CHAPTER ONE

Falling in Love

Dottie Benveniste hung up the telephone and there was a definite smile on her face. She was intrigued by the conversation she’s just completed. Dottie had been assigned the job by her friends in their young women’s group to invite some young men to a Halloween party they were planning. They figured that college boys would be perfect, since they were probably relatively intelligent and had something going in their lives.

She had heard about a veteran students’ residence at UCLA (the University of California at Los Angeles) and that sounded even better. Here would be some college men who were a little older and more mature. Her friends wouldn’t mind that at all. Calling the veterans co-op was a good idea, but there was one glitch: Dottie called the wrong number.

The UCLA Military Student Co-op maintained a sizeable residence in Westwood adjacent to the campus. That residence was filled to capacity in the years following World War II, but a small annex had opened up a few miles away to accommodate the overflow. Dottie did not even know about the annex and thought she was calling the main co-op. She got the annex number by mistake. This little error might not have mattered one way or another except for one thing. The boy on the telephone who had intrigued her -- Bernie Novatt -- lived at the annex, not the main residence. So she called the wrong number, but it turned out to be quite a fortunate mistake.

Bernie Novatt was two months away from his 21st birthday on Halloween of 1948. He had served his time in the U.S. Army in post-war Europe and had already returned to his native New York that spring when he received an intriguing offer from his old friend Stanley Freilich to visit him in California. Stanley and his parents had moved to Hollywood from Brooklyn a year earlier.

“California,” Bernie thought to himself, “I might as well. I’ve heard so much about it, but have never been there.”

In the back of Bernie’s mind, the idea developed to perhaps make this more than a quick trip. Stanley raved about how great California was, the weather, the beautiful girls, the freshness of this youthful city. It was not like New York where everything was old and established. According to Stanley, there was growth and opportunity everywhere you looked in Los Angeles.

Bernie had figured that he would re-enroll at CCNY (City College of New York) to finish the AA degree he’d started before enlisting. He did that and now nothing was really tying him down. Maybe now was the time to pursue something fresh. Bernie stayed in New York long enough to attend his brother Leo’s wedding, then boarded a Greyhound bus for the West Coast. Five days later he stepped off into the dazzling sunshine of Hollywood.

“I wish I’d brought some sunglasses,” Bernie said to himself. “No wonder all the movie stars wear them.

“What do I remember? One of my first impressions was how delicious my bacon-lettuce-and tomato sandwich was. It had avocado in it. I had never tasted avocado before, had barely heard of it…but it was delicious. I fell in love with avocados and tried to include them in everything I ordered. The night I discovered guacamole, I was even more impressed. I probably had my first margarita that same night.”

More than just his first exposure to the food, Bernie immediately sensed the potential Stanley had been talking about. He had the strong feeling that it was time to move on with his life, do something really different, and Los Angeles just might be the perfect place to make this happen.

Dottie was from the East Coast, too, Washington, D.C., but had moved to L.A. with her family a couple of years earlier. She graduated high school here and was working full time as a dental hygienist while taking night classes at Los Angeles City College. She was active in her Sephardic Jewish temple and it was the temple’s young women’s club that was throwing the Halloween party at one of the girls’ houses.

Dottie was a pretty girl, 18 years old, with medium length brown hair, enchanting blue eyes and a winning smile. She liked to learn new things, read voraciously and was very intelligent. She’d been the valedictorian of her graduating class. Dottie had dated a little, but had never had a serious boyfriend. She wished that would change, of course. Meeting a nice boy would be just fine with her.

Bernie knew that UCLA had a fine reputation for academics. He enrolled in the summer term and was pleased that his 45 units from CCNY transferred over without a snag. If he took a full load, he’d be able to graduate with his AA degree by the next summer. Bernie applied for residence in the Military Veterans Student Co-op and although it was already full, gained lodging in their annex -- a house donated by a UCLA graduate around 10 miles east of UCLA. It was located on Crescent Heights Drive, which happened to be in a Jewish part of town and was near the famous Schwab’s drug store where Hollywood stars were known to frequent the soda counter.

The young New Yorker enjoyed UCLA and appreciated that he was getting a good education there. He enrolled for the fall term with a goal of completing his AA and progressing on to dental school. Bernie’s tuition at UCLA was only $100 per term and his rent at the co-op just $40 per month -- including three meals a day (and a steak on Sunday nights). Gas was only 16.9¢ per gallon and Bernie was not a big shopper. He could live well enough on the money he had left over from the Army and devote himself to studying without worrying about getting a serious job.

“I did not want to activate my GI Bill benefits yet,” Bernie said. “I didn’t need to, and I knew I could apply my benefits to something bigger in the future. As a veteran, though, I was entitled to collect $20 per week unemployment as long as I was not working and not in school. When the summer term ended, I did collect a few checks before the start of the fall term. It was the one and only time in my life that I ever collected unemployment.”

Bernie took a full load of classes in the fall of 1948, with a wrestling class included along with his academic courses. He took a challenging physics class that started with 250 students but was down to 150 after the first test just two weeks later. The professor graded on a curve and it turned out that 35 points out of 100 was a ‘C’ on the test and 20 still passed as a ‘D.’ Still, lots of students didn’t score even that high.

“Luckily I was good at that kind of thing,” Bernie recalled. “People were dropping out like crazy, but it didn’t seem too tough to me. I remember that a ‘B’ was 75 out of 100 -- and I got 85.

Dottie told her friends that she had made her phone call to the UCLA veteran students’ co-op and a group of guys were coming to the Halloween party. She didn’t mention at the time that she had really liked talking to the young man she had presented the invitation to. His name was Bernie Novatt. He was from New York and Jewish! Hmm…

Bernie, meanwhile, spread the word about the invitation to his fellow residents and six or eight agreed to go to the party. When Halloween rolled around, they loaded into two cars and headed across town to the address Dottie had given him.

“They were a little late, though, so of course I was nervous,” Dottie said. “My neck was on the line! Thank Heaven they did show up and we got the party started.”

(Interestingly none of the men wore costumes to the party and only a couple of the women dressed up. Maybe college students in the late ‘40s were “too cool” for that.)

As the UCLA men introduced themselves, Dottie and Bernie connected right away.

“I was so curious to meet him,” Dottie said. “Then there he was giving me a nice smile. He was handsome! Medium height, slender build with brown hair. Bernie was very polite and well mannered, a little bit shy at first, but after that he was at ease. We started talking and connected right away.”

“I remembered that it was a girl named Dottie who had invited us,” Bernie reminisced, “and was glad to see that she was so pretty and so friendly when I actually met her. She gave me a really cute smile right away and I knew I’d like to get to know her better. As it turned out, we talked all night.”

Bernie found out that Dottie was Sephardic, a branch of Judaism he knew very little about. He had no way of knowing that he would one day come to be something of an expert.

Bernie and Dottie were both interested in politics and found that they were on the same wavelength -- liberals, progressives, fans of Franklin Roosevelt, supporting Henry Wallace in the election just a week away. Unfortunately neither was 21 yet and could not actually vote.

(Wallace had been Roosevelt’s very liberal vice president in an early term and was running on the independent “progressive” ticket. Harry Truman, who was Roosevelt’s last vice president and took over when FDR died in office, was running for re-election as a Democrat. Thomas Dewey was the Republican and picked by the newspapers as the overwhelming favorite to win. When Truman won instead, it was the greatest upset in U.S. presidential history.) (Maybe have to amend that to second greatest upset after 2016. )

Bernie had participated in a demonstration in front of a Westwood barber shop that would not cut black people’s hair. Upstairs neighbors poured water down on the students demonstrating and several raced upstairs to fight. The whole group faced criminal charges and actually went to trial. But all charges were dropped.

“I was interested in changing the world,” Bernie said. “Dottie agreed with my politics and was making lots of interesting points on her own. She had grown up in Washington. She was obviously well read and very intelligent. We talked about our families, our goals in life…we just talked and talked.”

“When the music started, I found out that Bernie liked to dance,” Dottie said. “Most guys were kind of reluctant, but Bernie was a good dancer. I had practiced so much with my three sisters that I was up on all the popular dances. Bernie and I danced the swing, fox trot, jitterbug and a several slow dances. We even tried a little tango. Bernie was the only boy I danced with all night.”

“I had taken an Arthur Murray course back in New York,” Bernie admitted. “Before that I couldn’t really dance, but I got pretty good. It came in handy with Dottie. She was a great dancer and we loved dancing together.”

The night passed all too quickly and when it was time to say good-bye, Bernie and Dottie made a date for New Year’s Eve. Dottie had a full time job and went to school at night and Bernie was focused on making good grades that fall term. But neither one had anything serious going on romantically and no plans for New Years, so that was going to be their first real date.

They did talk on the phone a few times, but did not see each other again until New Year’s Eve.

Bernie drove to Dottie’s house and noticed he was delighted when she came to the door.

“She was as pretty as I remembered and gave me that great smile again,” he recalled. “It made me wonder why I had waited so long to see her.”

They drove out to Venice Beach where some of Bernie’s friends were having a party. It was dark when they got there, but they walked up to a few different campfires until they found the right one. Bernie and Dottie socialized with the group for a while, then took a long stroll along the water. They talked about everything. Walking along, he reached over to take her hand. Dottie took it willingly and squeezed back with enthusiasm. Along the way back they stopped for their first kiss.

At the end of the night, they lingered a while on Dottie’s front porch. Bernie said he’d had a very nice time and would like to see her again, but he had his exams at the end of January and could they wait until the end of the month to go out again? Dottie was disappointed but tried not to show it. He promised to call and gave her a hug and another quick kiss as he said good-bye.

But Bernie didn’t call.

“I couldn’t understand it,” Dottie said. We had had such a nice time, got along so well… I thought about him a lot, even told my friends that things felt really special. January passed all the way through and now February was going by and still no call. I decided to take things into my own hands.”

Dottie went to Bernie’s co-op and recognized his car on the street out front. She could hear some clanking noises under the car and there were legs sticking out. She figured it was him.

“Oh Bernie,” she called out.

Bernie slid out from under the car, surprised. He squinted into the sun. Once he recognized Dottie, he smiled.

“Why didn’t you call me?” she asked, wasting no time in getting to the point.

“I’m sorry!” he said. He was glad to see Dottie and after a bit of an effort, talked his way out of the hot water. They talked for a couple of hours and made a date for the next weekend.

Their schedules were busy, but Bernie and Dottie started seeing each other at least once a week if at all possible, and their feelings grew steadily warmer. They took long drives and romantic walks, went to the movies, went out to simple dinners, she introduced him to Clifton’s Cafeteria. There was a little club not far from Dottie’s house that had live music and dancing. They went there several times, dancing into the night.

Dottie’s mother invited Bernie over for dinner. He had met each of her parents, as well as her younger sisters, but always briefly. This was to be the full immersion.

“It was a very nice evening,” Bernie said. “Her parents were warm and friendly and made me feel right at home. I liked her sisters, Pat and Joyce, too. There was obviously a lot of love in the family. And Dottie’s mother…what a cook!”

By now both Bernie and Dottie knew they were falling in love. They were dating each other exclusively, “going steady.” They didn’t really talk about it, but they could each see that there was a future together.

Bernie was having serious second thoughts about becoming a dentist. For one thing, he didn’t think he had “the hands” for intricate work like that. He discussed this several times with his friend Stan Freilich. They had started college together back in New York with the plan to become dentists, and were both at UCLA now. Stan was coming to the same conclusion. They looked at the possibility of becoming optometrists or pharmacists instead, and agreed that pharmacy was the way to go.

In March of 1949, Bernie applied to pharmacy school at both USC (the University of Southern California) and the University of Colorado. (Pharmacy schools were somewhat limited at that time and UCLA did not have one.) He had good grades, would have his AA degree by June and was a veteran. From his research, he expected to be accepted by both schools. He would then choose USC.

But then came the unexpected. Bernie was accepted to Colorado right away, but informed that he did not make the cut for USC. They would put him on their waiting list, but there were already a dozen applicants ahead of him. It did not look good for getting in this year.

Bernie loved Dottie and wanted to be with her, but he was serious about his future and determined to get his pharmacy degree as efficiently as possible so that he could get on with his career. He wrote to the University of Colorado and accepted their opening.

He knew that Dottie would be heartbroken at this news and dreaded telling her. When he did, Bernie could see it in her face that she was crushed, even though she tried hard to hold back the tears. He was going to be gone for the next two years and he told her that it didn’t make sense to try to continue their relationship. It wasn’t fair to make promises that might prove extremely difficult to keep.

The next two months were bittersweet. Bernie and Dottie spent a lot of time together and couldn’t help falling in love more deeply. But their love was tinged with sadness at the knowledge that it was inevitably coming to an end. It was hard to imagine not being together.

“I didn’t try to discourage Bernie,” Dottie said. “I had the strongest feeling in my heart that he was the one for me, but I also knew that his priority was getting his degree. It wouldn’t have been fair to try to talk him out of going…and if I had, I might lose him.

“But then, what did it matter? Bernie was going to Colorado and I was losing him anyway…”