



Hearts Across Time
BOOK TWO

FUTURE OF
MY
Heart

A FORWARD-IN-TIME
TIME-TRAVEL ROMANCE

from author

LOREE PEERY

Future of My Heart

LoRee Peery

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Dedication

To Kena, our 40th anniversary tour guide in Nashville.

You impressed me with your optimism, energy, gracious personality, and your humor. I told you I wanted to use your name in one of my books. Thank you.

And to my talented, tireless, and almost-always-write editor Jamie West. Jamie, your edits make me smile and sometimes roll my eyes over my own silliness. Always with heartfelt appreciation, I thank our God for you.

*What People are Saying About
LoRee's Books*

Where Hearts Meet "This is more than just a sweet romance. Deena and Simon both have serious reservations about risking their hearts again. But they bond over a common love for his mother. The love story is sweet and believable, and the peek into the life and challenges of living with Alzheimer's is poignant and authentic. ~ Robin Patchen

Christmas 'Couragement "This delightful story was full of hope and love. I enjoyed the characters, and I also enjoyed the discussions about Christmas, homelessness, angels, snowflakes, drug use, God's grace, and the importance of smiles. This book was full of little nuggets of wisdom and wonderful Scripture verses. The writing was crisp and fresh. I thought this was a terrific book!" ~ Danele Rotharmel

1

Psalm 138:8 ~ *The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O Lord, endures forever.*

Washington County, Nebraska, 1891

Phoebe slipped out the back door of the ranch house and eased it shut. She lifted the hem of her skirt and flew down the knoll to the chicken coop. The breeze she created pulled hair from its knot and whispered against her neck like a spider web in the barn.

On level ground, she glanced over her shoulder and caught the curtain flutter against the porch window. She went ahead and lifted the hook on the wood frame of the gate made of woven wire. Hot moisture built in the back of her throat. How dare Mandy Totten spy from the house?

She ruined my life. Now she has the nerve to peek at me through the window? Let her guess what I'm doing with the chickens.

Phoebe annihilated the hot tears trying to form and pushed inside the pen. Hens scattered as she re-latched the gate.

Take a breath. Hold it. Don't inhale with your nose.

Focus on the reason you're here. She stepped gingerly. It was hard to get beyond the smell of the chicken coop, but she had no choice.

She slanted another look over her shoulder. Mandy's stance on the back stoop added to Phoebe's haste to begin her search. She held her breath, made sure no hens sat in the boxes, and then plunged her hand beneath the straw in the first nest.

Where else could that thing be?

Not too long ago she would have done any chore, outside the barn, rather than enter this awful place. She shuffled through the next hen box, recalling the event that turned her world askew.

Life changed less than a year ago. She and her parents returned from a neighbor's home to find Gavin with a strange woman dressed in what looked like a youth's tight trousers. The woman hadn't made sense. She'd said her name was Mandy, reported she'd taken a fall and knocked her head.

Gavin claimed Mandy had dropped through the barn trapdoor at his feet. From the twenty-first century, of all things. Her showing up changed life on the ranch forever.

Wilder yet, her tale included traveling from the future by means of a box-shaped object called a cell phone.

If it worked for Mandy, Phoebe needed the cell phone as her own means of escape. She'd watched Mandy carry it from the barn to the coop. Out of her desperation to leave, Phoebe searched the laying boxes. "Where is that box?" She had tried not to admit her curiosity regarding the cell phone, the supposed device that enabled Mandy to travel through time.

Phoebe wouldn't be in this position if life had

remained the way she'd always known it would be. As long as she could remember, she'd dreamed Gavin loved *her* enough to plan a life together.

The spunky redhead with the green eyes showed up and made the family welcome her with open arms.

Not me.

Phoebe's future evaporated with the sudden appearance of Mandy. Now Gavin and Mandy's marriage loomed on the horizon.

Phoebe rummaged through another box and touched a broken eggshell covered in thick, stinky yolk. Intolerable.

She couldn't change any of what had happened. Her life would never be the same. "I don't belong here any longer."

All her life, her parents had made her feel loved. Until a stranger fell from the sky. Had Mama and Papa even missed Phoebe while she'd visited family? She wrinkled her nose and moved the straw, dug into the next box along the low wall.

Mandy had fit right in. She'd helped Mother in the kitchen, where Phoebe lacked skills. The interloper didn't mind gathering eggs. Phoebe had always been scared to death of a hen pecking her hand. She rubbed the back of her dirty fingers against her skirt.

A fat hen spread its wings. Phoebe flapped her skirt. "Shoo, you nasty thing."

Adjusted to the odor, she licked her lips, and then fumbled in the corners of the third box. Three more to go. She couldn't help it if the rugged side of ranch life had never appealed to her. The miles of endless grass and the animals weren't her idea of a lady's station in life.

Mandy, though, took to ranch life like a cat to

cream. She'd showed up out of nowhere. Could she really have traveled from the future? Now of all things, she planned to marry Phoebe's man.

I don't know if I can stand attending the marriage ceremony.

"I'm so glad I ran off to stay with family in Chicago." Her aunt and cousins introduced her to live theater. Upon her return, she'd tried to express her feelings to Mama, who said, "You have so much potential, Phoebe, God has a plan for you." Then she had to go and spoil it by adding, "I doubt that involves a bawdy theater."

Mama always told her to find the place God planned, not go after something sinful, such as the bowels of the theater. Phoebe wanted excitement. Personally tailored party gowns to attend plays and operas. She'd longed for the thrill of her own chance at acting on stage. Who cared about her reputation?

Hens grew quiet as she gritted her teeth and rustled beneath the straw in the fourth box. Countless times she'd tried to imagine how to work a cell phone. Mandy claimed it was the key, she'd called it a portal, which enabled her to travel through time. She'd disappeared twice more to return to where she'd come from. And then, Mandy put her twenty-first-century world behind and chose to stay, basking in her newfound love Gavin.

Gavin was orphaned as a boy, and then came to live with Phoebe's family. She had loved him ever since. He proclaimed to love her as a sister. That fairy-tale longing was just the lovesick dream of a girl. *He's lost to me. Stop being a ninny.*

She turned her head for a gulp of fresher air near the one open window, and then faced the fifth box.

Hens squawked. The gate clicked. Couldn't she be left alone? Her fingers dislodged a feather that drifted through the air. She blew it away from her face.

"What are you doing out here?" Mandy's kind voice grated against Phoebe's nerve endings.

She froze. "Gathering eggs."

"I've already gathered them."

Phoebe's hand hesitated in mid-air. She then swished her hand through the last box, squared her shoulders, and turned sideways to reach behind the box.

Mandy shrieked. "No."

Phoebe's hand brushed into something gooey, which caused her to gag. She recoiled at the same time a chicken swooped off the roosting rod to the floor. The hen disappeared through the small door so fast Mandy stumbled to the side, enabling Phoebe to reach farther. The touch of a smooth, foreign surface at last met her fingertips. She smiled in relief, and straightened, the prize held high.

"Don't." Mandy stepped near, holding out her hand. "Give me the cell phone, Phoebe."

She tucked the phone at her side. "You got what you wanted. Now leave me alone."

"Let's not tell your mother what you've been doing in the coop. She'll never understand. She wants us to help pare apples and prepare a pie crust for our supper. What will I tell her if you disappear forever?"

"Simply tell Mother I've gone away to make a life of my own, a place God has planned for me. While I was visiting in Chicago, you settled in here on the ranch. Upon returning, I decided there's not room for both of us. I don't feel as though I belong any longer." Mother would express bewilderment, but Phoebe

couldn't think about that now.

Mandy played with a stray lock of hair then tucked it under the straw hat that once belonged to Phoebe. "It's far from my station to say this, but you are acting like a child."

The usurper reached out her hand, but Phoebe scurried by to leave the building. She sucked in fresh air and fought to open the coop pen without letting loose the phone. Mandy had called her a child. Her parents' circle may consider her the pampered only daughter of a prominent rancher, but would they pity her now that her very position had been replaced by the foreman's bride from the future?

Phoebe's fingers shook. The whole scenario frustrated her to the point of screaming. She hated the tears that threatened. She yanked on the gate.

Mandy brushed by Phoebe and opened it in one smooth swoop without fumbling over a simple gate latch.

Steaming now, Phoebe rushed to put space between them.

Mandy re-hooked the wire gate behind them, and then clutched Phoebe's arm. "Stop. Phoebe, please. I beg you. Give me the phone. You don't know how dangerous it is."

Phoebe paused. How could the cell phone be dangerous? Ready or not, she needed to push forward. Mandy had done that very thing by choosing to live in an earlier century. Phoebe turned. "No. I have to know how this thing works."

Mandy shuffled her foot through the dirt. As good a person as the family considered her, Phoebe would never view Mandy as a sister-in-law, adopted or not.

"Fine. I'll press every button on that thing, myself.

You've taken my place in my own family. You've taken away the only man I love. Now it's my turn to take something from you. I'm going back to your world, to make a new life for myself. And not you, nor Mother, nor Papa, or even Gavin, will ever be able to stop me."

A pained expression clouded Mandy's face. She stepped forward, lifted off the straw hat, and shook her hair. "I'd be glad to help by listening. Can't you wait?"

"I'm done waiting. Done listening to others telling me what to do." Phoebe blew a gust of air and groaned inside. Her whole future was in question. She once knew where she was going, no matter if those in Mama and Papa's social circle considered her approaching the status of an old maid. She'd been waiting for a dream that went poof at Mandy's arrival on the ranch. For some reason beyond her, it no longer mattered that she'd lost Gavin to Mandy. "After I saw what city life was like in Chicago, I decided I want to visit the future of your time. Maybe become an actress."

Mandy's mouth opened, but she didn't speak.

A twinge of remorse stuck Phoebe's heart at the hurt and uncertainty her actions painted on Mandy's face.

Had she not hood-winked Gavin into falling in love with her, had they met under different circumstances, Mandy might have been Phoebe's friend. Curiosity increased as to where Mandy came from. Phoebe longed to discover the described amenities and fast-paced way of life in the future. She lowered her gaze and frowned at the edges of the cell phone. What made it work? So small, yet powerful enough to send Mandy back in time. Could it have the power to sail herself through to a forward time? She'd never considered herself so alone. A tremor scratched

down her spine.

Mandy squeezed Phoebe's arm, tried to grab the phone. "Stop all that fiddling with the buttons."

Phoebe snapped to attention and tucked the phone close to her chest. "Why? I only want to get away and see the world. Your world."

"You're taking a chance. There's no guarantee you'd land in my world." Mandy frowned. She let loose of her grasp on Phoebe. "Be careful what you wish for."

"What's wrong with wanting a different life, away from here, where I can live for myself? There's nothing on the ranch for me now that you're so comfortable here." That sounded so selfish, so unlike serving others the way Jesus did while on earth.

She only gained that particular knowledge because Gavin gave her a New Testament. A little modern book that Mandy originally brought with her.

Mandy stepped closer, lunged for the phone.

Phoebe swung away, turning her back. "I wish to fly to Mandy's world in the twenty-first century." She squeezed the celluloid rectangle to her bosom, and trilled her fingers. Spiraling waves encompassed her. Was she drowning? No. She breathed. Rather than drop, she rose softly, floating. Flying. Weightless, rising, and dizzy.

The world slid to black.

2

Washington County, the present

Nolan took advantage of the break in shooting to stow his light meter in the van. He stretched through the open back door to tuck it in the case where it belonged, all nice and tidy until he needed the tool again. His belly growled. He chuckled over his tendency to get so involved in the way light affected a shot that he sometimes forgot to eat.

Bam.

The van shook.

What was that? He saw no indentation from the inside, but something big had struck the roof. What in the world? It couldn't be a limb because the van was parked in the open away from trees. He backed out, took hold of the frame, and stepped onto the van floor above the bumper.

A dark-haired woman swathed by undulating green skirts sprawled on the roof.

His mouth agape, he looked up. Nothing in the sky but gathering gray clouds. He swallowed, cleared his throat, and jerked out of his momentary shock. "You hurt?"

The woman shrugged a shoulder, but didn't answer or move her head.

What if she broke an arm or a leg? Or worse, had a head injury? He stretched out his arm. "Can you hear me?"

"Oh. Wh...where am I?"

The young woman's words made no sense to Nolan whatsoever, as puzzled as he was over how she'd landed on the van roof.

The woman rolled over and propped herself on an arm. She blinked, and swayed to a sitting position.

His brain short-circuited. *Beautiful.*

She wasn't wearing a speck of makeup, yet her exquisite face was so perfect that everything around them ceased to exist.

They were the only two people in the world.

His heart unplugged for a beat. Or two. He shook off his paralyzed state to extend a hand. "Where'd you come from?"

She finally moved. Slid his direction, impeded by the pool of voluminous aquamarine skirt fabric. Judging by the high-top old-fashioned shoes, he concluded she was a cast member dressed in historic costume.

He pushed the skirt out of the way to span her tiny waist, balanced against the frame, and lifted her to the ground. He held her upright. Her long skirt brushed against his leg as he jumped down, hands still holding her steady. His head swam and his insides shifted as though he'd taken a fall himself. *Beyond gorgeous.*

She weighed less than the gear he toted around. Barely over five feet, she made him feel like a giant. She reminded him of a porcelain doll, so slight of figure. Fragile. Or a fairy dancing in a mythical forest. *Get it together, man.*

With a small hand, she brushed ebony hair from

her forehead, and raised her eyes. Indigo blue-brown eyes that appeared almost black sucked the air right out of his chest.

He blinked. Just like that, Nolan Riley at age thirty-four was spellbound. He'd met his future. *Get yourself together*. Some kind of trickery was afoot. "I don't get how you landed on the roof. Did you fall from the sky?"

She didn't answer, but gave a single head shake as if to orient herself. She looked around as though she made no sense of her surroundings.

Nolan scanned the sky again without knowing what he expected to see. No air balloon basket, no nylon parachute lying in a heap within sight. What did garner attention were dark clouds building in the west.

The young woman faltered.

"Dizzy?" He steadied her with a hand on her elbow, pulling her in. "What's your name?"

She stood more balanced on her feet, and leaned her head back to make eye contact. Her eyes cleared somewhat. "I'm Phoebe Boltz. I grew up here. Uh, live—" She cut off what she was saying. Sighed. Cleared her throat. "Um, I have a story you'll find hard to believe. What is your name, kind sir?"

"That sir makes me feel old. Nolan Riley." He held onto her. "Do you hurt anywhere? "Are you sure you don't need a doctor?"

"I don't think so. What exactly is happening here? What are these people doing around us?"

"We're filming a movie, remember? A western. I'm a lighting technician. Not bad with a camera, either. I assume by your costume, you're part of the cast."

"You wouldn't believe the kind of camera I'm

used to." She made a noise, somewhere between a cute noisy sigh, a quiet cough, and a giggle. She looked up again.

His knees went watery.

"Phoebe, think about how you feel. Here. Take a seat in the doorway of the van. Did you bump your head?" He searched her eyes. Her pupils were rounded the same size, but not dilated, as far as he could tell with the darkening sky. Probably not under the influence of drugs, but what experience did he have?

The horizon called for a second look. What a waste. The myriad colors in the sky just waited for him to catch them on film. He waved at Director Wesley and gestured in a circular motion.

The director nodded and pointed at the guy with a hand-held camera. "Scroll the sky. I'm guessing by the thunder clouds, we need to wrap up."

Lights, camera, action. Nolan grinned. His profession was so ingrained, his mind went there all the while he attended a damsel in distress. Action, all right. He ran a rough thumb over Phoebe's soft hand. "You need a doctor."

"My head is buzzing. I don't think I have a bump. I'm not fragile, about to faint."

"Maybe not. But, are you sure you're not in shock? Can't fathom where you came from, how you got on the roof." He followed the renewed filming, strained to catch the director's directions to the crew, then turned back to study Phoebe.

She closed her eyes and lowered her chin.

He waited, but she didn't speak. "If you're the extra, your scene is at the coop. That dress is too fancy. I have no idea where wardrobe came up with your costume, lovely as it is."

She raised her head, surveyed their location. At last, she met his gaze. "Oh, what have I done?"

~*~

The man's face wavered out of focus. With a twist of her stomach, Phoebe's blurred vision worsened. She blinked. Twice. Three times. Ever so slowly, she opened her eyes wide to take in as much as possible. A dream? *I'm truly here? Whisked away to Mandy's world for real?*

"You seem disoriented. What do you mean, what have you done?" The big man stepped back and stared at the horizon. "Are you sure you're not hurt? I still don't know how you got on top of the van. Were you hiding up there?"

"Hiding from what?" Disoriented. The word had defied description in her old world at the time Mandy used it. Here, disoriented defined where she found herself. She stood, sought substance beneath her feet. The grassy earth felt the same, yet the barn and house and landscape appeared eerily different.

Why did this gentleman keep asking if she was hurt? "I'm fine. Let's keep my appearance on the roof of this...van, a secret for now."

He glanced over his shoulder, returned his frown on her. "I need to go. Director called us on set."

She'd heard the phrase before. Mandy once said she'd thought she'd awakened on the set of a western movie, whatever that was. It was only a matter of time, and she'd know for herself.

Her mind went to the chicken coop where she last

had control of her actions. The cell phone. Where was it? It carried her here to the future. She'd expected to have had a sensation of falling, rather than floating upward through space. High above the earth, she'd risen into oceanic waves of blue sky, soaring, swirling, and speeding higher than she'd ever imagined an eagle to fly. Now that she was in this foreign time she had to decide where to turn first, open her senses to this exciting, strange land of the future. A shout drew her attention to the action across the yard.

"Riley, grab your camera. Capture this sky, people. Lights! Someone get in here and take Nolan's place by the coop. Quiet on the set. Five, Four, Thr..." The man's voice thundered.

People ran, carrying all kinds of objects.

A blinding flash of sudden light hurt her eyes. She blinked and looked away.

"Keep them rolling. Pan that stormy, big sky. If it doesn't start pouring, get shots of the coop from all angles." The man barking orders approached, and nodded at her. "I don't know where you got dressed, woman, but that costume is all wrong for the coop scene. Besides, you're not scheduled for those shots until tomorrow."

"Number two camera is fixed on the sky." Nolan rubbed his neck as he neared. "I need help with the twelve-by."

Twelve-by? Must be movie-talk, whatever that is. I need to get my bearings. Whatever is going on here, it happens fast. Should I pretend to be more confused than I am? "I don't understand." Phoebe scurried to follow and clung to Nolan's strong arm. "Where exactly am I?"

"Lady, you had to have hit your head." He came

to a stop.

The man holding the front of the huge shiny board almost pulled it from Nolan's hands.

Nolan scowled down at her. "How can you not know where we are? I'd like you to tell me how you appeared out of nowhere. Did you sneak in and hide up there? No. You wouldn't have made such a thud."

Phoebe tried not to smile as he answered his own question. He seemed as confused as Mandy had pretended when she showed up on the ranch. Phoebe would try the same. "I'm sorry, sir. Maybe I did hurt myself, and my thinking is befuddled. I'm not sure that I remember a lot about how I got up there. I did lose my phone."

He rubbed his neck again. "All right. I'll indulge you. Phoebe, right?" At her nod, he acquiesced. "This is a western movie set. We're working on an acreage west of Omaha in Washington County."

Mandy had mentioned movies, saying they were like plays, only made with cameras that showed people moving. She'd explained that others could then watch the pictures. But at the time, Phoebe had no reference point. She now began to understand. She took a deep breath and lowered her head. She hid her private elation from the big man. Had Phoebe really discovered Mandy's original world?

She kept up with Nolan as he interacted with others, handle tools, and went through a variety of body motions as he studied angles. She loved the excitement, convinced she'd made the right move by traveling here. Mama and Papa didn't need her on the ranch now that Mandy had pushed Phoebe out. Gavin and Mandy would look out for Phoebe's parents.

Nolan laid his broad masculine hand on her upper