

LEZLIE'S LIFELINE

SOMETIMES SECOND CHANCES COME
IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED PLACES

LOREE PEERY

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LoRee Peery

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

To my daughter, Chantell. I am so proud of the woman, mother, and nurse you are.

Praise for LoRee Peery

Moselle's Insurance

Moselle's Insurance is more than a policy...it's a secret worth learning. Highly recommended for any reader who loves stellar writing and a gripping storyline that honors Christ from beginning to end.—
Delia Latham

LoRee Peery is a gifted writer with a touch for heart-tugging romance that encompasses not just love, but faith and overcoming the odds as well. Her writing voice is smooth and engaging and her plot line of reconciliation and fresh hope kept me turning the pages.—Marianne Evans

1

"Watchmen, what is left of the night?"

*"Morning is coming, but also the night."—Isaiah
21:11-12*

Lezlie Diamond waved her hand in front of the automatic door sensor and rushed through. The swish gave way to a rustle of clothing, and something solid hitting the door.

"You didn't get the doctor in time. I told you my wife was in trouble."

Car, pedestrian, fatal. I tried.

"Sir, this is a restricted area." Her heart thumped in her ears. She stopped all forward motion. "Let's go back to the nurse's station."

"It's your fault she died." Mr. Hanson used heated hand gestures to accent every word.

The accusation mentally zapped Lezlie into the patient's room, where the dreaded nightmare event happened moments earlier. The silence had screamed they were too late. Silence except for the flat-line beep. No one breathed. Then, at her "Code Blue!" command, organized chaos ensued. She'd grabbed the crash cart herself. As a team, they attempted CPR, Auto External Defib, Epinephrine, Endotracheal tubes.

Nothing saved the patient.

We can't revive everyone. God has His say when it comes to life and death.

Back inside the public area, she leaned against the counter above the nurse's desk. When she caught sight

of a night security uniform at the end of the hall, Lezlie drew in a sigh of relief. Desk personnel must have called.

“Mr. Hanson, I am so sorry,” she said to the shocked and grieving husband.

With fisted hands on his hips, one corner of his mouth twisted low. “Save it. You let my wife die.”

The hospital corridor filled with people: the charge nurse, the chaplain, the critical care nurse, and whoever was on duty from several departments. The dark-haired, broad-shouldered security officer in midnight blue hovered behind the group.

The chaplain took charge of Mr. Hanson, diverting his attention. Once she was convinced he had calmed, Lezlie sought solitude. At the computer in a nook down another hallway, she filled out her end-of-shift paperwork. She prayed for concentration as she went through the procedure, noting that the chaplain and irate husband were gone, no doubt to the chapel. Finally finished, she logged out.

But she couldn't leave yet. She met the gaze of Cheryl Gates, the charge nurse, who shook her head when Lezlie stepped forward. Cheryl mouthed, “No.”

Cheryl must have guessed Lezlie wanted to stay and comfort other family members, who returned to the patient's room. Lezlie had helped clean up the patient, the room, and then repositioned the broken and battered body that once housed Mrs. Hanson's soul.

Lezlie's legs threatened to give way on her walk to the locker room. She dialed the padlock three times before it released. She grabbed for her bag. In seconds, patient rooms gave way to long hallways closed to the public eye. She bypassed employee elevators and

disappeared down the restricted staircase.

Am I responsible for her death? Could I have done something else?

She stormed through the exit door, racing to her SUV in ground parking on the north side of the hospital.

"Halt!"

She caught the flash of midnight blue behind her. Who was security after?

"I said, wait." An iron fist grabbed her elbow. "Why are you running? No one runs to their car after working all night."

"I needed fresh air." Nothing chasing me but regrets and self-questioning what-ifs.

An outside light revealed his face. Black hair. His unique, exotic, Asian look made her sway. Only his strong grip kept her feet under her. "Jordan?"

"Lezlie. You're a nurse."

"You're an officer of the law."

Jordan Marshall: childhood friend, teen lifeline, and the father of her son. But he'd been a little on the disreputable side as well. It was a bit much to take in, his being on the right side of the law.

His teeth gleamed in his dark face. "You're no longer fun-sized."

The old endearment pulled an answering smile from her. "Weird, huh? I grew two inches my junior year and another when I was eighteen."

Jordan tilted his head as though it weighed too much. "We need to go there, catch up. But for right now, let's cover what happened inside."

"It's fine. I'll be fine. Except, I'm really tired. One of these days I need to apply for the day shift."

"Know what you mean. I've worked nights for a

while now." He ran his gaze over her features.

The mirror told her she hadn't changed much since they last saw one another, except for deeper smile lines.

He looked distinctly delicious and the sound of his voice woke up every dormant longing. "I took the call a deceased patient's husband followed you off the floor. Did he hurt you? Threaten you in any way?"

"No. He's grieving. What he's going through must be awful. His wife was out running after dark. In the median, in the middle of a busy block, she was struck by a pickup that jumped the curb."

"I can't imagine. He looked about our age."

Out of who-knew-where, she asked, "Do you have a wife, Jordan?"

"Divorced. Married a police cadet when we were in training."

"What happened?"

"She wasn't you." His luminous brown eyes filled. Lezlie couldn't help herself. "Any children?"

"No"

Lezlie melted. She wanted to screw up her face and bawl her eyes out. Half her life she had refused to give Jordan a thought.

What would he do if he knew who she lived and worked for, the second half of her life?

She wasn't you.

Ah, Lezlie. My heart hurts.

Jordan couldn't stop looking at her. The reality of Lezlie was hard to soak in after half a lifetime. But there she stood, with her father's lavender-blue eyes,

freckles and red hair she'd inherited from her mother. Lovely. He'd always figured she'd turn into a beauty.

He blinked away the sentiment, and admitted how hurt he'd been when she disappeared after her mother died.

Sorry, Lord. I've avoided facing that all these years. Why would You bring her back into my life now?

She was as statuesque as the light pole behind her. He raised his eyes as the light blinked out. Full daylight now.

"I need to check in. I was on my way out before the call from your floor came in. They knew I was walking you out."

When Jordan finished reporting in, Lezlie opened her mouth, but hesitated. She gazed over his shoulder at the hospital, then focused on him. "Are you as awake as I am? No way can I go home and climb into the sack. Any chance we can go somewhere and talk?"

"I'd like that. Wonder if we have enough time to catch up on everything that's happened?"

They turned in a synchronized motion and strode side by side, steps matching.

"What's your dad up to?" he asked.

"It took him a long time to let Mom go. He has twenty acres on the southeast edge of Lincoln, where he works with horses. Found a lady love from Platteville. They got married Labor Day weekend."

"Glad to hear it. I always admired and respected your dad. My folks live in a retirement village in New Mexico. Dad got transferred with a new job after you moved away, and our family lived there for a couple years. When a job opened up here right after I got out of the police academy, I came back. Mom and Dad like it because they can come up once or twice a year to

visit old friends and have a place to stay, with me." He paused to wave a hand. "This is my ride. Where are you parked?"

Lezlie giggled and made an instant decision, wrapped in the comfort of their camaraderie. "We're nose to nose. Come on to my place, and we'll talk without time restraints."

"Took the words right out of my mouth. Your last name is on your badge. I need to make sure that guy doesn't find out where you live."

2

Lezlie parked in the driveway rather than use the remote door opener, so nothing in the garage would expose the existence of her son to Jordan's inquisitive eye. Thank goodness Jaxson had spent last night at Dad's.

She waited in the drive until Jordan was by her side. At the front door, she inserted her key. "Do you want coffee, or will it keep you from sleeping later?"

Jordan shut and secured the door and followed her through the hall. In the open living area he stopped to admire the wall quilt made by Geneva Harris from *Frivolities*. "That's quite the art. You still have a thing for turtles. And you like the same colors."

He remembered what she liked? Then again, she knew his birthday. It had been too long since she'd taken time to admire the orange, green, and purple in the hanging quilt. "Have to admit. I still like turtles. My step-mom's sister made the wall art. It comes from a terrific shop called *Frivolities*, in Platteville."

She jogged left and closed Jaxson's door on her way into the kitchen nook, so thankful he was grown and no childish art work was displayed on the fridge. She nonchalantly turned over the high school activity calendar when she reached for the coffee canister.

She felt his gaze observe every move. Flustered, she turned into a teenager again. Her fingers trembled when she separated the filters. She jumped at the

sound of Jordan's voice.

"Do you think about me, Lez? We were friends all through school. I'm the boy who kissed you between the water fountains in second grade. Remember?"

The last one to kiss me with meaning. She closed her eyes, and clunked her forehead against a cabinet. The weight of how she'd wronged him wouldn't support her head. "Please," she whispered.

"Please what?" He leaned in so close she felt his warmth. His low voice zipped down her side, ear to ankle. "I was devastated, you know."

She swallowed. Nothing but dryness in her mouth. "You're too close. Please step back if you want this coffee."

"I want more than coffee. I want...actually I *need* to know what happened."

He stepped away and she finished the task. Turning to look him in the eye, Lezlie admitted, "I was messed up after Mom died. Much of what happened is blocked, except she suffered horribly." *And I remember that last night with you.*

"Get that. But why did you use me and toss me aside?" His eyes turned so dark she couldn't discern the pupils from the irises. Then they turned luminous. "Where did you disappear to?"

Lezlie wanted to claw at the restriction in her throat. "Dad moved us across town. I stayed in the new school until spring."

And then I had our baby. And I dealt with my guilt over that when I realized guilt doesn't come from the Lord, once we've sought forgiveness.

"I am so sorry, Jordan. Why do teenagers do ninety percent of what they do?"

The muscle in his cheek jumped. He broke eye

contact and loosened his jaw. The coffeemaker quit spitting and gurgling. The clock from the living room clicked. They both jerked when the ice maker dropped a chunk.

She released a nervous laugh. "Have a seat. I've got some pumpkin cookies to go with our coffee. Unless you want a real breakfast?"

"Thanks, no. I ate at four a.m."

Jordan didn't sit, but helped her set the replica chrome and Formica table, then pulled out her chair. "We need to talk about what happened. Please talk to me now. You clammed up when you were fifteen."

I poured out my heart to you. Late at night, when I only had my baby for company.

Lezlie tented her hand over her cup, removing it after the steam warmed her palm. She noticed his mug was half empty already. Then she met his gaze. "We're not fifteen any longer."

He slanted a demi-smile that curled his lip and crinkled his eyes. *He's still hot. Hotter than ever. I'm in deep trouble.*

Lezlie poured creamer in her coffee and stirred. She relished the hazelnut fragrance before she tasted.

"Better than the black stuff on the hospital floors, huh? But it keeps us awake when we're on duty. Great cookies."

"Thanks. They're one of..." She almost said Jaxson's name! "That tasteless mud is a conspiracy. But a few departments splurge on flavor, not to mention the specialty coffees in the shop downstairs."

"I'm done talking wake-up brew." Jordan covered her free hand with his. "Tell me about what made you want to become a nurse. Where you went to school. Everything."

"I didn't know I wanted to be a nurse until after I earned an associate's degree from community college. I couldn't stop thinking about Mom and how other people deserve adequate care. So, I haven't been at the hospital all that long." She gave him cryptic answers with few details. Omitted the years she stayed at home when her dad helped with Jaxson's care while she finished high school studies, followed by college.

It took all she had to keep thoughts of Jaxson at bay. She'd dedicated many years to her son before thinking about her own future. She could have talked for hours about him and how proud she was. Especially the way he went to teen church services by himself on Saturday nights and preferred working for his grandfather over slinging burgers.

"The most important thing that happened is coming to Christ. Halfway through R.N. training, a friend invited me to Second Chance Church to hear a special speaker. I realized my sin, admitted my belief, and invited Jesus into my life."

"Unbelievable. Second Chance, you say? That's where I've attended for about a year, when I'm not working." His warm laughter woke up all the memories, erasing the years. "I should go so you can get some sleep. You on tonight?"

"I am, after the brew I don't know how soon I'll be able to crash. But I've worked on little sleep before."

"I'm on duty at the hospital, too. You know I'll have your back if you need me." He gave her a quick hug.

She was so stunned, she watched him leave without walking him out.

Jordan drove home on autopilot. Even after working all night, Lezlie smelled familiar, like a warm summer night. He recalled how fragile her fine-fingered hand felt in his. They used to trace the lines in each other's palms, marvel at the way they matched. Were those lines still the same length?

Lezlie had been on the chubby side as a preteen, but perfectly fit now, maybe too thin. And when she laughed, who could think about sleep?

She'd gotten nervous at the strangest times, stopped herself after starting to say something. He had the oddest sensation she withheld an important part of her story. Maybe she'd been married a short time and didn't want to talk about it. He couldn't imagine it, but could be she'd walked on the wild side and been in trouble.

One thing he knew, losing her mother changed Lezlie's life.

Whatever that change involved, he was determined to get to the bottom of who Lezlie Diamond was now. And whatever happened, he'd keep his promise. He'd always have her back, for no other reason than he was as besotted as when they were kids.

3

I've always had your back.

Sleep wasn't happening. Lezlie tossed and turned. Every time she closed her eyes, one of two thoughts kept her from relaxing into slumber.

The deceased patient kept coming to mind. Had Lezlie messed up somehow before the woman coded? Was Lezlie supposed to be a nurse? *Lord, help me shake off the doubts.*

And the biggie. How could she sort out what to do about Jordan and Jaxson? Had she made the wrong choice by not telling her father who was responsible for her pregnancy? He would have gone after Jordan. At the time, she thought she was protecting everyone by not revealing her baby's father.

Instead, she now feared she'd deprived them all.

Then her mind flew back to the distraught husband. *I did my job, am I responsible for Mrs. Hanson's death?*

As if answering her question, the Spirit assured her that life and death were in God's hands. She turned her last wakeful moments to the verses of Psalm 139. The Lord ordained her days and knew her heart. He'd help her sort out any trouble she faced.

Four hours later, Lezlie pulled into the employee

lot. Yawning, she parked next to Jordan's foreign gas saver. She wasn't surprised. He'd always been a conservative. She'd never imagined him as an officer of the law, though.

His exotic dark looks with his drop-dead grin, and the ripped way he filled out his uniform, occupied her thoughts all the way to her floor.

He was waiting at the nurse's station when she stepped off the elevator, and he held her gaze until she was close enough to see his single dimple. Jordan's dark eyes held a sparkle instead of fatigue.

"You woke up in time," he said, checking out her face and hair.

"Haven't been late to work yet. Did you get enough rest?"

"I usually crash right after church on Sunday night."

"At Second Chance."

"Right. The congregants have grown so much, there's worship Saturday and Sunday nights."

"I know, That's where—" Lezlie stopped on a gasp. She almost spilled, *where Jaxson goes on Saturday*. "—I try to go, but don't make it very often after working all night."

"Excuse me," Cheryl said, "but we have patients."

Lezlie felt the blush. "Sorry. Officer Marshall and I are old friends. Do I need to be on guard tonight?"

"The House Supervisor contacted me. Both the chaplain and head of security assured him the Hanson family came to terms. No one blames you or anyone at the hospital for what took place last night," Cheryl responded.

"When do you take a break?" Jordan asked. He was holding back a smile. Did he get a kick out of her