

# THEO *of* GOLDEN



a novel

A L L E N   L E V I

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Theo of Golden

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1. Fiction, Literary

To Cubby Culbertson,  
as a token of gratitude for our long friendship  
and a reminder, just between us, that you  
promised to buy a hundred copies of the book  
if I dedicated it to you.  
Will that be cash or charge?

THEO *of* GOLDEN





“Ellen’s wilted halo.  
Christmas shoes of Lamisha W.  
Pill bottle of Bobbo.  
Found feather of the absent jay.  
October sky above the Oxbow.  
Oceanscape at Biscopo.  
The blues of Golden were plentiful that year.”

From a brochure announcing  
an art exhibit at Zila Gallery

## PROLOGUE

**T**heo was in Golden for only a year, from springtime to springtime. He arrived just before Easter, when the Boughery and the Promenade were an ocean of dogwood blooms and azaleas. When pollen settled like a lemon patina on every exposed surface in the city.

Over time, his friends would learn that he had a great fondness for rivers. Be it the Douro of his childhood, the Seine of his glory days, the Hudson of his retirement, or the half dozen others that flowed through his various hometowns, he had a riparian instinct that seemed to draw him toward moving water. Growing up in a maritime nation might have had something to do with it. Perhaps every son of Portugal has the sojourning spirit of Magellan in his blood.

Whatever the reason, it is not surprising that he chose to live beside the Oxbow when he was in Golden. From his back window, facing west, he could see it at any hour of the day. From just outside his back door, three stories up, he could hear it. Or so he said. At every place or any hour, with his eyes closed, he could feel it, could sense its determined pursuit of the gulf, its winding journey south, its glad march to the Atlantic.

Only a year. Not so long. But long enough to create a current of his own and to catch others in it. Without knowing it, a whole cadre — Asher, Tony, Ellen, Basil, dozens of others — was being carried along by the vortex that was Theo.

Floating.

Sailing.

Gathering mass and momentum.

Running to an ocean they knew little about at the time.

And looking back, all would have said — in praise of that old Portuguese man with the lilt in his voice and the hint of a smile constantly on his lips — “our hearts,” to use the preacher’s words, “our hearts burned within us.”

# CHAPTER 1

**O**n his first full day in Golden, Theo woke early, pulled back the curtains of his hotel room, and looked out over the southern dawn. He had arrived the previous afternoon from his home in New York City, where winter, with a newsworthy late-season mixture of snow and ice, was in full fury. The flight to Atlanta (on a private jet) and the drive farther south to Golden (in a chauffeur-driven Lincoln Town Car) had transported him to a world of warmth, abloom in myriad shades of green, yellow, lavender, and pink.

Now, waking from a night of restful sleep, he stood inches from the window and breathed deeply, as if he might somehow inhale the freshness of morning through the panes of glass. He gazed admiringly at the first touches of springtime.

His eyes moved westward to the broad, meandering flow of the Oxbow River. A ribbon of fog hovered over the water.

From three stories up and through the dim light before sunrise, Theo recognized many of the landmarks he had studied in preparation for his trip: the cobblestone streets, the Iron Works, the old cotton warehouses, the antebellum oaks.

But three stories up was not nearly close enough for someone of his inquisitive disposition. He dressed comfortably, inspected himself in the mirror, straightened his collar and scarf, and turned off the lights. He hung a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door handle and took the stairs to the hotel lobby. He tipped his hat to the desk clerk and stepped out into the cool morning, eager to walk the streets before they became busy with foot traffic and automobiles.

Other than a coffee shop and a small diner, the businesses along Broadway were closed. Theo had the sidewalk almost entirely to himself as he began his walk.

He had no particular destination or goal in mind. Whenever he saw an object or sight that interested him — and he was a man very easily interested — he paused and lingered until his curiosity was satisfied.

He was, for instance, interested in the ornamental iron work on the

facade of the corner building. Who made it? When? How?

He was interested in the composition of the bricks in the old but well-preserved building that now housed a college admissions office.

He was interested in the plaque that told the story of the median, called the Promenade, that ran down the middle of Broadway. (Wherever he lived or traveled, Theo made a habit of reading historic markers, something he was able to do proficiently in five languages.)

He was interested in a sculpture, of modern vintage, near the entrance of the university nursing school.

He took particular interest in a small bird that perched and begged for crumbs from a bench along the sidewalk.

Theo stopped, bent slightly at the waist with his hands clasped behind him, and whispered to the imploring creature. "I'm sorry, dear fellow, but I have nothing to give you this morning. Perhaps tomorrow? And stop complaining. Be glad you're not in New York today."

He picked up an empty beer bottle and put it in a nearby trash can.

At one point, he took out a small magnifying glass, a loupe, from his pocket to study a purplish azalea bloom.

And on and on.

Those punctuations of interest turned Theo's walk into a crawl. By the time he had gone a mere two blocks, morning traffic was steady, the sidewalks were beginning to buzz with students and businesspeople, and the parking spaces on both sides of the Promenade, which had been vacant earlier, were almost full.

But not to worry.

On this day, and for the foreseeable future, Theo had no deadlines, no meetings, and no obligations. He was at liberty to enjoy the carefreeness of unfettered flexibility and complete anonymity. He was a mere tourist.

He did not know a soul in the town.

Well . . . perhaps one.

He was not yet certain how long he would be there — weeks, months, longer? — but in very short order, he was pleased with the feel of his new temporary home.

First impression: a very pleasant place to be, and appropriately named.

**Golden.**