



a novel

*with
every
memory*

JANINE ROSCHE

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For those who have fought the good fight—
for your recovery and healing, for your dreams,
for your identity, for your children, for the memory
of those who have passed on, or for your marriage—
whether you were able to find restoration or not,
this book is for you.

author's note

This novel contains difficult and potentially triggering topics, such as death of a child, sexual assault, adultery, and divorce. I have tried to handle each of these issues with sensitivity while also showing the reality of trauma in the family system. If you have experienced loss, adultery, or divorce, I recommend seeking professional help through the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy: www.aamft.org.

If you or someone you know has experienced rape or sexual assault, please contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline at (800)-656-HOPE (4673) where you can access a range of free services, including:

- confidential support from a trained staff member
- support finding a local health facility that is trained to care for survivors of sexual assault and offers services like sexual assault forensic exams
- someone to help you talk through what happened
- local resources that can assist with your next steps toward healing and recovery
- referrals for long-term support in your area
- information about the laws in your community
- basic information about medical concerns

LORI

Even the best makeup couldn't hide the fact that I'd been raised from death to life. A sound—half chuckle and half sigh—skimmed my lips as I placed my Givenchy powder and brush in my travel case. If Deirdre, my favorite nurse, heard my thoughts, she'd tell me to display my scars proudly, as I was "a walking testimony of the good Lord's mercy and grace." A walking testimony. She'd never caught the slip, and I'd never called attention to it.

I placed the travel case in the basket on the front of my walker and then began my trek to my chair. I'd no sooner caught my breath than a knock sounded at the door. "Come in."

"Good glory, Ms. Lori!" Deirdre sauntered through the doorway like she was wearing a gold-breasted choir robe instead of the same green scrubs all the nurses at the rehab center wore. She spread her arms wide and let the door swing behind her. "Are you excited? It isn't every day you get a second chance at life."

"I am excited. To sleep in my own bed, cook my own food, read with my childr—" I swallowed hard as reality struck. "My daughter."

"That sounds wonderful."

I checked my watch. Nearly nine. "I should make sure I have everything." I readied myself to stand, prompting Deirdre to quickstep to my side and offer her arm as a support. With a

flick of my hand, I waved her off. “I must get used to doing all this on my own. May as well start now.”

Using the armrests as support, I leaned forward and pushed with my legs. Fire ripped through my quadriceps—a feeling I’d learned to appreciate. Months ago, I’d felt nothing in those muscles at all. After I straightened, I waited for vertigo to come. It didn’t, thank heavens. Perhaps it had slept in. Meanwhile I’d been awake since four.

“Don’t push yourself too hard now or you’re likely to end up right back here.” Deirdre watched my slow progress. “Your baby girl may think she’s grown, but she still needs her momma.”

My lips were too taut for my smile to feel genuine.

Deirdre looked over the tray holding my hardly touched breakfast. “Now, now, Ms. Lori. Your hubby might be a feast for the eyes, but you’ve still got to eat real food.”

“I tried. My nerves had other ideas. I’d rather not start my ‘second chance’ by getting sick all over myself or Michael.” With the help of my walker, I shuffled my cashmere-slipped feet over to the large window of my suite—the best money can buy, Michael had called it once. How long ago was that? Was it even Michael who’d said it? I brushed the voile curtain back to see the sunlight sparkling on Denver’s South Platte River, yet an even better image caught my attention. In the parking lot below, Michael shut the door to his Lexus. After all his visits to the rehabilitation center, I still expected to see the beat-up Honda since my brain only occasionally acknowledged the eight years prior to our accident.

I closed my eyes and went through my mental checklist: the month and year, the current president, my age, the names of the living members of my family, and the facts of my situation. Each answer tugged harder on my heartstrings, but I wouldn’t give in to tears. This was a big day, so I shoved away the consuming sadness and focused on that tall, dark, and handsome man casually walking toward the clinic’s entrance.

“Why are you anxious?” Deirdre asked.

My stomach twisted. “Because I know it won’t be how it was.”

“What if it’s better?”

She tried to pat my shoulder, but I shirked away from her touch. “Better? After all I lost, how could it possibly be better?”

“I’m only thinking the Lord’s not through with the Mendenhalls yet. With the way you helped us redecorate these rooms to look less like a morgue and more like one of those flippity-flop home shows, I bet you could make quite a name for yourself as an interior designer.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I can handle any more of his plans.”

“After all you’ve accomplished here? ‘Course you can. When the hospital transferred you in January, you couldn’t walk, talk, or remember your name. Look at you now.”

I cast a glance at my reflection in the window’s glass. Like I did dozens of times a day, I fussed with the hair near my scar, brushing it forward. Did I have time to grab a scarf from the wardrobe? I had to try. The leg of my walker caught on the chair when I went to turn. It took several jarring shimmies to get it facing the other way.

While Deirdre prattled on about the importance of slow, deliberate movements, I shuffled to the wardrobe as quickly as possible and pulled the door open. Empty.

“Where—”

“We packed most of your stuff yesterday.” Deirdre knew better than to add the “remember?” part because, clearly, I didn’t. “I’ll pack up your toiletries so you two don’t linger here one minute longer than you have to. Mr. Handsome is bound to be in a hurry to get you home.” She winked at me as she headed to the bathroom.

Warmth flooded my cheeks. My eyes caught something on the top shelf of the wardrobe. I slid the paper toward me and

picked it up, finding one of the family photos they'd used for my memory work. My favorite memory. The moment I'd recovered it in therapy had been almost as happy as the day it had occurred. It was Easter Sunday, and the church had set up a backdrop for pictures. Austin and Avery were three. He wore light blue-and-white seersucker overalls with a hand-embroidered turtle on the front pocket. Avery wore a blue dress with pink tights, black Mary Janes, and a sparkly red bow—always the fashionista. They sat together on a bench, holding hands. Austin had insisted on it. And Michael? He was the most dashing man who'd ever dashed. He'd opted for his favorite pose with me. He'd stood behind me, slid his hands over mine, then wrapped me in an embrace.

"Hey."

The voice jolted me, and the photo slipped from my fingers as I looked up. Fifteen years after that photo was taken, Michael stood on the threshold, not an ounce less handsome but much farther away. His gaze wasn't on me but the stack of Michael Kors suitcases he'd had delivered last week. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, I believe so. Deirdre is getting the last of my things from the bathroom."

Finally, his focus found my face, and his eyes widened. He closed the distance between us in only two strides. His fingertips gentled my neck, turning my chin slightly. "When did you get this bruise? What happened?"

"On Sunday," I said, "after visiting hours ended. It was nothing. I thought I could get to the bathroom without my walker, but I fell and bumped my chin on the floor." No need to tell him about the cut on the inside of my bottom lip or the massive headache the fall summoned.

"Why didn't someone tell me?" His glare demanded an answer. "This place is supposed to be the best in Colorado—"

"Michael." I used my softest voice, hoping to recapture his focus. It didn't work the way it used to. Then again, I was no

longer the beauty queen he'd fallen for. "I asked them not to call you. It was my fault."

He looked at me from beneath his pinched brow. His hands dropped from my neck and secured my waist in his strong grasp. There was no way I could fall now. "Should you be standing? I can get a wheelchair."

"I'm fine." I wrapped my hands around his upper arms, noticing how much more muscular he was now than in our early years of marriage. When had fitness become so important to him? Since the accident? Or during the part of our life I couldn't remember?

"Don't push yourself too hard, Lori." His eyes, walnut-hued and rimmed by dark lashes, did more than ask me to be careful. They implored me to. The concern radiated through me, stunting my ability to speak.

Instead, I offered a slight nod. Not sure how much more careful I could be than living in a rehabilitation center all this time, never once leaving to go shopping or to get coffee. Maybe the command was meant for when I returned home. Or when I got in the car. With a lifetime of memories swirling about my brain like specks of dust in a tornado, I wasn't sure of anything anymore, except that no place was completely safe. Not even my husband's embrace.

After I assured him I was good to stand on my own, he kneeled and picked up the photograph I'd dropped.

"I nearly forgot that picture when I packed my things," I told him, leaving out how I had no memory of packing at all.

"Hmm," Michael said after a quick examination. "When was this, again?"

"Michael," I said, "I'm the one with a traumatic brain injury."

"You know me and these things. The kids were, what, five here?"

"They were three."

He stared at the picture the way he might analyze stock dividends.

Grief, my therapist had said, is rarely handled in the same manner by everyone, and we must be careful not to judge. That didn't make my heart ache any less.

Deirdre walked into the living area. "Well, Mr. Mendenhall, your queen is ready to leave one castle for the next." She extended the handle on the largest suitcase. "We sure are going to miss her around here."

"Not as much as she'll miss you, I'm sure." Michael's million-dollar smile—another change that had developed in the span of time I couldn't recall—had its effect on Deirdre. She started fanning herself exaggeratedly. When he glanced back at me, though, the smile fell. "I'll go get a wheelchair."

"I told you he'd be in a hurry to get you home," Deirdre said with a chuckle.

"Yes, I'm sure that's it." I fidgeted with my hair again.

After one last check passed from Michael to the clinic's administrator, the fanfare began. Patients and staff who had become my friends lined the third-floor hallway, waving their goodbyes. The ones who could stand offered hugs. Suddenly, I was thankful for the wheelchair. These people had comforted me at my lowest moments, like the day I was informed my son—my precious Austin—hadn't survived the crash that I'd just barely come through. And these people cheered for me every time I relearned something the doctors had said I'd never again do. Saying goodbye was hard.

Still, it wouldn't be as hard as the missing hello back at home.

In the car, Michael was quiet.

"I thought Avery might come with you." I ran my hand over the smooth leather upholstery. This car looked more like a New York City limousine than a family vehicle. Hadn't he and Avery been doing family things while I'd been at the clinic recovering?

Other than visiting me every other weekend, I mean. Avery, it seemed, never enjoyed the visits. It was out of her comfort zone, I told myself each time, which was okay. I was sure the place would have grown on her if I had to stay much longer. Avery wasn't nearly as happy-go-lucky as Austin, but once they had settled into a place or activity, Austin had always helped Avery come around. And when that girl smiled, the sun may as well take a rest. Unfortunately, that was a light I hadn't seen in a long time.

"This is the last day of summer," Michael said. "I thought I'd let her sleep in one more time before the school year starts."

I closed my eyes and willed my brain to work. The current year minus the twins' birth year. That made Avery—

"It's her senior year," Michael whispered as if saying it at a normal volume would embarrass me for not recalling my only surviving child's age.

"Thank you." I unlocked my cell phone and scrolled through the most recent photos that Michael had uploaded of Avery. "I hate that I can't remember."

"That's all right. I'm here to help you, babe." He reached over and patted my knee twice, then settled his hand on my thigh long enough for its heat to burn through my lounge pants. There had been a time when he'd thought I was pretty. Back in my Miss Colorado Teen days. Back when my hair had been the color of the Great Sand Dunes and there wasn't a four-inch-long C scar above my ear.

His hand tensed and his knuckles arched. Then he pulled his arm away entirely. Could I blame him? I looked nothing like the young twentysomething in that Easter Sunday photo.

Michael cleared his throat. "And I've hired the finest home health-care professionals to come over while I'm at work to get you settled in."

"You're going back to work? How soon?"

He kept his eyes on the road. “I have a meeting this afternoon across town. I can cancel it if I need to.”

I swallowed my disappointment like it was a chocolate-covered toad. “No, I’ll be fine. It’s been a tiring morning, so I imagine I’ll rest. Maybe read a book.” I laughed coarsely. “Do I still like to read?”

“I hope so. I uploaded the latest book from that author you love onto a new e-reader. You know, the one who writes those love stories set in the 1920s. Do you, uh, remember what an e-reader is?”

“Only because one of the nurses had one.”

“You loved yours, but it was in your purse when we . . . Anyway, this one has far better features. Top of the line. It’s plugged into the charger on your bedside table.”

“Michael, thank you.”

He stiffly nodded as we headed north on Highway 93 toward Boulder. Funny how I couldn’t remember our address, but I knew every hill and curve of this road. Perhaps funny wasn’t the best word. I gazed out the windshield at the mountains rising unapologetically from the plains, capturing the focus of anyone looking west and beckoning them toward their cragged beauty. Thank the Lord I could still recall my childhood climbing boulders and befriending foxes outside our cabin, all while promising Mom I wouldn’t skin my knees ahead of pageant day.

We passed the neighborhood where our three-bedroom ranch stood. According to Michael, we moved out of our “starter” house four years ago. Was it too much to hope we’d found a quaint home nestled into a secluded mountainside?

My heart leaped when the Lexus turned west onto a road I didn’t recognize. Soon, absurdly large homes came into view. The kind in the home decor magazines I used to fawn over after researching the week’s best deals on diapers.

Michael steered the car between sprawling estates, many

of which had horses in adjoining pastures. “Does any of this look familiar?”

My chest tightened, forcing my no out on a breath.

We pulled onto a driveway that led to a sleek home, mountain-style but modern, with sharp eaves, large windows, and textures of lumber and stone. Beautiful and entirely unrecognizable. My eyes stung, and I turned away from Michael.

“Lori, it’s okay.” His typically deep voice rose in pitch and softened. “Take it one day—”

The car stopped abruptly, and my body pitched forward until the seat belt lashed my chest and neck. I threw my hands up to shield myself from the steel and glass I expected to strike my face. Piercing noise assailed my eardrums as my vision went blindingly white then black.