



*Hearts Across Time*  
NOVELLA

TELEPHONE

*Christmas*  
PHONE  
BOOTH

A HOLIDAY  
TIME-TRAVEL ROMANCE

*from author*

LOREE PEERY



# Christmas Phone Booth

LoRee Peery

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**Christmas Phone Booth**  
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## *Dedication*

To the memory of my cousin Marlin Kammann, whom I didn't know until 2010. I grew up believing I was the oldest grandchild, but learned I was second oldest. He was exactly nine months older than me, and his favorite number was also nine. A reader who wrote wonderful letters, and verse, I'm honored to save his handwriting.



*Christmas Extravaganza Titles*  
*by LoRee Peery*

A Blessed Blue Christmas  
Christmas Rescue Route  
Christmas 'Couragement  
Christmas Trinkets  
A Cardinal Christmas  
Hiding from Christmas  
A Cup of Christmas Kindness

# 1

*But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. (Jeremiah 17:7)*

Nicasia stepped into the past. A wide, open staircase with generous newel posts welcomed guests to the upstairs rooms. The nineteenth-century wrapped around her as she took in the lobby of Hotel Wilber. The well-worn wood floor creaked beneath her soft-soled boots as she read the invitation to ring the ornamental bell on the hotel's desk.

She breathed in the scent of furniture polish with an underlying aroma of "old," and couldn't help the thrill that rushed over her skin. A ginormous antique cash register with its ornate detail weighted one end of the oak counter. Nicasia turned to her right and scanned the lobby. Two walls held shelves three feet deep and eight feet long in between the windows. A vast collection of various Christmas villages lit with white lights sparkled on cottony "snow."

With her back to the counter she surveyed overstuffed settees, accent tables, and a bulky piece of ornamental furniture against the stair wall that might have once been a buffet. A registry amidst Father

Christmas figurines invited her to pick up a pen. To its left, she passed a glance across front windows and closed doors. Then she circled around and caught her breath at what graced the wall on the right side of the registry.

The buffed oak frame of an antique telephone booth begged for a closer look.

A string of colored Christmas lights danced over the top and ran down the sides of the closed doors. A circular logo that read Lincoln Telephone and Telegraph with the image of an old desktop phone, decorated the glass door on the left. Her fingers itched to open the doors and enter. No way. The small cubicle reminded her of a bathroom stall.

She drew in a breath and stepped close enough to peek through the glass of the righthand bifold door. A big rectangular oak box clung to the right inside wall. Two bells ornamented the top. The receiver's cord dangled off the left side. Her fingers trembled with the urge to step in, unhook that audio tool, and speak. Bravery was in short supply today. She'd have to stand on her toes to reach the mouthpiece, but the slanted shelf looked like a perfect perch for her free hand.

Underneath the phone box, a corner shelf held a spray of red and white silk flowers. She guessed its original purpose was to hold a purse or something else to free the caller's hands.

"May I help you?"

Nicasia jumped at the voice in the short hall to her right.

"I apologize for startling you. I'm Jan. Are you just

taking in the ambiance, or are you here for the private wedding?"

"Oh. The wedding. I'm the bridesmaid."

"Welcome to Hotel Wilber. I'm Jan." The manager repeated her name. She was dressed in a cardinal Christmas T-shirt and jeans. Brushing back a gray curl, she held out her hand.

"Nicasia Palowski." She shook the woman's hand.

"Of course. You're the maid of honor as well as decorator and planner." Jan beamed a wide smile of welcome. "You'll fit right in with that last name. I've put you in the Palecek Room, to the left at the top of the stairs. I have your card info if you'll verify your phone."

Nicasia rattled off the number, and Jan nodded that she had it correct.

"I've prepared a light dinner for you and left it in the fridge. Breakfast and lunch tomorrow are part of your registry." She handed Nicasia an old-fashioned skeleton key. "Please make yourself at home. Sign the registry, if you would, sometime during your stay. We'd love to have you jot down any comments. Roam around. Check out the dining room just past this hallway. You'll see the guest refrigerator I mentioned, clearly marked in the kitchen. Snacks are available for honest guests who leave a cash offering. The rehearsal dinner will be served tomorrow evening in the Mares Room to the left of the main entrance. And you're sure you want the ceremony in the lobby with all those Christmas villages?"

"Yes. The lights make a homey, festive backdrop.

Thanks so much.”

“My cell number is on the cash register, please call with any questions or concerns. I’m just a couple minutes away.”

“I take it I’m still the only one who came a night early?”

“Yes. Everyone else is scheduled to arrive tomorrow.”

Nicasia reached for her roll-on bag. “Is there a separate entrance to the reception so I can start decorating?”

“Czech Cellar is through the dining room and to the left. Or right of the Mares Room off the lobby. There’s a garden entrance, but it’s locked from the outside. The key is clearly marked on the wall behind the counter.”

“So I can carry in decorations through that door?”

“Certainly. It isn’t open to the public right now.” Jan pulled on hunter green leather gloves. Her hooded wool coat reminded Nicasia of a fairy-tale character. “I’m off then. Don’t let our friendly ghost scare you tonight.”

Ghost? She couldn’t be serious?

Nicasia nodded a good night. She lifted her bag and took her time climbing the grand staircase. Open, with wide balusters, she reached the top as the layout of the second floor became visible. At the top, she extended the handle of her luggage and passed a cursory glance ahead of the upstairs floor and to the right. She turned left and rolled her bag past two rooms until she found hers with its windows front

facing.

A garland of Christmas greenery with white and silver angel ornaments draped the door that said PALECEK, the sign held in an angel's hand. She giggled as she turned the key in the door, having never used a skeleton key. "Of all the blessings."

No en suite bathroom, only a pedestal sink, which probably amounted to more decoration than anything, rested against one wall. She removed her crossbody purse and hooked it on the curlicue by the door, her hands visibly trembling. What was she thinking, to stay here ahead of the family? Getting a jump on preparations no longer sounded like a good idea.

She'd sipped on a cola during the drive, and now received an urgent message from her bladder. Heart in her throat, she backed into the hall and turned around. "OK, Lord. You know what's ahead. Be my strength, please."

Garlands dotted with varied colored lights and themed ornaments graced the doors of each room. She noted Czech handpainted shoes, poinsettias, and tiny blue globes. Then a sign read LADIES, encircled by a wreath of greenery that looked like cedar from a pasture.

"Get it together. You're alone. You can do this." Heart in throat and shaking from the inside out, she pushed through the door. Her eyes glazed over with the long-ago scene. "No!"

Nicasia leaned against the first sink, her fingers clinging to the edge. "Go away. I'm alone, and I have to pee."

Two breaths as deep as she could muster followed by explosive pushes of air, she opened her eyes. Blasted flashbacks. The mirror reflected stalls and showers behind her. "You can do this. No one is here."

She finished her business with the stall door open and hurriedly washed her hands.

Rather than return the way she'd come, she turned left. Men's room, country themed doors with deer, trees, and bears gave way to cardinals, bluebirds, snow people, red glass balls, and Dickens characters. She paused at the the Ourecky Room, or honeymoon suite this weekend, draped in white tulle along with greenery and Victorian ornaments.

Nicasia ran a hand over the handrail and then circumvented a plush sofa to the top of the stairs. "Hey," she yelled just for fun. Her voice echoed. Would it be as long a night as she imagined?

~\*~

### *1895 Sheriff's Office*

Deputy Logan Korshoj tapped the wanted poster depicting Bart Scofield's mustachioed mug, adjusted his gun belt just right on his hip, and then repositioned his star. He snagged his coat off the chair back, settled the lapels just-so. He lifted his new gray Stetson off its hook with one fingertip. Then he smoothed the hat brim with both hands, and clomped to the door.

The new bar in town was located in the basement of the hotel, open to more than the upstairs guests. If Bart showed up in Wilber, he'd be swilling beer. He

might mistakenly believe himself safer in a saloon without windows as a good place to hide. But Deputy Sheriff Korshoj included the place in his hourly rounds.

A north wind burned Logan's cheeks, but he didn't mosey in December. He turned up his collar and lowered his chin. The wind whistled around a corner like a growling whisper. He imagined his reverend father's nasty words. *Jesus may have died for others, but He didn't die for you.*

"Why now, Lord? Will I never forget that man's taunting voice?" Logan gritted his teeth until the cracking of his jaw ground in his ear. He raised his head and faced the elements. What would his pa say if he could see the strength and courage it took to chase grisly varmints who broke the law? Logan had done nothing more than say he believed in a gentle, loving God rather than follow the hypocritical, two-faced life his dad lived. One man in the pulpit. Another, ugly man at home.

Logan shook off the past. His quick stride covered the eight blocks in no time at all. One block north of the business district, the Wilber Hotel was a smart new structure that did a good business. Soft gaslight glowed through the windows. The newspaper claimed electricity and telephones would soon make life easier in small-town Nebraska.

Logan veered off the sidewalk and tried the side door, only to meet resistance. He turned the knob again. Would he really have to go through the lobby? The locked door surprised him. He pushed harder.

A swirling, whirling vortex of sickening motion pounded in his ears. His feet no longer touched the ground. The world as he knew it went black.

~\*~

Nicasia had helped herself to coffee on a table in the dining room. She'd needed the jolt of caffeine for unloading the reception decorations from her car to the basement. There wasn't much to it, since the wedding guests numbered less than twenty. That meant adorning an existing fake pine tree, one end of the bar, and four tables in wedding finery

She set down the last tote and perused her surroundings. Half a dozen stools waited for occupants at the counter bar. Three tables with chairs were set in place, along with the cake table already covered in a white lace cloth.

"You've got to be kidding me." She grimaced at the sight of decorations on a fake pole pine tree: crushed beer cans and one string of lights that didn't even follow the branches, but dangled vertically. Her grimace switched to a giggle.

She snapped a picture. Good to capture a before and after. Next, she selected Christmas carols on her phone and with the speaker on, set it on the bar.

It didn't take long to dismantle the tree. She ran a finger over a branch, surprised it didn't show dust or feel slimy. Soon, two strings of silvery lights, white bows, bells, and hearts dangled from the branches.

White plastic poinsettias with silver ribbon woven

through greenery graced the centers of the tables atop lacy white cloths. Since the groom owned a ranch, a resin figurine of white and silver cowboy boots rested on the bar. Nicasia set silver napkins, plates, and serving utensils on the cake table, and stood back with a smile. She stacked the totes and put them out of sight in a back room along with the beer-can ornaments.

Now, what to do with the rest of her night? Sleep seemed far off in this cavernous place all by herself. Her stomach rumbled, a reminder she hadn't eaten since noon. She turned off the basement light at the top of the stairs. A light by the side door revealed a switch for the dining room.

She crossed to the kitchen and hummed "Joy to the World" as she uncovered a turkey and Swiss cheese sandwich. Too restless to sit, she ate it while circling the dining room, noting pictures and some history that revealed the original hotel had been made of wood, built in 1873. But it burned down in 1895, replaced with the current brick structure.

Wilber was the only town in Nebraska named for a professor. And nearly everyone in the state knew it was the home of the annual Czech festival. She hadn't known Wilber had been declared the official Czech Capital of the United States in 1987, in a decree signed by President Ronald Reagan, or that the Czech Foundation owned the hotel.

She noted lights had turned on in the lobby, probably due to timers, as well as the Christmas lights on the porch. Public rest rooms were off the short hallway close to the dining area and lobby. No way

would she check what was behind the door labeled Ladies. But she paused at the phone booth.

A jittery sensation built within her. The glass doors made the back wall clearly visible, what was there to fear? The bifold doors opened on a whisper.

Nicasia entered the phone booth and picked up the elongated tube hanging on the left side of the oak box. Impishly, she dinged the twin bells above the speaking tube and stood on tiptoe. What should she say besides hello?

As fast as that thought struck her mind, a solid weight pushed through the wall and knocked her off her feet with her upper body out the door.

"Ouch! Get off, you oaf."

"Ouch, yourself. What did you hit me with?" The owner of the deep voice took the majority of his weight off her chest, but it was too tight to lift himself off of her. He raised up to his knees. A humorous light twinkled in his hazel eyes. "You'll need to crawl out first, ma'am. I fear one of my boots is caught on something in this narrow contraption."

The stranger in the cowboy hat and old-fashioned clothes smelled clean and outdoorsy. He leaned as far to his left side as he could, which freed her legs.

She scooted backward, dragging herself out the phone booth door. Her shoulders hit the opposite wall at the same time she brought up a knee and clocked the man in his chin.

"Reckon I deserved that." He twisted around as best he could to check out his foot. Using the door as leverage, he slipped out of a well-worn cowboy boot.

“I obviously pushed through a door that doesn’t lead to the basement of this fine establishment. That is, if I’m even in the hotel.”

Nicasia stared, speechless.

“I see no one to introduce us, ma’am, so I’ll do the honors. Deputy Sheriff Logan Korshoj, at your service. I’m here looking for a bad guy in the hotel basement. Who might you be, in your odd-looking clothing?” He seared her with his gaze. “Are you wearing black long johns?”

She ignored his question. This had to be some kind of joke. A secret door in the phone booth?

Had Samantha and Cade sent protection so she wouldn’t be in the hotel alone overnight?

## 2

Nicasia scooted on her seat away from the phone booth, giving herself room to stand. She brushed off her leggings, her gaze never leaving the cowboy sheriff in front of her. She attempted to speak, but fear clogged her throat.

Logan shot her a puzzled look, reached in, and reconnected the swinging receiver. "That thing hit me on the head."

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?"

The cowboy sheriff pulled his long legs out of the phone booth and yanked on his left boot, his elbow butting against his six-shooter pistol holder. For real? As he stood, she spied the star on his vest. A silly way for him to dress.

He stretched to his height of well over six feet and ran his gaze from her ankle boots over the hem of her long red sweater, up to her messy ponytail, and finally to connect with her eyes.

"Why are you dressed as though you just came in from a ride?"

"A ride?" she squeaked.

"It's dark. Where's your dress?"

What in the world was wrong with this dude?

She held out a hand to prevent him from stepping

closer. "Let's back up here. Who sent you here tonight, and why were you in the phone booth?"

"A bad guy on a wanted poster. I've never seen a phone in a box." He bounded beyond her, surveyed the hotel lobby, shot her a glance, and then hooked his thumbs in his belt.

Could his gun and tied-down holster be authentic? She pursed her lips to keep from smiling, raised a brow that he didn't see, and gave him the same once-over he'd given her, from his scuffed cowboy boots to the top of his head. He had nice, thick russet hair that he now scrubbed through with a hand.

He scowled and locked eyes with her. "What in tarnation are all those little town buildings? And where is Mitch?"

"Who's Mitch?"

"He runs the hotel." Logan lowered his head and looked around. "Oh. There's my hat."

She gave him a wide berth and leaned against the counter. "A woman named Jan was here when I arrived." No way would she admit her solitary status. "What did you say about a bad guy and a wanted poster?"

"Bart Scofield is wanted for rustling cattle, and I expect to find him down below. I'll just be on my way." He scanned his surroundings again with a frown. "What's happened to the hotel?"

"I can't answer that. But I can assure you, not a soul is in the basement at the moment."

"Pardon me, ma'am." He bent to pick up his hat, brushed it off, and went to put it on, seemed to change

his mind, and rotated it by the brim in front of him. "I'd like to see that for myself, but would you be so kind as to direct me to the correct door? As I said, the appearance of things isn't what I'm used to."

She expelled a gust of air, took a gentler breath, and led him through the dining room. In front of the outside door, she reached around the doorjamb of the basement entrance and turned on the light.

"Thank ye, ma'am."

"Would you please stop saying that? I'm barely out of my twenties and being ma'amed makes me feel old."

His gaze met hers. With a nod, he donned his hat, and then descended the stairs, mumbling to himself.

A noise sounded like a kick against aluminum cans—the crushed ones from the tree? Judging by his tone, he'd most likely cursed, and then his boots resounded on the bottom treads.

Nicasia backed against the wall near the side door and waited for him.

He came back, reached out and switched off the light, grinned, turned it back on, and then off. "Ain't that the darnedest thing?"

She kept her gaze on him as he rolled up the shade on the outside door, peered out, and pulled it shut again. His stomach grumbled.

She giggled.

"Pardon."

"We're in the right place if you're hungry."

He circled the space. "How come it's empty? What are these walls doing here? I don't even smell cookin'

beef.”

She shrugged. He certainly seemed mixed up. “Why don’t you have a seat? I’ll get you a glass of water. And, if you’d like, make you a sandwich.”

“Appreciate it, ma’...uh, what did you say your name is?”

“Nicasia Palowski.”

He tipped his hat, pulled out a chair at the nearest table, and rested his Stetson on top. “May I ask why you’re in this place, and why is it so quiet? Are you all by yourself?”

“My cousin Samantha Kensington is getting remarried here at Hotel Wilber. The family will be gathering for the small wedding ceremony. I’m the bridesmaid. We’re also best friends. And I pretty much made all the weekend plans.” *Way too much information.*

He surveyed the room with a bewildered expression. Did he suspect more lurking surprises?

She switched on the kitchen light, ran a glass of water, and carried it to him. “It’ll only take a minute for the sandwich. Mayo or butter?”

He quirked a brow. “Mayo what?”

“Mayonnaise.”

“Never heard of it. Butter’s best.”

He’d never heard of mayo? Her turn now to shake her head and frown. This whole thing could be a scene in a novel.

Wait. Her hand stilled on the fridge door. Could it be...? Nah. No way could he have traveled through time. That was only for storybooks. Or her recurring dream. She went through the motions of making his