

*A Cup of
Christmas
Kindness*

CAN HER LOVE FOR HIS DAUGHTER
MELT THE BITTERNESS IN HIS HEART?

LORIE
PEERY

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LoRee Peery

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2020
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0322-0
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To granddaughter Hannah, who as a little girl loved
ladybugs.

I am so proud of the woman you are, mother of two,
about to earn a degree. May the Lord richly bless you
as you take your children into the world of their
imagination, and lead them to give God credit for
making all living things.

What People are Saying

On Hiding from Christmas. "Ms. Peery knows how to weave an inspirational story you won't soon forget." ~ Renette Steele

1

The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness." ~ Jeremiah 31:3

Heath had experienced various events in his life, but never imagined waiting in Cornhusker Community Church for his mother's celebration of life. The atmosphere was pleasant on this Saturday afternoon, yet somber tears hid behind smiles.

Family was supposed to gather in a side room, but no way could he sit in one spot. He gave his dad's shoulder a reassuring pat and sauntered into the open reception area. Drafty. Every time the door opened December made its presence known.

He wandered to the open common area. Six-foot tall Christmas trees grouped in twos and threes decorated in white and gold stood at main entrances, including the large auditorium for worship services. Tall groupings of peeled bark birch tree trunks held sentry at the entrance to other rooms, with green pine boughs accented with red bows to bring in the holiday

theme.

Weird, what entered his mind. How different the building was compared to the little clapboard country church they'd attended when he was a kid. There was probably a name for a metal building faced with a brick front, but he couldn't bring it to mind.

How did a grown man deal with such grief? Or be stronger for his young daughter? She was all that mattered in the long run.

The line at the reception table continued to grow. The sight of Mom's scattered fairy figurines threatened to unhinge the hold he had on his emotions. Heath tore away his gaze, scanned above the heads of the gathering throng, rather than crash into the sympathy expressed from individual eyes.

How would he ever make it through the day?

A sudden jolt against his leg jarred his straying thoughts. He smiled and patted the golden curls bouncing down the girl's back. He crouched to Charlotte's level and faced his daughter.

"Daddy, Pastor said it's time. We can go in and sit."

If it weren't for Charlotte, he'd be the loneliest man alive. She'd ground him in the coming days, and he prayed for strength to hide his grief. He took her hand and stood. *Lord, help me. I don't know what to do.*

Heath found his seat next to the aisle and scanned the stage. Why did people still send flowers? Too much eucalyptus. He'd never breathe in the cloying scent again without thinking of this day. Dad would need help deciding what to do with all the arrangements.

Pastor Linton took the stage and turned on his mic. He gazed over the gathering, landed his focus on Heath and his dad. "It's good to see all of you here

today as we honor the life of a dear friend, wife, mother, and grandmother who represented the woman described in Proverbs thirty-one. Kimberly Banfield will be missed. Before we hear shared memories and I tell you about her life, I want to read, at Kimberly's request, her favorite Bible verse."

Heath gritted his teeth to hold back the tears as Pastor lifted Mom's worn leather Bible and shuffled the pages to the back of the Book.

"Colossians 3:12 reads 'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.' Kimberly lived by those words, as her family and Christian friends can attest to. And now, please join in as we sing her chosen hymns."

Dad's shoulders shook. He lowered his head as musicians with banjo and guitar took the stage.

Heath threw his arm around Dad and bowed his own head. He only heard the echo of his mother's sweet voice as the lyrics to "Sweet By and By" filled the chapel.

The song was interminable.

He had to pull it together. Per her request, Mom had given him something to read on this day and had requested him not to mourn.

Which was exactly what he did...mourn.

Dad squeezed Heath's leg.

Heath covered Dad's hand.

They sucked in breath at the same time and raised their heads in sync, gathering renewed purpose from one another.

He could do this. *Only with Your help, Lord. I haven't needed You so much since Violet left for California. Help me keep it together, for Dad and Charlotte. I can't do it*

without You.

His mind went numb. He'd helped write the obituary, the accolades to Mom, and listened as her life was eulogized.

The sound of his name jerked his head upright. Pastor Linton stood on the side steps in front of him, mic extended.

Heath swallowed. He moved as stiff as a robot. Somehow, he accepted the mic and found his spot in front of the lectern. See-through plastic. Could all those people in front of him detect the way his knees quaked?

He blinked, reached for the paper in his inside pocket, and lowered his attention to unfold the notes.

Time stopped. Air blew down from the exposed vents above him. Someone coughed and made him jump.

Fear not. I am with you.

He raised his gaze straight forward. And his tongue swelled enough to choke him. Tears that clogged the back of his throat gave way to dryness. His mouth turned to thick cotton at sight of his first and only real love.

Violet Steele sat in the third row directly in front of him. Her blonde hair was shorter, which emphasized those beautiful angelic, yet trusting eyes that stared up at him. Memories of the last time he'd seen her drove a stake into his heart. Since then, miles and separate life chapters had kept them apart. She'd chosen a new life without him.

What was she doing back at a time like this?

He'd eventually found a life that left him in a world of hurt, except for Charlotte. Divorce and financial hits dimmed in the light of gaining his

daughter.

A cough registered his drawn-out hesitation.

Violet and he had been neighbors, then best friends. Shared their first kiss. He thought she was his future. But she went after a new life and fell from grace according to her parents. She looked anything but fallen as she stared up at him.

Another cough. Stirrings of clothing or feet against the floor from various seats penetrated his brain fog.

How many seconds had elapsed? Too many.

He glanced down and refolded the paper. "Whoever thought it a good idea for a wonderful woman's son to stand in front of you all and try to say something worthwhile? I'm not worthy. Thank you all for coming. I know many of you didn't know my mother, who threw kindness around like confetti. You're here to support me or my father, or because you're on the food service committee."

Quiet laughter drew his stiff smile. "I think the important things have already been said. We've seen the pictures overhead, heard her favorite verse, and Mom's desire was, in her own words, to see everyone present today with her in heaven at some point. We've sung her favorite hymns. If you knew her, you've either given her a fairy figurine, or she's gifted you with one of her favorites. If you don't have one already, I know my mother would be pleased for you to take a fairy figurine off the reception table in the foyer. Thank you for your support."

He handed off the mic to the pastor and prayed his choked grunt of grief hadn't resounded as an amplified growl throughout the room. Heath resumed his seat.

Shortly, it registered that those around him had come to their feet. No ushers. Attendees shuffled

toward the back of the chapel, a funny name since there wasn't even a cross or an altar. Only a scattering of floral arrangements along the edge of a raised dais.

"I'm thirsty, Daddy."

He shook his head in a vain attempt for clarity and squeezed Charlotte's hand.

Halfway down the aisle between the rows of folding chairs, he heard his name. He turned and met Violet's gaze.

Moisture skimmed the surface of her eyes. The corner of her mouth twitched in the familiar tell that showed she wanted to smile but knew it would be out of place. The soft touch of her hand on his arm branded him through the fabric of his jacket. "I don't know what to say. Your mom was a special woman."

He fought his own tears, glanced over her shoulder, made sense of nothing, and brought his gaze back to hers. "I didn't know you were back."

"I've been here about a month."

The angle of her haircut emphasized her beauty. She lit up the place like a golden halo around the sun on an otherwise cloudy day. "Nice short hair. Everybody looks the same these days, with bouncy hair down their backs or in ponytails."

What a stupid thing to say. Why couldn't he just thank her for being here?

The way her cheekbones rounded above the sweet smile she flashed took him back in time. She'd given him countless such smiles that spoke volumes about her caring heart. The bright light of her gorgeous sage eyes once threatened to steal the oxygen he drew in.

He forced himself to lower his gaze. That didn't help. He inhaled her snickerdoodle scent. One thing for sure. He couldn't deal with Violet Steele at the

moment. But his daughter could.

“You’re pretty. I’m Charlotte. And I’m seven and three quarters. What’s your name?”

Violet dropped the foot she’d scrubbed against the opposite calf. “Hi, sweetheart. I’m Violet. I knew your grandmother a long time ago. She was a special lady.”

“I know. But she’ll always be in my heart. Grampa says I can have all her fairies that are left. Hi, Mr. David and Ms. Cynthia.”

Heath acknowledged Violet’s parents, his old neighbors, with a subdued nod.

Violet’s mom spoke to Charlotte. “She knew you’d take good care of them. I gave her a fairy once upon a time.”

“Do you tell stories too? Gramma loved fairy stories, and I love trees.” She looked up at Heath. “Right now, I’m thirsty.”

He muttered a thank-you, nodded again at David Steele, and then turned to follow the pull on his hand. Condolences and well wishes escorted them along the way to the drink table.

Muted conversation murmured around him. Heath remained in a bubble. Dad’s and Charlotte’s had been the only voices to penetrate through the fog of the last few days. Until Violet filled his vision again. She stood near the last row of chairs with a hand on her seated father’s shoulder.

As though she sensed his attention, she performed a one-eighty in his direction that made her filmy floral kimono twirl as she lifted her cup of coffee in acknowledgement. What timing, that she should return to Ceresco, Nebraska, and find him at his weakest point.

His weakest since the day she’d left him.

The second their gazes met, Violet was transported to the July after they graduated from high school. Their argument. Heath's refusal to support her decision to leave. How silly and grandiose to think she could "find herself" in southern California.

At this moment he held her by an invisible thread, a stronger transmission than a force singing through fiber optics. He broke their connection to heed his daughter.

She wrenched her gaze away and settled on Charlotte. *Lord, help that lovely child remain tender and innocent. Help her brighten Heath's coming days.* Violet understood from her parents that Kimberly Banfield had cared for Charlotte after school. What woman would Heath find to fill that role now?

As her mother approached, Violet fought tears and managed to prevent them from running down her cheeks.

"Cynthia," Dad stood, using the chair back for support. "I'm sorry to be a party pooper, but this chair is waking up all my aches."

"Dad, I'm sorry. I should have realized."

"Today is important. You don't have to leave. Maybe Heath could bring you home."

That dried up those tears. "No way. I'd never intrude in his life on this day."

Too many people stood around for her to single him out as they left, but she did take her turn and hugged Heath's dad. "Matt, I'm home now. We're only a couple doors down, so I'll second that what Mom said. Call on us for anything at any time."

They paused at the reception table. Mom picked up a figurine. "I gave this to Kimberly. Do you think I could have this fairy?"

Charlotte ran up. "Please, Miss Cynthia. Gramma told me it came from her best friend in the whole world."

Mom wrapped her fingers around the painted porcelain object and leaned to kiss Charlotte on the temple. "You come over and we'll bake Christmas cookies. I know you and your gram were getting ready to do just that."

"Thank you. I've counted the houses in the block. If I go left or right from their house, the same number of houses takes me to your place from Grampa's."

Violet couldn't hold back her laugh. "You are a delight, Charlotte. I hope we can become friends."

"My Gramma told me you liked my daddy a long time ago, so I hope you like me too."

"I like you already, sweet girl."

"Charlotte," Heath's voice sounded gruff. "It's time to choose some flowers to take home."

Violet waited, but Heath didn't pause to look at her. He seemed ready to break. How in the world could she help him through this? There had to be something she could do, or she'd crack along with him.

But would he accept anything from her after the way she'd hurt him?

2

Violet had awakened several times during the night, replaying times with Heath during their growing-up and later, dating years. Awake now, she'd exchanged thoughts of him for turning to the Lord. Though it was Sunday, they'd opted to stay home from church.

The first thing before she got out of bed, Violet began her day as she always did, with prayer. "I give this day to you, Lord. Everything I say and do, Lord. Guide me hour by hour and minute by minute. And may I put my whole being in it. Doing the work You'll have me do, and to You goes the glory—when I get through doing the things that bless my soul. Loving not fighting, encouraging not maligning, ever living for my King, trusting You in everything." She opened her eyes and giggled at the thought that followed her silent amen. What would a husband lying beside her think of those words? Her smile disappeared. Why consider such a thing?

Heath. Facing him had awakened several emotions that repeated each time she woke through the

restless night. Seeing him the day before must have remained in her subconscious. She wasn't one to dwell on negatives, but his opposing reaction to her buffeted in waves that beat against her skin.

Violet slung off the covers and planted her feet on the cushy carpet. Her heart bled for Heath's obvious sorrow and that darling Charlotte. How awful it would be to not have a mother in the picture, and now lose a beloved grandmother. Violet prayed as she slithered leggings up and buttoned the purple, men's-style button-down shirt she favored.

"Lord, be with Heath and Charlotte today. Matt, too, because he and Kimberly were married a long time. Ease their sadness and show me how I can show them Your love."

She stood and stretched. Ugh. Stiff muscles. A good walk had to be on today's agenda. Sitting at the service yesterday had to have angered all those nasty trigger points that caused Dad pain. His muscles needed thorough localized massages. She'd only touched the surface of that hard tissue since she'd been home. Such knots required deep muscle touches to break the built-up toxins. That would depend on whether or not he could tolerate the pressure.

Recalling her school years in California kept her company on her way down the stairs and into the kitchen. Her many odd jobs, hosting her ex's—how she fell for the idiot she'd never understand—parties when all he did was take advantage of her. But she'd managed to get her degree in health services, though it took years because she couldn't decide in what area to specialize. As she reached for a coffee cup, a stitch in her own side made itself known. She rotated from side to side and worked her shoulders. Tight. "Mornin',

Dad.”

“Mornin,’ Hep.” He’d done that since the first time he saw her casual clothing style. The actress Katheryn Hepburn had worn men’s dress shirts with rolled up sleeves. “You look as stiff as I feel. Had that same bed since you were a girl. Why don’t you go pick out a new mattress at Ernie’s? I can afford it.”

“I believe I enjoy doing things for others because you taught me that kind deeds are godly.” She dropped him a kiss where the hair was thin on top. “I’m sure the mattress isn’t a problem, Dad, but thanks for the thoughtful offer. Yesterday was rough on a lot of us, and I suppose I just didn’t sleep as well as usual. Besides, you don’t have to spend money on me.”

He smiled, flipped over the newspaper, and reached for his coffee.

They sipped in easy silence. The day before had drained them. Violet was certain all of their thoughts were for Matt, Heath, and little Charlotte concerning the loss of Kimberly.

Once her brain felt less muzzy, Violet reached for her dad’s hand. “Where’s Mom?”

“Oh, you know her.” He grinned, but she read the pain in his eyes. “You’re cut from the same cloth when it comes to doing for others. She walked a coffee cake over to Matt and Heath.”

“She beat me to it. I was planning to talk to her about what we could do for the family today. It has to be hard for them after all the hubbub of yesterday.” She slapped a stickie note on the newspaper that read *IOU*.

“What’s this? You don’t owe me anything.”

“I owe you regular trigger point massages for all the guff I gave you as a teenager, and now for putting

me up. It'll also keep my fingers in practice for my next job." She flexed and kneaded the air. Hmm. What a smart idea. She could do good deeds until Christmas. Not only for Mom and Dad, but for Heath, his dad, and Charlotte. Like an Advent of kindness.

Mom returned and placed her boots in the tray. "Have some snow cover out there, but not enough to even sweep off the drive."

A knock sounded at the door while she still wore her coat. "Hi, there, Charlotte-girl, long time, no see. Let me take off my coat. You can come on in."

"We forgot to give you the dish from before." The girl entered and stomped snow off her boots. "We came around the other way, but Dad didn't hurry. I wanted to beat you home."

"Thanks for returning my casserole dish." Mom opened the door and called out. "Heath, you don't have to stay on the porch."

He didn't respond, but a moment later, stepped onto the tile floor. His gaze roamed over the kitchen and he avoided looking at Violet.

She stood. "Come on in and have some coffee."

"Thanks, no. Good morning, David." He took his hands from his coat pockets, ran his fingers through the nonexistent, military-cut hair above his ears, and addressed Mom. "I have a bit of a dilemma starting next week when I return to work."

"What's that?" Cynthia put the dish in the cupboard.

"Now that Mom's gone, Dad's in no shape to care for Charlotte after school."

"Is that why you wouldn't let me walk over here alone?" Charlotte planted her hands on her hips, which made her coat puff out like a bright red, hot air