

A WARM, TOUCHING TALE  
OF LOVE AT CHRISTMAS TIME

DELIA LATHAM, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# A CARDINAL CHRISTMAS

LOREE PEERY



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LoRee Peery

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## **A Cardinal Christmas**

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0170-7

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

To the ultimate Hero, my Lord Jesus Christ, for Who  
You are.

My second hero is my protector hubby, William, or  
Bill, as I've always called him. I thank him for enjoying  
cardinals as much as I do and for taking care of his  
mate.



## *What People are Saying*

LoRee Peery delivers a warm, touching tale of love at Christmas time, mingled with the angst of a heart broken by abandonment and jaded by a lifetime of bitterness. I enjoyed watching Kameron's journey to joy, as well as Hayley's unwavering optimism. God's love and grace, beautifully portrayed. The trinkets were a sweet bonus element. Nicely done.

~ Delia Latham, best-selling author.





# 1

*Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.*

*~Psalm 31:24*

Werner rode his trail bike at a good clip in the crisp December air. In many ways, the trail was similar to the railroad tracks he'd hiked as a kid. The difference was a much less treacherous rock covered grade. He slowed as the rhythmic sway of a jogging woman's ponytail mesmerized him. Something about her tugged at his heart.

Just as the woman ahead ran out of sight, he neared the spot where he'd first met Blythe Travis. The field remained an open pasture gone to natural prairie. Surprisingly, green grass peeked through the dormancy of December.

He geared down and rolled to a stop, his mind going back in time. For a short while as a kid, his folks had rented a farmstead beyond the copse of trees in the distance. He'd ventured across the field to walk the railroad tracks only to find a girl with hair blacker than ebony watching him approach. Blythe.

He now balanced, one foot on the ground, and imagined her waiting for him on those long-ago, lazy summer afternoons. They'd shared many adventures and even followed the creek to a beaver dam one day.

Agreeing to savor that memory, they never returned to seek out the beavers.

Soon, they'd meet again. Where was she now, wasting time during a layover in a busy airport?

The trail snaked ahead, where he'd heard a train whistle blow near Edgewood long ago, but they'd never seen a train during their excursions. Like many tracks across the country, the rails were long gone and repurposed as an exercise trail.

He stared off into the distance as though he had the ability to make Blythe appear. His heart quickened at the prospect of seeing her all grown up.

His mouth went dry. Blythe's beauty often stole his breath as a kid. Her parents said she used this path whenever she came home to visit as an adult. What was she like now? He'd seen pictures. Though her job took her to exotic places across the globe, her skin glowed like porcelain in the photos displayed. Had she ever thought of him?

He was eager. Would she remember him? Her flight was due in past midnight. Surely, her parents had told her that he was the temporary mechanic.

A rustle in the bush ten feet ahead pulled him from his thoughts. A flash of red, a rustle of brown and orange. A pair of cardinals swooped in. The female flitted to the naked branches of a honeysuckle bush and the male dropped to the ground next to something that glinted in the early morning sun.

He'd heard a few male cardinals sing since he'd returned to Nebraska, and he'd caught the familiar crimson streak on occasion. But these birds were the first pair he'd seen since his grandfather's graveside service in Illinois when Werner had been a teen. At that time, a pair of northern cardinals had settled in a

nearby juniper bush. The sight of the birds distracted him and occupied his mind, freed him from giving in to tears while the pastor droned on.

He sucked in a breath to handle the hurt. The thought of funerals stabbed him anew. No cardinals or any other creature showed up in Seattle on that most recent day. The loss of his parents remained fresh.

The sun sparkled on whatever lay amidst the crushed rock on top of the graded bank. Werner swung his foot to engage the kickstand. The cardinal pair flew off.

Crossing to the larger rocks along the path to where the male cardinal had been, he spied a necklace. The ring on the clasp was open where the silver chain had parted, but the pendant remained intact. Pretty. He swiped off his glove with his teeth and reached for his phone. He snapped a picture, lifted the necklace, and let the chain dangle as he studied two large seed pearls set in fancy swirls. Mounted inside a heart, the jewelry no doubt meant something special to the owner.

The necklace was a nice piece of jewelry. Whoever it belonged to would surely miss it. He slipped the necklace into his jacket pocket and zipped it in tight. Maybe he could catch the raven-haired jogger to see if she'd lost it.

~\*~

Blythe's feet pounded the well-worn trail. She hadn't run off as much negativity as she needed to this morning. Despite her early morning arrival in Edgewood, she'd hurried out of the house as her

mother headed to the hospital to be with her father. Sprinting, then jogging, hadn't helped her mind calm. It seemed odd to run so close to Christmas with green grass on either side of the graded path rather than the landscape covered in snow.

This time of year, she was rarely in the States. She usually ran barefoot on white sandy beaches, welcoming sunrise at an exotic resort. Not this year. Home for the holidays due to her father's knee replacement. Even before that surgery was scheduled, Blythe had not received an assignment to oversee the management of any Eiseley International resort. Last year at this time, she was all aglow over her recent engagement. While at home then, she'd turned ecstatic watching her best friend Hayley fall in love with the preacher's house sitter.

One thing that never changed in life, change was a sure thing.

At least Dad's business hadn't changed. Travis Auto remained constant as usual, despite her father's surgery and upcoming rehab. She needed to cut her run short and get ready to open up the office for her mother.

Forty minutes later, Blythe jounced though the door of Auntie's Antiquities in their hometown village.

Hayley squealed. "You're here."

Blythe hustled to hug her friend. "I'm so glad to see you."

Hayley appeared bright and beautiful, her amber eyes as gold as the big ribbon tied to greenery on the breakfront counter. "I'm sorry to hear about your dad. But he should be in a lot less pain."

"Yeah. That knee plagued him. He had a hard time getting around the garage vehicles for a long time

before he admitted pain to Mom."

"I'm glad he has good help now. In fact, the new mechanic was just in for coffee."

"You're one up on me." Blythe loosened her hold. "I haven't met whoever Dad hired yet."

Hayley gave Blythe another quick squeeze and turned to slip behind the counter. "The new guy who's filling in is staying at the parsonage with us, at Pastor Gregg's insistence. Kameron says the mechanic is all right."

"Good to know. Your handsome husband's approval must ease your mind over having a stranger in the house. I couldn't believe it when Mom told me he'd been staying at our place."

"Not a good idea to be alone with a stranger while Bette Jean is at the hospital for another day and a half at least."

"Right. Awkward. Mom did say he wasn't from around here."

"Really? I got the impression from Kam that the guy used to live nearby. Sorry. I heard his name but don't remember it."

"You must still be blinded by love." Blythe pointed at the coffeemaker. "Smells *brewtiful*, as usual."

"My coffee used to make you smile." Kameron's eye for detail must have rubbed off on Hayley, the way she seemed to look into Blythe's soul.

"What's your choice this morning, flavored or black?"

Blythe turned her head. "Black. That way I can savor your fudge."

"I'm sorry again about your breakup. I know we talked on the phone but wish I could have been there to take your mind off how the jerk treated you."

"A year later, see how things have changed. My engagement is off. Hope he's miserable with his precious someone new." Blythe inhaled and made a half-hearted attempt to lift the corners of her lips. "He sure pulled a fast one on me. Pretty much hurt his testimony for the Lord with all the people around both of us. At work and at church."

"I don't know a better place to heal a broken heart than coming home. Our warm spell is keeping the trail busy as well as creating good business for me and the auto shop. You'll be here for Christmas. Pastor Gregg is doing a series of messages on joy—"

Blythe interrupted. "Is Kameron upstairs writing already?"

"Not yet. He's walking the dogs."

"They must have gone out after my run. I'd better get going. Mom will miss your fudge this morning, but lay on me today's flavor."

"Peppermint." Hayley used parchment paper to lift a chocolate square and slid it into the white paper bag.

Blythe passed her gaze over the chalkboard on the wall behind the breakfront at the same time she slapped her neck. "Oh, no. My necklace."

"Ouch." Hayley swung her way, finger in her mouth. "Paper cut. What necklace?"

Blythe searched beneath her collar. "How could I have showered without noticing it was gone?"

"You think that's yours?" Hayley pointed to the notice on her board. "The guy came in this morning and had me snap a picture of the picture off his phone. I'll get it." She capped a go-cup and set it on the counter. "Do you like my caption?"

Blythe chuffed. "Only you would call it 'Trinket

found on the trail.' I'm glad he left his number."

Hayley swiped her phone and showed the picture to Blythe.

"That's my necklace. Thank You, Lord. I didn't even know it was gone. I'm doubly thankful someone found it right away. It's my last anniversary gift from Eiseley Resorts." She set down the bag and put the phone number from the posted notice in her cell.

"I recognized the necklace as quality just by the photo on his phone. I know you got in late. Your mom called me yesterday with your flight schedule. When you're ready for a good catch-up gab session, let me know."

"You always were a good listener. Now I need to open up shop, listen for the phone, and try to answer calls about all those car and truck things I don't get. Words like carburetor flushes and timing chains always make me yawn." Blythe shut the door on Hayley's tinkling laughter. Her own heart wasn't much into finding humor these days. She checked for traffic before crossing the road, surprised to see garage lights on behind the overhead doors.

Blythe unlocked the office door, placed her sack and go-cup on the counter, and then took off her coat. She grabbed her phone and swiped only to hear a ring tone coming from the garage.

~\*~

Werner set aside the power lug-nut tool and reached for his cell. Unknown, but from the local area code. "This is Werner."

"Werner Wright?" Echoed from his phone and the

doorway to the office.

He whipped his head around. His fingers almost lost their grip. "Blythe Travis."

"What are you doing here?"

"Why are you calling me?"

They spoke at the same time, all the while walking toward one another, and met behind the rusty back fender of a pickup in the center bay. Each shut off their phones without looking.

He swallowed nothing but dryness and reached for her arm. "Be careful."

She stepped aside to avoid bumping into the trailer hitch.

He rested his elbow on the tailgate, and grinned while shaking his head in slow motion. "You turned out mighty gorgeous. Prettier than your pictures, little Blythe."

She frowned. "Where'd you ever see pictures of me?"

His chin jutted backward as if she'd insulted him. "Your folks have pictures of you plastered in every room of the house. Figured you knew I'd been staying there for a week so your pa could orient me around the garage. Before your dad's surgery, your mom fixed enough food for me to last another week."

She frowned at him as though he was nuts. She spread her arms, wonderment on her blush-tinted face. "So, you're the mechanic who's been staying at my parents' house?"

"They haven't told you that?"

Speaking at the same time again, he dropped his hand and shut up to avoid talking over her. His bottom lip twitched against the smile that wanted to spread.

Werner raised his hand and stroked his short

beard. "I believe in ladies first, but I don't have a lot of time. I promised a lube job and tire rotation on that sedan by late morning."

"Our time has been spent talking about Dad and his surgery. As for you being here," she arced her arm out in front, "that much is beginning to make sense. Since you're here, you must be Dad's temporary mechanic."

"And you're manning the office. If you didn't know who I was, why'd you call me?"

Her hand flew to the base of her neck. "Oh. How could I forget my necklace? You must be the one who found it."

"How do I know it belongs to you?" He pulled the rag from his pocket and swiped his hand where it had touched the truck. "Describe it for me."

She calmed. She could tell the instant it sank in that he was teasing. "Why else would I be calling you? I got your number about my necklace across the street at Hayley's."

"Describe it for me," he repeated.

She did, with more detail than he could have.

"Your necklace is safe. Zipped in my jacket pocket and hanging in my room at the parsonage." He longed to tell her she'd grown up to be the beauty he always predicted she'd be. "Your face still tells me what you're feeling. You're as frustrated as all get out."

"Probably. My parents didn't tell me much of what's going on, just that they could really use my help. It was a shock to see you here out of the blue. On top of that, I lost a piece of jewelry that means a lot to me."

"Got it. Plus your dad's situation. My gramps went through a knee replacement. There will be a lot of

icing and pain and physical therapy. None of you have to worry about Travis Auto. I'll cover my end of the work, and I'm sure you will, too."

Her face smoothed and her sea-green eyes brightened. "Right now, you have more confidence than I do in me handling the office."

"Can't wait to hear what you've been doing with your life. I'll fix the loose clasp on your necklace and return it after lunch, if that's agreeable. I really need to get back to work."

His last word ended with the ringing of the telephone in the office.

## 2

Blythe hung up the phone at Travis Auto. She'd have to get reacquainted with the mechanic lingo again, not that any of it had ever made sense to her. Dad had tried to teach her about motors and taking care of what's under the hood, but she never believed she had the aptitude. Plus, she hadn't cared enough to learn.

A bang from the garage made her jump. Werner must have dropped a tool.

Werner Wright, of all people. He'd always come to mind as she ran adjacent to the open meadow where he once walked to meet her. If her heart wasn't so bruised and down on men at the moment, she'd linger over how good looking the adult version of Werner turned out. Gracious. That thick curly hair and short beard begged to be touched.

It took years to get over her girlish hurt when he up and disappeared. She'd trusted him to always be truthful. Instead, he'd moved away and never even sent a letter of explanation. In her memory, they walked together one day, with plans to meet the next, and then he didn't show up at the tracks.

Two days later, she walked the two miles to his family home and was greeted by a *For Rent* sign. Werner was gone.

She had to shake it off. Her coffee was no doubt cold by now. Careful to remove the lid without spilling, she sipped. Lukewarm. She grimaced. Thank goodness for the mini microwave on the premises.

And thank goodness Hayley had a knack for making fudge. She let the first tiny bite melt on her tongue while her brew nuked. The peppermint wasn't too strong, nor too light. Just right, mixed in with milk chocolate. The idea of Goldilocks made her giggle. She hadn't had much to smile about lately and found it not worth the effort to force her mouth into a curve.

Until now. For some reason, the giggle formed a smile that lingered. Her heart lifted.

Maybe her life would be all right again after all. She'd been so happy. Thought her love was returned. No one had to tell her she looked glum. She assumed Hayley had read her face and could tell she was having a hard time the second their eyes met.

Sure, the situation with her dad.

Yes, her fiancé dumped her. She still hurt so much she couldn't even think his name let alone say it out loud, mad at herself as much as him for being gullible.

To top it all off, something was going on with her job. She'd been around corporate business long enough to catch on to any undercurrents. She hadn't been assigned a trip for six weeks. To her knowledge, no other veep of management had been sent overseas either.

The whirring of the overhead garage door woke her out of her musings. She turned on the radio and her favorite Christmas carol filled the air. She sang along on the chorus, trying with all her might not to watch as Werner switched out the pickup for an SUV from outside.

His words stilled her singing. "Go on into the office and see Ms. Travis."

The elderly man, a hitch in his step, entered the office.

"Good morning," she greeted. "Give me your name, please, and I'll pull up your invoice."

"You must be the daughter. Hope your pa comes out OK."

She nodded, and then found the computer order. *Thanks, Mom.* "That's the automatic lubrication, right? If you're paying with a card, go ahead and insert or swipe right here on the counter, Mr. Johnson."

The customer left through the office door. Werner couldn't be the only one working around here. Since she had the appointment schedule onscreen, Blythe studied the jobs to familiarize herself with the day's business.

Mr. Johnson had left open the connecting door to the garage, which enabled Blythe to hear the whirring, grinding, thumps, and clangs of Werner at work. He was downright proficient at rotating a set of tires.

Ten minutes until noon, a car pulled up. A lean, middle-aged man in the passenger seat got out and entered the office.

"Hi, may I help you?"

"I see my pickup outside, so I assume the tires have been rotated?"

Werner entered the office. "All done but the tread is wearing, and you'll have to watch for a broken belt. Better plan to get a new set by spring."

Blythe laid the printed invoice on the counter.

"Thanks for the advice, young man. Been doing business with Ross Travis for a few years, so I'll trust you. Your parents are mighty proud of you, Miss