

ALSO BY LARRY B. GILDERSLEEVE

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*Follow Your Dreams*

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**Blue by You**



# Blue by You

an award-winning novel

LARRY B. *G*ILDERSLEEVE

*Blue by You*

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Editors: Deborah Froese, Dianna Graveman

Cover and Interior Design: Emma Elzinga

Indigo River Publishing

3 West Garden Street, Ste. 718

Pensacola, FL 32502

[www.indigoriverpublishing.com](http://www.indigoriverpublishing.com)

Ordering Information:

Quantity Sales: Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

Orders by US trade bookstores and wholesalers: Please contact the publisher at the address above.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024924004

ISBN: 978-1-964686-24-0 (paperback) 978-1-964686-25-7 (ebook)

978-1-964686-23-3 (hardcover)

A previous edition of this book was self-published in 2022.

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*To Kathleen*



# One

DECEMBER 4, 1998

TUESDAY, DAY ONE

“I’m lost.”

Daniel looked up to see a tall, slender woman approaching, flowing auburn hair bouncing off her shoulders. She strode confidently up the winding stone walkway toward his large, two-story log cabin home nestled up against a hillside crevice yet in plain view from the gravel road where the dust kicked up by her late-model European roadster began settling back down.

“Perhaps we can help.” He touched the head of a tail-wagging, pure-bred Australian Shepard at his side, rose from a sturdy wooden rocking chair, and stepped over scuffed, square-toed boots he’d removed at day’s end.

She waved him off and effortlessly climbed the six wide steps with no hand railing. Her fashionable stilts, better suited for cocktail parties in cosmopolitan Nashville than outdoors in nowhere Colorado, made her slightly taller than the man now standing near her on the front porch.

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“I’m Daniel. This is Blue.”

He heard a hint of vulnerability when she slowly answered, “Paula.” Her wristwatch slipped out from under her right coat sleeve when she firmly grasped his extended hand. “Paula Chandler. And what a beautiful dog.”

Tiny freckles dotted Paula’s flawless complexion, the rest of her hidden beneath a white turtleneck sweater, unbuttoned brown cashmere coat, and creased, cream-colored slacks.

Clad in well-worn jeans and white chambray shirt, Daniel had the healthy, clean-shaven look of a man who spent a lot of time outdoors.

“Now that you’ve found us, what were you really looking for?” he asked affably, gesturing toward a rocking chair matching his own.

She settled into it as gracefully as an actress performing on a Broadway stage and looked out at the distant snow-capped mountains. Her profile of delicate features against the canvas of a cloud-streaked azure-blue sky melted away his quiet confidence as he sat back down. 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 late 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.”

He thought her Southern accent equally captivating as her countenance.

“Manor House. Nice place.” He rested one foot on the porch railing and crossed his ankles. “Staying there?”

“I am. Made the reservation months ago. Can you tell me how to find it? I mean, I have no clue where I am right now, so how do I get there from here?”

“Here would be a good place to start.”

A smile pushed her cheeks upward. “Are you making fun of me,

Daniel? It is Daniel, right?"

He nodded.

"Wait! We've just met. Let me ask someone who should know." She looked at the dog lying between them, his head resting on his paws, his tail stilled by sleep. "Blue, is your friend here making fun of a damsel in distress, a sojourner at her wit's end in a foreign land? I had such a good first impression of him, but it appears I may have misjudged him. Please say it isn't so."

Blue snored faintly in reply. Paula dropped both hands to her lap and turned toward Daniel.

"Sojourner, eh?" he asked, holding her gaze.

Her turn to nod.

"Point taken." With a conciliatory tone, he added, "I apologize."

"No need. But I accept. Now, with that silliness behind us, let's begin again. If there's one thing I really love, it's new beginnings."

Her wink and the playfulness in her voice surfaced memories of another woman that chipped away at what remained of his laid-back demeanor. 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."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Sounds easy enough. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Wanting to prolong her departure, he dropped his feet to the porch deck and pointed again. "Don't see many cars like that around here. Mercedes?"

"Beemer." She cleared her throat. "Sorry. BMW."

Daniel settled back in his chair and cupped his hand to slowly stroke Blue's back. "She's a kindly lady, Blue, she truly is. Making citified jargon easy for simple country folk like us to understand."

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“Guess I deserved that,” she said.

His eyebrows went up.

“Okay. Maybe I *was* being just a tiny bit smug.” She unfolded her arms. “Without meaning to be, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Still, my turn to apologize. And it seems like I may have met my match.”

He shrugged good-naturedly.

“Right. Now then, before I go, one last question.” Her voice flat, her words deliberate. “Once I’m downtown on that one main street, which restaurant serves the best meals?”

“The Diner.”

“Does it have a name?”

“It does. The Diner.”

“A diner named ‘The Diner.’” Her left hand tapped the armrest as she rocked back and forth. “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.”

She pursed her lips. “Daniel, we’ve just met, and we both know you’re enjoying messing with me. We also know you’re good at it.”

“A bit out of practice, but yeah. Got me there.”

“And just so you know, I don’t mind. Not one bit. In fact, I find it rather charming. In a rural mountain setting kinda way.” His smile mirrored hers. “Being serious for just a moment, can you give me directions? You know, after I’ve arrived all the way downtown . . . from here.”

He was delighted their bantering kept her from leaving. “Sure. Across the street from Manor House. Once you’ve found one—”

“I’ve found the other. I think I can manage that. Well, I better get going. Got an early start this morning and skipped breakfast.

And lunch.”

Nearby poplar trees swayed in a sudden stiff breeze. Both watched as some of the remaining stubborn leaves twisted and swirled to the ground.

“I should go,” she said with a sigh. “Wouldn’t want to get caught up in rush hour traffic and find out they gave my room away.”

“Wouldn’t want that.”

He knew darkness would be upon them in less than an hour. With her departure imminent, he drew a blank trying to think of something, anything, to forestall it. As she pushed into the arms of her rocker, he stood and extended his hand. Blue scrambled to join them. After a few heartbeats they were still holding hands. Daniel noticed a slight flush in her cheeks before she squeezed his hand to free hers.

“Does Blue shake hands?” she asked.

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

“Clever.” She bent down to tenderly pat the head resting against her knee. “Did he get his name from his eyes?”

“He did.”

“Time for me to go.” She held out her hand again. “Thank you, Daniel. Thank you very much.”

The warmth of her small hand in his coursed through his body. She turned away to begin her descent. He wanted one more look. Just one more look before she left.

“Elvis.”

She stopped on the third step and turned. “Elvis?”

“Yeah. He said that a lot.”

“Said what?”

“Thank you. Followed by thank you very much.”

She looked at him quizzically. “He did?”

“He did. Elvis tribute singers do the same when their audience applauds.”

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She tilted her chin. "A wild guess. You're a fan."

"Guilty."

She giggled and almost lost her balance. He lurched toward her instinctively, but she quickly steadied herself. When she reached the ground, she performed a nimble, one-eighty pirouette on those tall, thin heels and took a step back.

"Thank you. For the directions, and the dining recommendation." She bowed slightly, kept her eyes fixed on his. "Thank you very much," she said with emphasis, then added, "Goodbye, Mr. Elvis Fan."

Spellbound, he knew in a few seconds she'd be gone. "Goodbye, damsel in distress."

Posh shoes slipped twice on rounded cobblestones as Paula made her way back to her car. She opened the driver's side and waved.

Daniel held his hand in the air until he heard the car door closing, then wrapped an arm around one of the rough-hewn posts supporting the porch roof and watched the Beemer with Tennessee plates disappear down the unpaved road. He regretted 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 returned to his chair.

Blue raised his head.

"Tall, too."

Blue's tail swept the floor twice as he lowered his head to rest it once again on his paws.

They both remained in place, Blue sleeping, Daniel ignoring the pristine scenery while consumed with the thoughts of a man hopelessly adrift. He'd been pretty much a loner all his life, save for his childhood 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 to the one place he knew would keep her memory alive. Until he could find a way to get on with life without her.

That was a year and a half ago, and he'd long since crossed over



from being alone with cherished memories to being desperately lonely, a loneliness that fed an ache deep inside as he looked down the empty road that had carried the sojourner away.

Daniel became aware of the setting sun and drop in temperature. He rose and leaned against the porch post again, wondering 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 rearview mirror until it disappeared beneath a rise in the road. Her husband had urged her to fly rather than drive, but she'd told him she needed the added windshield time away from her job. To reflect. To clear her mind. To pray. What she truly sought was something to guide her next right step in a childless, loveless marriage that had, in her mind, reached a tipping point.

She 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 entrance to Manor House and turned off the ignition. She sat for several minutes, staring absently toward the white picket fence encircling her destination as her thoughts wandered.

*What are the odds that somehow, in some mysterious way, I've been tipped in that stranger's direction?*

She stepped out of her car and shook her head, hoping it might dislodge thoughts of a man who'd made her feel as if they'd known each other for years instead of moments. The only thing dislodged were her keys. They slipped from her fingers and clattered onto the pavement. She bent down, snatched up the key ring, fumbled, and it fell again.

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“Well, there’s my sign,” she muttered.

She picked up her keys and dropped them in her purse with a flourish to dramatize an end to her delusion.



A curtain of darkness matching Daniel’s mood had descended outside the window as he prepared his dinner and Blue’s in a kitchen any gourmet chef would praise. After arriving from DC, he’d begun a self-guided culinary journey he hoped would both help pass the time and heal the hurt. The enticing aromas wafting through the air bore witness to his flourishing skills.

Country music, a staple in his life as long as he could remember, filled the house. He heard a knock on the door between the refrain and the chorus of one of his favorite songs. When he opened it, a familiar face looked back at him, her beauty undiminished by dim porch light and screen-door mesh.

“Hi. Remember me?”

“I do. Paula.”

After a few seconds of them staring at each other she asked, “May I come in?”

Recovering, he stammered, “Of course. Yes. Please.”

She pulled open the screen door. Her beguiling presence and the sound of her voice lifted his cloak of gloom as quickly as the imposing chandelier illuminated the living room when he flipped the wall switch just inside the door.

“This is unexpected.”

“You’re telling me! This has *not* been my day. I mean, apart from meeting you, that is. And Blue.”

“I think I can speak for both of us when I say we feel the same way.”

Blue trotted in from the kitchen, nose twitching, and made straight for Paula. She knelt to pet him.

“You can’t be lost,” Daniel said, closing the door. “We took care of that, didn’t 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? A woman named Marlene was nice about it . . .”

Marlene McKenzie, the childless widow who’d owned Manor House as long as anyone could remember. A casual acquaintance Daniel ran into from time to time at The Diner.

“. . . and I tried to be nice, too. But I’m afraid I became a little unpleasant with her. Okay, maybe a lot unpleasant. 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, out by the interstate. I don’t call that reasonable, do you?”

“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.” She bit her lip.

“With another hotel, you’d be that much closer to wherever you’re going tomorrow.”

“True. If I were going somewhere else tomorrow. Believe it or not, I came all the way out here on purpose. To attend a writer’s seminar. Three days. At the Manor House. A friend of mine is one of the

instructors, but her room only had a single bed so we couldn't share. Anyway, 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."

He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

"Since you're the only person I've met besides that woman, 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 late afternoon, and I can be on my way home, getting at least as far as one of those hotels you both mentioned."

Paula paused and took a breath as Daniel marveled at the number of words she'd streamed into a single sentence.

"I decided to drive back out here to ask 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 of course I didn't have your number. So, there you go. And 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."

Frustration clouded the face of the alluring woman standing little more than an arm's length away.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Oh, I am! That's another thing. I forgot all about eating at that place you told me. Got myself all tangled up and sideways thinking about somewhere I could stay the night. 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.”

Almost eighteen months of self-imposed exile from most of the rest of the world left Daniel in unfamiliar territory. Awed and intimidated by her appearance, he'd been slightly more at ease sitting with her on the porch in the great outdoors that afternoon than standing so near to her inside a few hours later. He felt closed in somehow, but to his surprise, 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 and loosely clasped them behind his back.

“Oh, well,” she continued, “since I know the way, I'll go back to town before starvation sets in and I fade away to nothing. Then I'll find my way out to the interstate and a different hotel. Now, about food.” Paula narrowed her eyes. “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?” She 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?” she asked.

“No offense taken. In case you're wondering.”

His smile and words, intended to convey humor, were instead met with a chagrined look.

“Oh. Sorry.” She averted her eyes. “Again.”

Daniel spoke his next words with the disarming ease of the skilled trial attorney he'd been in his former life. “Would you like to join us for dinner?”

“Us?” Her eyes widened. “Us? Is there a lady of the house?”

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A flicker of pain crossed Daniel's brow before he shook his head.

"Just Blue and me. You'll be a welcome third."

"That's very kind, and I accept. Gratefully. What a relief. And to 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 toward the wonderful smells. Aware her host still wasn't wearing shoes, she stepped out of hers and set them next to his boots by the door.

With Blue at her side, Paula headed across the highly polished hardwood floors toward the kitchen. Without turning around, she said, "I love country music . . . in case you're wondering."

*Clever*, he thought, as he carefully hung her coat in the hall closet. *And quick. Might've been a worthy courtroom adversary.*

When they entered the kitchen, Paula studied an array of copper pans and skillets suspended from a rack above a long center island. She pulled back one of four hand-crafted wooden stools, two on each side, and sat down.

"Excellent choice," Daniel said, his hand on the refrigerator door. "Chardonnay?"

"Yes, wine would be wonderful. Thank you. And what did you mean 'excellent choice'? All I've done is sit down. Nothing special about that. Or is there?"

"You chose the stool on the end."

"And?"

"Perfect for a left-handed diner."

She glanced at her left arm as he opened the wine.

"And you know I'm left-handed how? Are you gifted with clairvoyance?"

"The way you wear your watch."

She looked at her other arm.

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."

He poured a glass for each of them.

"Actually, that's not true. I never went to finishing school. I was just turning a phrase. Making conversation."

His senses heightened, he noticed manicured fingernails in one of a hundred shades of pink and heard the unique ringing sound of expensive crystal when their wine glasses touched.

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

Daniel turned and stood over the impressive gas range.

"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."

He set cinnamon-colored stoneware plates on the center island and took the stool across from her. 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.

She sipped the wine. "This is excellent. What is it?"

"Meiomi." He turned the bottle's label toward her. "California."

"May-oh-me," she repeated slowly in a refined Southern drawl.

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“And this is all so amazing! 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 become lunch the next day, sometimes shared with Blue. And I wasn’t expecting you. Why would I?”

Scarlet crept over Paula’s fair complexion.

“What part of the South do ya’ll call back home?” he hurriedly asked, riding to her rescue as he topped off her wine.

“Cute. Real cute.” The coloring on her neck faded. “Did my accent give me away? Well, of course it did. When did you notice?”

“Might have been when you said, ‘I’m lost.’”

“Really? That quickly?”

“Maybe not. Could’ve been later when I heard “river” with an *ah* at the end. Or when you stretched wine into two syllables a minute ago. Or when—”

“Are ya makin’ fun a me agin, Dan-yul?” she asked with twinkling eyes.

“Not at all. The only thing more charming than your accent is—”

“Is what?” She leaned forward expectantly. “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 Daniel hadn’t dined on seriously for a long time. A waitress months ago? Flirtation, yes. Serious, no.

“This was all so delicious. Thank you.” Her meal mostly eaten, Paula placed 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, and looked across at Daniel. “Now, if I may, I’d like to get to know the chef. 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.”

Paula’s 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?”

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?"

The third glass of wine contributed to her candor as 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 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 learned she didn't pose a threat. Homecoming queen and Miss Anything would have been hers for

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the taking, but her domineering mother wouldn't allow her middle daughter any such recognition. 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 wanted to be a cheerleader, but Mother nixed that in a nanosecond."

His first question was one Paula knew he could answer himself.

"Why?"

"The uniform, silly. 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 after Paula bounced it off Daniel's forehead. Blue sniffed with disinterest and moved to lay beside Paula's stool as Daniel retrieved the errant item.

She looked at the dog sprawled across the floor. "Have I made a new friend?"

"It appears so."

He began clearing the center island space between them. She shook her head when he offered coffee and watched as he placed the dishes and flatware in the sink before sitting back down.

"Please continue."

She told him her parents owned a small grocery store that consumed most of her father's waking hours. When he was home, he kept to himself, deferring to his wife. Paula always 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. And he remembered my name when he opened the door.*

“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 steeped his hands together in silent 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.”

Daniel lifted the bottle of Meiomi. “Where’d you see yourself going after graduation?”

“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 one day publish my writing.”

“How long were you in New York?”

She looked away with a sense of melancholy, 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 really *are* clairvoyant.”

“Two things.”

“And they are?”

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

“And the other?”

Daniel rested his elbow on the island, held up his left hand, palm toward her, and rubbed his thumb underneath his ring finger. “Ring imprint. Tan line.”

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

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

“One thing the air here also does for sure,” she continued defensively, “is make my skin dry. Took my rings off to put on hand lotion. That’s all. They’re in my purse.”

She looked at her watch while stifling a yawn.

“Tired?”

“More than,” she answered, with uncharacteristic brevity. 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, I guess you could call it.”

“Sure it was me and not Blue?” he asked, stepping off his stool. “He’s been known to have that effect on women in town.”

Blue shook himself as he stood and looked first at his human before turning toward their dinner guest.

“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 odd 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 leaned against the kitchen doorway and crossed his arms. “Paula, you said 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 also 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. It’s gotten so late, and I’d hate to drive that hour and find there aren’t any hotel rooms left. 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 rolled her blue-green eyes as she slid off her stool. “I’ll say this for you. 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 nearby for me to go. Okay, I’ll just drive back to town and sleep in my car in front of Manor House. But if it’s not too much trouble, 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?”

Daniel looked up to a clock on the wall and then down to where Blue was standing before his eyes found hers again.

“If you want,” he replied. “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. But that shouldn’t matter, should it?”

*It’s not just his words, few as they may be, Paula thought, it’s his non-threatening demeanor. I barely know him, yet I feel so comfortable. And at the same time, I feel conflicted in so many ways. My head knows right from wrong. Not so sure about my heart.*

“Rescued first from hunger and now homelessness. I accept. Gladly. And I do apologize for interrupting you. It’s a shortcoming of mine that needs more work. Along with my impatience and overreacting at times. And probably some other things.”

Blue led them out of the kitchen.

“No worries. By the way, we bunk down the hall there,” Daniel said, his back to her, pointing to his left. “There’s a lock on your door if you’re worried we might wander up during the night.”

Relief at having a warm, safe place to stay the night emboldened her to return what she took for 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?” she asked provocatively.

“Mine, too.”

They reached the bottom of the staircase.

“Blue will guide you while I retrieve your luggage. Keys, please.”

“It’s unlocked.”

Paula admired his tight jeans as he walked across the living room, the way his broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist. He picked up his boots and closed the front door behind him as she got down on both knees and hugged Blue’s neck.

“Show me the way?”

The tricolored dog, mostly black mixed with streaks of rust and white, sensed where they were going. Despite his age, Blue bounded



up the stairs ahead of her. 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.

"Got to thinking. Will it be a problem if your husband 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."

"Won't need one. 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 and Blue have a big day planned tomorrow?"

"I'm going where you're going."

"Manor House?"

He nodded.

"Why? I mean, 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."

"The seminar. Paid my fee, same as you. Blue will stay home to guard the castle."

She tilted her head slightly. "You're a writer?"

"Poet's more like it."

"Really? Anything I can read?"

BLUE BY YOU

“Maybe. Sometime.”

“So, is this a full-service bed and breakfast?” She laughed when she saw his surprised look. “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?”

An earlier pained expression returned. “There was.”

“Did she leave you?” She silently scolded herself. “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 and hugged her knees. A flood of emotions came over her as tears welled in her eyes. Happy to have met a handsome stranger, unhappy to have spoken without thinking. Sad for him without knowing why.

Exhausted, she closed but didn’t lock the bedroom door, undressed and slid under the covers, all the while wondering what lay ahead in the few days before she left Three Oaks, Colorado.

# Three

1996, NINETEEN MONTHS EARLIER

WASHINGTON, DC

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

The question tumbled into Daniel Collins's thoughts as early morning sunlight poured through a bedroom window framed by heavy, white tie-back curtains. More acutely aware of clocks and the calendar than at any time in his life, he instinctively knew thirty minutes had passed as he sat silently next to Mallory. When she opened her amber eyes, she turned toward him. He rose stiffly from his chair, arched his back catlike, and leaned across the edge of the bed to gently lift strands of chemo-ravaged hair away from the eyelashes ensnaring them. She often assured him their first kiss would be the highlight of her day.

Their morning routine 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 pills 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 wedged

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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. He let her believe he spent his nights sleeping comfortably in their master suite upstairs instead of on a cot a few steps down the hallway, close enough to hear her labored breathing until one of her little soldiers relaxed her into a mercifully peaceful sleep. Then, and only then, could he drift off. None of the overnight hospice attendants ever betrayed his secret.

Not that long ago, their lives stretched out before them like a Wyoming highway with no curves, no speed limit, no end in sight. An oncologist's prognosis had sent them careening down an unpaved country road, one that would 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 Mallory finally asleep, Daniel slipped away from their bed to make his way outside to the front of their Georgetown townhouse. 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. While a caregiver was there during daylight hours, Mallory 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'd previously lacked the time to indulge. He hated what made it possible now, but he welcomed the brief respite of losing himself in the fictional lives of others while country music played in the background. His thoughts always returned to Mallory.



In 1973, the tragic deaths of Daniel's parents brought him from a

Pacific Northwest farm to live with his grandparents in Arlington, Virginia. His grandfather, a lawyer, had for many years been a congressman representing a portion of Washington state.

On his first day at school, Daniel met Mallory, hands-down the prettiest and most popular girl in their sixth-grade class at Walter Reed Elementary. Their lockers stood next to each other, and their paths walking to and from school intersected. Each school day began and ended with them together. His shyness was no match for her persistence as she eased his rural-to-urban assimilation among their ten-year-old classmates.

Given their ages, the unique friendship caused envy among the girls and puzzlement among the boys. She told him she'd learned her name meant *unlucky* in French and asked him to call her Mel, but only when they were alone together. A familiarity she denied everyone else. He went by Danny at that age. He confided in her alone that his grandmother had told him his middle name, Colin, was the fruit of his mother's offbeat sense of humor when his father insisted their only child become a fourth-generation Daniel Collins.

Their togetherness continued almost every day through high school. College separated them when Daniel went to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and Mallory to Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, her parents' alma mater.

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 life was faith-centered; Daniel had attended church only 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 a few months of each other. 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 bus downtown rather than self-navigate the insanity of weekday DC commuter traffic.

One crisp autumn Saturday afternoon, as the decade of the eighties came to an end, Daniel sat outside 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 and 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. A floodgate of memories opened the instant he recognized her, but tempted as he was, he 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, a knowing grin spreading across his face.

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

"It is."

Mallory stumbled 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." She punched 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 and helped her peel off a multicolored wool jacket.

As she draped it across the back of the chair, she said, “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 stroked an imaginary beard, 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?”

BLUE BY YOU

“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. Then there’s Elvis. Not country. And even though he’s gone, he’s still my guy.”

Daniel struggled to fully grasp how his life had changed in an instant. He looked at the woman sitting across from him as if he’d won the lottery. In a way, they both had.

“Danny, I have to say, you look fantastic!” She leaned toward him, waited a few seconds, then said, “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*. In 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, rekindled a sense of boyish giddiness he’d felt all those years ago the first time she reached to hold his hand walking home from school. “As a placeholder, how about *beyond beautiful*?”

“You always did say the nicest things, Daniel Colin Collins. Say, are you still writing poetry?”

“Now it’s you who remembered.”

“How could I forget?”

“We’re mimicking each other like we used to do when we were kids.”

“Thought you’d notice,” she answered with a smile.

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



“So, does that mean you’re living your dream? 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 a word better than *beyond beautiful*.”

“I’m working on it. In the meantime, your Perry Mason would like to buy you a coffee. Still take it the same way?”

She nodded.

“Be right back.”



Despite stellar grades and the law review, Daniel had accepted a low-paying public defender job the month after graduation to give him the trial experience he didn’t think a white-shoe law firm would provide a newly minted associate. He wasn’t surprised his clients were among the worst of the worst on the lower rungs of DC society. 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. Let them suffer erratic heating and cooling he shared with other over-worked and equally disheartened attorneys.

Daniel’s long hours at low wages ultimately paid dividends. 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 destiny smiled favorably. After only a few years, he rang the success bell loudly as the all-important DC 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 DC’s rectangular borders, and Daniel’s performance during 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 a twist of fate intervened.



“Mel, where are you living now?” Daniel asked, returning to their table, coffee in hand.

“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 pointed to his shoes. “Doesn’t lawyering earn you enough to afford socks?”

“Don’t like them. Only wear ’em days I’m in court. Keep a few pairs in my office just in case. Say, what brings you out this way today?”

“The Westover used bookstore. 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.”

“Am I one of those memories?”

Her eyes pulled his into them, and 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. Other than being Perry Mason, 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 shifted in his chair. “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.



After an hour or so spent together that afternoon, from that day on they were inseparable. She always called him “Danny” when the rest of the world knew him as Daniel or Dan.

When he told her he’d stopped going to church, she didn’t say anything, but a certain look of determination crossed her face. A few Sunday mornings later, he donned a suit and tie to be at her side at the Washington National Cathedral a short distance from her Hillandale townhouse. As the music began, Mallory said a silent prayer of thanks that the man she’d never stopped loving was worshipping with her.

Walking out an hour or so later, Daniel stopped them at 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?” he asked.

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.

The summer after the young couple found each other again, a dozen or so close friends attended the civil ceremony and informal gathering afterward Mallory wanted. Her parents chose not to be among them.

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

In the months leading up to her wedding, Daniel was late getting home every Tuesday and Thursday, and he didn’t correct Mallory’s assumption it was work-related. Those evenings, before he returned to their Hillandale home, Daniel took ballroom dancing lessons.



On their honeymoon at a resort hotel on the Hawaiian 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 tighter to him, "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 and the waiting ballroom.

BLUE BY YOU

Mallory fingered the handcrafted, eighteen-karat gold Jerusalem Cross dangling on a gold chain around her neck, a Valentine's Day gift. "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."