



IF SHE RISKS HER HEART
WILL HE TAKE IT OR BREAK IT?

LOREE PEERY

*Where Hearts
Meet*

A NOVEL

Where Hearts Meet

LoRee Peery

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Where Hearts Meet

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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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, 2015

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-437-4

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my friend and mentor, artist Emma Garber. Your love for Jesus and spiritual wisdom have always lifted my heart.

And to all those specially gifted individuals who are involved in elder care. Whether you are family members or professionals or both, may your lives be blessed because of the lives you have touched.

Praise

A Blessed Blue Christmas:

LoRee Peery brings a sweet, touching romance with a touch of suspense. As always with this author's work, it is unquestionably well-written, and Peery has mastered the art of creating a storyline that honors God while still painting a realistic picture of attraction and passion. I thoroughly enjoyed this quick, easy read. ~
Delia Latham

Other Titles by LoRee Peery

Frivolities series:

Moselle's Insurance

Rainn on My Parade

Sage and Sweetgrass

Found in the Woods

Lezlie's Lifeline

A Blessed Blue Christmas

Creighton's Hideaway

Paisley's Pattern

1

Blessings crown the head of the righteous...The memory of the righteous will be a blessing.~ Proverbs 10:6-7

Deena Shores looked into the vacant blue eyes of Rose Hart, and prayed. *Help me, Lord, show me if this dear woman is the one You want me to spend the bulk of my time with.*

"Do you know what happened to it?" Mrs. Hart pleaded. "I've looked everywhere. I can't find it. You know what I mean."

Deena went back over their hour together. Did the dear soul refer to a missing object?

"Let me help you to your chair, Mrs. Hart. I'll get you a glass of water, and then we'll see if it will show up. We can ask Simon when he gets here."

Her heart beat faster at the mention of his name.

"It was right here a moment ago. I need it." Rose Hart's gaze rolled wall to wall, never stopping to rest. She smiled, her agitated hands in motion. "You know I miss it. And you're so lovely to help me."

Deena placed the half-filled glass of water on the table and ran a hand over Mrs. Hart's bowed shoulders. Then she sat down next to her charge.

Mrs. Hart sipped daintily. She raised her gaze and beamed at Deena. Like the flip of a switch, the clouds were gone. She set down the glass. "Thank you dear, I feel much better. You are so nice to me. Bless you."

Deena breathed easier.

Thanks to the input of family members, the comfortable sitting rooms of the suites in Francisco Memory Care held personal belongings, including favored pieces of furniture. The apartments were designed in an open floor plan, to make it easier to imitate the homes residents had left when they could no longer manage on their own.

Deena's gaze lingered on a photograph of Rose Hart's son, Simon. Simply soaking in the fathomless blue eyes caused her heart to pound in her throat. Her body temperature rose to feverish degrees. It had taken a mere half dozen of his visits for Deena to form the most intense crush she'd ever experienced.

Could she chalk it up to spring fancy?

As if she willed his appearance, Simon tapped on the open door and entered. He paused for a second to scowl at Deena's presence, but kept his attention on his mother.

The hesitation was long enough for Deena to detect a hardening that drew his mouth tight. A drop of sweat sparkled at his temple.

She lowered her gaze. The beat of her heart accelerated to the rhythm of a jack hammer.

His focus fixed on her while he approached his mother's side.

"Hey, pretty Mama, how are you today?"

"Oh, baby," Rose said. "It's so good to see you. We have such fun. How was your day?"

Deena willed her heart to settle.

"Ms. Shores," Simon finally acknowledged with a nod. He visibly relaxed his shoulders as he leaned to kiss the top of his mother's head. "I had a good day, thanks."

Deena would melt to mush if he ever turned that loving, soft voice toward her. A silent clashing of cymbals slammed through her being at the thought.

She forced herself to remain professional, bracing for the second their gazes next met. But it was impossible for Deena to get ready for the intensity of the impact.

If he expressed the look on his face, his words directed at her would be harsh.

She dropped her gaze again before he had a chance to peer deeper and make her blush. In the past, she had fed the growing habit of carrying the image of his eyes long after they parted. Poets of yore would have grown rich writing about those dreamy, piercing orbs.

Simon often put off the impression he was startled at the sight of Deena.

She questioned his reaction. What could he hold against her? They didn't know one another outside saying hello here at Francisco's.

If she spent more time with his mother, would Deena learn Simon's history?

She dared a peek through her lashes.

He was waiting.

"Is there a reason you're away from your desk, Ms. Shores? Is everything all right with Mom?" He spoke low, with just an edge of concern, limned with irritation.

Oh, if only his attitude would soften toward her.

He offered a half smile, lingering on her mouth instead of her eyes. Then he turned his attention to Mrs. Hart as though the idea of remaining connected with Deena was distasteful.

He swiped his chin with thumb and forefinger.

Was he trying to rub her away with the action?

She had never been attracted to facial hair. But Simon's short two-day's growth of sandy brown and deep gold stubble went beyond appealing.

Her jumping insides were so uncharacteristic. "There's nothing new to report about your mom. She's fine. But I've recently completed an e-learning course, so I am officially a care companion now. After visiting with some of our other clients, I plan to be with a chosen resident or possibly two in the afternoons."

"Good for you. Sounds lofty."

"Not really. Gotta put my college degree to some use. I think human services are valuable. As for our facility," Deena paused to include Mrs. Hart, who now wore a blank expression in addition to her smile. "If it's been awhile since you looked over our brochures, we've printed new ones. You can pick up one and see what we're all about."

"I'll do that." He paused.

She waited, holding her breath.

They connected, all right, their eyes speaking volumes.

But did Simon view that as a good thing?

"And I'll have to get used to not having you greet me at the desk when I come in."

She exhaled at the same time he talked, absorbing each syllable.

His comment warmed her cheeks. "I'm still a morning receptionist."

She glanced at the trick of light accenting the deep blue, defining rim of his eyes. Deena looked at Mrs. Hart, who switched her gaze back and forth between Deena and Simon.

"Look, my son is here after his day at work." Mrs.

Hart reentered the present moment.

Deena melted almost to tears at the light in the older woman's countenance when she was totally aware of Simon's presence.

"If your mother and I continue to have fun on our visits, you'll be given the choice to see a lot more of me." Deena patted Mrs. Hart on the shoulder, speaking to her face, while updating Simon. "We went through a scrapbook and photo album today, and that made her quite happy."

"Imagine so. Mom used to keep everything attached to family memories."

"It's important that our residents reminisce rather than chase memories." *Easier said than done.*

"Not chasing memories is a lesson we could all take to heart," he grouched.

"Pictures of their younger selves can trigger the familiar rather than accent change, which can be confusing. You did a good job of putting that together, Simon."

His slanted smile heated her chest. "I like the curio cabinets filled with items from long ago."

What would they talk about when they finished with their polite back-and-forth thanks? Deena bit her lip. "I'll pass that on to Gale and Leonard Francisco."

"Well, your bosses have done a commendable job. Everyone I've had contact with here at Francisco's is good at his or her job."

"I'll take that as a personal compliment since I helped scrounge items from yard sales and antique shops. Gale and Leonard have taught me well. They're like substitute parents to me, so I know they'll appreciate your comments."

"Parents are important. Guess I'll see you often,

since you're in my mom's life."

She swallowed, dropped her gaze, and prayed she'd soon relax in his company.

Will I be happy or miserable, interacting with Simon most every day?

~*~

How could Simon not be drawn to this woman's caring personality, vibrant red lips, and mysterious dark eyes?

Deena's smile jolted. When he first met her, the narrowness of her shoulders, or maybe the way she'd sat at the desk intent on the screens before her, called out to his protective instincts. The red lipstick she favored would draw any man's eyes to her mouth. Maybe the bright color drew clients to her face as she interacted with them.

What was he doing? He'd given a woman a second glance. Simon gave a mental head shake and turned back to his mother. He smoothed her chin-length silver hair behind her ear. "It's a beautiful evening, Mom. We could eat on a table in the courtyard, if you like."

"Oh yes, I would like that." She jerked her head away from his hand, making her hair sway. As quick as a hummingbird's wing, her eyes went wild. She tracked the counter and table tops, jerked her hand toward the wall. "It's disappeared again. You know what I mean. Did that woman next door take it?"

Mom had blinked into that unknown place again.

He looked away to prevent her from reading sadness in his eyes, hating the sense of helpless loss. Not long ago, the parent aging before her time had

once been a talented, vibrant, productive woman with vivid bearing.

How was he to guess what she referred to, or what loss whirled around in her mind?

Maybe Deena could shed some light on that subject. *I'm relying on her already?*

A familiar knot of emotion threatened to close his throat. He pushed it down and prayed for God to give his mother peace rather than confusion. She reached for words and meaning that no longer connected her thoughts. Did she recognize the absence? His heart hurt for this woman who once competed with herself over how fast she finished crossword puzzles.

"I can see you're ready for time together." Deena patted Mom on the shoulder once more and leaned in close to face her. "Tami will be by later to help you prepare for bed. Have a good night and I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll be right back, Mom." Simon escorted Deena to the door. This was the closest he'd ever allowed himself. She smelled like a fruit smoothie from his favorite java and juice shop. "Is that brochure you mentioned out front?"

She shot him a glance, looked away. Was she blushing?

"They're on the receptionist's counter. Mark the listing of tasks or errands you think your mom would like help with. Remember, we want to bring brightness to Mrs. Hart's days and keep her as happy as possible."

Who do I have around to keep me happy?

He cleared his throat. "It's clear to me how much Mom enjoys your company. Thank you. When she gets frustrated over looking for those elusive items, she can lose her smile. Her optimistic outlook used to bug me

at times, especially when the inevitable situation would clearly have a negative outcome. In a way, I'm glad she has that sunny outlook to fall back on."

"You are so right. That kind of deep-seated joy will be her best asset as time goes on, Simon. Remember to pick up a brochure. If you think your mother would like anything other than what's listed, please let us know. Whatever I'm able to help with, unless you prefer another contact person."

She sure was animated about her job.

"Are we talking about extra services? Will there be more to pay—"

"Where are you?" Shuffles and a chair scrape came from the kitchen nook. "Where are you? Is it time to eat?"

Deena laid her cool fingers just above his wrist and pulled back so fast he could have imagined the light touch. "We'll talk later. She needs you. I'll pray you have a good evening."

Deena turned down the hall.

Simon's heart twisted at her exit. He headed back to his mother's kitchen, to her slipping mind, and their dinner preparation.

He pulled strawberries from the fridge and opened the container. The disturbing berry fragrance of Deena Shores lingered throughout the meal.

2

“Hey, Gale. We were right. Rose and I had a nice time together, and I’d like her to be my first charge.” Deena had called her boss on the cell phone, knowing she was somewhere on the property and she’d not have time to track her down.

“It’s perfect timing to implement the added activities,” Gale agreed. “So unless God closes the door, you’ll be spending quality time with Rose.”

Deena had worked for no other employers besides Gale and Leonard Francisco. The older couple had reached out when her own mother became ill. They’d advised and praised and encouraged Deena through the time she cared for her mom, and later, they provided a home for Deena.

Now it was up to Simon to add his approval to the arrangements between Deena and Rose.

If Simon did approve of their time together, she’d need to get beyond feeling barmy in the belly every time he came around.

“Lord, show me the way when I’m near Simon. I lose my sense of clarity. He makes me so uneasy.”

Their meetings also brought out something in Simon. It was hard not take it personally. He would close up and look foreboding. But they needed to put aside whatever set them on edge. After all, Mrs. Hart was their primary concern.

Deena would have to get over the way he affected

her. She'd schedule herself to be with Mrs. Hart one-on-one in the afternoons. That meant Deena would see Simon most every day. He faithfully came to see his mother at the close of the afternoon and usually ate dinner with her.

If Simon Hart had a social life, it took place late at night.

~*~

"Francisco Memory Care. This is Deena, may I help you?"

The phone had been ringing all morning, keeping Deena busy at the front desk.

"Hey. What time do you break for lunch? Could we meet then? I'm having a slow day and thought we could go over that list for Mom."

"Uh..." *Get it together, Deena, this is Simon, Mr. Foreboding.* "Twelve fifteen. You could come here. I planned to eat on the Francisco's patio, just off the main courtyard."

"Tell me what I can bring you, and we'll meet at your desk."

"I'm good, I have my lunch here, so just get a bite for yourself."

They disconnected.

Thank You, Lord, for nudging me toward Rose Hart.

The afternoon receptionist came to the desk.

Deena was on her feet as Simon approached the glass doors. She picked up the brochure, made sure a pen was secure in her pants pocket, and drew a bracing breath. She moved to his side without meeting his eye and led him down the hall.

She almost tripped on nothing when she caught a

masculine whiff. He smelled shower fresh from a manly wash, or a mix of deodorant and the outdoors. A discreet glance upward told her yesterday's stubble remained on his face. Would it be rough to the touch or soft? *Pay attention to what you're doing!* She turned a corner so abruptly he staggered, but not before his chest brushed her shoulder.

"Sorry. I sh-should have said we're going into the lounge. I'll grab my lunch from the staff fridge. Then we'll walk through the courtyard. Gale and Leonard have quarters in the far corner. I often eat on their patio."

His heavier footsteps, quiet rubber thuds compared to the click of her heels against the flagstone paths, were the only sounds as they meandered two blocks. The courtyard was as near to paradise as a pleasant late spring day could get in Nebraska.

"Is that where we're going?"

"Yes. The Francisco patio is the slatted area that extends further into the courtyard." After a moment, she led him around the corner of a clever wall constructed of thriving greenery to an iron table painted a greenish black. She pulled her lunch items out of her insulated bag.

He politely waited for her to sit.

Once seated, he paused. "May I say grace?"

"Please do."

His beautiful prayer asked for a blessing on the food and put Deena at ease for the first time. She spooned yogurt over her fruit mix. "Let's save the brochure list for after we've eaten. I've seen Rose's captions on scrapbook pages of you in high school and college, your business card on the fridge. What exactly is Stow It West, Simon?"