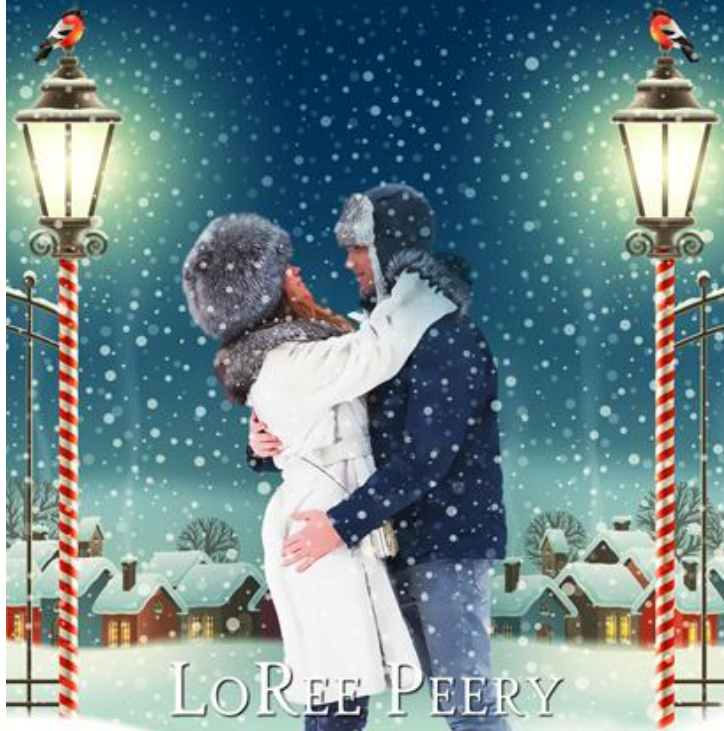


IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE  
ACTS 20:35



LOREE PEERY

*Christmas  
'Couragement*

A HOLIDAY ROMANCE

Christmas  
'Couragement

LoRee Peery

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

## **Christmas 'Couragement**

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## *Dedication*

To my grandson Orion, who asked to see his name in  
one of my books.

I can't imagine another editor-in-chief as more  
encouraging than ours at Pelican Book Group. Nicola  
Martinez, this one's for you. Thank you for year-round  
Christmas 'Couragement.



## *What People are Saying*

LoRee Peery always writes with tremendous heart. I was impressed by the sheer depth of angst written into the pages and between the lines.

—Delia Latham, Inspirational Romance Author

Ms. Peery seamlessly ties fitting Scripture verses into conversations and introspection and keeps the reader turning the pages to discover what happens next.

—Tanya Hanson, Award-Winning  
Romance Author

*Check out LoRee Peery's other Christmas  
stories:*

A Blessed Blue Christmas  
Christmas Rescue Route







# Prologue

*Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.*

*~ Romans 12:16*

*15 Years Ago*

"He needs 'couragement." Zoe ignored the walk light and stopped at the curb.

Her best friend, Meredith Gorgeous, went on ahead.

Would Mom be mad if Zoe talked to the man on the bench?

His crossed arms told her that he sought warmth from the ragged blanket, which was too small to cover the front of his body. Though his knees were pulled up, the metal bench had to be ice cold. Did the poor man have anyone to share Christmas with?

From the corner of her eye she caught Liam stay his sister with a hand, and return her to Zoe's side, where Meredith stood rooted. Zoe felt the heat of Liam's heart-stopping blue eyes as he looked down at her.

"What kind of crazy word is 'couragement?"

Meredith jerked from her brother's touch and bumped into Zoe. "Just because you're a teenager now, Liam, doesn't mean you can pull me around."

Zoe liked Liam's protection. She'd never been afraid walking with Meredith in downtown Lincoln. On Saturday afternoons, he often escorted them from a movie to the SUV where Mrs. Gorgeous waited.

"I'm obeying Mom, Meredith. And Zoe, that stranger might be as crazy as the word you used."

The heat of Liam's attention pulled Zoe's gaze off the homeless man. She raised her eyes and had to tip back her head. Liam's handsome face was capped by dark blond hair that brought his last name to life. He'd grown again since school began. She looked down to listen to what he said without being distracted by staring up at him.

"You're in the fifth grade now, way too old to not say the word correctly."

Her heart did a flip-flop at the sound of his deep voice. They'd never be in the same school again. Next year he'd go to high school at the same time she and Meredith advanced to middle school.

"Let her be, Liam." Meredith hit him on the shoulder. "So what if she says the word without the beginning letters? I want to always be a little girl at heart."

Zoe reached for Meredith's hand. "That man on the bench. He's sad. He's cold and alone. I want to make a Christmas card to 'courage him."

"OK, squirt." Liam circled her tender earlobe, freshly pierced. "I got it. You want to encourage the man to make him feel better."

"Right. Could you ask your mom to take us to the craft store on the way home so Meredith and I can make a card tonight? Let's look for him next week after the movie."

That night, the girls sat at Zoe's kitchen table,

which was covered with scrapbooking materials. "Meredith, since Mom works at the hospital on Saturdays, I'm glad your mom drives us. Do you think Liam will walk us girls around a couple blocks by the theater? I'll pray first on Friday night."

"I'll pray, too. I want to give this card I'm making to just the right person."

Zoe worked her tongue while she cut silver paper. "Did you see the face of the man on the bench today?"

"I did. He made me think of Santa Claus." Meredith swung her heavy, long braid over her shoulder.

"It shouldn't be hard to find him with that white beard. I want this card to go to him. I wish I was older and had a job so I could buy him a big blanket to keep him warm." Zoe handed the scissors to Meredith.

"You look for him. I want to look for a raggedy woman. Maybe even someone who has a place to sleep at night, but looks lonely and lost. God will show me if a sad lady needs Christmas cheer from my card all decorated like a beautiful tree."

"I have an idea." Zoe reached for gold foil and a snow-white sheet of paper. "Let's each make a card and then make one together. That way we can give out three cards for three Saturdays."

"You work your favorite number nine into everything you do." Meredith uncapped a bottle of silver glitter. "That's OK. We don't have enough time to make twenty cards."

"You're my best friend, Meredith Gorgeous, but I'll never understand why your favorite number is twenty."

"Why does anybody have a favorite number?" Meredith straightened the table mess.

Three weeks later, the girls waited inside the lobby for Liam. He and his friends had met for a sci-fi movie, yet to end. Meredith bopped to a tune plugged into her ear.

Zoe scanned past the movie posters, and sighed at the sight of Liam loping down the corridor. Her mom said she was too young to read romance novels, but as long as they were Christian and her mom had already read them, it was OK. Every hero in every book she read had Liam's face. She'd never told Meredith the way Liam made her feel. He was strong and protected them. He did funny things to her insides, and she often didn't know what to say or do. He thought she was his sister's best friend, and nothing more. *I want to marry Liam someday.*

He approached and yanked out Meredith's earbud.

Zoe waited, but he didn't look at her.

He waved to his friends as they headed for a different exit.

Outside the theater, the girls held hands, Liam walking behind so it didn't appear as though the three were together.

A homeless man pushed off the wall of the building and into their path. "You girls are angels."

Liam's shoes slapped on the sidewalk as he ran to catch up. He placed a hand on each of their shoulders, preventing them from getting too close to the man.

Zoe smiled at the man who wore a light jacket over a frayed, hooded sweatshirt that looked more gray than black. "We're not angels, we're 'couragers."

"I like that better. It takes courage to approach a reprobate like me. I'm not gonna hurt them, laddy. You girls encouraged me last week by that beautiful gold

angel card. Prettiest thing my hands have held in a long, long time. You gave me hope, so much I'm gonna clean up and find a church Christmas Eve." He gave a slight bow and moved aside.

The girls didn't say a word as they walked the two blocks to the SUV.

Liam clambered into the front.

Zoe waited to open the door. "Meredith, let's always remember each other at Christmastime."

"Why would we forget? We're best friends forever. How could we forget each other?"

"I don't know." She braved a look at Liam through the window, where he slouched in the seat, drumming his fingers on his knee. "He always keeps us safe when we walk downtown." *I'll never forget Liam, either.*

# 1

## *Present Day*

Zoe closed the door on a lilting Irish version of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” and set her coffee on a hard plastic table outside the coffee shop. The only one brave enough to sit outside on this December day, she folded her heavy scarf to cushion the icy seat. She put on her left glove and lifted the cup with her right, arrested by the sight across the street.

A guy sat at the cement base of a street light strumming a guitar, his case open to passersby. It wasn't the busker who caught her attention, but the man who'd stopped, staring down at the guitar case. So lost in her study of the man, she burned her mouth as she touched the fragrant brew with her lips.

She couldn't take her gaze off him, convinced something about the man was familiar. Her mind traveled back. Instead of the guitar player, she envisioned a hunched man with a white beard and a conversation with her best friend Meredith and her brother, Liam. Zoe sipped a cautious taste of her chocolate-flavored coffee and made sure it didn't drip as she set it back down.

The man in a fitted leather coat and woven, brown plaid scarf suddenly shook his head, and traipsed to the crosswalk. Her mouth dropped open. Could it be *Liam Gorgeous*? As he approached the door she'd

exited, she caught a lost expression in his eyes. She swallowed. "It looks like you could use 'couragement same as that guitar player."

His head whipped around. He frowned, then his forehead smoothed. "I've only known one girl to use that word."

Her heart blipped at the sound of his rich bass voice, so low she shivered. "Hey, Liam. How long have you been back home?"

"Little Zoe Danner."

"Not so little any longer." Zoe's voice shook. If he noticed, she hoped he'd blame it on the cold.

He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets, gave her the lift of one corner of his mouth. She wouldn't call it a smile.

"I was just thinking about you and Meredith. That's the same street corner where you stopped because you wanted to help a man on the bench. We'd passed people of the streets many times going to and from the movies. Yet that December, one of them got to you."

She nodded toward the guitar player, who now strummed "Silent Night," the notes clear since traffic had gone through the green light. "Those lost souls still get to me, and I often stop. Can't pass by a bell ringer without putting something in the bucket, or keep from greeting those I meet on the street." Her attention returned to Liam, who didn't respond. His eyes told her his mind was once again far away.

Zoe took the opportunity to study his features. His charismatic good looks had turned breathtakingly handsome, but his deep blue eyes were dull. He lacked the spark, the verve of his youth. Was he still protective of Meredith? She noticed his little dance as

though his feet were cold. "I can finish this inside if you'd like some company."

"That'd be terrific. I'm used to California weather, though San Francisco can turn brisk in the middle of winter. Can't believe you're able to sit out here."

"You used to love wintertime." She stood, grabbed her scarf and coffee cup. "I've always liked the fresh air."

He held the door while she canvassed the room for a table. "Go ahead. I'll be right with you."

She obliged and found a clean table. To avoid staring at him while he placed his order, she set down her coffee and unwound her scarf. She stripped off her glove and unbuttoned her coat.

He joined her without removing his scarf or brown coat, and wrapped both hands around his cup.

She couldn't help but laugh. "You're in Nebraska. Don't tell me you don't have gloves."

"I do. Not in the habit of putting them on. Left them at the studio."

"What kind of studio?" She gave her cup a swirl to mix the chocolate, and drank. Lukewarm. She gulped it down for the flavor.

Liam took a cautious drink. "I take it the cold outside stole the heat from your coffee."

"Right." She sat back and waited for him to answer.

"Your hair is different."

"Women change their hair all the time. You didn't answer my question."

Once side of his mouth lifted. "You always were persistent. Photography studio. I take pictures."

"You got a camera for Christmas when you were thirteen and took pictures of Meredith and me.



Remember all the posing you made us do at the lake?"

Liam sipped his coffee. "You obliged."

"That we did. As much as I want to hear all about it, and why you lived in California, I want to know all about Meredith. It's so weird how kids, girls especially, can be best of friends. Then life gets in the way and we lose track." *Thank You, Lord, for getting me back on track instead of the road I was traveling.*

~\*~

Women had a tendency to change their hair, but Liam wouldn't have recognized her even if her hair was still dark. Little Zoe Danner was all grown up. She no longer wore glasses. He approved of her tri-colored, soft waves that swirled every which way and bounced on her shoulders. Cinnamon, mahogany, blonde. The variations made her eyes appear amber. He recalled them as green. He'd like to examine her through a camera lens.

What was he thinking? He'd stick to inanimate objects. They didn't make him feel. The woman across the table tugged at places that hadn't been reached in longer than he cared to consider.

"Where is Meredith? We promised to never lose touch. But that's exactly what happened when we went to different colleges. Is she still in Nebraska?"

He'd better pay attention. "Slow down a bit. I could answer easier if that Christmas music wasn't blaring."

"How can anyone not like Christmas music? Have you turned into a grouchy Grinch?"

"I'm thinking you haven't changed much. You always loved Christmas." Another thing he'd already

picked up on—Zoe still didn't let things go once she set her mind on an objective. "Meredith is an intern in DC. She put those nerdy brain cells to work. I couldn't be more proud of her. I regret that we only see each other a couple times a year."

"Is she married? Engaged? Healthy?"

Liam couldn't remember the last time he enjoyed a conversation as much. He couldn't hold back smiling on the inside, though he kept his lips closed. "No. No again. And yes. Fit as can be."

"Is she on social media?"

"Hand me your phone."

Zoe scooted her chair next to his, so close he caught her scent. Something Christmassy, of all things, like pine and peppermint. Heads close now, he smelled her breath. Her coffee must have had chocolate in it. He took her phone, swiped, selected, and tapped. "I entered her phone number for you. Here's her most recent picture."

"Oh. Meredith Gorgeous is gorgeous." Zoe giggled.

Something broke loose in his chest.

She thumbed a text while he looked on. *Squeeeee.*  
*I'm with Liam. He connected you & me after all these years. You look great.*

An immediate ping sounded. *My friend Zoe from Nebraska? For real?*

*Me, for sure. Hey, girlfriend. I've missed U.*

He lifted and drained his cup, slid off his chair away from Zoe's side, and tossed the empty cups.

Her slim fingers still held her phone while her thumbs tapped away. Her smile could light up a Christmas tree.

Initially, he'd had a hard time seeing past the

woman she'd become. Now her excitement over getting in touch with Meredith revealed the girl she'd been as his little sister's best friend. "I'm headed back to my studio. Nice to see you, Zoe Danner."

She beamed up at him, nodded, and went back to her phone.

For some odd reason, he'd walked several blocks to take a jaunt down memory lane. Who could have guessed he'd run into a living memory? He suspected he was headed for much more back in Nebraska than he ever imagined.

~\*~

Zoe would have liked nothing more than to catch up with Liam as he strode down the street. At the moment, she was more thrilled over reconnecting with Meredith. Questions for him would have to wait. He was headed in the direction of Haymarket. Could his studio be there? If so, he wouldn't be too hard to find.

As far as that went, she could ask Meredith about her brother. They continued to text and finally agreed to talk later that night, since Meredith needed to get back to her office. Zoe fired off one more text message. *How did your bro lose the spirit of Christmas?*

*When Mom died.*

As children, neither Meredith nor Liam had talked about the absent Gorgeous father; maybe it was a good thing Zoe hadn't asked Liam about his mother.

Instead of heading to Agape Wear, Zoe scurried to her car and turned southeast to the craft store. As memories spun back to her times with Meredith, Zoe's mind was full of Liam. He was in the background as they'd made the Christmas cards at Meredith's home.

He had fun teasing Zoe as much as his sister, never in a mean way.

Liam had obeyed his mother and escorted, rather trailed behind a few feet, as the girls sought just the right person to hand their cards to. Sometimes they later cried over the joy they'd brought to a recipient.

Zoe experienced much the same fulfillment now when she helped the helpless. She'd learned not every directionless man on the streets was a drug user, lazy, or mentally ill. They were often victims who'd never connected with the right advocate and availed themselves of the aid available.

Faces of the homeless stretched far beyond the men who slept on vacant benches or under bridges. The women and children who had frequented Agape Wear shared awful stories. They were in trouble due to loss of homes because of fire or abandonment. Many dependent children lost their security when their fathers' jobs didn't pan out. Other honest families went broke due to lack of insurance to cover medical bills. Then there were the women who had to start over because of abuse.

Help was available for everyone if they had the right advocate or avenues.

Zoe didn't want to contemplate the effect that drug users had on families. She knew the heartache addiction caused. When it came to loss of livelihood due to that affliction, she identified with many of the people she encountered.

Tears threatened at the way the Lord had saved her from her weak self. She was still working on being deserving of her financial status. "Thank You, Abba Father, for the desire to pass on what I can, without hurting another's sense of self."

## Christmas 'Couragement

She arrived at the craft store, ready to spend some of that money on craft items to lift another's spirit. Liam's image came to mind.

What had happened to make him so serious that his eyes lacked luster and his face looked as if it would crack if he smiled? If anyone needed 'couragement, it was Liam.

Let the Christmas countdown begin.