

LOREE
PEERY

Christmas
A CONTEMPORARY
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE *Trinkets*

Christmas Trinkets

LoRee Peery

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Dedication

To Greg and Therese Hayes. I'm thankful you are family. You are in my prayers daily. May the Lord richly dwell within your hearts forever and always.

Other Titles by LoRee Peery

Frivolities Series

Creighton's Hideaway

Paisley's Pattern

Where Hearts Meet

Christmas Extravaganza titles:

A Blessed Blue Christmas

Christmas Rescue Route

Christmas 'Couragement

1

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.
~ Psalm 147:3

Hayley switched on interior lights and the open sign to Auntie's Antiquities, and then glanced up at the Victorian replica ornaments decorating the garland that dangled at the edge of the window.

Ross Travis, from the garage across the road, approached at the same time as another early bird, who held the door.

"Welcome, gentlemen. Coffee will be done in a minute."

The stranger gave her a nod and headed for the seating area.

Ross flipped steel-gray hair from the corner of his eye and watched steam from the coffeemaker.

Hayley picked up parchment paper and selected a piece of cut fudge. "Hope Bette Jean likes today's selection. It isn't chocolate."

"Peanut Butter's my favorite. Blasted diabetes."

She turned her shoulder to protect her homemade delight in case Ross reached for it. "I'm putting it in a bag or Bette Jean will give me guff because you bit into it before you made it across the road."

"Your fudge is the best kept secret around here or you'd have all of east Lincoln driving out this way."

"To keep Bette Jean off my back and you out of the

hospital, this fudge is for your wife alone." She closed the bag with a double fold and accepted payment. "Tell her to come over and check out the latest brooch I found."

"You'd make your mom proud the way you carry on her love for junk."

She switched her attention from Ross to the man who slung his shoulder bag onto the marble-topped parlor table. Men around her age, shy of thirty, rarely came in.

He ignored her as she neared with the carafe of steaming coffee. He'd removed his coat and placed it over the back of a mahogany chair with inlaid rose in needlepoint.

She suppressed a giggle at sight of the laptop as he flipped it open. No such new-fangled invention had ever touched the antique marble.

The man closed his eyes and performed what looked like a ritual, based on the concentrated breathing and shrugged shoulders, followed by immediate dropping of the hands.

"Coffee?"

He jerked up his head, clearly startled. "I didn't...OK. Sure. Thanks."

Wow. Good looking, but preoccupied. Brown eyes. An interesting crooked nose that, no doubt, told a story. Square unshaven jaw. Not classically handsome, but attractive enough to garner a second look.

"You're the first to walk into my shop with a computer. Advanced grad student?"

He frowned, which twitched his full bottom lip downward. "No. Writer."

Goodness. A man of few words. Correction. Few spoken words. "I'm not used to people coming in to

hang out. I just offer customers coffee or a glass of water. My fudge is pricey enough so I provide complimentary drinks. You're welcome to a refill."

He ignored her, ran his bottom teeth over his top lip, and stared at his computer.

"Sorry for carrying on. I'll leave you be."

His fingers clacked at a fast pace by the time she reached the breakfront.

So much for conversation with someone new. Quiet days at Auntie's turned busy around late morning. Some shoppers still gave old stuff as Christmas gifts.

She glanced at her guest again. Hunched over, his fingers flew in a furious manner as though they couldn't keep up with his thoughts. A glance out the window showed no parked car. If he was having work done at the garage, Ross would have talked to the stranger. Returning clientele drove out from Lincoln, but more often than not, locals breezed through while they waited for work to be done on their vehicles.

Someone must have told the new guy about her shop. No way would he have toted a laptop while enjoying the hiking trail and just happened to stop in.

Hers had been a rather isolated existence with only her mom around. She'd always believed if a father had been in the picture she'd know more about people and have a broader world experience.

The clacking stopped. The writer tapped his foot. Ran both hands through his straw...no, golden-colored hair. He peered out the window, but she doubted he even noticed the open overhead door across the road. The newcomer looked down and glared at his coffee cup as though surprised to see it waiting there. He picked it up and caught her gaze over the rim. It took a

second, but a foggy curtain, or daze, seemed to clear. Then he noticed her.

She approached. "I'm Hayley Wolfe. I apologize if you felt me staring. Are you always so totally absorbed in the task of writing?"

He gulped, set down the empty mug, and gave a slight nod. "Kameron Kohl. Yes, I shut out the world around me as much as I can."

"Kameron Kohl. Writer. As in blogs, newspapers, journalist, books?"

He hesitated. "Books. Dystopian for young readers."

"I've never met a real author before. May I ask what brings you to Edgewood, Nebraska?" She waited. The dazed expression returned. Had he slipped back into his make-believe world?

"I get lost in other places where my story guys struggle to survive through their heroic exploits."

"What exactly is dystopian?"

"Alternate, yet believable world. Fantasy where disaster or a dictator have bands of people fearing for their lives, trying to stay alive and survive."

"Do they find love?"

She read a *Huh?* in his expression.

"I don't write romance."

"I'm sorry." Ugh. Uncomfortable. "I'll get you a refill and leave you alone."

He slid a glance to the right, and then back to meet hers. "I don't mean to be rude. I'm on deadline for getting a first draft to my agent. Still working out some of this dangerous forest world I've created for lost boys."

"I've loved to read since I was a kid. What's your story about?"

"It's the first in a new series. A future century to take kids away from the troubles of the real world."

"Got it. I'm more a sweet mystery lover. With a little romance."

"Women," leaked out under his breath.

She giggled, waved her free hand. "Couldn't help myself."

Kameron tapped a knuckle against his mouth, rolled his shoulders into a hunch, and typed away. Cute, but did he ever smile?

Carafe returned to the warmer, she picked up a feather duster and went to the front window where motes magically appeared in the sunshine. Shiny speckles caught the light. Hundreds of silver sparkles glistened on the shelf beneath a sparse pine branch she used to display her impulse buy of bird nests. According to the online ad, every true Victorian Christmas tree held a hidden nest for good luck.

She'd never believed in luck and purchased the replicas just for fun. Should she leave the miniature antique tractors drowning in glitter of varied sizes?

Kameron appeared at her side. "Don't whisk away the sparkle. The shiny spots wouldn't look nearly as magical spread over the floor or in a dustpan."

He reached around her and dabbed a circle of silver caught on a tractor seat with a finger and resettled it on a square of midnight blue velvet that showcased an elaborate filigreed garnet brooch. Without permission he spread his hand to pick up sprinkles, and then brushed them onto the velvet.

"They look like stars. Good accent touch. Thank you."

"Welcome." He raised his empty mug. "Your brew's good. I can pour my own refill. I didn't see a

coffee price on your blackboard, only homemade fudge and penny candy."

"Coffee's on the house. Candy's shelved in the vault."

"Candy in a vault? Catchy."

"We're in an old bank." Facing him, sun glinted on his brown eyes and turned the rim around the iris to gold. "Ross from the garage was in earlier. They have a machine but the coffee tastes commercial rather than fresh brewed, so he comes here when he can."

"And leaves with fudge."

Kameron topped off his mug and sipped as he studied curiosities in one of the white-washed cabinets. For a writer, he had nice muscled shoulders.

What a thing to notice. She turned back to the window. It took three minutes to dust over the doll and crib that cradled it, repositioned a replica Montgomery Ward catalogue. She unclipped a nest from the faux tree and sprinkled more silver on a red velvet tray holding costume rings.

"I didn't answer your question." Kameron's voice at her side made her jerk. "The pastor is on vacation so I'm taking care of his dogs."

"How do you know Pastor Gregg?"

"I've known him all my life. What's this piece of canvas with laces?"

Hayley stepped to his side. "Few people know what they are. Odd looking, don't you agree? I've tried to imagine the potential buyer. They're called spats. Men in the nineteen twenties tied them over their shoes and laced them on top. They're a perfect accent to the silk stockings. I like to think a young handsome groom wore the spats and the stockings belonged to his beautiful bride."

A shadow creased Kameron's forehead.

His expression was dark enough to make her swallow and slide her gaze away. What did he smell like? It had been a long time since she missed her sense of smell.

She fingered a silver garter, created a purposeful wrinkle in one silk stocking heel where it draped over a hand-painted wooden box. "Maybe you could write a story about star-crossed lovers who wore such items as these."

"If I was into that time period. Speaking of stories..." He gulped his coffee and handed her the empty cup.

She ran an eye over his retreating back, and sighed as he resumed his seat. While brushing the feather duster over rims of ruby crystal, her glances strayed to Kameron at the corner table. How long did he plan to stay in Edgewood? Would he return to Antiquities?



Kameron positioned his hands on the keys, the cold marble against his arms reminded him of the unusual setting. He stared at the blinking cursor. In his own apartment, he got comfy in the leather chair that conformed to his seat, feet propped on the ottoman with laptop on his legs. He could shut out street noise and doors slamming in the four-plex.

Gregg had mentioned Auntie's Antiquities as the perfect place to write without interruption. Until he met the proprietor. Why had he looked into her amber eyes? He was aware of her as she moved around the place. How to shut her out so he could write?

The dogs at Gregg's had bothered him so much

the night before Kameron thought he'd never settle his mind to write. Their noisy pacing prevented him from finding a comfortable spot. Winter and Summer. Crazy canine names, but no wilder than those he came up with for characters in his stories.

Used to writing in isolation with nothing but the Internet to tempt him off task at his place, he jumped at the boisterous laugh of a customer. The clock on his screen read a few minutes before noon. Word count showed just under 2,000 words. Enough for now. Save and close.

"Finished? Want more coffee?"

He studied every graceful move Hayley made. A woman had never before distracted him so he couldn't concentrate. Nice shape exposed in clingy athletic wear that seemed to be a popular choice of women's wear instead of jeans. Pretty. Did she walk the nearby trail to keep so toned?

"So, you'll go back to the pastor's place and while away the afternoon?"

"Need to play with Winter and Summer first. I'll probably take them on the trail."

"I often meet the dogs when Pastor Gregg goes out in the morning before I open. Husky and rat terrier."

He nodded. "This morning I let them run in the yard to take notes for what I wanted to write while here."

"Wanted to?"

"Didn't get as far as I'd planned." He wasn't about to tell her she'd invaded his muse. Instead, he raised a hand to indicate the wares around them. "If you don't mind my observation, what's the scoop with the old stuff? The jewelry trinkets and unique goods? You're kind of young to collect such antiques. Makes me feel

like I've fallen into yesteryear."

"Yesteryear. Good word. Based on the worlds you create, I'd think you're used to falling into other lands."

Why did she have to smile so much? Didn't it make her face hurt?

She waved graceful hands. "As for the old stuff. It's all I've known. Mom and I moved here when I was five and she set up the shop."

Hayley filled the air with her sweetness. *Have to remember that and write it down.*

"Authors are a mystery to me. I don't know how anyone can find thousands of interesting words to pour onto the page to keep a reader's attention." Her long slim fingers went to her neckline. She pulled a chain from underneath her tangerine shirt and ran a fingertip over a double heart, hinged at the top. The wide-linked thickness on either side connected to a thinner chain. "Let me get a fudge sample for you. If you like tales of local lore, I can tell you about the vault where I keep the goodies."

A roar buzzed in his ears, muting her words. He cleared his throat. "Stop."

She hesitated, glanced over her shoulder. "Excuse me?"

"Your necklace. Where did you get it?"

2

Hayley took a step back. "My necklace?"

He fingered a matching chain attached to his keys, and pulled it from his pocket.

"Oh, my goodness. Look at that! It's the exact same design. I've seen a lot of interesting pieces through the years, but none like this. Looks like a short watch fob. May I hold it?"

He slid it off the keyring and offered it to her. Their fingers touched. An arrow shot straight to his chest. He'd always chalked that kind of spark to romance authors. Imagine that. To experience such a thing for the very first time. *No way. Ignore it.* He pulled back and stuck his hand in his pocket.

"One of the features of gold is that it absorbs body heat. Do you know what the bar is for?" She ran her thumb and index finger over the T-shape at the end of the chain.

What would it be like to have those long, white fingers touch him in exploration? Crazy. Was it wrong to crave a woman's touch? He'd missed out on the nurturing cuddles of a natural mother. *Same old refrain.*

"This chain looks like a watch fob, where the tee fits into a buttonhole, but it's different somehow, not as long as the norm. Where did you get it, Kameron?"

“Pastor Gregg gave it to me. The shop is your inheritance. This chain is the only inheritance I have.” However, not from a blood relative. No way would he tell her that. Someone as secure as Hayley, safe at home in this tiny town, couldn’t identify with a guy who’d been left on the church steps.

Abandoned like an old shoe tossed in the street.

“Did Pastor say where it came from? Someone in his family, maybe?” She laid his chain on top of an antique curio cabinet, flipped her hair to the front, and unhooked her necklace. Laid side by side, there was no mistaking the pieces were made to match. “I have goose bumps. They had to have been created by the same artisan. And you know what? Since I found my necklace amongst my mother’s belongings, I’ve never taken a magnifying glass to it.”

“Why should you?”

“For identity purposes. Mom never got into old jewelry deep enough to use a loupe, so I haven’t either. I’m guessing the pieces were designed to go together. The necklace made for a woman and the chain for a man. Did you grow up around here?”

He took the knuckle he’d been gnawing out of his mouth. “The first home I remember was in a drafty old parsonage near the Kansas border. Pastor Gregg moved from town to town about every five or six years. At least I was in the same school from ninth to twelfth grade.”

“I know Pastor is single. How long has he been a widower? Oh, I apologize. That means you’ve been without a mother that long.”

He frowned in an attempt to follow. Gregg was right. He’d have horrid forehead wrinkles if he didn’t stop scowling. “Pastor’s never been married. His sister

Teresa lived with him and took care of cooking and cleaning. She adopted me, raised me. I don't talk about my past."

"I apologize if I've stepped on your toes. I'm too curious for my own good. I get it because I don't like to talk about what's in my past either." She smiled and held out the chain. "Pastor Gregg's dogs are no doubt waiting for their romp."

"For a few minutes there, I forgot about the dogs." He stuffed the laptop in his bag, shrugged into his coat but didn't close it. "You seem to enjoy this old stuff. Don't know how the jewelry is connected, but if there's a way to find out, I'm sure you'll be able to. Now I need to make tracks so I don't get back to a mess in the house."

He jogged the two short blocks to the parsonage without noticing a thing around him, thanks to the lovely woman he'd just met. Why did she get to him?

She ran an old-lady kind of business in an aged, brick bank building. Did she live above the shop?

He hadn't put his mind on the abandonment word for a long, long time. Instead, he poured out the hate, anger, his own sense of worthlessness, into his characters. Boys forever lost without knowing home. None of that helped. He'd still been tossed aside.

Summer's barks resounded with his first step on the porch. He opened the door. "OK, OK. I'll let you out back to do your thing."

Winter did the growl sound that Gregg liked to put words to.

He swiped his feet on the mat, just a little snow, and then jogged through the lower level to let out the dogs.

In the spare room, his bag knocked over a tiny

bust of Jesus that he'd molded and painted in sixth grade. It had gone unnoticed since his arrival the day before. Authors were supposed to notice details. Maybe he was as much a fake writer as he was a fake son. He straightened the statuette on the small table, and bit his knuckle. *Ungrateful fool*. Pastor Gregg thought enough of Kameron to keep the silly thing all these years.

Winter's teeth on the doorknob and Summer's yaps pulled his dark thoughts to the present task.

Keys in hand, he fingered the fob chain. Dare he snoop in Gregg's cedar-scented room?



Kameron caught his breath at the top of the narrow iron stairs outside Auntie's Antiquities and waited for Hayley to answer his knock. Her hair had slipped lower, but was still knotted on her nape. He'd like to see it undone. *Focus*. "Hope you don't mind that I asked Mrs. Travis at the garage to give you a call."

"Good thing they were still open. I told Bette Jean you weren't bothering me."

What would she say if he confessed she bothered him?

"I don't get many visitors. Their daughter, and my best friend Blythe, spent her days with me when we were out of school. Bette Jean has always worked in the office when Ross has the garage open. So, come on in and tell me what's on your mind."

He waited for her to secure the door, and then let her precede him into her living space.

Even on a December night her apartment shone cheery bright. Fat candles, towels, dishes. A pretty

plate with the added touch of turquoise on the windowsill. "You sure like orange."

"My favorite color is on your mind?"

"Not really. Jewelry is. You don't have much to do with Christmas here in your apartment." He stood in her tiny kitchen area that smelled of chocolate and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm telling myself to be more observant."

"I do like orange. As weird as this sounds, citrus is the only scent I'm able to smell due to an early-childhood sinus thing."

Weird, all right. "Guess I expected a tree and other Christmas stuff."

"There's enough of that downstairs. Besides, I favor sunflowers from July to Thanksgiving. Want something to drink?"

"No thanks. I thought about snooping for personal documents, pictures of old relatives, or something." *The way I did at twelve, looking for my real parents.* "But I've never lived in Gregg's house here, so I'm not comfortable with digging through his belongings. Did you find any markings on your necklace?"

"No. I had just put it back on when a carload of women came in to shop. One collected handmade gloves and went nuts over a crocheted pair. Another cleaned out half of my ruby glass crystal from sheer to opaque, and didn't care if the glass was smooth or heavily grooved. She just wanted the color. A third bought a silver teapot and two matching hand-tooled tin trays." Hayley rubbed a finger across the twin hearts at her throat. "I apologize. Guess I'm still on a seller's high."

If he was the smiling kind, he'd return her grin. The woman was too happy for his comfort. "Where do

you go to find your inventory?"

"We went antique hunting on weekends. Not far. Went through ads for garage or estate sales."

"Who's we?"

"Just Mom and me." She straightened her necklace. "Kameron, you didn't come over here to ask where my connections came from. We just met. What is it you want?"

He slipped off his coat and laid it over the back of a comfy-looking chair upholstered in charcoal fabric, and turned to lean against the counter that divided her living space. "I had a thought when I was with the dogs on the trail. You said something about the crossbar on the chain being a bit shorter than the usual watch fob. Could you take off your necklace, please?"

She looked at him with open trust and curiosity. He was a stranger, yet she welcomed him. Without comment, she reached up.

He swallowed. He wanted to unhook her necklace.

It was warm from her body. He fumbled with the clasp. Two halves of a heart swung open for one half to link through the tiny circle.

He tipped up the points of the heart to examine the bottom where the double locket connected. Just as he thought, a small notch on the inside of each heart. Extracting the key fob from his pocket, he anchored the locket top on the counter. "Here goes nothing."

Hayley stepped in close, bringing the scent of citrus.

He fitted one end of the T-bar into the heart notch on the right, then the left. The two hearts separated.

Hayley sucked in air, released an audible, decidedly feminine gasp. "A perfect fit."

"Go ahead and do the honors."