



LOREE PEERY

Christmas
RESCUE ROUTE

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LoRee Peery

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Dedication

To Loren. I've prayed for you all of your life (even before you were born). I was there when you entered this world; laughed in secret over your tantrums when you couldn't wear the little red sundress; watched many soccer games, heard the snap of your arm break; and played numerous games of Scrabble. And now you're about to graduate from college. I'm proud of you, and I've always loved you, dear oldest granddaughter. Thanks for the inspiration.

Praise

I haven't yet read a LoRee Peery book I haven't liked and this one is no exception.

~Clare Revell on *Paisley's Pattern*

1

He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth.

~Daniel 6:27

Where am I? What is that pounding? What's that weight on my chest? Why can't I move? Paralyzing panic rose from Izzy's chest into her throat. Icy moisture slapped her hand and chased away dire thoughts. She refused to let the anxiety choke her. Do not let your mind acknowledge the memory of that tight, dark place.

A heavy weight on her chest stifled a breath.

A nightmare?

What was the stench?

Her eyes flew open but she struggled with wakefulness and the dregs of a dream, so she closed them again. The sounds, or lack thereof, along with the cold air and stinging wet told her she lay somewhere far different than her bed.

Falling snow struck her with awareness.

The world was white outside the car except for dark tree shapes.

An accident. Flashes of memory rolled through her mind. She'd been driving in white-out conditions on I-80. Dimly discernible taillights trailed in front of her. So much snow the wipers couldn't keep up. So much snow the white line dividing lanes became next-to-invisible.

Red and blue lights, orange cones, a trooper's yellow flashlight beam arcing to direct traffic to an off-ramp.

Dark country roads.

A ridge of barely visible, frozen gravel, thumps.

All followed by nothing beneath the car tires. She'd experienced a wrenching, jarring crunch, an explosion, a suffocating weight. Now the murky sky was far beyond the broken windshield of her car. It was dark and it was cold.

No green dashboard lights oriented her.

Airbag gas explained the chemical smell.

She lay curled in a swirling white world, listening to silence. Not silent. Tortuous howling wind blew snow through broken car windows.

Breathe. Focus. Orient. Can I move?

Images flashed again. Trapped in the dark. *No. That's an old memory.* Air surrounding her now carried the cold freshness of night. Again, she experienced the sense of flying, felt the huge thud and jolt from hitting a sudden towering dark tree trunk. The car tipped upside down, crunching in horrid thuds.

Everything mixed up in her memory. Home. *I'm going home for Christmas.*

Home revived her. Izzy turned her head. *Thank You, God, my neck seems fine.*

She stretched out her arms and touched cold hard surfaces. She wiggled her shoulders, which didn't rest flat against the back of the driver's seat. She searched her mind for pain. All that registered was numbing cold.

What bound her legs? Huddled in her seat, she couldn't move. Something weighted her side. She fumbled with the seat belt latch. The hook didn't

retract. Trying to wiggle, she realized the side of the car was pushing against her, forcing her into the console. Not one thing felt right. She detected no swaying or sense of upside-down; the car must be on its wheels.

She reached to find anything of use. She needed a lifeline. Dad said something about the locator warranty on her car having expired, which meant nothing beeped or blinked into a call center.

Call! Her cellphone. She groped again, to no avail. She attempted to unhook her seat belt, but it remained rigid. *Get a grip on your mind.* "Lord, chase away the terror, please. I can't escape what's happening if I can't get a grip on my mind. Help me think about breathing, and not being alone. Please help me figure out what to do to get out of this mess."

I Am with you always. The comfort of the Spirit worked for seconds that dragged like minutes.

She reminded herself the Lord was with her and she wasn't alone, terrorized by a madman in the backseat of a car. That time was all heat as she fought for her life.

Now she fought the cold. She'd never longed for the warmth of home as she did on this December night.

Could she flip up the hood on her sweatshirt? Without realizing she'd done it, drawn her hands into her sleeves. She straightened her fingers a knuckle at a time, flexed her joints, and reached for the hood. At least the seat belt gave enough to enable her to squirm forward a smidgen. She managed to squiggle the hood halfway up the back of her head to cover most of her ears.

She warmed her fingertips against her palms and tucked them back into her sleeves. What should she

think about other than the cold? Christmas carols? *Joy to the world, the Lord is come.*

Were any of those beloved carols written during a snowstorm? If she survived this one, Izzy determined to do an online search. She may even discover the roots of "Good King Wenceslaus." Hey, that song mentioned snow.

Had she imagined sounds aside from traffic above the ditch, or creek bank, or wherever she was trapped?

Trapped. She hated that word. And refused to give in to the panic of long ago. *Think of something else.*

She'd never known a world without computers. She would have been badly hurt without an airbag. Had the car engine shut off at impact when the air bag deployed?

Izzy shivered. She sought to see anything of substance, but was disoriented by the wet, white flurries swirling in through the open window. She licked her lips. She imagined the heat of Mom's homemade cocoa on her tongue, and tasted a tear. She reached again for anything, maybe the scarf and gloves stuffed into the top of her backpack. She leaned forward, grasped nothing but air where her backpack should have been in the foot well.

In older model automobiles, lights would have shone ahead of the car until the battery wore out. Dash lights would have relieved the blackness. But if she could see, would she want to know what the expanse revealed? Probably nothing but a deeper hole and worsening storm.

Oh, where had her heavy coat and blanket landed? God only knew where anything loose had ended up.

"God? You've got my attention. But really, in a small space where I'm unable to move? Haven't I

already worked through those girlhood night terrors?"

This bitter cold proved more real than the fear it took years to overcome.

Thoughts circled back to the crushed car. If the engine still hummed, she'd have heat. Maybe.

And maybe the gas line would've been punctured and she'd have been burned up by now. At least she'd be warm.

Stop. Pray. Don't give in to the fear.

Izzy had been there. Done that. Panicked in the dark. *Stop.*

I AM with you.

A distant twang sounded in the stillness. Mom calling? She'd told Izzy how excited she was for the family to be together, and promised to call every hour if Izzy hadn't kept in touch with her whereabouts. Mom and Dad had to be watching the weather report. How long before they became concerned for their little girl coming home from college?

How long indeed? *How long* turned into a sing-song voice in her head.

She closed her eyes against the intrusion, thought back. She'd been driving at a snail's pace on I-80. Her lights had shone on the maelstrom of snow, obliterating the white guiding lines.

Lights. She'd love to have light right now. Who needed a flashlight if the cellphone was charged?

"Lord, I'm sorry I haven't been listening for Your Voice much lately. I thank You for being the reason we celebrate Christmas." *Don't cry. The tears will freeze your face. How long will I be in this car?* She refused to contemplate not seeing her family for Christmas. *How long before I freeze to death?*

And why, oh, why hadn't she eaten a decent meal?

She'd grabbed snacks and gone through a drive-up for a burger around suppertime. Food. Would she be here so long she'd miss Mom's tortilla soup and Dad's spicy cheese dip? Their Christmas Eve tradition was Mexican food after church service.

Christmas Eve. Tomorrow. Unless she somehow got out of this mess, she'd have no gooey cinnamon rolls for breakfast in the morning.

Soft thud. A voice? A light beam bobbed in the distance.

Stranger danger or safe rescue?

At this freezing point in her life, she did not care. "Here! Help."

~*~

Brock fought to keep his truck out of the ditch. He felt sorry for any driver who had trouble on country roads, especially during a blizzard. The lights picked out a darker shadow to the right where prior snow had been pushed—about the only hint keeping him on the road covered in white. Too many travelers seeking the call of home hadn't heeded the good sense to stay off the roads until the storm passed.

Who was he to talk? He could have stayed overnight with his grandparents in Grand Island. He patted the decorated box of Grandma's sugar cookies, recalling the words he'd heard her say since he was a kid. He loved that woman and couldn't fight smiling whenever he thought of her. "No boy should go without Christmas cookies, no matter how old he is."

Brock hit his bright lights, making visibility worse in the wind-driven snow. He dimmed them again, ever watchful for the edge of the road on his right. He

searched, anticipating intersections ahead, some without visible STOP signs. He hoped to get back on I-80 soon. At least it was somewhat brighter there, where he could keep his eyes on taillights in front and the narrow band of white on the road. A bad accident had diverted eastbound traffic a mile south.

Vehicles had come to a stop and were being guided to crawl off an icy ramp, all aided by flashing police vehicle lights and bundled-up troopers with mega-volt flashlights. If Dad was with him, the family would all be praying aloud.

Not a bad idea. "Lord, be with all of us crazy enough to keep moving out here tonight. I have no idea who was involved in the crash on I-80, but please reveal Yourself to them and keep rescue workers and law enforcement safe."

Taillights in front drew closer, and he slowed to a stop. He and the other driver waited for a speeding truck with bar lights atop the cab to cross the intersection—probably a volunteer firefighter.

Brock waited for the car to advance through the intersection. The driving snow had paused enough to reveal broken young trees free of mounded snow and a broken metal post.

He imagined a driver surprised by the approaching intersection, braking too fast, and sliding off the embankment. Lights behind him were faint. He grabbed his stocking cap and reached for the flashlight behind his seat and then rolled down the window. Moisture stung his exposed face. He tucked the light under an arm and patted his pockets for the bulge of his gloves.

He scanned the area until he found a field entrance, a safe place to park without getting stuck in a

deep ditch or hit from behind. He set his flashers, and tied the strings on his hood. Not much exposed skin but for cheekbones, eyes, and nose. Thanks to the powerful flashlight, he determined faint tire tracks past the disturbed trees and what used to be a road sign.

Who was down there? One person or a family?
How badly hurt?

*OK, God, it's You and me out here. Please help us all.
You know I'm not good with blood and guts.*

Adrenaline kicked in, and he side-stepped as he scurried down, somehow keeping his balance amongst the perils of nature. Along the way, he encountered broken glass and plastic car pieces. Soon, a mangled car came into the light's beam. It rested sixty feet below.

"Anyone there?"

The driver's side looked as though a giant fist had crushed a soda can.

He sidestepped down the incline, the snow knee-deep in places, and discovered the driver curved in an unnatural position between the mangled metal and console. He didn't see blood.

"You OK in there?" The passenger door wouldn't give. Maybe his fingers were too cold. Gloves did a lot of good if they stayed in coat pockets.

The driver had to be frozen. How long had it been since the car went off the road?

A moan. Female.

"Hi there. My name is Brock Winston." He used his elbow to clear the broken glass from the window casing.

"Izzy."

"You're dizzy?"

She made a sound almost like a giggle, always a

good sign. "Kind of dizzy. Mostly cold. Izrael is my name. Izzy."

"Sweet name. I'm here to help." He climbed through the passenger window—not an easy feat, but he'd been inside ductwork and crawl spaces. He settled his light near his feet and picked up a heavily padded coat caught between the seat and door.

"Your coat's here. I don't want to shine the light in your eyes, but could you look at me please?"

Oh, what beautiful eyes. Clear and focused. He read relief and trust, with maybe a hint of reserve. Thick lashes, no makeup. He lowered his gaze.

"I'm going to feel for your pulse. Your hands are like ice, girl. Sorry, mine are, too. Do you have gloves?" He skimmed her body. *Thank You, Lord. No blood, no exposed bones poking through skin.*

"Scarf and gloves in the top of my backpack."

"I don't see it. Maybe it flew out a window. Your pulse is steady and slow, so I guess that's a good sign. Not that I really know what signs would mean trouble."

She answered his smile.

He would have reared back if there was room.

She had a deep, pretty dimple in her left cheek. Cute as all get out.

Did he have a surprise for her. Later, when they had light. "I've got your coat here, but before I cover you, do you feel like you're bleeding anywhere?"

"I don't think so. I'm in a funny position. Feel kind of crunched. But I can move my neck. I was almost afraid to try at first. Sometimes I feel like I don't have enough room to breathe. Maybe it's the cold, but my left leg is numb. I can't move it."

"Thanks for answering my next question. As long

as nothing is killing you with pain, I'll try to get you warm. Do you have anything besides your coat?"

"I've traveled to and from Denver for four and a half years. I know how to pack in winter. Thanks for finding my coat. It was in the backseat. I tried, but I couldn't reach a thing."

"What else do you have?" He figured it would be good to keep her talking.

"Foggy memory. A blanket. Another hoody. Water's probably frozen. My phone."

"I'll take a look." He reached for his light and scanned the back. The blanket had snagged on broken framework pushed forward from the trunk. He yanked. The fabric ripped, but it came free. Nothing else.

"Look what I found. I'll cover you up and then call nine-one-one."

He'd been asking himself why he wasn't more excited about Christmas. This emergency must be God's way of shaking things up.

2

“What is your emergency?”

Brock kept eye contact with Izzy while he spoke to the dispatcher. “Car accident south of I-80. Couldn’t see the mile marker. One female driver pinned in a car off-road and headed toward a ravine.”

“I have the ping from your phone. Who am I speaking with?”

“Brock Winston.”

“Good job for reporting the accident. You say the driver is pinned. Does he have obvious injuries?”

“The driver is a she. Pulse is steady. No blood or obvious broken bones. I have her as warm as I can get her. No idea how long she’s been here.”

“Is she in pain?”

“She claims to feel crushed and her left leg is pinned. She has a few lacerations, no doubt from broken glass. Nothing bleeding that I can see. She’s cold of course. Her left leg is trapped, though, or I’d have her out of here.”

“May I speak with her, please?”

Brock held the phone to Izzy’s ear and groped for her nearest hand.

The dispatcher asked for Izzy’s name and then assured her help was on the way. “Is there anyone we can call for you?”

“Oh, thank you.” Izzy’s eyes closed and she sagged. “My parents will be worried. Everett and

Ardith Kahn. They live in the country between Ashland and Greenwood, Nebraska.”

“I’ll call them as soon as I can, but only a cell number will work. Landlines are down in that area due to heavy sleet before the snow. They’re buried in snow right now, but I’m sure they’ll be relieved to know where you are. What’s that number?”

Izzy gave it to the dispatcher.

“Hand the phone to Mr. Winston, and please keep the line open until I can hear rescue sirens.”

Brock set the phone near his light. “I don’t know how long the battery will last. May I shut off the light? I’m right here with you.”

He kept eye contact until he clicked off the flashlight beam. “Mind if I hold your other hand? Warm you up some? And let’s keep talking until we hear the sirens.”

Her fingers felt chilled but not icy.

She squeezed and took a deep breath. “I grew up on gravel roads.”

“Good. Then you know to use reasonable speed, especially during pouring rain or in this case, intermittent white-out conditions.”

“I must have braked or hit black ice. I’m really thirsty. I don’t think anything is messed up because I don’t have internal pain. Think you could scoop up some snow to wet my tongue?”

“I think I can manage that. I’ll also feel around the seats and floors for your phone.”

“I’m pretty sure I heard it ping once, so it’s near, but probably buried in the snow. The snow can’t be good for it.”

Brock dug out his gloves, and tried the door handle. He felt the release and pushed with all his

might. It gave, and he almost fell into the snow. He found his balance and turned on his light.

Izzy stifled a giggle. She must not be hurt bad, or maybe it helped to concentrate on him.

His gloves couldn't be clean. He removed his right glove, scooped up a handful of icy white and slid back on to the seat. He extended his hand as close as he dared. He knew she could lean her head forward, but instead of sticking out her tongue, she used her fingers to grasp a bite.

"You should keep your hands warm."

"And you should talk. Your hands are far colder than mine."

She repeated the dip from his hand to her mouth twice, tucked her hand beneath the blanket. "Thanks. I needed that. Now put on your glove before you get frostbite after holding that snow."

He did just that and ran his gaze over her features again. He shut off the light.

If he were a player, he'd ask her where she'd been all his life. Instead, he tucked the blanket over her chin. Those lips may have fit perfectly, had she sipped from the cup of his hand.

Where had a thought like that come from, at such a time as this?

~*~

Izzy licked her dry lips and leaned forward toward the snow, but movement remained restricted due to the seat belt. She lifted her gaze and wondered at the puzzled look on Brock's face. Had he expected her to lap the snow from his hand like a dog, or nibble against his hand like a horse?