



LOREE PEERY
CREIGHTON'S
HIDEAWAY

Creighton's Hideaway

LoRee Peery

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Creighton's Hideaway

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

Dedicated to my Aunt Violet Ingram. You are a gift to all who know you. Thank you for providing a safe haven, what I once referred to as my waiting place. "May your children rise up and call you blessed."

And to all farmers and ranchers who have been saddened by native pasture tilled under for corn.

Praise for LoRee Perry

“After reading *Found in the Woods*, I am now a fan for life! LoRee Peery does an awesome job of weaving a story of faith, trust, love, and overcoming fear into characters that you care about in a book that you will not be able to put down.

I tuned everything out while reading this book, realizing that time had passed as I was lost in the pages. Why is “Do not be afraid” the most repeated command in the Bible?

...The twists and turns in this story will take you on a journey of overcoming paralyzing fear by faith, trust, and love. This book is for anyone who has experienced fear and anyone who loves a great Christian romance. I cannot wait to read more by this author!”~Sally Shupe

1

I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.—Psalm 121:1-2

“Hi. I’m Creighton. Welcome to my little hideaway, Shana.” His full lips spread in a wide smile of greeting, exposing brilliant teeth in his sun-darkened face.

She searched the deep-set hazel eyes that crinkled at the corners, fitting numerous descriptions into a first impression. “Rita has talked about you so much that I think I know you already.”

Creighton’s open countenance invited a more enthusiastic response, but she was taking in the scenery. He belonged in this setting, as solid as the cottonwoods. Wholesome and handsome and strong, all wrapped together in one package.

“All good stuff, I’m sure.” Creighton leaned into the window and winked at his sister before locking his gaze on Shana. He withdrew and opened her door.

It was rude to stare, but she had been slow to move her gaze from the healthy face of her benefactor, let alone climb out of the vehicle. Shana blinked against the bright sunlight he’d been blocking.

For some reason she had expected him to be anti-social rather than open and inviting. Yet it took her a few more seconds before she could break eye contact

with this man she'd be living so close to.

Their gazes reconnected and something indescribable transpired.

All it took was one nanosecond and she felt as though they'd known each other forever. She blinked for clarity of thought and gazed off into the distance of an endless stretching sky. She took a quivery breath, turned back to face him.

Focus on why you're here.

Was she really about to do this? Stay on a ranch with a man she had never met before? Way out in the boonies of northeast Nebraska? Of all the places, she'd never imagined herself...

She retrieved her purse and climbed out. Then she faced him again. "Creighton, this is so good of you. I really didn't know where to go so I could concentrate on my thesis, away from work and ringing phones and the troubles of others. Rita has suggested more times than I can count for me to vacation up here. It looks perfect."

"You'll soon wonder why it took you so long. Timing, I guess." He reassured her with another smile. Creighton turned from Shana to Rita. "Besides, I owe my baby sister a thing or two."

Shana stepped away to give the siblings a moment. She stretched out the kinks, and gazed off. She didn't see much except clouds moving in, changing the blue expanse to white. She could deal with finishing her thesis. She had a couple weeks to pull it all together.

Creighton found it hard to pull his gaze from

Shana, trying to remember everything Rita had mentioned about her. The freckles were a surprise. Her large, blue-green eyes were stunning.

"Creigh," his sister's voice drew his attention as he headed her way. "I said, Shana will need a day or two to acclimate. She's a terrific program manager, usually so in charge of what's going on that nothing shakes her. But this ultimatum to get her degree came like a jolt out of the blue."

"I thought she'd been working on her degree since she started as the director."

Rita cradled the small roundness of her abdomen. "True. But she had planned on another semester to pull it all together. Upper management decided it was a good chance for her to use some vacation time and get that paper finished now to secure her job before it goes to someone hungrier."

Creighton pulled Rita close and enveloped her in a hug.

Rita mouthed against his chest, "I think peace and quiet will do her a world of good."

"If you say so, little sister." Creighton pulled the end of Rita's long braid in a gesture that went back to their childhood. "The timing is perfect since most of the cabins are empty. End of summer, before hunting season."

He slanted a look across the hood of the SUV.

Shana's thoughts must be far away. Was she as lost as she appeared to be? She looked small, but he sensed her strength was cloaked in vulnerability.

"You've been away too long, kid," Creighton said to Rita. "Next time I see you, I won't be able to get my arms around you!"

Rita punched his upper arm as they stepped apart.

"Then I'll expect you to hug the baby, Bro."

He gave her focused attention. "You're doing OK? You and the baby and Ray?"

"Couldn't be better. The Lord blesses us every day. How about you?"

"Have to agree and say He blesses me beyond words. Don't know where I'd be if He hadn't brought me back to the ranch."

"I thought of you when Shana said she was pressured by our boss, and we were so close following our sessions at Hope Circle, we just had to come see you." Rita glanced at Shana and lowered her voice. "Can you check on her for me? When she starts working on a project, she often forgets to eat."

Shana shot them a wistful smile and spoke to her feet, "You've done enough talking about me. I'm right here."

"Right as usual, boss," Rita quipped. "Guess it's time to get back on the road. Ray's probably had enough of his mom, so I'd better head down to Norfolk."

Shana left her side of the vehicle to face them, leaning against the fender.

"Wish you could stay, Sis. Will you spend the night there, or go back to Lincoln?" Creighton reached in and grabbed all of Shana's bags.

"This round belly needs its own bed, so we'll eat a bite and head on south. I promise, after the baby comes, we won't be such strangers to this wonderful ranch."

When the women shared a warm embrace, he surmised that feminine tears threatened to surface. *That's all I need around here, a bawling woman.* He watched them draw apart, avoiding eye contact.

"I suppose the next time I see you, you'll be waddling like a duck," Shana's obvious attempt to lighten the moment came out rather flat.

"In two weeks? Dream on. You do your writing but don't get so carried away you neglect taking in the ambiance of this land. That tiny cabin will drive you nuts in a couple of days! There's not enough inside to sort and rearrange. So go out and enjoy nature. That's an order." Rita laughed.

"Tease all you want. I have plenty of interviews to tie together. In all seriousness, Rita, thank you for everything. Going to O'Neill with me, and bringing me here." Shana waved an arm in front of her, indicating the expanse.

He could get used to the soft cadence of her voice. Keeping his eyes on Shana, Creighton longed to discover if those short dark curls were as soft to the touch as they looked. He guessed they were natural and he suspected she was a shampoo-and-go kind of gal, not one to fuss over her appearance.

And she didn't have to. He found her stunning.

"Nonsense," Rita sputtered, and turned from another quick hug. "I profited as well as you, sitting in on those group counseling sessions. For now, you'll love it up here and it'll do Creighton good to have you around. I've wanted you two to meet for a long time."

"Well, little sis, your wish has been granted." Creighton tugged Rita's braid again while holding the door open. His expression went serious when he swung it shut. "Drive safe, you're carrying my nephew, you know."

"Or niece." Rita waggled her fingers and put her vehicle in gear. "Bye, you two."

Shana shoved her hands deep into her pockets. It

seemed to Creighton that she shrank into herself. He studied her as much as the SUV turning onto the blacktop.

What had he gotten himself into this time? Big brother always there to help his little sister. He took one last look towards the road and caught a flash of sunlight as it glinted off Rita's windshield.

Creighton turned back to Shana. "Let's get you settled." He raised his voice as he strode towards the garage and disappeared around the corner, "The cabins are through the pasture. There isn't a road down to the creek."

Shana's eyes rounded when he rolled out his four-wheeler. He hoisted up her big bag and set it on his lap while swinging onto the seat. Creighton turned the key and said over the thunderous motor, "Grab your smaller bags and climb on."

"I've never..."

"You're safe with me. I'd even give my pregnant sister a little ride. Just cozy up and hang on."

Shana looked straight ahead as she awkwardly found her seat. She reached for her things, then squirmed until she balanced a canvas tote on each thigh, holding herself erect.

He sneaked a glance over his shoulder and almost laughed when she squeezed her eyes shut. He felt her body slump against his back and again questioned his generosity. *Savior of little lost creatures. That's me.*

He put the four-wheeler in gear, thinking he'd save the grand tour for another time. It was a short ride through the windbreak. What did Shana notice as they wound down the hill towards the creek? For some unknown reason, he wanted her to be impressed with his carpentry as well as God's nature. He was proud of

his cabins. Proud of all the work he had done with his bare hands and a lot of time.

Creighton redirected the boasting thoughts. He couldn't brag about anything he'd done. God Almighty deserved the credit for whatever changes had been made on the ranch, as well as in his life.

The four-wheeler rolled to a stop in the shade of a magnificent cottonwood tree. Creighton turned off the engine, and Shana stirred behind him.

"This is your home for as long as you like, or until the snow flies, whichever comes first," he said.

His rumbling words vibrated through her cheek. She'd have to stay at least as long as it took to keep on track with her career path, as well as maintain her current position at The Pines Youth Center.

Shana raised her head and looked over Creighton's shoulder. Was there such a thing as rustic chic? Rustic class? The melding of man and nature? "It's not what I expected," she ventured.

"Is that a compliment, I hope?" Creighton chuckled.

She directed a frown his way rather than a verbal response. She questioned her agreement to come to this place, so foreign compared to what she was used to. A bath was the only amenity Shana wanted besides a nice soft bed. "There's a real bathroom, isn't there?"

"Of sorts. Actually, you have a choice since only one of the cabins is occupied right now."

"What do you mean by a choice?"

"Just kidding." He laughed outright, and nodded towards the front door. "Yours has an inside facility,

the only choice of bathroom for any friend of my sister's."

"That's reassuring, since I've never used the other kind." She leaned to the side and stood, the totes slipping off each shoulder. Her gaze roved over the roofline. The navy bag on her left arm fell unheeded to the ground. "What's it called? I don't think I've ever seen a roof like that." Shana wanted to focus on the mundane, anything to keep her mind off her situation. "They probably have them in Lincoln, too, but I'm usually too preoccupied to notice roofs."

"Baked enamel. Comes in a variety of colors. I think this blue matches your eyes."

She gave him a mental point.

He kept right on talking, smoothing over the personal reference. "I've seen them on homes all over the Northwest. They're becoming more popular on outbuildings and some businesses here in Nebraska."

"It's really nice. I think I like it." She looked closer, noting finish detail. "Rita said you built the cabins yourself?"

"Sure did. The cabins I ordered from a log home outfit and I just put them together," Creighton answered.

"You should be pleased with your work. They look very nice."

He picked up all the bags in a smooth swoop and followed her onto the porch. With his free hand, Creighton slid open the wooden latch. He stepped aside so she could pass through. "There's a bar on the inside. No keys."

Shana gasped. *Am I nuts for staying here?*

2

Creighton dropped the bags.

"I had no idea it would be so beautiful," Shana said.

He relaxed his alert stance. Her outburst had been a good sound of pent-up air, rather than an exclamation of distress. *You need to get out more, boy.*

So captivated by her uncertain smile, no words came to mind. But he had the urge to give her a hug. He wanted to cuddle her like a lost kitten. Questioning where the idea had come from, he rubbed his eyes and ran his hands down the length of his face.

He tried to see his work from her point of view. The west wall was all glass and looked down over the creek, across the pasture, and up a ridge of mounded hillocks where white-faced brown cattle dotted the scene. He cleared his throat, more rattled by her presence than he wanted to admit. "Do you have any questions? Most cell phones don't work here. Feel free to use the land line at my place. Do you need me to show you anything?"

"Thanks for mentioning the phone. I'd better turn mine back on." Shana scanned the room while reaching for her purse. "What else is there to see?"

It was one big, open room except for the bathroom tucked in next to the kitchenette.

She peeked around an unfolded screen along the opposite wall. The rustic white pine bed covered with

a mauve and turquoise blanket woven in a southwestern design looked homey, but was it inviting to a city girl?

"The porch goes all the way around and there's a closet next to the pantry. Go ahead and open doors and cupboards—" He circled to make sure all was in place. "Make yourself at home."

"Rita and I have talked about so many things, but I don't know much about life in the country," Shana faltered. "When I need a break from my laptop would you show me around?"

"Sounds like a plan." He grinned, gratified by her interest.

"I do have a couple calls to make," Shana said as though speaking to herself. "My dad, especially. Guess I'd better check in."

Creighton wanted to help her get her bearings so she didn't look so much like a little lost sheep. "Back to my place here. I like showing it off. For now, I'll tell you that there are five cabins. The creek kind of winds around and I just tucked them back so the cabins would be out of sight of one other, close to at least one tree for shade. There's a cabin between this one and the road. The third is south a ways and that's where the writer lady is staying. Her name is Valerie Dennis. Farther up are the two rustic ones, for hunters, minus indoor plumbing."

He shot her a sheepish grin, paused to figure out what else to tell her. "Sorry I rambled. I'm used to talking to trees, but they don't ask questions."

"All of a sudden, I am really tired." Shana swayed where she stood.

He figured it was hard for her to admit any weakness. "You look dead on your feet. There's milk

and eggs in the fridge. Coffee, cereal, and a few canned things. Start a list of what you'll need and I'll make a grocery run in a couple of days. I'll come by to check on things in the morning. Say, around ten." Not one to follow compulsions, he stepped close and reached out. Creighton ran his knuckles across the softest, most feminine cheek he'd ever touched.

Her eyes widened. She blinked.

His action surprised himself as much as it obviously startled her.

"Don't forget to bar the door." The words were barely out before he felt contrite over the gruffness of his voice. "Sis said this rustic stuff is all new to you."

An attractive, needy woman on his place was all new to him, too.

Shana slid the bar on the cabin door through the brace until it connected with the interlocking woodwork piece. "Just what bogey-man am I locking out here?"

She listened to the monstrous red and black four-wheeler sputter off into the distance. She swirled in slow motion to survey the room.

Wrapping her arms across her body as though warding off a chill, she absorbed her surroundings. The earthy furnishings included a small bookcase amongst the necessities, accented by a braided rug in deep teal and burgundy at the center of the wide-planked floor.

When her eyes blurred, she slouched back against the door. The bed drew her gaze to the right. She shuffled six steps and collapsed onto her stomach,

without kicking off her sandals. Those interviews at Hope Circle had taken a lot out of her. Shana's last conscious thought was thankfulness for Rita's company and the image of Creighton's smiling face.

She awakened some time later, one body part at a time. What was wrong with her right arm? It felt as heavy as her old book bag. She lowered her arm and waited out the renewed flow of blood from shoulder to fingertips, and then rolled onto her left side. Shana opened her eyes to lengthening shadows and wondered at the unfamiliar fabric beneath her cheek. Then she remembered: Creighton Rice's cabin on his ranch south of Verdigre.

An unrecognizable noise jolted her upright.

"Get it together, woman." She stood, groped for a switch, found one next to the door. Light immediately flooded across the golden wood. She sighed in relief. Something was off. "Why do I have this foreboding feeling?" she asked her pile of luggage.

So, what to do first? She ran her gaze over the totes. Her bags obstructed the design of the rug. *Better get to setting the cabin in order.* She reached for her largest bag and heaved it atop the bed. The smaller one with her laptop didn't look right on the small dining table, but that's where she would work.

Shaking her head over the enigma of Creighton's generosity, she emptied polo shirts and khakis into the two bottom drawers. She left the nicer jacket and blouses in the tote. Smaller items went in the top drawer of the chest. She ignored the mirror on the wall above.

She utilized the hooks near the door for her sweater and light jacket, and she placed her sturdy athletic shoes underneath. One tote filled with toiletries

went into the minuscule bathroom. Returning, she stretched for the canvas bag where it remained on the rug, and reared back at the loud knock on the door.

"Yes," she squeaked. Then louder, called, "Creighton?"

"Yeah. How ya doin'?"

Shana opened the door and her stomach rumbled, reacting to the beefy smell that greeted her. She couldn't help the smile. "Is it morning? What smells so good?"

"Steak sandwich. I figured after Rita's remark about your eating habits that you wouldn't even think about food tonight."

"Oh. You're right." She folded her hands in front of her midriff. "And Rita's right. When I'm preoccupied I don't give much thought to meals, especially when it comes to someone else's deadline."

"That's what I understood." He lifted the food closer to her nose. "OK if I come in?"

"Uh, sure." She stepped away from the door.

Creighton placed the pan with the foil-wrapped wonder on the table and turned towards the kitchen area. She pulled out a chair and sat, filling her gaze with Creighton as he reached for a plate and set it on the table.

He slanted a grin her way before pulling a roll of paper towels from underneath his arm. "I don't leave napkins around to tempt mice, so I hope this is OK."

"I don't mind." As if on cue, her stomach gurgled.

He turned and reached for a glass. "Water or milk?"

"Water. Please. And, thanks, Creighton. It's been a long time since someone waited on me like this." She hesitated. "At least, not since I lived at home."