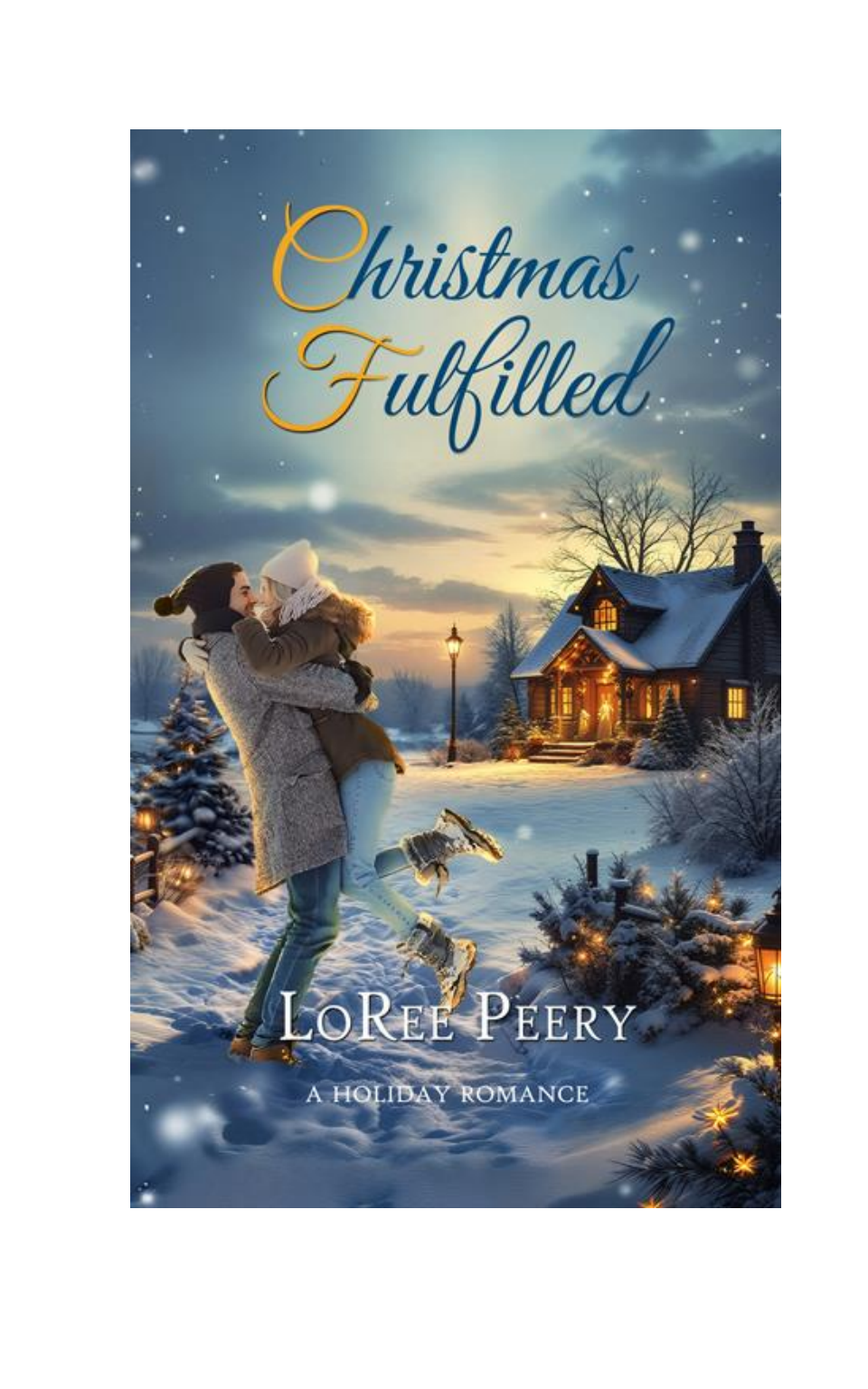


A romantic holiday movie poster. In the foreground, a man and a woman are embracing in a snowy field. The man is wearing a grey coat and a black beanie, while the woman is wearing a brown coat, a white knit hat, and light blue jeans. They are both smiling and looking at each other. In the background, there is a cozy, snow-covered cabin with warm lights glowing from the windows. A small evergreen tree is decorated with lights to the left of the couple. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise, with soft snowflakes falling. The overall mood is warm and romantic.

Christmas Fulfilled

LOREE PEERY

A HOLIDAY ROMANCE

Christmas Fulfilled

LoRee Peery

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to the Triune God.

Written in my weakness, I called out “Help, Jesus,” “I can’t do it without You, Father,” or “Holy Spirit, please write through me.”

For some unknown reason while working on Pink’s story, I struggled to enter my writing space. I wrote a few days a week, then found other things to do, sometimes for months.

As always, my heavenly Father came through. He was my strength when I labored over simple words until I finished.

To God be the glory. For every little thing.

What People are Saying

“This is just the coziest, and that’s, I think, the highest compliment I can give.”

~Julie Arduini on Christmas in Garland

1

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ~ Hebrews 11:1

A bouncy orchestrated Christmas tune Pink only heard in December rang through the car speakers. Could she ever get tired of humming along? She and her older sister, Pepper, had never celebrated holidays as girls. She drew a deep breath and savored the scent of clean, washed laundry that blew from the vent freshener.

Pink had driven all night. Now she wished her body was as replenished as her current fuel fill-up. She accelerated for entrance back onto the interstate. A glance in the rearview revealed the same dark blue camper pickup she'd noticed earlier pulling out of the lot.

"I suppose it's normal to see the same vehicles travel along the way."

She replaced her curiosity with reflections of her sister. Pepper had bought her first home, a cottage she dubbed Christmas House, in Garland. The little town sat a half hour west of Lincoln, Nebraska's capital. Pink could never thrive in a water tower town.

Then again, anything was better than the way

they'd spent their girlhood in a storage unit on Cornhusker Highway. Would she ever be able to rise above the scars that stained her inner being?

She growled. Why go back there? Twenty years had passed since she'd followed Pepper when they ran away. Seventeen and fifteen. They'd survived. And were both satisfied where life had taken them today. Though Pepper had a blue-collar job, she was happy. And Pink shined in her classy brand name wardrobe. There was nothing wrong with managing retail clothing sales.

Pepper thrived. She had no qualms about her job, loved decorating her home, had fallen in love. But she couldn't stop talking about Jesus. Pink's big sis had blossomed since meeting Foxx Haven, though Pepper claimed her transition had more to do with Jesus than Foxx.

And Foxx had introduced Pink to Bowie Miller. Thinking of the big man always brought a smile. He'd endeared her to him the first time she'd heard his knees click.

And with a click in thought, Pink pictured her mother.

"Why did Mom ignore us as children? I need to know the answer. Better yet, why does it still bother me?" This was the first time she'd spoken the hurt out loud.

Pink wiped a finger across the teardrop on her jaw. Her life went all topsy-turvy that day last month when she'd seen Mom in downtown Denver. Homeless. No surprise there. She'd had that ogre of a

husband tell her what to do during the girls' childhood. Had something happened to him?

Pepper and Pink had vowed never to let such a thing happen to them if they ever got married. Now that Foxx had entered Pepper's life, that resolution would soon take place.

Pink had practiced several openers during her second recent drive from Denver to Nebraska, wanting to explain why she'd up and left the Rocky Mountain state. Now that Mom and Pepper were in the same location, maybe Pink needed no reason. Suffice it to say, the Rainwater women would be together again.

She glanced in her side mirror and saw the same old, dark blue truck with some kind of home-made looking box on the back. She assumed it was for sleeping. It traveled often in the opposite lane behind her on the interstate. Taking the off ramp when she did. Pulling into rest areas as she closed her car door. Gas station stops.

A shiver raced down her spine as the image of creepy Rudy Noble came to mind. He'd scared the life out of her. The mall security guard had shown up at the store window several times a day during her breaks at the dress shop. She'd found him waiting at the entrance she used when her shift ended. He'd actually followed her to the car three days ago and used the snowfall as his excuse for watching out for her safety.

She shivered again.

Pink approached Lincoln from the west as the eastern sky lightened above the horizon, where the

state capitol punctuated the demarcation below the sky. On the road all night hadn't bothered her, except she'd gotten sick with fright at the last town, Julesburg, Colorado, before Nebraska's state line. A man who'd worn a hoodie that hid his features could have been Rudy's twin. His body type was the same as Rudy's, on the short, stocky side. The dark blue truck had pulled out and followed her for forty minutes before turning off the interstate.

Picturing Rudy's dead eyes creeped her out. "Leave me alone." Why wouldn't he get out of her head? She was in a different state. What would that pickup driver have done if she'd pulled in front of him, stepped into the road, and yelled, "I've got a gun and you don't scare me."

Pink snorted loud enough to bring on a cough. Yeah, right. She almost missed the turn lane for the first Lincoln exit ramp that headed for downtown. "Pay attention to your surroundings, woman."

Tree trunks webbed in silhouette and shadows turned more distinct against the lightening sky. At the first street light, heading in from West O Street, a light peach color painted the skyline like a halo above the earth. How many pastels shaded the dawn sky?

She'd chosen to drive through downtown for a better sense of the city's heart.

An industrial area gave way to the bustling Haymarket Park and Railyard district. If she were into football, she'd check out Memorial Stadium that now rose on her left. According to Bowie, the place was considered Nebraska's third largest city on game days.

She shook her head. Bowie Miller again. He'd entered her head way too often in the last two weeks since Thanksgiving. He typified a gentle giant. Her dad had disappeared one day, and when the payments stopped on the storage unit, Mom became homeless. But Mom was in a safe place because of his generosity as a property owner. They'd spent time together at Pepper's home on Thanksgiving. More hours together when she'd ridden in his truck to the Christmas tree farm, and then cut trees for Pepper and Foxx's homes.

It all made sense because Bowie and Foxx were best friends from grade school.

She couldn't imagine. Her only best friend was her sister, Pepper.

"Stop thinking about him." She chuckled. Better Bowie than creepy Rudy.

Downtown was definitely decked out for Christmas. The dawn traffic lights flicked green as she approached. She caught only glimpses of lit up trees, huge red bows, lights of all colors, animals, and giant baubles on sidewalk corners.

Quite a contrast, compared to the buffet of café and bar choices from Twelfth to Sixteenth Streets.

Streetlights blinked off as she hit Twenty-first Street, a beautiful renovated area that included a park and invited a leisurely stroll. She turned from her glimpse of a couple walking two large dogs as the sky turned pale slate.

Mom's apartment, in one of the houses Bowie owned, was only minutes away. Better let her know I'm on my way.

She connected her phone at the next intersection stop. "Hey, Mom. I drove through the night and I'm a few blocks away."

"You're here for Christmas." Excitement brightened the tone of Mom's voice, a lightness that lit Pink's heart. "It will be such a blessing to have both my girls together. I'm overwhelmed at how life has changed for me in such a short time."

"I couldn't be more thankful, Mom."

"According to Pepper, you two girls have lots of people to thank for how you survived."

Pink blew scoffing air through her lips. No thanks to our parents. Survived—that one word brought back her father's heavy threats.

"Never, ever, allow anyone to see where you live."

"Dodge the cops no matter what."

"Don't look in to anyone's eyes."

From a hidden life spent secretly in a storage unit, where Dad had ignored them or given them orders not to take part in life by talking to anyone outside the family, Pink was now content concerning Mom. She'd rarely spoken to her daughters while avoiding Dad's unpredictable temper. She had only realized his abusive control over Mom after they'd been exposed to other married couples.

Away from life in a tin box.

Away from being addressed as Girl Two.

Away from being manipulated and browbeaten by Dad with all of his dos and don'ts.

At last freed from sneaking out at night while the sheet still covered the door and Dad was at work.

Pink accelerated as the light turned green.

Mom laughed on the phone.

She laughed? And sounded fully engaged in the here and now.

“Who could have guessed life would change so fast for your good? I’m happy for you, Mom. I take it everything is on course for you turning into a house mother?”

“Oh, don’t call it that. Pastor Willie from church blessed me with news of the job opening. I’ll be an older companion for them. Can you just imagine me as a mentor? There are six to seven women in the house, transitioning from abusive relationships.”

“They aren’t recovering addicts who live there, I hope.”

“Not at all. These are women who’ve found themselves in homeless or jobless situations due to an unsafe environment because of men who don’t know how to care for them except by control and stealing their gumption. I know all about that. I look forward to guiding them as they get back on their feet.”

“I’m sure Bowie and Foxx would never treat women in such a way.”

“They’re both really good men.”

Pink had to agree. Bowie Miller had offered one of his rental apartments so Mom could get on her feet. Foxx Haven could be Pepper’s love of a lifetime.

Mom talked on. “Pepper claims God knew I would end up returning to Lincoln and guide me back on my own two feet. I’ve gone to church with her and Foxx. Bowie too. Everyone there under Pastor Willie’s

leadership is so kind and helpful.”

Pink fought to remain respectful as Mom continued. “I guess a woman is never too old to connect with others. I don’t feel alone anymore. Pastor Willie told Pepper he thought I’d be perfect for this job. The bad circumstances in my earlier life will be turned to good as I help women in the transition house get on with their lives.”

Mom used the word blessed and went to church? Was she going all Jesus the same as Pepper had? Maybe I shouldn’t be moving here after all.

“I’m out front now, Mom. Hope you have the coffee on.”

Pink made sure the rental trailer didn’t block the neighbor’s driveway and reached for the second key that Bowie had offered her for the rental house when Mom moved in. Would he be pleased Pink had returned so soon?

The porch light came on. Mom waved from the window, and then opened the door. Her mouth gaped. “You really did pack up and leave your job?”

“Hey, my family is in the same place now.” Yep. Mom’s Girl Two towed a moving trailer. One of these days, she’d ask Mom why she’d called her daughters Girl One and Girl Two.

Neither had ever felt love or a sense of who they were without personal names.

Shake it off. Those growing up years now seemed like a bad dream that lasted a long, long time.

Pink walked into Mom’s hug, and then accepted the filled cup of coffee. The fragrant brew mingled

with pine from the live tree in front of the big picture window at the front of the house. She answered questions about the drive while drinking the wake-up brew. As Pink tipped her mug for the last sip, she paused at the sound of a footfall on the porch.

Mom opened the door to Bowie.

His size dwarfed the room. "Hey, darlin'. I saw your car. Must have had the date wrong for you coming. I've been praying for you."

His gaze arrested hers. Here we go again. Why did her cheeks warm whenever he was around? She dared a peek into his eyes. If he talked about things other than Jesus stuff, she'd gladly peek at his thoughts. She swallowed. Why did Bowie seem happy to see her?

"Thanks. I'm back."

"For sure. Welcome. Looks like you're toting a lot more than Christmas presents for family, unless you brought mighty big gifts."

Pink broke eye contact. She glanced at Mom, whose cheeks were sucked in with whatever she wasn't saying. Was she thinking about a relationship between Bowie and her youngest daughter?

Pink spoke to Bowie's chest, where his arms crossed and bulged. "Surprise. I didn't bring big Christmas presents. I'm not coming just for the holiday."

He swung his arms to his sides as though the movement would help make her words sink in. Had he thought of her as much as he had come to her mind?

She slanted a glance up at Bowie's face, and then swiveled to the sink. "I've quit my job. I left Colorado,

so I'm here for more than a visit."

And an attempt to get rid of the security guard. She hated the way he made her feel sick inside. She wished for the thousandth time that she was educated, not self-taught, so she had a greater vocabulary. Ill at ease. That worked.

~*~

Bowie retreated a step—the kitchen was kind of small for three people—and leaned his shoulder against the door. His heart pounded in his chest. Pink really left Colorado? Was he prepared to face his attraction toward her?

He addressed Pink's mother. "Wow. You Rainwater women are shaking things up. I'm losing my best friend to Pepper. I understand you're on fire for your new job, Doris. Foxx keeps me updated, says Pepper is really proud of you." He turned from Pink, but continued speaking to Doris. "Congratulations on your new job. I think you'll be great at helping other women in that transition house."

"There can be advantages to growing older." Doris beamed. Well, smiled wide without parting her lips. "Yep. Passed all the counseling sessions, and drug screening. Don't have any kind of record except a couple vagrancy charges. I had a physical and updated my shots. Passed everything with flying colors. I still need to see an oral surgeon."

Pastor Willie had done a good thing when he pointed Doris in the direction of helping women find

their way.

Pink hugged Doris, but kept her gaze on Bowie. "I still have a hard time seeing this healthy, bright-eyed woman as the mother of my childhood. I can't tell you how pleased I am to know things are working out so well. And I'll always be grateful for the use of your apartment, Bowie."

Doris took Pink's hand. "I feel I'm close to healthy for the first time in my life." She smiled at Bowie as though they shared a secret. "In all ways that count."

Pink shook her head. "Sometimes I can hardly believe things have changed so much in such a short time."

Doris nodded. "God can do anything."

Bowie waited a beat. "In fact, He goes ahead and plans our steps." Did that include unbelievers? To his knowledge, Pink had yet to take a step of faith.

She visibly froze at his statement.

Bowie said a quick, silent prayer. Doris had heard the gospel message from the pulpit. Maybe since she had turned to Jesus, Pink would follow.

Pink had no idea, and wouldn't unless she realized her need for Christ. He'd been praying for the Rainwater women since Thanksgiving. Especially for Pink. Pepper's younger sister had worked her way under his skin and into his thoughts more than any other female, except the one he'd allowed to face harm. He pushed down the high school guilt that still surprised him at odd moments.

Would he ever shake that off? How many times had he asked God's forgiveness? Was it an excuse that

he'd frozen and not helped her? How long could he think of himself as an oversized farm kid whose brain hadn't yet matured along with his body?

Bowie shivered with revulsion over his lack of action to come to the girl's aid.

Pink had returned to the breakfast stool, and now ran a finger over the Husker coaster on the breakfast counter. She stared at the motion as though mesmerized. Her shoulders slumped with obvious weariness, and her eyelids drifted. Had she just arrived? "Pink?"

She jumped at the sound of her name.

"Pink," he repeated, "did you drive all night?"

She sat up, nodded, and met his gaze.

"I'll get out of here then, so you can sleep." He hesitated. "I don't like the idea of a woman driving so far by herself. You've got spunk."

His compliment earned him a sweet smile.

"Sleep sounds really good all of a sudden." She yawned and blushed. "Kudos to you for furnishing this apartment with such a comfy looking sofa."

"I'm pretty sure there's extra bedding left from the former tenant. Then I'll be as quiet as a mouse until Pepper comes at lunchtime. Does she know you quit your job?"

Pink shook her head. "I haven't told her yet. She's not expecting me for a few more days."

As much as Bowie wanted to stay and talk, he needed to leave. "Well, ladies, I'll take off for work. I'm sure I'll see you both soon."

What a deal. For the first time since high school, he

wanted to get close to a woman. That teacher crush meant nothing compared to the pull he felt toward Pink. But no way. He couldn't get close to her. He only had time for a woman who believed.

Lord, You know what's going on with Pink. And You know how much I'm attracted to her. You know everything. Guide me, help me find the right words to say to her. She's Your daughter, but she doesn't see that yet. Thanks for helping Doris. You provide for all of us. Now, help me do my job safely. In Jesus' name, amen.

2

Pink panted, fists pumping and high heels clicking on the asphalt as Rudy Noble chased her in the parking lot of the Denver mall. "Why are you leaving me?" Rudy yelled as he reached out for her.

"Hi, Mom. What's with the trailer outside? Did the new renters show up early?"

Pink jolted awake covered in goose flesh at the sound of Pepper's voice. Why would she dream of that man who creeped her out? She flipped back the poinsettia-themed throw, longing to sweep away the security guard as well, and zeroed in on the tree.

Pepper's back faced Pink. "Your tree is pretty, Mom. Did you make the colorful chains and snowflakes?"

"I did. With nothing in my bank account yet, I thought back to my years in grade school. I asked for paper from the women training me, and made good use of it."

"Hey, sis. Surprise!"

Pepper squealed.

Pink flung her legs to the floor. "Comfy couch, Mom."

"Tell Bowie. He furnished the place." Mom was quicker with her responses these days, much more

engaged in the here and now.

Pink surveyed the room as she folded the blanket. "Bowie has a lovely place here. The wide oak woodwork looks as though it's never been painted."

"I doubt that it has. The house is cleverly divided with me in the front space and a side entrance to the back apartment."

"Little sister is here early." Pepper opened her arms, and Pink accepted the hug. "I hope that still means you can stay until after Christmas."

She clung. "The trailer's my rental. I made the decision to move closer to family. Besides, I want to help with your wedding plans. So, yes, I'll stay longer than Christmas."

"Who said I was getting married?" Pepper gave a final squeeze and kissed Pink's cheek. "Having you here for the holidays is wonderful. And longer than a few days? I'm ecstatic. You shouldn't have trouble using your fancy dress sales ability in finding a job. There are plenty of shopping venues for women's clothing in the city."

"One step at a time. Job first, and then a place to stay. It's way too quiet out there in the boonies where you live in Garland. Even with the donkeys making occasional racket. I plan to store what's in the trailer and stay with Mom for now."

"Great. You've got a plan. You can come to church with us. Foxx and I will be picking up Mom tomorrow."

Church. Who would have thought that Jesus talk would take over her sister's life? Every time Pepper