

Blue by You

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The Girl on the Bench  
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# Blue by You

Larry B. Gildersleeve

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to Kathleen



**W**hen cancer claimed his young wife, a woman he'd known since they were children, Daniel fled the nation's capital for the remoteness of the Colorado mountains, leaving behind his law practice and everything else that held meaning. He convinced himself there were no do-overs in life, no second chances masquerading as firsts. Nothing left worth living for except his dog Blue.

Then a woman from Nashville swept into his mountain exile for seven extraordinary days and left him a changed man. Decades later and a thousand miles away, a chance encounter reunited them, yet Paula had no memory of him or their previous time together. Daniel fell in love with the same woman twice, a stranger to her both times. A new beginning, but would it end differently?

# 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.”