



LoRee Peery

*A Blessed
Blue Christmas*

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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2013

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-288-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my daughter, Paige, who has shared a lifetime of birthdays close to the day Jesus was born. Your creative beauty shines through the lives you touch, and I am so proud of you for embracing the next chapter of your life story.

Praise

Found in the Woods is a masterful story filled with hope, faith, and healing. Beth and Aiden are on a journey to find healing from past hurts and their place in life. Lakota, the wolf they befriend, is a strong symbol of all they struggle with. Beth's strong faith guides her through difficult times as her abusive ex-husband is in pursuit and she tries to overcome a feeling of unworthiness. Secondary characters have depth and bring much to the storyline. I loved to watch Aiden come into faith due to Beth's strong example. There is much to love about this story and the entire Frivolities series!—Mary Manners

Lezlie's Lifeline, a dollar download, is a quick read at just 34 pages. However, those 34 pages are packed with action, drama, and romance in a way that pulls you in and just doesn't let you up for air. It's got the awww moments and the heart stopping moments, not to mention the 'the author did what???' moments. We meet new characters as well as the old friends from the previous books. If you love LoRee Peery's books, don't miss this one.—Clare Revell

1

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.—Proverbs 3:5-6

“Dahlia Delisi, could I have a word?” The man’s soft-spoken voice pulled her attention away from the metallic blue camisole she draped over the dressing room door in a back corner of *The Blue Dahlia* boutique.

She glanced up and her mouth dropped open. Sloan?

The customer’s *thanks* on the other side of the swinging door shook her mind into shutting her mouth. A Christmas rock tune playing over the speakers segued into Bobby Vinton’s voice and then faded into the background.

“That’s right. Sloan Letheby, U.S. Marshal.”

Dahlia prided herself on the ability to keep her thoughts hidden, no matter the situation. Not this time. Recognition of this man from her past startled her beyond surprise.

He’d crossed her mind over the years. Never once had she imagined him electing to shave his head. But the lack of hair made an onlooker get lost in his eyes. The deep blue irises with gold surrounding the pupils drew her gaze to search behind the thin metal eyeglass frames.

He reached for her in slow motion, captured her

total attention, taking her back to when they were crowned King and Queen of the Christmas Ball. That magical night of their senior year when he'd touched her arm in that very same manner. Then they'd danced the night away. She remembered not wanting to say goodnight. The recalled image from high school came as vivid as yesterday.

Pull yourself together. She swallowed and looked down at his fingers on her forearm. She let her gaze travel up to take in his attire. A tucked-in, long-sleeved navy dress shirt made his eyes pop. A dressy gray felt hat with a fancy leather band was held next to his side. She lowered her gaze and frowned at his strong, warm fingers until he released her.

Back to his face. *Breathe.* "It's been a long time, Sloan."

"That it has. And I'm sorry to tell you duty brings me here today." He surveyed the women in the shop.

Three customers took their leave. The oldest smiled and waved her fingers as she shut the door. The remaining two were probably too young to wonder why a handsome lawman stood in *The Blue Dahlia*.

"Do you have a place we can talk out of earshot?" Sloan asked.

"Just call my name if you need anything else," Dahlia said to the woman beyond the dressing room door. "I need to help this gentleman."

"I can wait, Dahlia. Thanks for the cami," the woman responded. "I'll put it next to the register and shop a bit more."

Sloan stepped aside.

Dahlia spoke over her shoulder. "It's taking a few moments to get over the shock, meeting you again after all these years. A lawman, no less, chasing off my

customers. What are you again?"

"U.S. Marshal. Lancaster County Sheriff's Office, Criminal Investigations." His smile widened, as though he got a kick out of his title.

"That's some mouthful. Be with you in a moment." She strode to a circular rack and straightened a pants hanger, and then said to the others in the shop, "Please call my name if you need help. I won't be long."

Sloan twirled the brim of his hat.

"Back here." She led him past a folding screen to a Victorian settee upholstered in red velvet. She indicated for him to sit, and tossed aside a decorative Father Christmas embroidered pillow.

He nodded for her to get situated first, wearing that constant smile, yet his aura gave meaning to the phrase satin-covered steel. He must smile often, based on the double laugh lines creasing his face and the light in his eyes.

She smoothed her hair behind her ear, braced herself, and perched on the upholstered edge. She put off facing him by glancing up to make sure the front door was still in her range of sight. With back straight, she lowered her shoulders and crossed her ankles.

"We should make this official," he said, unhurried. Sloan pulled aside his charcoal blazer to reveal the star belted at his waist. Then he sank into the corner, dropping an ankle over a knee where he rested his hat.

"Please state your business." She finally met his gaze and swallowed the dryness gathering in her throat. "Can't imagine why you're here."

"There is no delicate way to jump into the reason. Do you know a man named Rusty Ewing?"

"I've never heard of him."

"He's under investigation. One of his past acquaintances is Carrie Delisi, from when she worked at Hickman's Trackside Bar."

"We're so glad she doesn't work at that bar any longer. Carrie is married to my brother. You remember Ken."

"Of course I remember Ken. You're only a year apart and you once told me the two of you grew up almost as close as twins."

"That's right. What's this all about?"

"Ewing is into criminal activity. He's reported to frequent that establishment in Willow, where he kept company with your sister-in-law. We haven't yet figured out in what capacity. I understand she works for you now. Since you're around her, has she ever mentioned his name, or have you noticed her make any suspicious phone calls?"

"As I said, I've never heard of the man. Most of our conversations are about family, the shop, and lately, our plans to help Mom redecorate Willow's Main Street for Christmas." Dahlia stood and led him to the front, where she stopped next to a customer at a display counter of beaded handbags.

When Sloan turned, Dahlia couldn't prevent the gasp that escaped. A six-inch long, jagged scar in the shape of a seven marred the smooth skin on the back of his head.

He swung back at the sound. She took two steps forward.

"Sorry," he said. Their eyes locked. "I forget it's there. Hair doesn't grow where the graft was, so it's easier to keep it shaved."

"You were hurt?"

"Goes with the job." He boldly surveyed the

boutique and tipped his hat. "I like this place, so much blue. The name becomes you, Dahlia."

Her name rolling off his tongue erased images of what nasty weapon could have caused such an injury to his head. He made it sound like an old endearment. Pleasure shot awareness through her system. She refused to heed her reaction and hid it from him. "Thank you. Will you let me know what you discover?"

He slipped a business card into her hand. "Have Carrie call me when she comes in. Considering my line of work, this needs to be kept under wraps."

The brush of his fingers danced to the inside of her wrist, where her heartbeat pulsed.

He gave her fingers a quick squeeze. "You look mighty fine in your blue boutique. I'm happy life turned out good for you."

She pulled her hand from his, pushing away thoughts of a time when her life was all about him. And the forever they'd planned. She rolled the card between her fingers. "Thanks, again. But I am certain Carrie won't be able to help when she calls you."

"You never know, considering. Say hello to Ken and your parents for me, Dahlia."

What if she hadn't resisted his tug on her fingers? Tingles still radiated up the inside of her arm at the memory of his touch. She imagined the brush of his lips against the underside of her wrist, his signature touch going back to their first time together.

And his whispered words at her door that night, "*I'll always remember this night, and the way you felt in my arms.*"

The jangling ding of the door closing on "Fa la la la la la" playing from speakers outside jerked her back

to the here and now.

Sloan settled his hat, adjusted the collar of his jacket so it rose higher on the back of his neck, and walked into the darkening December evening.

Dahlia followed his movements. Memories flooded her mind. He hadn't asked if there was a significant other in her life. Did he have a special woman in his?

They'd both wanted to see each other more away from school that second semester. But she'd been wrapped up in youth group at church in Lincoln and violin lessons. He spent most of his hours outside school training for cross-country before and after school whenever the weather allowed.

She glued her attention to his retreating physique. He paused on the walk and swiveled his head to take in his surroundings. What prompted Sloan to scratch the scar on his head, jostling his hat and tilting the brim just so? Habit? Ever the track star, he snapped open his phone and pressed his key fob on the way, racing towards his car now, eating up the yards. He drove one-handed out of the parking lot, buckling his belt when he hit the street.

She'd watched him leave one other time. She could almost feel the heat of summer between their senior year and college. He'd moved away to go to school in the East. She'd traveled west to college. A few phone calls once they got settled that fall had been their only connection. For some reason, they'd missed each other over Christmas break. Once settled back in her college dorm, she'd known her interlude with Sloan had ended.

That didn't mean he hadn't been constantly on her mind. She continued to doodle hearts and scribble *Mrs.*

Dahlia Letheby in her college freshman notebook instead of doing Bible study. She'd wanted it all. Her dreams had been filled with Sloan and their life together. She waited for his call and continued to plan their life. A life that would begin with the flowing, long-trained white wedding gown she'd designed on paper. She'd imagined their life together after college, followed by their babies.

Dahlia shook her head at such girlish notions.

Their forever had fizzled.

She'd been doing just fine on her own, knowing what to expect of herself. And rarely had she needed anyone else.

What about the Lord?

God wasn't the same to her today. He had been real once. She'd viewed Him through the eyes of a child. Sure, she still believed. No one but the one true God could have created the world, and the entrance of Baby Jesus into the world was about to be celebrated.

But He'd let her down by not making her dream with Sloan come true. And she'd begged for something else that hadn't happened. She showed the window her back. Her customers needed her.

*Life doesn't turn out the way we imagined or wanted.
My life is The Blue Dahlia now.*

2

Sloan regretted taking a shower as soon as he tumbled onto his king-sized bed. The past flooded his mind and kept sleep at bay.

Dahlia Delisi. She personified chic.

He'd fixed her lovely face in his mind a long time ago. But not so much recently. Time made some things fade, like emotional attachment.

The day's activities replayed through his mind. He'd been at the office going over what they knew of Rusty Ewing. The name Delisi jumped off the page, and the case had his fullest attention.

Dahlia's low, no-nonsense voice and classy style had captured him in high school, but she'd been way out of his league. They'd only known one another in passing before they were crowned King and Queen of the Christmas Ball. Then they were attached to each other's side for the next six months, at least between classes.

Since he'd fallen for her, every woman he'd met came up short in comparison, especially anyone he danced with. He sought a glimpse of her in any woman who garnered a second glance. Over the years, if stressed and unable to sleep, her face and voice slipped into his consciousness.

His mind returned to the earlier hour when anticipation had carried him along as he pulled into the strip mall where all the shops were ablaze with

Christmas lights, blue balls, and giant snowflakes.

He'd stepped out of his car to hear carols blasting in the brisk air and entered *The Blue Dahlia* as afternoon waned. He'd zigzagged through the stuff that excited some women across the depth of her place and waited for her attention. He studied her while a rockin' Christmas song gave way to a guy crooning, "She wore blue velvet."

He squashed his eagerness and waited patiently while Dahlia fiddled with something shiny, and he'd grinned when she slung it over a dressing room door. At least he'd remembered to remove his hat before she looked at him.

As Dahlia had lifted her greenish-gray eyes, he felt the jab to his gut.

Behind his closed eyelids now, he held a strong picture of his first glimpse of Dahlia's profile late that afternoon. Her adult face was now emblazoned upon his mind.

She'd turned into one gorgeous woman.

He started at the top of her almost six-foot height. Black hair now, so black he caught the illusion of blue rather than the natural brown he remembered. How could any woman appear so flawless? He'd noted the long, slender legs that went on forever, atop high-heeled boots.

She'd spoken to her customers with respect. Then she'd glided his direction with the natural grace of a woman sure of herself. Her long strides closed the gap between them. Breathtakingly dramatic, she could grace the cover of a magazine. Her hair fell in waves, brushing round cheeks. Her lips were full and dark. He may dream of tasting her dark lipstick.

He licked his lips in the dark of his room and

recalled pulling his thoughts from her to the reason he found himself at *The Blue Dahlia*. But he vividly pictured her clothes. She'd worn a shiny electric-blue blouse and jeans as inky as the depths of the ocean.

She'd drawn close enough to smell. Spice with a tang. Dahlia gave the impression of serenity to match the predominately blue décor of her designer boutique. But she'd felt something at seeing him again. Rapid blinking indicated he had rattled her composure. She stared at him with raised brows and a slightly open mouth.

No doubt about it. He'd taken her off guard, but she pulled herself together admirably.

He rubbed his fingers against his palms, comparing the coarse sensation to the memory of her smooth hand. Remembrance of her cool translucent skin drew a spark of heat that shot through him.

Lord, I need You to direct my steps for this case, and guide my decisions.

All through the following morning at *The Blue Dahlia*, Dahlia had worried over how to approach Carrie when she came in for her shift.

Conversations among customers had been all over the place that morning, mostly about Christmas food preparation and last minute shopping. And fashion, of course.

The early afternoon lull found Dahlia organizing receipts while Carrie undressed a mannequin. Dahlia closed the drawer and sidled Carrie's way on rubber soles instead of her usual stilettos.

Carrie must have been fully engaged in her task

because she jumped at the sound of her name. The fringed black lace and burgundy-beaded shawl trickled through Carrie's fingers, missing the mannequin's shoulders.

"Got it," Dahlia said as she picked it off the floor. "I had an interesting visitor yesterday. A U.S. Marshal came in asking if I knew a Rusty Ewing."

Carrie avoided eye contact. "I know Rusty."

"That's what Sloan said. He wants you to call him." Dahlia handed the business card to Carrie.

Her hand shook when she took the card. "Sloan Letheby. Isn't he the g—"

"Yes. My boyfriend from high school. But this isn't about us. Sloan is investigating Rusty Ewing and thinks for some crazy reason you can give him information."

"He was really nice to me in the bar. Towards the end, he came in every night and always wanted to talk when I wasn't busy."

"Better call Sloan before we get busy again."

"How about I hang this dress, and you let him know I'm here?"

The bell on the door jangled. "You take these clients and I will."

Dahlia tossed the fringed shawl over her shoulder and smiled when she heard, "Look at these jeans! I love this place already."

Dahlia retrieved her phone from the front counter and flipped it open. While she waited for Sloan to answer, she marched the shawl back to the intended mannequin. With one hand, she artfully draped the silky fabric over the white plastic shoulders.

She counted three rings while in the background Elvis crooned his proclamation of enduring a blue

Christmas without his lady love.

Her heart raced, agitated over being silly enough to anticipate the sound of Sloan's voice. She stomped to a shelf and straightened a pair of midnight blue leather boots.

"Helloooooo."

Finally. "Sloan. Carrie asked me to let you know she's here at *The Blue Dahlia*."

"Thanks. And did you mention Rusty Ewing?"

"I did. She seemed uncomfortable. Said he spent a lot of time at the bar."

The beat of dead air pulsated before he continued. "Little slow here. I was called out for an all-nighter and haven't slept."

"Carrie's here until seven tonight. We've got plenty to keep us busy if your business with her can keep."

"Believe me, even though my ears are buzzing from lack of sleep, I'll get on this as soon as I have some shut-eye. I wouldn't admit that to anyone else, Dahlia."

She could tell he was smiling now.

"Can you give me a few hours? If not, I'll put Carrie in touch with another investigator."

Dahlia found something compelling in Sloan's voice. For some inexplicable reason, his slow manner of speaking calmed her anxious heart. Every indication pointed to him being good at his job. She shook her head, and then realized he couldn't see her. Why drag another guy in?

And into what? She had no idea.

The time on the wall clock reminded her many shopping hours would pass before closing time. "This is your investigation, Sloan. I don't know how urgent it

is that you talk to Carrie."

"You let me worry about the details. One of my guys on the Ewing case goes to Hickman's Trakside a lot. I've even walked in a time or two, myself."

She pictured Sloan's face and imagined him ready for action, but not right now, judging by his noisy yawn. "See you when we see you."

Dream of me, she almost added, the way they'd once wished one another goodnight.

"What do you want for Christmas, Dahlia?" Carrie asked. "I would like to give Ken the best news ever, but I'm not sure yet."

Dahlia knew what put such a wistful tone in her sister-in-law's voice.

She and Ken had been married four years, and they both longed for a baby.

Carrie had been so depressed, Ken finally told her to find something to do outside the house. Unfortunately, her first job had been at Hickman's Trakside Bar.

Dahlia contemplated how to answer. *For someone like Sloan to come back in my life*. "I've honestly been so busy I haven't given it much thought. For my shop to do well, I guess."

"It's been a good day for *The Blue Dahlia*, don't you think?" Carrie caressed a lapis bracelet and rearranged it at a jaunty angle.

Sloan's broad shoulders filled the doorway.

Judging by her skittering stomach, Dahlia couldn't tell if the night was going to end better or worse.

He swiped off his hat, met Dahlia's eyes, and then