



Christmas House

LOREE PEERY

"THIS WAS BEAUTIFUL. I COULD PICTURE EVERYONE. SIMPLY BEAUTIFUL"

-JULIE ARDUINI,
AUTHOR OF ANCHORED HEARTS

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Dedication

To the woman of Titus Tuesday. I've known some of you since before 1980. I've been abundantly blessed by your encouragement, fellowship, leadership, meals, prayers, servant hearts, and teaching that honors our Lord. I look forward to spending eternity with you. And to Editor-in-Chief, Nicola Martinez. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for including me in the author (family) list of Pelican Book Group. To God be the glory for every aspect of the publisher/reader connection.

What People are Saying

“This was beautiful. I could picture everyone. Simply beautiful.”

~Julie Arduini, author of *Anchored Hearts*

“This is the perfect story for Christmas. One of second chances and knowing God’s love and grace is always surrounding us. The flow of the story was gentle and perfect.

~Sharon Dean, Avid Reader

1

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah 1:5

"Are you lost?"

Pepper jerked her hand off the gentle donkey's face.

"I didn't mean to startle you. Can I help you?"

The man's pleasant baritone voice drew her gaze upward. His inviting smile held no malice or threat, only open curiosity.

"I'm Foxx," he said. The warmth of his voice grabbed her attention as much as his words.

"Excuse me?"

"My name." He grinned. "Foxx with two exes."

She dropped her shoulders. Not a threat. Just Nebraska nice.

He waved a hand. The donkey pricked its ears, swiveled, and nudged the man's side. He laughed and ran the animal's ear between his fingers. "Please, no comments about my name. I've heard them all. Foxx Haven."

Her head reared back and she denied her twitching lips their smile. "Oh, I like it. A pleasure to

meet you. ”

“Really? Most people come back with Foxx den or ask if I’ve pounced on a mouse lately.”

She couldn’t fight the twitch of her lips, and offered a small upturn. “I’m not most people. I’m Pepper Rainwater, by the way.”

He patted the donkey’s neck. “This guy is going to bother me until I feed him. Wanna join me?”

Pepper looked for a gate.

“No gate. Come around to the door of the shed.” Man and donkey walked with her as she followed outside the fence. “Around the corner, to the back side.”

The donkey crowded Foxx from the fence and gained closer access to Pepper.

Another donkey, a female, was eating hay from a trough made of crisscrossed wood.

“Where’d you come from?” His voice welcomed her.

“Up the road.”

“What brought you here?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“How else am I going to get to know such a pretty lady?”

Had anyone ever called her pretty? “I was arranging decorations in my new place and heard the strangest sound ever. Followed by a *hee-haw*. I had to check it out to see if I’d imagined a donkey’s bray.”

“Understood. What—”

“Enough. You’re giving me the third degree.” She waited while he unlatched the wooden door and

swung it open just enough for her to squeeze through. The donkey pair nudged her hands and thighs, clearly the reason Foxx hadn't opened the door farther. "My turn. Why the name Foxx?"

His chuckle raised his shoulders. "That's a question for my parents. Mom always said they were curious and cute with their fluffy tails as long as their bodies, their curiosity and their quickness. Why'd your folks call you Pepper?"

"I never asked."

She gave each donkey a pat and headed into the fenced enclosure.

He nodded at the animals in turn. "Meet Rex and Rhoda."

She acknowledged his nod. "My parents didn't like questions. Pink and I learned early to stay out of their way as much as possible."

He stalled her with a hand on her elbow. "Say again?"

"Doesn't matter. My parents should have never had children."

"Hunh. Did you say Pink?"

"My younger sister. Pink left Nebraska as soon as possible." *I've never been badgered for or so forthcoming with personal info.* Except at job interviews, few as they were. The way Dad had drilled it into them not to trust anyone, especially the government, remained instilled deep within.

The donkeys ignored their fresh hay and stayed at her side. "Are they waiting for something?"

"Just to be near another being. They're pack

animals and crave company. I like to run a bit with them so they don't stand like lumps. Come you two, catch me." Foxx ran full out and burst into laughter when the donkeys sandwiched him.

Pepper soon caught up, and studied the masculine features. He must smile a lot, judging by the grooves near his mouth and lines fanned from his eyes. Was he happy? His face was more interesting than handsome, not that she'd ever noted handsome men other than on the TV or theater screen. Light brown, tannish eyes and dark brown hair with mahogany highlights.

"Your turn to take 'em for a romp."

Running belonged to the past, but it felt great to stretch her legs. Pepper jogged the opposite direction. From the new perspective, she noted the patch of fallow earth between the donkey fence and her yard. Ownership made her smile. The smile turned to rare laughter as Rex and Rhoda vied for her attention. "Good thing there's only two of them, one for each hand."

Foxx approached. "When Fred introduced me to these two, I was thankful there weren't three. Guess it's a good thing God gave us two hands."

"Who's Fred?"

"Their owner, Fred Olmsted."

"Oh, so you aren't my neighbor?"

He chuckled. "We're all neighbors in Garland. But, no, I live toward the center of town. I'm spending a bit of time with these fine beauties while Fred is fishing in South Dakota."

She wasn't used to casual conversation, but turn-

about seemed fair. "So, who are you, Foxx Haven? Why don't I see a vehicle?"

"My house is at the other end of Main Street. My dad—well step-dad, but he might as well have been my real dad—he just passed, and now the place is mine. I rode my bike over. I work as facilities maintenance tech for over a thousand apartments in several buildings in Lincoln." He took a breath. "I also attend church in Lincoln. I love animals, but never had any, especially after what they can do to living quarters." He gave that *heh huh* chuckle from his chest that she already identified as unique to him. "I'm single. No significant other, nor has there ever been one."

Good grief! She'd asked for all that? Ask a question and expect to receive information.

A buzz sounded from his pocket. He held up a finger and answered. "Got it. Be right there." He returned the phone and walked backwards. "That was work. I'm on call this weekend. Stay with our friends as long as you like. Make double sure the door hinge locks. See you around."

Pepper nonchalantly followed him, running her fingers over two soft, long ears. The heat of the animals at her sides warmed her with four-legged welcome. A moment later, Foxx whizzed by on a sleek yellow bicycle, which explained why no motor sound had passed earlier. She kept him in sight until he turned onto another street.

"Nice to meet you two." The donkey's backs were warm underneath her sliding, farewell hands. "I'll be

back.”

What a day of intrigue. By early evening, all the moving boxes were in from her car. Most of the Christmas garlands of greenery and ornaments were sorted. Ready to grace doorways and enhance her meager furnishings. She’d met a man who triggered her attraction meter, and made friends with miniature donkeys that were bound to be a comfort in her new residence.

Could tomorrow, Sunday, be nearly as interesting as today?

~*~

Foxx pedaled hard the few blocks to Dad’s—no—*his* home now. Pepper was a beauty. He relived the meeting with her. Pert and pretty, but way too serious. And secretive. He grinned. She hadn’t liked it, but he’d drawn her out to talk about herself. Her caution made him more curious, but he wanted to know all about Ms. Pepper Rainwater. Unusual, the way both their names weren’t common to the human race.

His life had been so crazy lately, following all those months of caring for Dad. Lack of sleep and more apartments to clear before the next tenant. He almost regretted that Dad hadn’t lived in Lincoln, where proximity and traffic kept his driving thoughts turned to his surroundings. Traveling the bike trails in the city, he concentrated on the exercise. Greeted others with a nod, and gloried in the passing air currents he

created.

He secured the house and garage, hopped in his oversized SUV, and left for the job. During the commute from northwest of Lincoln, life and people and the past kept hitting him as distractions. Where did Pepper work? Somewhere on this side, or did she head into traffic for a busy commute?

It was much easier to let his mind go blank while on two wheels. Thoughts wove from Fred's donkeys back to pretty Pepper. Where had she come from, what was her story? Why was he so drawn to her?

And all those months with Dad. Mesothelioma was a killer. Watching him go downhill hurt. It was over. Why relive it? But his memory was relentless. Shortness of breath had led to oxygen tanks. The pain in Dad's chest hurt Foxx as his elder fought for life. The cough, fatigue, weight loss, swollen abdomen.

"Stop!" He loosened his grip on the steering wheel. "Oh, Lord, take it away. It's over. Dad's full of joy in Your presence now."

No sooner than he'd asked, a racing motorcycle cut into his lane from the right. And the light changed. He hit the brake pedal. From then on, Foxx concentrated on his surroundings as he pictured his route to the apartment building where a water heater element needed reset.

Yet Pepper returned to the foremost presence of his mind. The serious woman was a mystery he wanted to unfold.

2

Tires crunched on driveway gravel. Pepper secured a garland of green and silver in the corner over the doorway between living-to-bedroom. She peeked out the window, recognized Foxx, and unlocked the door. He stood from the passenger side with a covered container, which he balanced in one hand, and then reached to grab a sack off the seat.

He lifted his hands one at a time. "Hey, I brought you the best lasagna around as a welcome to the town. Eat it now or later. But I've had lunch and wouldn't mind sharing dessert."

She found no words, but stepped aside so he could enter.

"Wow. Uh. Christmas in October?" He stopped in the middle of the empty living area.

It could look worse, but the room was furniture bare. Only a wooden chest for a coffee table, an oak rocker holding a red and green throw and a Christmas pillow sparkling with "Silent Night" woven in golden thread. Various Christmas items covered most of the dividing island.

"My house. My decorations. Never had Christmas as a kid. I always said I'd have trimmings year-round if I ever owned my own home." Why did she feel an

explanation was needed? Suddenly self-conscious, Pepper didn't know what to say or where to look. Her home, and her Christmas in October, were none of his business.

"Seriously?" A crinkled frown replaced his smile. "No Christmas as a kid?"

She gave a lopsided shrug. "I don't know you well enough to answer the reasons behind those kinds of questions. But, no. Never a tree or Christmas celebration that I remember."

"Wow."

Pepper bit her cheek to keep from laughing, though it was a delicate subject.

He shook his head and scanned the green and red once more. "I'd scratch my head, but my hands are full."

"Oh. I apologize. Thank you. Uh. I've eaten, so the covered dish can go in the fridge." Her hand was filled with white and red geometric-shaped dangling baubles that made them both laugh. "Let me put these down first." She drew the looped strings off her fingers and piled the items on the wood chest.

"Allow me." Foxx was careful not to dislodge the plastic lid from the plate as he held onto the small sack with his other hand, and carried it to the fridge.

"I approve of your bright and sunny kitchen." He pulled two pint-size containers of ice cream from the paper sack. "Knew a kid who lived here years ago. I remember wild floral wallpaper. Spoons?"

She pulled open a drawer and handed him one.

"Since I don't know you, I have a vanilla and one

with chocolate chunks. Preference?"

"Chocolate chunks. My mouth is already watering." Ice cream would go on her next grocery list.

He slid his gaze around the open space, and then motioned for her to sit in the breakfast nook.

"You know I have a sister. I haven't seen my parents since I was seventeen. What about the rest of your family?"

"I also have a sister. Kitten is ten years younger."

She swallowed a huge bite of cold delight that zinged right to her brain. At least the chocolate was a tiny rather than big chunk. "Kitten? As in a fox and kits?"

"Heard it all. Mostly that my last name should be den because an underground burrow is where foxes live."

"Well, I like the ring of Foxx and Kitt. Believe me, we've heard remarks about our names as well. Such as, salt is pink but no one had ever heard of pink pepper." She took a small bite, let the creamy vanilla and chocolate melt on her tongue. "What about your parents?"

"My mom, Goldie, uh, left when I was quite young." He swallowed. Shuffled his feet. Was there more to his story? "My Dad's name was Judson, people called him Judd. Mom thought it clever for us to have the double consonants in our names. Anyway, Dad died with mesothelioma not too long ago. He gave me his house here in town, and I'm still cleaning it out. Kitt will be coming soon to finish with the paperwork and his private stuff. Some weeks are so busy at work

that I don't get much else done."

"Plus, you're keeping a couple donkeys company."

He nodded, offered a half smile. "I'll wait until you're ready to tell me why you never had Christmas. The world has made it profitable."

Some people probably thought that. And a good thing, because she was on the lookout for any ornaments and decorations at a fraction of what they originally cost.

They paid attention to savoring the cold deliciousness and didn't talk much more.

Foxx licked his spoon and stuffed the lid into the cardboard container. "Next time I treat you with chocolate, I'll get caramel for myself." He took his waste to the open container near the sink and touched a cardinal-shaped liquid soap dispenser. He tapped the tuft on its head. "But it makes me sad that there's more emphasis on buying and gifting and Santa than the real meaning of Christmas."

She took his statement as a question. "The baby Jesus."

"Right." He leaned against the counter with ankles and arms crossed. "I don't see a manger or nativity scene amongst all your do-dads."

A nativity must be biblical characters. "For now, there isn't enough room to display what I want to. I keep checking antique shops for a complete set of figurines but I'm always reminded they aren't all there. A shepherd or sheep or king or even the baby. Pieces are often missing."

One of the corners in the living area would be perfect for a curio cabinet. She had saved almost enough money to purchase a selected oak piece in one of her favorite thrift stores. But a couch and dining table came first. Pepper had worked every Christmas for double pay from age fifteen to twenty, at grocery or gas stations. She'd still do it if her current employer was open holidays.

Now Christmas could surround her all year round, with or without furniture. Maybe someday she'd shop in regular stores rather than junk shops. But people threw away perfect goods. For her gain.

It took an extra push to secure the lid on her ice cream container. "I'm not used to eating a whole pint, so I'll save this for later. Thank you."

As the freezer door sealed, it dawned on Pepper that she was relaxed. Odd, and uncharacteristic not to be nervous over the anomaly of a man in her private space. There was just something about Foxx that was unobtrusive, though right now he crowded her kitchen, where they leaned against the counter. She was genuinely curious about how normal families functioned, but was not comfortable barraging him with questions. It was bad enough that he'd badgered her.

That must be the way people got to know others, by asking questions. Her work line was so noisy at the motorcycle plant, even with ear protection, that her ears still hummed during breaks from the raucous. Others talked all they wanted, but it took no effort on her part to tune them out.

Was it questions and answers that developed into friendships? She'd never had one. Only Pink for conversation. Their parents sure hadn't conversed with them, but bossed them around and drilled into them not to trust anyone. Especially the government.

Foxx straightened, gave his endearing *heh-huh* chuckle. "I'd best be off. If you don't have a church home, I'd be glad to take you with me next week."

A church home? What was that? Pepper barely noted buildings with steeples as she drove by. They were just landmarks to her. Maybe going to church was something normal families did?

~*~

Foxx had been interrupted by thoughts of Pepper for a whole week. He'd seen her drive by at the same time each afternoon except Thursday, while he was still in Lincoln. She hadn't been at the donkey pen when he showed up, probably due to their schedules.

He ran a finger over his parents' wedding picture, and set it back on the mantle. Pepper's question of his parents drew thoughts and feelings he wanted to ignore. Especially remembering Mom and the guilt that followed. But here in Dad's house, it was harder than ever to keep too busy to think about the fact he was an orphan now. Could grown men even be considered orphans?

He stared at the image of his mother. The loss of Goldie Haven had created a huge void in his childish heart that he'd carried into manhood. She had done