

for the
LOVE OF *Charley
Chaplain*



LARRY B. GILDERSLEEVE

award-winning author of *Blue by You*



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Blue by You

The Girl on the Bench

Follow Your Dreams

Dancing Alone Without Music

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For the Love of
Charley Chaplain



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For the Love of Charley Chaplain

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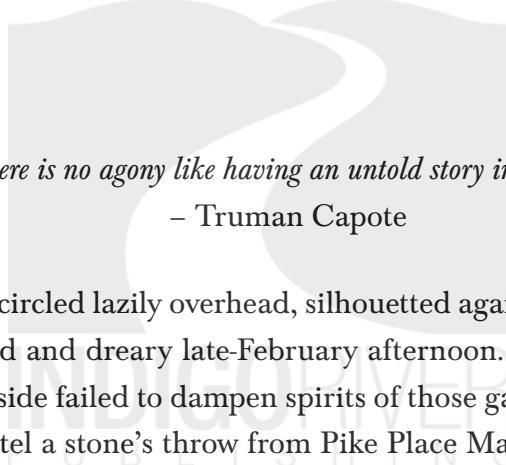
*The late Reverend Charles E. Flener, known among his
law enforcement colleagues as Charlie Chaplain,
inspired this fictional book.*

*A dear departed friend whose memory
will always be with me.*

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1

Opening Act



“There is no agony like having an untold story inside you.”

– Truman Capote

Seabirds circled lazily overhead, silhouetted against overcast skies on a cold and dreary late-February afternoon. Seasonal gloomy weather outside failed to dampen spirits of those gathered inside the boutique hotel a stone's throw from Pike Place Market, a sprawling, century-old downtown venue regarded by many as the soul of Seattle.

Chandelier lights in the opulent ballroom flickered a warning before dimming as latecomers vied for the few remaining seats. Her ceremonial task completed, the presenter of the highly coveted Lanneau Prize for journalistic excellence stepped away, leaving the recipient, Charlene Tuell, a woman many in the audience knew as Charley Chaplain, standing all alone center-stage. The room fell pin-drop silent, all eyes on the beautiful, impeccably dressed woman.

“I was asked to keep my remarks to around twenty minutes. I assure you that won’t be a problem. I’ll be done in about half that time.”

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A sudden realization she'd forgotten to thank the articulate emcee or offer a greeting to attendees added to nervousness already seeping into her voice. She silently prayed for a more relaxed rhythm.

"I've read our world is full of people whose stories must be shared. Never thought mine was one of them." Her hands relaxed their white-knuckled podium grip. "At first, David agreed. He changed his mind, and despite his charm, something he had in abundance, I remained steadfast. We were at an impasse. Then something happened."

She tilted the microphone up and pulled it closer.

"What happened was David got a different yes than he'd asked for, and all of us are here today because of him. It should be David Jacobs standing before you, not me." Her eyes filled, her hands held fast to the lectern. "Oh, if only he could."

A gust of wind parted low-hanging clouds; sunlight spilled in through windows and skylights; dust particles danced in the sunbeams. Rays of sunshine quickly disappeared as clouds reappeared. Charlene thought she saw someone standing alone in the shadows beneath the balcony at the back of the room. She looked again. Nothing.

Seconds ticked by. A ringing cell phone and scolding looks cast toward the unwelcome sound brought her back into the moment.

"We had barely eight days together before fate intervened, as fate so often does, and we were forever separated."

She forced her shoulders back and drew a relaxing breath.

"David wrote *"Hearts Beneath Their Shields"* after we parted. Had we known what lay ahead, would we have done things differently? A question I've been asked many times before, and my answer has always been no. No, we would not."

Her downcast eyes studied her notes.

"As it says in Scripture: How do you know what will happen tomorrow? For your life is like the morning fog. It's here a little while,

then it's gone.”

She reached for the water glass and waited patiently when the loud chiming of a second phone caused some to look around, others to fidget on their chairs and utter sighs of annoyance.

“On the last day I saw David, control of my life was seized by others for many months. I was taken to a place you’d never want to be. In one of my darkest moments, sitting in that tiny shared jail cell, I was lifted up by the realization God sometimes has a sense of humor when placing people, as well as opportunities and obstacles, in our path. I believe what happens next is all up to us.”

Her eyes scanned the audience. “You may not agree, but I hope and pray you do.”

She loosely clasped her hands and rested them on the podium’s edge. Unhurried now, she’d found her rhythm.

“Someone once said grief distorts everything, including time. Not for me. Not when David and I were together ever so briefly, and not in my memory of those few days. I’ve cherished every moment I remember after *our* paths crossed less than a year ago.”

She paused. “How did we meet?”

Her cheeks lifted beneath her luminous eyes into what a romance author might describe as a fallen-angel smile.

“Well, for those of you who know me, or have read about me, that’s the sense of humor part. It certainly wasn’t in church.”

A Chance Encounter

A popular neighborhood bar and a fine dining restaurant filled the ground floor of a two-story, sandstone and brick building on the historic Bowling Green town square in Kentucky's third-largest city. Different owners, separate sidewalk entrances, a connecting passageway. JAR's Pub shared a kitchen with Main Fare and offered a limited menu inside as well as for those seated outside at a half dozen cast-iron, four-top tables.

Under the streetlights, the pavement glistened from an afternoon downpour. Darkened skies and heavy air threatened more. A welcoming neon sign flashed on and off above the weathered, dark-green canvas awning covering JAR's entrance. It caught the attention of a passerby with no other destination in mind.

Lured inside, he lingered for a moment, then ambled left toward the ten-stool mahogany bar that extended a third the length of the room. Nestled against the opposite wall were five wooden booths. Scattered tables and chairs could seat another twenty patrons. At seven o'clock on a slow Thursday evening in early April, with only

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one booth and two tables occupied, the room felt both intimate and comfortably spacious.

At the far end of the bar, her back to the door, sat a woman whose aloneness could inspire a country music ballad. Well and truly within herself, she didn't sense the new arrival until he was seated several stools away.

After ordering a Knob Creek neat, the man's eyes were drawn toward an ethereal image in the mirror behind the bar. He gazed at the woman's reflection with the same detachment he would an uninspiring museum painting. Or thought he did.

His bourbon arrived, accompanied by the bartender's fingers grazing across the back of his hand. Her eyes conveyed she had more in mind than serving drinks. She drifted away when he didn't respond as she'd hoped.

The reflection took a genteel sip of her drink.

The man's insouciant museum-gazing failed him. The awkward silence slowly turned them toward each other. He raised his glass. "You look a bit lonely over there."

The woman rolled a half-empty glass between her thumb and fingers, then tipped it his direction.

"As soon as I reach bottom, I'll be leaving." Her voice lacked even the hint of an accent marking her as a local. "But thanks anyway."

The comely, early-forties bartender watched and listened before closing back in like a predatory feline approaching its prey, elbows pressed against the sides of a low-cut blouse. "I can always use a friend."

His head lowered slightly. A long count of *one Mississippi, two Mississippi*.

He lifted his chin, made eye contact, and heard himself say, "This is JAR's bar, right?"

"Yep," she answered. "Pub, actually."

"What's the difference?"

“Well, I guess it’s—”

“Never mind.”

His mind was on the other woman, but his abruptness caused a pouting face just inches from his own. He continued a less than halfhearted effort. “Are those the owner’s initials?”

“I guess so. All anyone ever calls him is Jar.” She blinked twice, slowly. “And I’m Shirley.”

Were her fawning attention not so clichéd, the unfolding scene might have found its way into his writing. He accepted her extended hand adorned with an assortment of rings and fingernails painted scarlet.

“Nice to meet you,” he replied.

He tugged; she held tightly.

“You don’t sound like yer from around here. Are you from England?”

Even the most casual observer—and there were none at the moment—would know one woman had an itch in need of scratching. The other, watching silently from her perch, decidedly didn’t.

“Australia.” He gently freed his hand. “Quite some time ago.”

“That’s a long way from here,” Shirley said.

“It is,” he answered dryly.

A well-dressed elderly man, steadied by his ornate cane, entered through the passageway from the restaurant and with slow, deliberate steps, found his way to a stool at the opposite end of the bar. Shirley reluctantly peeled herself away.

The mirrored reflection turned her head slightly, the man from “down under” filling the corner of her eye.

“You *are* a long way from home. Sydney? Melbourne? Brisbane? The Outback, perhaps?”

“Interested?”

“Truthfully, I’m not.” She reached for her glass. “Forget it.”

He brushed her answer aside and pressed on. “Adelaide. Born

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and raised." And on. "Capitol of South Australia, one of seven states." And on. "Everyone's friendly there. Or almost everyone." He sipped his drink. "And in California, where I live now." *One Mississippi, two Mississippi.* "That's all I'm trying to be."

"I see." She averted her eyes. "Well, thank you for that, but I have plenty of friends." She finished what remained of her drink and gave him a sideways glance. "And I long ago reached my quota of troubled ones."

He took a long swallow of his bourbon before he plunged ahead. "That's disappointing. And how, may I ask, does *troubled* look to you?"

She rested her elbow on the bar and pointed a manicured finger with clear nail polish at the male image in the mirror staring back at her.

His mouth curved into a smile. "Clever."

"Glad you think so," she answered, unsmiling.

Nothing she'd said or done offered encouragement, but he had no place else to be, no one else to talk with, and he'd found this kind of sparring with strangers occasionally provided dialogue for movie scripts when his imaginary friends stopped talking to him.

"How did you know?" he asked. "About me and being troubled."

She turned to face him. "I used to be in the trouble business. And believe me, there's nothing casual about how you wear yours."

She was right. He was troubled. Deeply troubled. And he was further troubled it was apparent to a complete stranger sitting far from him in a dimly-light room.

His voice wavered. "I must say, that sounds rather *casually imprecise*."

"Just a messenger."

"By the way, my name is—"

She raised her hand. "No names. Please. And before this goes any further, I'm here to be alone."

She'd been to JAR's on a weeknight and envisioned a solitary respite from *her* troubles when she left a friend's house an hour earlier. She sought to stem the flow of unwanted conversation.

"Not interested in any notion of not being alone," she continued. "Here or someplace else you might have in mind."

Undaunted, he sought to keep the dialogue tap open.

"Not interested in not being alone," he repeated with slow weight. "No worries. Alone is fine by me." Long accustomed to a writer's solitary life, he added, "I'm alone a lot myself."

He teased out an exaggerated grimace when she said, "No surprise there." Her tone softened. "Me too. And thank you for understanding."

He lifted his glass, realized it was empty, and set it back down. "You were about to tell me the trouble business you used to be in."

She pushed back yet again. "I think not."

Though she had no interest in continuing verbal volleyball, she found herself appraising the stubborn player on the other side of the net. Even in the bar's stygian setting, his complexion had an unhealthy pallor, and she'd soon understand its incongruency with an otherwise fit-looking, clean-shaven man in his late fifties or early sixties. Early fifties would make them the same age. The beginnings of a receding hairline crept up against his thick brown hair with just a few gray brushstrokes at the temples. A slate-colored cashmere sweater over a white, silk-cotton blend golf shirt. Bare ankles between black jeans with a starched crease and his black, tasseled loafers made from a reptile's skin.

She gave him a six, maybe even a seven, on a lofty ten scale, and couldn't help wondering if some woman in California had influenced his pleasing sense of fashion.

Watching her watching him, he cast aside any misstep regrets and emulated her lack of subtlety. His mind turned to how he would describe her on paper, knowing his written words were often better

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chosen. He settled on *beautiful in an alluring sort of way*. In days to come, he'd learn his "well-rounded" assessment of her curvaceous figure, small waist above shapely hips, could serve as a metaphor for the life of the woman he hadn't expected to meet until the following morning.

Neither wanted to convey the slightest weakness by asking what the other was thinking.

He served up his question again. "What kind of trouble business?"

She coaxed shoulder-length brunette hair away from her sea-green eyes and sighed heavily before sending the metaphorical ball sailing back over the net.

"The police kind."

He straightened. "You're a cop?"

"Was."

His mind raced. *No way*. Lingering uncertainty led to a hesitant, stumbling reply. "Let's say, for the moment, I believe you."

"Let's say." Her perch had become as uncomfortable as the conversation she sought to escape, and she became incensed at his staring. "What?"

"You don't look the part."

"What part?"

"Well, at the risk of offense, all your parts."

Her penetrating eyes sought his, but not in a kind way.

"It doesn't surprise me Australian men can leer just like Americans. And it shouldn't surprise you I'm offended. As any woman would be." She inclined her head toward Shirley farther down the bar. "Well, perhaps not every woman."

The sting of her reply knocked him back.

"I'm embarrassed. Truly, I am. And I'm sorry." He gamely tried to regain his footing. "But let's be honest. Why should I believe you?"

"About wanting to be left alone?"

"No, no. About you being a cop."

She thought for a moment, then reached into a luxury-brand handbag resting on the empty stool nearest her. A flick of her wrist sent an object sliding smoothly across the shiny surface of the heavily-waxed bar.

He lifted the soft black leather casing, held it for a few seconds, then wedged a thumb into a crevice to open it. His challenge now would be to look and sound surprised as his uncertainty about her identity vanished.

“Long way from home. A police chaplain?”

She shrugged her narrow shoulders, which seemed molded to a light tan, tailored linen jacket covering a buttoned-up white silk blouse tucked into a laurel green skirt.

“If that’s what it says, it must be so. Wouldn’t you think?” she asked.

He cast a questioning look that invited more.

“Apparently not,” she continued. “Okay, then. Ordained. Used to work with the cops. Was one myself.” She looked away and ruefully added, “In a former life.”

When her daughter, an only child, left for college in California, Charlene Tuell had parlayed her seminary degree into becoming a social worker. After a few years, when she was no longer intimidated by her then-husband’s vehement opposition, her volunteer work became a full-time profession.

Assigned to the Charlie Sector (the others Alpha and Baker) in Seattle, her fellow officers, respectfully and with affection, nicknamed her Charley Chaplain. A nod to both the Charlene nickname she’d gone by since childhood and to the famed actor in early twentieth century silent movies.

The combination of her unique career and the catchy sobriquet found its way into feature articles in newspapers, magazines, and broadcast media, locally and regionally. She never became

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comfortable with the public relations notoriety the police department encouraged and obligated her to endure.

All that was now in her life's rear-view mirror.

The Australian carefully closed the bi-fold case containing a gleaming silver Seattle Police Department shield. He moved off his stool and leaned across with an outstretched arm toward her waiting hand.

"Then why do you still have it with you?" he asked as she dropped the shield into her purse.

He took a chance sitting with only two empty stools separating them and was pleasantly surprised when his encroachment went unchallenged.

"In case a smile and polite deference aren't enough to avoid a traffic ticket." Her eyes found his. "And to discourage . . ." Her voice trailed off.

He was enjoying the back and forth and thought she was as well. "I guess it could thwart a stranger in a bar asking 'your place, or mine?'"

Accustomed to men paying her unwanted attention, she couldn't yet bring herself to leave. "Ya, think?"

"Yep. Guess that could be a little off-putting."

"No, a *lot* off-putting."

After a long silence, he thought of a peace offering.

"Would I be endangering my life if I offered to buy you a drink?"

He tapped a finger on the top of his glass. "I'm thinking of having another, and it's still early."

"No."

He knowingly risked agitating her even further. "Are you referring to my life being imperiled or my offer of another drink?"

"Both."

"I see. We're not getting on very well, are we?" Like a skilled trial attorney who only asks questions in court to which the answer

is already known, he was emboldened by knowing who she was. “Everyone has a story, and I’ll bet yours is really something. Care to share?”

“I’ll save it for the person I’m meeting.” She hesitated. “Or not.”

He also hesitated before deciding against revealing *he* was that person.

“That’s odd.”

“In what way?” she asked.

“You said earlier you came here to be alone.”

“And truth-telling is what you expect in a bar?”

“Well said.” He looked at his watch. “I have no place to be. I can warm this stool ‘til he arrives. I doubt they’ll ask us to leave if we only have one drink.”

“You assume I’m here to meet a man.”

“A fair assumption, I think. But okay, until he or *she* arrives.”

“You assume my meeting is tonight,” she continued.

“It isn’t?”

His question went unanswered. Being with her was a welcome distraction from, as she’d said earlier, the trouble he was wearing not so casually. Despite his best efforts, he sensed their conversation coming to an end when she eyed the door through which they’d both entered.

“It would appear I’m meeting myself coming and going,” he said, “and getting nowhere.”

“And now it is I who must be *getting going*.” She slid effortlessly off her stool, reached into her purse for her wallet, and withdrew a single bill. She caught the bartender’s eye. “Both of us.”

He watched as she laid the bill next to her empty glass and turned to walk past him.

“A fifty? You’ve either been here a long time or you’re extremely generous.”

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“Consider it my treat. For you”—she angled her head toward the far end of the bar—“and your new friend. I have no doubt I’ve disappointed you. She might be more to your liking.”

“Don’t know what you mean,” he answered innocently.

“Oh, come now. We both know she has something other than idle chit-chat in mind.” She moved a few steps away, stopped, turned around. “Russell Allen Wilson.”

“Who’s Russell Allen Wilson?”

“The owner.”

He furrowed his brow in a meditative moment. “That would make this, what, the RAW Bar? So where did JAR come from?”

“Some other time.”

“Some other time. For you and me? That sounds promising.”

An *in your dreams* look accompanied her parting words. “Doubtful. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

He wasn’t alone in watching her gracefully navigate between the scattered tables and chairs, some now occupied. One man, sitting alone, set down his beer and signaled to no one in particular a two-thumbs-up rating of the woman who’d just departed.

David watched Shirley pick up the empty glass streaked with a trace of lipstick and a crisp, green portrait of Ulysses S. Grant.

“She said she was buyin’ for both of you. Want another?”

“No, thanks.”

“Couldn’t help hearing some of that. Didn’t go well, did it?”

He eyed the door. “Maybe yes, maybe no.”

“Maybe rain, maybe snow.”

“What?”

“Oh, just somethin’ my gramma used ta say.”

He rose from his stool and started to walk away.

“Will you be coming back again sometime?” she asked hopefully.

He turned and echoed the now-departed reflection. “Doubtful.”

He paused and added pleasantly, “Shirley, it was nice meeting you.”

L A R R Y B . G I L D E R S L E E V E

Moisture dripped from JAR's frayed awning when he stepped out into the misty evening air. He looked both directions and found himself in a crowd of one. In the stillness, he heard the distant whistle of an approaching freight train continuing its southern passage. He looked across the street to lights illuminating the still-wet leaves on towering magnolia trees in Fountain Square Park.

That was quite something, he thought, smiling. The morning's promise lightened his step as he dodged rain puddles on his way back to a nearby hotel.



3

Not What I Expected

The storm moved through during the night. An hour or so after a cloudless spring sunrise, the former chaplain was seated in a booth at a noisy comfort food diner in a part of town whose best days were decades past. The venue hadn't been of her choosing. As delicately as possible, she held a laminated menu tacky from syrup and who knows what else. She sensed another's presence.

"It's you. *Again.*" She dropped the menu, and with sharpness in her voice as crisp as the corners of an envelope, asked accusingly, "Stalking me?"

He wasn't surprised by her reaction, her words, or the unpleasant glint overtaking her eyes. This morning, he knew he'd have the upper hand, once he got past the frost line. He pointed to a large purse on the bench.

"No need to reach for your kryptonite shield," he answered affably. "It's a short stack of blueberry pancakes I'm stalking. Told the best in town can be found here. Saw you when I came in." He paused for her to speak. She didn't. "May I join you?"

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She noticed his sweater and jeans selections were different from the night before, and that smooth and tasseled burgundy loafers had replaced reptilian ones. Socks still missing. She rolled her sticky fingertips across her thumbs, careful not to touch her white cable knit sweater or designer blue jeans.

Intent on keeping him at bay, she surveyed the room. “I’m meeting someone.”

“You said that last night.”

“True then. True now,” she replied evenly. *What’s it going to take to get through to him?*

She wiped her hands with a paper towel plucked from the upright stand on the table. She hoped he’d just leave her alone but didn’t expect he would.

He noticed four women at the table nearest them had stopped their conversation. He assumed they anticipated something far more interesting than gardening, grandchildren, and the shortcomings of their husbands. He stepped to his right to block their prying eyes, leaned in, and lowered his voice. “What time?”

“Eight.”

“You’re quite early,” he whispered, “and I was wondering if I might—”

She’d also noticed the eavesdropping women and made sure they could hear her response: “Asked and answered.”

Four words or less in each of the six times she’d spoken.

“You know, there’s no need to be this way,” he answered quietly but firmly. He straightened up. “It’s unnecessary and if I may say, unbecoming.”

She lowered her voice to match his, her words blending pique with defensiveness. “Well, how’s *that* for putting me in my place?”

He replied, “Sorry,” but wasn’t. He would have walked away save for a promise he’d made to a friend, now wishing he hadn’t. He canvassed the restaurant.

“There still aren’t any open tables. May I at least join you for a cup of coffee? I’ll leave as soon as your friend arrives. Promise.”

She looked around absently. Discolored walls. A mix of linoleum and ancient hardwood floors beneath unmatched tables and chairs. An overall décor reminiscent of a lower-end consignment store.

“It’s not a trick question,” he gently prodded.

Perhaps I’ve misjudged him.

Several more seconds passed before she offered a welcoming gesture. Of sorts.

He took his place across from her. “Thank you.”

She fixed a stern look toward the women inviting them to mind their own business, and was rewarded with chagrined faces. She turned her attention to the man sitting much closer to her than the night before. “I’ll say this for you, Mr. Australia. You’re nothing if not tenacious.”

An opening for him to play fair and level the playing field by divulging his name.

Before he could respond, a waitress about the same age as Shirley but looking nothing at all like her, appeared. She dispensed coffee, then pulled an order pad from her wrinkled apron and a pencil from behind her ear.

He thumbed at himself. “Together.”

Things were progressing much faster than the chaplain could have anticipated. “Separate.”

He grinned, as did the waitress as she took their orders, gathered up menus, and left. His grin twisted into an amused smile.

“Cozy, isn’t it?”

She slowly creamed her coffee, and a conciliatory tone wrapped around her words. “Please tell me you’re not talking about us.”

A thawing, perhaps? “No, ma’am. This place.”

Although the town had grown in a different direction over the years, as far back as the late 1960s, locals knew Karen’s Kastle as *the*

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place for comfort food and respectful conversation. In the large window by the entrance, hand-drawn by Karen Thurman in bold letters on a wrinkled sheet of butcher's paper, was an impossible-to-miss framed greeting: *Be Nice or Leave, Thank You*. It had been there as long as anyone could recall. Failure to comply—and it happened from time to time—caused the offender upon departing to be invited nicely not to return.

Karen's Kastle was open for breakfast and lunch, and those who crossed the threshold came from all walks of life. It was not uncommon for the clientele to offer quiet blessings at their tables before eating, and in the thematic Kings and Queens restrooms hung signs admonishing *Wash your hands & say your prayers 'cuz Jesus 'n germs are everywhere*.

Each time the ancient cash register rang loudly, Karen wished her customers "Have a blessed day" to send them properly on their way. If Karen could have *her* way, Sunday morning churches wouldn't still be the most segregated gathering places in America.

The tense quiet in their booth contrasted with conversations varying in loudness and animation all around them. Each waited for the other to speak.

Curious how things would play out, he decided to wait to introduce himself. "Don't think I said good morning. I apologize. Good morning."

She lowered her coffee cup. Her lips compressed into a thin smile, and a bit of color crept into her cheeks. "Good morning to you."

"Here's a thought. Until your friend arrives, we could revisit last night."

"Let's not," she replied.

"As I recall, we left off with me asking you to tell your story and—"

"I can see your listening skills haven't improved overnight," she interrupted, though not unpleasantly.

“Okay, then. To pass the time until you send me away, how ’bout I tell you my story?”

She shook her head with exaggerated slowness.

“We’ve got to talk about something.” He feigned inspiration. “I know. What if I share just my ‘today’ story?”

“Fine, I guess.” Beginning to enjoy his company despite her reservations, she leaned forward slightly. “Did you get up early?”

“I did,” he replied, puzzled. “Why do you ask?”

She struggled not to smile. “Oh, just trying to get a feel for how long your ‘today’ story will take.”

“Good one.” He creased a paper towel. “And now your secret’s out.”

She leveled her eyes and cautiously asked, “What secret?”

“Tough on the outside, tender on the inside.” He sipped his coffee. “Clever, too.”

She relaxed. “A bit over the top, don’t you think? Especially for this early in the morning.”

He thought a shrug-enhanced smile was a sufficient reply.

“And what about you? Could be wrong, but it seems to me your idea of conversation is more akin to scripting a stage play.”

“Who knows?” He raised his eyebrows. “Maybe I am.”

Breakfast arrived, and he tucked in the paper towel like a cravat. He’d ordered one of several Kastle specials: pancakes, eggs over-easy, crisp bacon, homemade buttermilk biscuits, grits, hash browns, and freshly squeezed orange juice. Her taken-by-surprise lack of interest had spawned a dismissive “I’ll have the same” to the waitress, and now there was food plentiful enough for at least four spreading across the Formica table.

She started to ask about his “maybe” remark, but he was talking again.

“For the longest time, I’ve dreamed of owning a new Corvette and—”

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“Forgive me, but we may only have time for your ‘today’ story.”

He continued, undeterred. “All Corvettes are made here. In just a little while, I have an appointment to walk the assembly line and watch them put the finishing touches on mine.”

As she listened, she contemplated how best to attack the largesse before her. Knife and fork in hand, she attempted carving the mountain of food into something manageable. She wondered if she’d even like blueberry pancakes.

When she noticed his left hand in a relaxed, half-closed fist on the table between two plates, she set her knife aside and carefully reached across to touch it with the fingertips of her right hand. “And this memorable experience is why you’re here instead of just having the car shipped to wherever you live in California?”

He hoped her casual, non-flirtatious gesture meant the frost was melting away. “California. You remembered from last night. Don’t know if you want me to be, but I’m encouraged.”

She again suppressed a smile, something becoming increasingly difficult. “If you’re thinking what I think you may be thinking, don’t be.”

Her expression didn’t offer a clue if she was teasing or not, and although she didn’t continue, she didn’t pull her hand away. Eating became secondary to conversation.

“Anyway, to answer your question, the car is also a means to an end. Driving Route 66, all the way from Chicago to Santa Monica. Another dream of mine.” He thought anyone would interrupt. She didn’t. “Do you know about America’s Highway?”

“Very little.” She moved her hand to her coffee cup. “And you’re doing all this now, the car and the trip at the same time, before the clock runs out and old Father Time catches up with you. That it?”

He pressed his lips together tightly. He remembered her saying something the night before about nothing casual in how he wore his trouble. *Where had her remark come from?* Only he, his doctors, and Mac

knew his trouble. Knew how precarious his life had become.

“You might say so,” he finally answered.

They ate mostly in silence, reflecting on where they’d found themselves on a springtime Saturday morning. One thought it was accidental; the other knew it wasn’t.

“I understand. About the car and the trip. And good for you.” She felt he was searching her face for sincerity. “I’m being serious. Really, I am.” She was relieved when he appeared satisfied. “Curious about one thing, though.”

He waited, then asked wordlessly with an upraised open palm.

“I get the whole Corvette thing. Male baby boomer aspiration. You’ve added, as I understand it, the lure of the open road and all that goes with that.”

“True.”

“Then how’d you come to be enamored of Route 66?”

“Because I’m Australian?”

She’d just taken a bite of pancake; her reply was a curt nod.

“Been here a long time. Long enough to become Americanized.”

He paused. “Sort of.”

“And?”

“My friend inspired me. He’d made the drive once. Talked about it often.”

She waited. Nothing more. They continued eating.

“Does your inspiring friend have a name?”

“Jim.”

She tilted her head while knowingly taking the bait. “I see. Is his last name a secret?”

“McKenzie. Jim McKenzie. Likes folks to call him Mac and most everyone does. Used to live up the highway in Louisville. Great guy. He and I—”

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He stopped when he saw the fingers that had so recently touched his hand pull at the cuff of her long-sleeved sweater to expose a gold Cartier tank watch.

“You’ve got about ten grand there on your wrist. Give or take. Standard police issue in Seattle?”

“Of course not.” She pulled her sleeve down. “Some people think mine is the fruit of a poisonous tree.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I hope you never will.”

He looked around the café. “Have you been stood up again?”

“Again?”

“Last night.”

“Oh, that.” She bowed her head and studied her napkin. “Well, this morning I really *was* expecting to meet someone.”

“You don’t appear upset.”

She looked up. “I’m not. Relieved, in fact.”

“In that case, we now have time for my whole story. Then yours.”

“I don’t mean to be unkind. Really, I don’t. I should be on my way.”

“Can’t say I didn’t offer. A couple of times.”

“And a kind offer it was.”

Appetites satiated, their meals were far from half-eaten. A Kastle trademark. More, often much more, is better. And if you leave hungry, Karen knew you didn’t try hard enough.

She reached for her purse. He picked up both checks. She started to object.

“Last night you treated me. My turn.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind.” She slid toward the edge of the bench. “And now I must be going.”

They still hadn’t exchanged names. *Remarkable*, he thought, *but fixable*.

“One thing. Before you go.”

Her inquisitive look and the setting down of her satchel beckoned him to continue.

“A woman police chaplain, all the—”

“Former chaplain.”

“A *beautiful* former police chaplain all the way from the Left Coast, sitting alone last night in a bar in Kentucky . . .”

She smiled. “Thank you for that. And—”

“. . . could be the makings of a novel . . . if one gives imagination full reign.”

“What makes you say that?” She recalled her stage play comment. “Are you a writer?”

“I’ve been trying to tell my story.”

“So, you are?”

An obedient nod. “Screenwriter. And since you haven’t asked, I live where I work. Hollywood.”

Recognition lit up her eyes much like a switched-on light illuminates a darkened room.

“It can’t be! *You’re* the writer Marla Jo Taylor wanted me to meet here this morning?”

“What are the odds, huh? But yes. And I have qualities that go way beyond that label.”

Her eyes still wide, she struggled with the unexpected. “I’m sure you do. But why didn’t you say something when you first sat down? Or last night?”

“Last night, you said no names. Remember?”

“What’d you expect? Thought you were a stranger on the make. Never imagined you were, well, you.” She shook her head. “Not at all what I expected.”

“Well, I’m with you there. You’re not at all what I expected.”

She hurriedly asked, “And how is it I’m less than you expected?”

“Didn’t say less.”

“Different?” she asked, retreating.

F O R T H E L O V E O F C H A R L E Y C H A P L A I N

“I’ll say. Last night I stepped all over myself commenting on your parts. Remember?”

A faint blush of embarrassment colored her neck.

He carefully reached across the cluttered table. “I’m David. David Jacobs.”

She slipped her hand into his. “And I’m Charley. But I’m guessing you knew that in the bar.”

“Not right away. But yeah, the shield was a bit of a clue. And coincidence out of the question.”

“Understood. By the way, that’s with an *e-y*, not *i-e*.”

“I know. Marla Jo coached me. Nice to meet you, Charley with an *e-y* Chaplain.”

“And you as well,” she answered. “I think.”

“First impressions can be wrong. Mine about you certainly were. And I’m willing to wager I’m not the first.”

“True. I’ve found judging someone is easy. Getting it right? Not so easy.”

“How’ve you dealt with people misjudging you?”

She lowered her eyes. “Usually found a way to work it to my advantage.”

“I’m sure you did. If I may ask, how did that work?”

Her eyes found his. “I could quote you chapter and verse of Scripture until closing time. Would that help?”

“Perhaps, but I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Not a Christian?”

He removed his paper towel cravat and set it on the bench beside him. “You could say that. And you’d be right.”

All conversation in the diner ceased as dishes and flatware clattered noisily to the linoleum floor when a nearby diner stepped out of his booth and collided with a waitress carrying an over-laden tray.

Charley used the distraction to collect her thoughts.

“We’re here because my friend Kristi has a big mouth. About

me, that is. She talked to her friend Marla Jo, who turns out to also be your friend, and—”

Their waitress passed by. David handed her the checks and a fifty-dollar bill. “Keep the change.”

Effusive would best describe the waitress’s gratitude before departing.

“I’ll repeat what you said last night. Isn’t that a bit generous?”

“As I struggle to match wits with you, Charley, at least allow me to try and match tips.”

“Fair enough,” she replied with a bemused smile. “And you came all the way from sunny California to talk about writing a book about me. I guess I should be flattered. No, I *am* flattered.”

“The truth is, I was coming here anyway. I suspect my plans were set before yours.”

She thought for a moment, then playfully slapped her forehead. “That’s right. Your car.”

“You got it. Anyway, Marla Jo *is* a friend, as you say. We’ve worked together on some writing things over the years. As to what she told me about you . . . next to nothing.”

In truth, Marla Jo Taylor and David Jacobs had talked in the early afternoon the day before. David knew a great deal about Charlene Tuell before their chance encounter in the bar. But then, and now, he wanted to hear her story from her.

“But you heard enough you agreed to write a book about me?”

“Nope. Not even close. But let me ask. Other than your clever moniker in a title, why did *you* agree?”

When a literary agent approached her about sharing her story, Charley initially warmed to the idea of writing an inspirational non-fiction book based on her unique career and notoriety. She talked it over with Kristi Andrews, her best friend in Seattle, who believed it might be just the ticket to get Charley healthy again, mentally and emotionally. And Kristi thought a successful book

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might have the added benefit of exacting a measure of revenge on Charley's ex-husband.

Kristi had taken it upon herself to advance the idea to Marla Jo Taylor, a college classmate and successful writer living in Kentucky. Marla Jo's husband, Ben, remembered reading about "Charley Chaplain" in a Seattle newspaper while visiting there years ago. He agreed a book might have promise, adding another voice to those urging Charley onward. But on the nonstop flight from Seattle to Nashville, the closest major airport to Bowling Green, she'd made her decision.

"I haven't agreed. And I won't. I promised Kristi I'd listen to Marla Jo. I did. I promised Marla Jo I'd meet you. Now I have. Done and done. All that's left now is for you and me to go our separate ways, back to our separate lives."

He stared into his empty coffee cup. "If that's what you want."

"Don't you?"

He lifted his eyes to meet hers. "I thought we might try to be more than just friends."

"Wouldn't we first have to become friends?"

"Getting ahead of myself."

"Just a wee bit."

He smiled. "Happens from time to time. So, what about being friends?"

She let his words marinate, thinking about his assertion he had qualities beyond being a writer. From their brief time together over the past twelve hours, she had no doubts. Her doubts were about herself.

"Not much future in that, wouldn't you think? You off on Route 66, back to California."

"True. What about you?"

She sought a place on the crowded table to rest her empty hands.

Finding none, she dropped them to her lap.

“Here for a while, then probably back to Seattle.” She knew she had to return, though not as quickly as she’d soon learn.

“On the other hand—”

“Is there one?” she asked.

“I think so. Go with me now to watch my car being born. Have dinner with me tonight. You might even come to like me.” With a sheepish grin, he added, “Just a *wee* bit.”

Her face broke into an unrestrained smile.

“I might, at that. I just might. But I’ll pass on the car birthing.”

“Why?”

She reflected for a few seconds. “Too much of an intimate experience for you to be sharing with someone you barely know.”

He couldn’t mask his disappointment.” Any chance I can persuade you it isn’t?”

She shook her head.

“Okay, for dinner, how about—”

“I didn’t say yes to that either.”

He hoped she was only being coy. “Well?”

“Sure, why not,” she answered matter-of-factly with a shrug. “I have nothing else planned.”

“It’s not an act of mercy. It’s just dinner.”

“Sorry, David.” Concern in her voice. “Didn’t mean to come across that way.” She looked at his stoic countenance. “Does that mean you don’t want to have dinner with me now?”

One Mississippi, two Mississippi. “Only kidding. I’ll even dress up. Over dinner, we can plan the rest of our weekend.”

She was relieved to be back in the game. “Aren’t you the confident one?”

“Confident? No. Optimistic? Yes. Should I be?”

“Maybe yes, maybe no.”

F O R T H E L O V E O F C H A R L E Y C H A P L A I N

“Funny. I said that very thing last night, but you were already gone.”

“And yet, here we are.” She paused. “Mark 9:23.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Biblical shorthand for anything’s possible.”

After hearing “Have a blessed day” from Karen as they departed her Kastle, Charley and David exchanged cell phone numbers while standing in the oil-stained and uneven gravel parking lot close to nearby railroad tracks. They agreed David would make dinner reservations and pick her up at Marla Jo’s house in a leafy, highly desirable suburban neighborhood.

“Should I be on the lookout for your new chariot?”

“Of course,” he replied.

“Excited?”

“Beyond words.”

“Coming from a Hollywood wordsmith, that’s saying something.”

“You’ll find I often err on the side of understatement.”

“Something I already know.”

“Thought you might.”

A warm smile accompanied, “Until tonight, Mr. Australia.”