



HIDING
FROM
Christmas

A HOLIDAY
TIME-TRAVEL ROMANCE

from author

LOREE PEERY

Hiding from Christmas

LoRee Peery

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Dedication

To Sharon Dean, avid reader and supporter of Christian authors. Thank you for inspiring this story. By sharing the shining aspects of your character, you are a person extraordinaire. The support you give authors can't be topped.

I am blessed and thankful to call you a sister-in-Christ. I wish you abounding blessings, with abounding love.

A special thanks, also, to Emily Gray and Jennifer Slattery for your input on this story. God has given each of you unique gifts with which to serve others. I appreciate each of you and treasure your friendship.

To all readers, may your Christmases be merry and bright.

What People are Saying

I really enjoyed this story as it hit home and the heart in many ways! I learned a lot about myself through Calissa and think this story will flourish very well with readers. Revisiting our past and getting to know our ancestors is so very important these days, and it's something that is often pushed to the wayside.
~ Sharon Dean, A Writer's Angel

1

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.” ~ Isaiah 55:9

Monte licked the envelope and tapped it on the desk in his bank office as the call connected. “Hi, sweetheart. I have a surprise for you.”

“Hi, yourself. You excited about something?” Calissa sounded distracted.

He’d probably interrupted her work, but he was about to give up on helping her see life from his point of view. “I am. I’ve taken off the afternoon to celebrate our December thaw. Set aside your thimble. Wash the glue off your hands. Dress warm, and I’ll see you in half an hour.” He wished she still lived close to downtown, but he loved her country apartment off Highway 77 south of Fremont.

She sputtered.

He knew Calissa well enough not to give her a chance to make an excuse. Outside the bank, he loosened his scarf. Too warm in the sun.

Twenty minutes later, he inhaled the aroma of spicy meatballs, Calissa’s favorite menu item from Pop’s Place.

Demure smile in place, she met him at the door of

her home. She'd gathered her long hair and puffed it high at the crown, just the way he liked it.

"How do you manage to look so lovely when you work from home?"

Her cool eyes glinted silver. Her lips parted in a bigger smile as she grabbed her black leather jacket. "Surprise, huh? Am I dressed all right?"

"Jeans and boots are perfect." He assisted her by settling the jacket across her shoulders. "I knew as soon as I heard the forecast for a day in the mid-sixties, so rare for December, that I needed to get you away from your house. Do you have any speedy orders to expedite?"

"We're busy filling Christmas gift orders, of course. Younger and younger girls are getting into the bling of my jeweled denim." She opened her front door and jiggled the knob to make sure it was locked. "I'm so glad my nieces help after school."

"They're what, fifteen and sixteen now?"

"Yes."

He wound his way through the development surrounded by fallow cornfields.

She gazed out the window, occasionally repositioning a pin that held the pouf of hair above her unlined forehead and away from her face.

He slowed for the country road off the highway, and she finally turned to him.

"Are we going where I think we are?"

"Yes. The snow is gone. I thought a picnic would be the perfect surprise to celebrate a beautiful day."

She punched him in the arm and smiled again. "You can be romantic when you want to be."

Moments later, he pulled into the indecipherable drive where little gravel remained visible. Green grass

in front of the dilapidated home made it look more like September than December. What she saw in this place, he'd never understand. Why it hadn't fallen down in a good wind was unbelievable. It had to be dangerous and rotted. The window glass was long gone. Trees grew out of the foundation.

"Oh, thank you, Monte. I love this place. It's always looked rundown, yet something inside me considers it home."

He shook his head, exited, and then turned to the backseat. "If you grab the food behind you, I'll get everything else. I borrowed a camp table and chairs from our upcoming new savings account campaign at the bank." And a nice tablecloth from the vice president, who claimed it a romantic touch.

"This smells wonderful." Calissa set down the box on the table. Its contents were wrapped in foil. She moved her chair so she'd face the decrepit house. "I can't believe how warm it is today."

"You know Nebraska. The weather can change fifty degrees one way or the other with a wind shift." He set out plates and plastic ware, which were wrapped in oversize paper napkins, winked at her, and then opened the tin holding their individually wrapped meatball subs. "But there's no way you'd go on a picnic in the snow. I would, considering how much I love Christmas."

She folded her hands and bowed her head.

"I would have prayed out loud."

Calissa didn't meet his gaze as she picked up her cup of cider. "I wasn't praying."

So much for getting his hopes up that she'd acknowledge Jesus in her life again.

They enjoyed a few bites. No matter what topic he

discussed, he couldn't engage her in conversation. She just sat and stared at the house.

He finished his sandwich. "Since you're not interested in what's going on at the bank, or the songs I'm rehearsing for our church choir, why don't you tell me what's going through your mind?"

She forked in the last meatball from the bread that lay open and untouched, wiped the corners of her mouth, emptied her cider, and sat back in the chair. Finally, she met his gaze. "I try to picture my grandparents in the house where Mom and her eight siblings slept. I know a boundless affection existed between my grandparents. I saw their love as lasting forever and ever. Why did they have to die apart, just days before Christmas?"

"Those answers can only come from God, sweetheart."

She shook her head and took his hand. "Thank you for being so patient with me. For overlooking my bad moods. You went to a lot of work to make this a special time for us. I can always count on you, Monte."

He turned over his arm and twined their fingers. "We've known each other since kindergarten and have always accepted the other. In good times and bad." This was a bad time for her. Her depression had a strong hold on her, which made him feel helpless. He brushed his thumb over her wrist.

Her eyes glistened watery gray in a ray of sunlight as she met his gaze. Her voice quivered. "I don't know how to tell you this. I've been having dreams about my grandparents. They're so vivid, I feel as if I'm right there in the room with them. I hear their laughter. They're always so happy. Do you think it's a glimpse of heaven?"

“That’s a question for our pastor and for God.” He squeezed her hand, released it. “I have something for you.” He pulled the envelope from his inside breast pocket.

She accepted his offering and traced her name on the front, turned it over, and ran her index finger over the bottom half. Calissa made eye contact for a split second, and then unsealed the flap.

He grinned.

A Victorian boy dressed in green with his cocker spaniel at his feet shyly knocked on a door with an envelope in his other hand.

The moment he saw that old-fashioned card, Monte had imagined Calissa opening the door for him. His smile faded.

She stared at the card. “You know I don’t do Christmas.”

~*~

Shattered again. How much could a heart take? Calissa crashed through the door without experiencing her usual pleasure over the upscale apartment. A place void of Christmas decorations. She tossed her bag with its signature purple butterfly design to the couch. It bounced off. She slapped her cheeks to prevent weak tears.

How did a person get used to a destiny of disappointment over and over? She’d longed for Monte to sweep her off her feet for over ten years. She shouldn’t have told him about those dreams. Did he think she was seeing things?

That’s what she got for expectations. The most

wonderful season of the year to everyone else loomed, and she couldn't get in the spirit.

Her best friend ever, the man everyone expected her to marry, Monte had made her heart soar as he'd reached into his pocket. He'd been more attentive lately. What else would he have other than an engagement ring?

Yet, she knew better than to have anticipated something he'd proved unwilling to offer.

Of all things, he'd handed her a replica Victorian greeting card. A mushy, Christmas one, at that. How could he present such a thing without declaring his heart? Only Christmas wishes. Granted, the presentation reminded her of a token her grandparents may have shared.

Wasn't Monte not only her lifelong friend, but supposed to be her one true love and forever soul mate? Not according to him, evidently. He'd proved it by not giving her a ring.

She slumped. Her body felt too heavy to hold up.

Hadn't he guessed what she wanted? True love meant a forever love. She had to give him credit for taking her to her favorite place in all of Nebraska. But why couldn't he offer her a lifetime together? Maybe she'd never have that lifelong love she'd always dreamt of. If God hadn't let her grandparents have it, why would He give it to her?

She was done waiting for Monte to propose. And she had no one to share her disappointment with. That was one of the downfalls of working from home. How she longed for the gab sessions she once had with her sister. But Emma had her own family to listen to.

"Pick up your bootstraps, girl." Calissa whipped off her jacket and righted her velvet purse. "Shrug it off

and get busy. My creations don't disappoint. I should know better than to think marriage would really happen." Maybe she should initiate romance rather than remain willing to spend time with Monte whenever he called. Not that she'd been any kind of joyful company for a long time, let alone a happy date. But did they really date?

She should be thankful he'd put forth the effort for a dream date in his eyes, by taking her to their old meeting spot. They'd often met at the homestead after high school classes at Longley, once cheerleading and football practice were over. They'd shared their days, their secrets, their dreams. They'd sat and talked for hours.

They were friends first. Then, because they were always together, they evolved naturally into becoming a couple. The day Monte got his driver's license, he drove them out to the land of her heritage where they'd experienced their first kiss.

Neither had dated anyone else. Longley was a typical small town in the heartland. Everyone who knew them took it for granted that they were in love and would someday marry.

She had to be right, considering an engagement ring a traditional Christmas gift between couples. He got so excited about the season that he talked about it and decorated the bank before Thanksgiving.

She took the pins out of her hair. So what if he preferred it off her face? She'd worn it poofed up on top for him. It didn't help now to dig her fingers into her scalp over her own stupidity.

An upbeat kind of guy, Monte had somehow changed toward her recently. She, serious more often than not, understood how he'd get tired of trying to

uplift her. He went to church every week and had given up on asking her to join him.

She raised her head and faced an antique picture of Jesus that had belonged to Grandma. God had let Calissa down. Again. Was something wrong with her that she still believed everyone had a soul mate and once a couple married, they'd be together always?

Her grandparents shared the one true love experience that every couple should have. With their deaths after sixty years of marriage, God had taken that dream of a lifelong soul mate away from Calissa. And she still harbored anger over it.

Her mind went back to the news that the family had separated her grandparents. Then in December of her junior year in high school, she lost them within nine days of each other. Their last moments hadn't been spent with one another.

Calissa lost her dream in lasting love. She'd chosen to be angry at God.

Those ideals were so ingrained, hopelessness had taken over her life.

2

Calissa was the only person Monte knew who didn't love Christmas.

He poked a pen at the box on his desk, circling the collection of replica old-fashioned Christmas cards. How could he have guessed so wrong to think the card would be the perfect thing to snap Calissa into getting excited about Christmas again? She'd loved every sparkly, gift-wrapped moment of December when they were young.

At the mention of her older relatives possibly sharing something similar, her mood had plunged. It did no good to remind her that God timed a person's days on earth. Why didn't she find comfort in knowing those dear souls were now together with Jesus for eternity?

Her disappointment over his card couldn't have been more obvious. He considered it clever. A boy in his old-fashioned short pants and hat, holding the sealed envelope close as he joyously knocked on the girl's door.

She'd ignored the motivation of his heart, how he wanted her to open up to him. Open up to Christmas. Open up to believing again. How could she not believe Monte wanted her happy?

Monte dropped the pen and it rolled off the corner of his desk. One hand smoothed down his silver jingle

bells on red background tie. He loosened his tense jaw. The computer screen blurred in front of him. Fine bank officer he wasn't today. If asked, he hadn't even looked up the day's interest rates yet.

Calissa Ladd. He'd soon run out of ways to please her. She worked hard with her online business, keeping up with the specialty orders that excited females.

He loved her, driven her to the place she loved. Cared for her more than anyone but his immediate family. Would she get over the past if her family bulldozed the building and buried the debris? He'd never forget how nervous he'd been at sixteen, not only driving her there in his very first car but kissing her for the very first time. Earlier than that, she'd pretty much been his whole lifeline following his parents' divorce at his tender age of nine.

Considering Calissa's behavior today, he was more convinced than ever that such a thing as a lasting, successful marriage didn't exist. Fantasy. Forever only existed in the dreams of romance lovers. He saw too much of what those broken dreams did to couples from a financial perspective.

He couldn't imagine a world without her, and he vowed not to give up on her. Yet.

Movement at his office door made him glance up.

"Excuse me for interrupting. I said your name twice."

"I apologize, Stacey."

"Those cards are so nice. I hope Calissa enjoys them."

He had to keep giving her chances to pull out of her bad attitude. "I hope they help her get into the spirit of Christmas. How may I help you?"

“Mr. and Mrs. Watts are here for their appointment.”

“Please have them come in. Did you offer refreshments?”

She nodded and stepped back across the hall. “He can see you now.”

“Monte McQueen.” He shook each of their hands, and then picked up his pen as he took his seat. “How may I help you today?”

Mr. Watts cleared his throat. “Sorry to say, we need to talk to you about a farm loan. These new tax evaluations have us mighty concerned.”

“I’ll draw up your account and see what we can do. Please let me know at any time if you have any questions.” Monte struck his keyboard and attempted to set aside his journey with Calissa to take care of business. He couldn’t give her what she needed if she wouldn’t tell him.

Did she even know what she longed for?

Only God knew, but Monte couldn’t help but think she’d find her answer with the Lord. She’d set Him aside from her life, had chosen to turn her back on anything that had to do with God.

~*~

Calissa responded to an order for three pair of jeans pockets decorated with peacocks. The morning flew as she worked with varied purple beads. Her innovative clip-on designs had yet to take off in a large market, but she was fine filling online orders and supplied items to a made-in-Nebraska store on Main Street.

Thank goodness, Emma's daughters weren't in sports or other after-school activities. They were eager to learn, loved sewing, and enjoyed their share of profits. The girls breezed into the apartment at one thirty. Brittany favored Emma with pale blonde hair and light blue eyes. Hadley had dark hair and eyes like her dad.

Calissa jumped at their giggles and the slam of the door. Cool air and their spearmint gum caused her stomach to rumble.

"Worked through lunch again, huh, Auntie?" Brittany whipped off her jacket and scarf.

Calissa blinked and checked the time again. "Why are you here so early? Not that I don't need your skilled fingers."

"We've got one of those teacher service days." Hadley popped her gum. "That bird's beautiful. How many do we have to make?"

"The order is for three, so that's one each. One of you do blue, the other green, and I've finished the purple. But you know you can stay as long as you can and work on any design you fancy from my stash." Calissa stood and stretched. "I need to grab a yogurt or something."

"Mom said the three of us can come over and help decorate your place for Christmas." Brittany nudged her sister.

"It isn't right that you don't have a tree, Aunt Calissa," Hadley added on cue. "Or at least a nativity scene to make Jesus happy."

Calissa couldn't help but smile at her. "I doubt the objects mean that much to Him. If I recall, His job is to look at the heart."

"Then you need to make yours right with Him."

Hadley joined Brittany on the last three words.

They worked until ten when Emma texted to see what they were doing so late.

Calissa called her back.

"I'm glad you make my girls turn off their phones, sis, but you could answer yours once in a while."

"I don't like to be disturbed. They won't be much longer."

They capped the evening with hot cocoa.

Calissa locked the doors and dragged herself upstairs.

A clacking sound against the window roused her the following morning. She sat up in bed and caught her reflection in the en suite bathroom mirror. The sunshine glowed around her head as if someone had painted a golden halo. At one time, she'd view such a sight as a light from the Lord.

God had let her down, the same as Monte had. At the time, why hadn't God influenced her to speak up and prevent her grandparents from being separated into different homes for their final care? She was just a kid. As an adult, she knew God gave each human a certain number of days, but that assurance had been blocked from reaching her heart.

A look out the window revealed a landscape covered in ice. Breathtaking. And it wouldn't last long if the sun stayed out. She slung back the covers and ran to the bathroom, longing to see how the countryside would shine. "I hope the roads aren't a glaze of ice."

The ice-covered surroundings drew a smile that reached the depths of her heart. It had been a long time. She gingerly stepped onto the patio and closed the sliding door. Clouds now obscured the sun, but that would make better pictures. The lake water looked