

“I’m leaving my sandals on.” She refastened the strap, thankful it didn’t loosen in the pond.

“Wow! The cement is burning!” He bounced to the grass in his bare feet. “What’s wrong with kids living a little?”

They turned for home, dripping.

“What will we tell Mom?” A rivulet ran down her neck while she waited for him to choose an answer from his surplus of excuses.

“We can stay outside while our clothes dry. She’ll never know the difference.” Mom’s pottery craft and household chores liberated them to dawdle by the street. He counted on it. Making a quick change in gait, he flopped on a patch of grass in a comfortable sprawl.

She had a choice—follow his lead or go home drenched. She stretched out on her belly to accommodate his stalling tactic but wished for a towel.

He tossed his sneakers where the sun baked them while he acted on his sudden need to relax. Finding a three-inch stub of a branch, he held it between two fingers, then to his lips and blew invisible smoke.

“Will you smoke when you grow up?”

“Prob'ly. Dad does.”

Her eyes grew round. “He doesn’t!”

“I’ve seen him in action when he takes me with him to work.” The stick hung from the side of his mouth.

Wondering if it was true, she stopped talking. While he gloated about knowing something she didn’t, she poked out her jaw and blew a puff of breath upward to shoo a bug teasing her face. It persisted until she swatted it away. “But you’re not like Dad in other ways.”

“Such as?”

“He doesn’t have fun like you.”

“Aw, he’s a grownup. They don’t know how to enjoy life.” He crushed out his make-believe cigarette by the curb. “I’ll be different. I’m going to have fun till I die. You watch me.” He shot from the ground like a tightly wound spring.

She didn’t have his easy agility. He repeatedly coached her to turn cartwheels the way he did, making her practice the moves, but nothing worked. She couldn’t keep her legs as straight as clock arms.

Their clothes dried by the time they reached home, but not the sneakers.

Mom met them on the front porch. “Airing out your shoes, Luke?”

“Yep. Wanted to go barefoot. It’s summer, after all.”

“Luke Foster, it’s one thing to disobey me and another to lie to me. I have you on both counts.”

He opened his mouth, but for once, nothing came out.

“The town forbids swimming in the pond.” She stepped close enough to touch the wet canvas of his shoes. “Leave these on the stoop to finish drying. You’re confined to your room for the rest of the day. Except for supper.”

“You, too, Dana. I’m sure you weren’t the ringleader, but you don’t need to follow everything he does.” A slight pat directed her toward her bedroom. “I’ll call you to set the table.”

Dana hung around by the entrance to the hall, smarting at being punished for something Luke started.

He skulked through the kitchen to the back door as Mom’s voice followed him. “You’re supposed to be your sister’s protector, not the one who helps her get into trouble.”

He slowed but didn’t turn around. “She doesn’t need protection.”

“But she might at some point. What if someone picked on her?”

He pivoted. “No one bullies my sister. They’re afraid of what I’d do.”

Dana smiled to herself. Her quarantine might not be so bad after all.

Chapter 2

Her need for a friend hit Dana hard a few days after the dip in the pond. A call came from Teddy's family for Luke to join them on a boat ride.

“Can I go, Ma? Please?” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his knees bobbing like a dancing crane.

Mom paused from working on a long-necked vase. “You told Dad you’d mow the lawn today.”

“I know, I know. I’ll do it first thing tomorrow. I promise.” His whole body begged. “It might be weeks before they go again.”

“Oh, I guess another day won’t make a difference. Just this once.” She readied her brush. “Don’t forget.”

“I won’t, Ma. Thanks.”

Dana followed him outside as he hopped on his bike, stood on the pedals and rode from sight, his long legs pumping to a blur. She stared down the empty street, expecting to find a visible trail he’d left from taking the ride so often.

She wandered back into the house to Mom’s worktable. “I wish they’d asked me to go, too.”

“Maybe when you’re older.”

It wasn’t what she wanted to hear. The front door offered an outlet. Grass bent under her sandals as she shuffled to the sidewalk heading toward Teddy’s, opposite of the way to the library and goldfish pond. Teddy’s family might drive by, see her walking alone and ask her to join them.

Dragging herself past the church next door, she crossed the street to a vacant lot on the next block and stopped by a field of ragged foliage. Luke and Teddy let her tag along on the day they ripped out clods of wild grass growing in that empty lot. Swinging them around with soil and roots still attached, they adopted the role of David confronting Goliath, the house beyond the field. Hurling clumps thudded onto the roof. No window opened in the empty house.

“Want to try it, Dana?” Teddy passed her a tuft of grass as long as her arm. “Swing it like this.” His hand hung down, wheeled forward to

high above his head and back around in a smooth underhand throw. “Let it go when your hand comes in front of you about eye level.”

Her best effort landed in the weeds a few yards away.

Luke took over. “You have to release it when it’s high enough to sail in the air.” He demonstrated the move and made her practice before giving her another one.

Boys were born knowing how to do everything.

#

Before the Olson family moved nearby, Dana and Luke battled boredom together. They roamed from neighborhood yards to the overgrown woods behind the church, where they bent on hands and knees among tree roots to see people in the basement meeting room. Once Luke sneaked around to the small wooden flap in the main front door, lifted it and yelled, “Shave and a haircut!” She had to scurry away with him or get caught.

While he baited a fishhook with live worms, grasshoppers or crawdads, she hung around to watch. Bait too small to fit on the hook squished to nothing. He chased her with them, but she learned how to pretend she wasn’t afraid by ignoring him. No fun teasing a girl who didn’t scream and run away.

The pattern remained—Luke as actor and she as observer until this year when she joined him to keep Teddy from replacing her altogether. In some ways, she liked it better as the watcher.

One morning over a breakfast of oatmeal, his words got to her. “Crawdad guts.” He nudged his thumb downward at her bowl. “See? You can tell by the creamy white color.”

Cooked cereal, never her favorite, plunged to the bottom of her list. Mom would never make them eat crawdad guts, but the stuff in front of her was as lumpy and icky as the real thing. A ball of mush clogged her throat and refused to go down. She dipped her spoon in again, but as it poised in the air, she gagged.

Finishing his own bowl, Luke did a tantalizing jig of freedom in the doorway.

She dabbled in her bowl to make the mess appear half eaten. Her hand crept into her shorts pocket for the lucky penny.

Sudsy water foamed high in the sink where Mom was finishing the dishes. “Eat up, Dana. I want to put these away.”

“Luke said the oatmeal has crawdads in it.”

“Don’t be silly. You know he’s teasing.” Mom scrubbed smudges from the trim beside the pantry. She pulled the plug in the sink to let the water burp down the drain, then balanced the laundry basket on one hip and headed for the basement where the wash machine waited. A final message wafted over her shoulder. “That penny won’t help you.”

Since when did Mom have x-ray vision?

The untasted bowl of cereal sat on the table. Twenty minutes passed before Mom’s basket dropped to the floor, announcing her return. “Still here?”

“I can’t do it.” Dana clutched the edges of the seat.

“Oh for heaven’s sake! Go then.” Mom shooed her away.

Dana slid from the seat, hiding her smile. Her hand stayed far from her pocket.

In many times like that, Luke lured her into trouble while she was minding her own business. Another incident though, a blameless one from two years ago, crept most often into her mind.

Uncle Barn, short for Barnabus, arrived for a visit between Air Force assignments. He brought gifts, turn-of-the-century paper dolls for her and an intricately crafted blue sailboat for Luke that they hardly touched. They spent most of the day perching on Uncle Barn’s shoulders or commanding him as their sled dog while he towed them on a tarp across the lawn.

Mom cried when her brother left the next morning. His new assignment to a base out west might keep him away for months or years. In sympathy to her mood, rain fell through the morning, creating temporary creeks beside the curb on the way to storm drains at most corners.

To Dana it meant a chance to get acquainted with the paper dolls.

In early afternoon Luke found her on the bedroom floor, surrounded by paper scraps and recently cut shapes arranged in a semicircle, lying in flat outlines against the rug. He held up the boat in one hand like a prized trophy. “Hey, the storm’s over. Want to witness the maiden voyage?”

She followed him outside. The orphaned dolls didn't win a backward glance.

They skipped down the steps and across the lawn past the knotted oak in front and stopped by the sidewalk. Leaves overhead released their last sporadic drops into the fresh, moist air of a world cleaned by a hard rain. The smell tickling Dana's nose would link itself forever to the blue boat.

Runoff from the downpour flowed in deep, rippled patterns at the curb. Luke dropped to his knees to launch the boat into the current. It took off, upright on its first try, bearing the image of a full-scale vessel, its prow straight and proud, skimming uncharted waters.

They raced with the speed of Spartans to keep up. Captured by its unerring balance and agility, they became sailors aboard a craft on a fast-moving river. Paying no attention to their surroundings or the small river's increased momentum, they ran to the end of the block.

The boat plunged into a storm drain. Gone. Swallowed whole. The swiftness of it froze them in place.

Water continued to flush the opening, empty except for a messy wad of debris deep inside. Dana recalled in slow motion how it tipped in a magnificent arc in the curve of the waterfall, bearing its regal mast firm and erect until it vanished.

Recovering from stunned silence, Luke stood still while his eyes searched for a sign of the gift it stole from them. "I guess we have to say, 'Goodbye, little blue boat'."

Her first encounter with sudden loss left Dana sucking air in great gulps. And though they never spoke of the boat again, a festering sadness lingered. She couldn't forget the unswerving, sleek figure, sails pointing skyward all the way. Then lost. Its abrupt disappearance wouldn't leave her.

#

Luke wasn't home when Dana helped Mom set the table for dinner.

Dad arrived home from work as foreman at the Yardley Textile Mill. "To the lake again?" His eyebrows pinched together at Mom's news.

“You know how they enjoy the boat. It’s not every day.” Mom poured iced tea into frosted plastic glasses. “So few chances to go during the week when it’s not crowded. Teddy’s dad can’t always take the day off.” Her voice rose to disperse the dark cloud near the ceiling.

He hung his golf jacket in the closet and shoved the door shut. “Told him the lawn needed mowing. I wanted him to be aware and do it on his own. Show some initiative.” Fishing receipts from his pocket, he filed them in a slim drawer under the kitchen counter. “I keep thinking he’ll grow up and surprise me.”

Mom caught his glare. “At eleven, Jesse? You know the choice you’d make at his age.”

He rested his wrists on the table as he waited for dinner. “Didn’t have a choice out in the fields working for my old man. No time for boat rides.” His eyes slid to the door and back to his watch. “But I never missed a meal. Where is he?”

“I’m sure Barbara will be calling to ask if he can stay for supper or to say they stopped somewhere.” Hands in potholders, she lifted a steaming casserole from the oven.

After Dad gave the blessing, they ate, but no message came.

Mom used idle talk to quell her concern. “We turned over the leaf pile this afternoon where we’re going to plant more garden. Rich black soil should give us some nice vegetables.”

Dana cooperated in the distraction. “Found worms, too. They’re good for the garden, aren’t they, Dad?”

“So they say.” His face relaxed when he looked her way. He rolled his glass, tipped it and took a sip.

Mom balanced a sugar-mounded teaspoon for her tea. “How’s work?”

“Everything’s running fine there.” He spit out the final word for emphasis. Lifting his fork, he eyed it like a foreign object. “You let him go when you knew he had work to do.” He began eating his salad, scowling at the bowl.

Little remained of the man who bounded into the hospital room after Luke was born. Dana had heard the story more than once. Fearful at first to say he wanted a boy, he held out a tiny outfit with “Slugger” imprinted on the front, and the tiniest baseball cap Mom had ever seen.

Although Dana knew he may have dreamed then of Luke becoming a baseball star, she listened these days to his life-isn't-a-game message conveyed far too often. Worse than that, a series of changes causing turmoil at the mill followed him home. She wished for the days when he came home hiding a surprise chocolate in his pocket.

When the phone rang, Dad leaped up, but Mom already had it.

“The boat?” Her hand flew to her cheek. “Is he ...” A frantic nod. “We’ll be right there.”

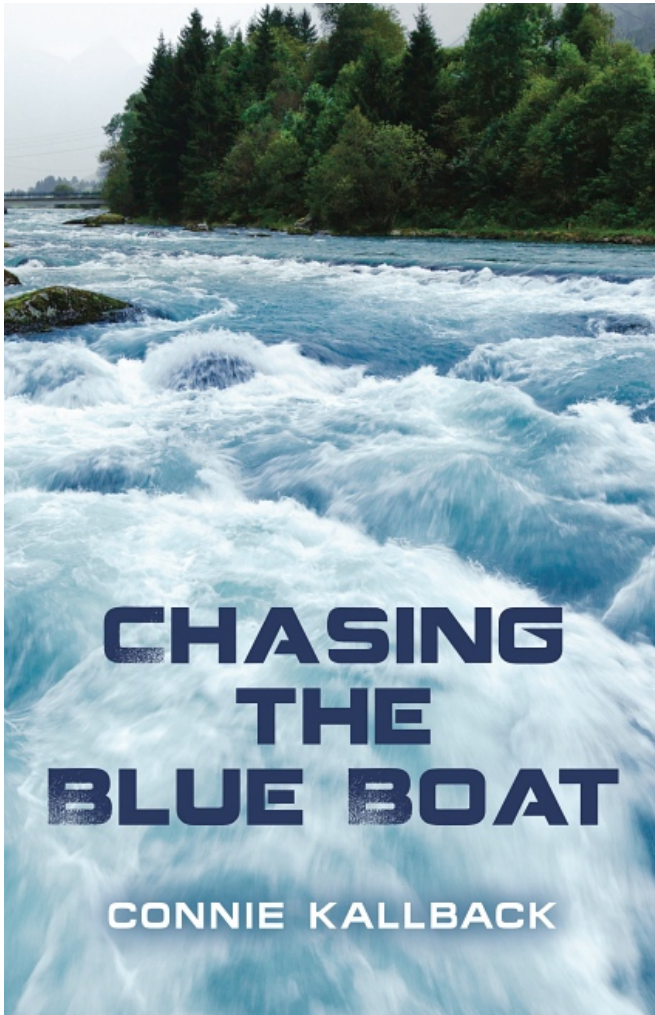
His chair scraped the floor, but the receiver already rested in its cradle.

“Accident at the lake. Have to get to the hospital.”

He grabbed his keys. “What about Luke?”

“Michael said to hurry.”

The oyster casserole, Luke's favorite, sat abandoned on the table.



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