



Loy's Inn
#1

WITHOUT A
Song

LOREE
PEERY

Without a Song

LoRee Peery

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Dedication

To every Christian author in all genres, we are family. Likeminded as believing sisters, brothers, and authors answering the call of Jesus. I thank my God for each of you as we share the blessed Hope.

And to the One and Only True God, Who has far too many attributes for my puny mind to come up with. Thank You, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit for any work that I do. I'll always remember how the premise, setting, and title of this story came to me while driving to choir practice, during rehearsal, and on the way home. For reasons known only to You, I am Your daughter. You sent the Best Friend in the world to take my sins to the cross. Jesus, I am forever indebted to You.

What People are Saying

Roni is a struggling widow. Dawson seems to have lost his ability to write. Very well written and gives good insight into how to let the Lord lead you until you can find your way. —Anonymous

Without a Song is a tender story about finding your way when things haven't quite turned out the way you planned, and about setting priorities. A heartwarming love story that opens up healing and reminds us that life's answers are already written down for us. We just have to seek and trust. A very enjoyable read. —Anonymous

Truly wonderful. The characters are very special people who you will enjoy reading about. You will feel God working throughout. You won't be able to stop reading. —Debbie Slocum Jamieson

Ivy's Inn Books

Without a Song
Without a Home
Without a Dream

1

The last time Roni had attended a church service was Jim's funeral six months earlier. She wiggled, crossed, and uncrossed her ankles. Young men weren't supposed to die and leave a woman alone to raise a three-year-old daughter. With Ivy in Sunday preschool, Roni studied the church she'd attended as a girl.

She took in the stained glass. The picture of Jesus with his arm enfolding a lamb drew a frown rather than bringing calm to her heart. She closed her eyes. *You should smile inside. Jim rests in the arms of Jesus now.* Roni opened her eyes. Gilded rays of sunlight graced the Lord's head with a majestic aura. Her soul softened in repentance.

Caring people made her uncomfortable because they didn't know what to say about her loss other than how sorry they were, or what a shame, or other useless words. None of it mattered. She missed Jim every time she looked into her daughter's eyes, inherited from her father.

Nights were the worst.

Pastor Pullman took the stage, which yanked her out of her thoughts. "Joy to all of God's people, this good morning. What a glorious day for us to meet in

this place. We have a special treat today. Our own song-writing country boy, Dawson Bennett, is with us. Recently home from Nashville, please welcome him. Dawson will sing one of his own songs to begin our worship.”

Dressed in a lavender shirt with pearl buttons, dark denim jeans, and cowboy boots, long-haired Dawson leaped over two steps to stand at the mic positioned in front of a stool. “Thank you. I feel as though I should say y’all, but you’d laugh at me.”

Snickers and chuckles spread through the congregation.

Roni remained serious. She’d dated Wayne Bennett, Dawson’s older brother, in high school. Pleasant memories, except she’d always wondered about the boys’ home life without a mother.

Dawson balanced on the stool, lowered the mic stand, and positioned his guitar on one leg. “Have you ever considered how the songs may have sounded, the ones mentioned at various Psalm headings? I thumbed through my Bible one day looking for inspiration. At the beginning of Psalm 56, it says to the tune of ‘A Dove on Distant Oak Trees.’ Are you as curious as me about that tune? It was no doubt played on a lyre or a harp with twice the strings.”

How long had it been since Roni had turned to her favorite book of the Bible, the Psalms? Had she ever in her life paid attention to the subtitles?

“A dove on oaks made me think of home. The coo of a dove is pleasant, but the trill of a meadowlark from a distant fencepost takes me right to the

surrounding grasslands of my youth.” He scanned the congregation, passed Roni, and came back to her with a smile and narrowing of the eyebrows. Did he recognize her?

She waited uncountable heartbeats as they made eye contact.

Finally, he looked beyond her as his gaze finished roaming the room. “The landscape of this place in northeast Nebraska is my home on earth. But I look ahead to my eternal home in heaven.” He strummed a chord and his focus turned inward. “I titled this ‘Call of the Meadowlark.’”

Dawson’s melodious voice raised the hairs on Roni’s arms in reaction to his low register. The longing in his lyrics reached her soul. His phrases accented wait, trust, and hope. Edgy and smooth at the same time, his musical story evolved.

The last chord vibrated in the silence.

Delayed clapping erupted.

Pastor Pullman shook Dawson’s free hand while encircling his upper arm. “Thank you. You’ve blessed us.” Pastor turned his attention to those in the pews. “It should no longer amaze me, but it still does, the way the Holy Spirit reaches more than one person at a time with the same ideas. Dawson’s song is a perfect segue to the message I prepared this morning on trust. But first, the choir will lead us into our first song of worship.”

Roni choked up and could sing few words of the first verse. She braced her hands on the back of the pew in front and listened. At the end of each refrain,

she heard Dawson's pure baritone as he sang from two rows in front of her.

She swung her braid over her shoulder as the congregation took their seats, closed out the elder's announcements, and only stirred at the return of a couple from the choir loft who slid past her to take their seats.

"As I mentioned earlier, this morning I want to focus on the word *trust*. Depending on the version you prefer, the Bible refers to trust over and over." Pastor Pullman paused. "According to my Internet browser, trust is mentioned in the Bible 127 times."

Roni slid her gaze to Dawson where he sat slanted in the pew ahead and to her right. He brought up one knee, smoothed a lock of light-brown, blondish tinted hair behind his ear, and shot a glance back at her.

His slow smile and deep brown eyes let her know he knew exactly who she was.

She nodded, and turned back to the sermon.

"We all have trials and tribulations. We all have a tendency to wonder and worry about the uncertainty of tomorrow." Pastor waved a hand to the stained glass on either side of the room. "Take a look at these pictures in colored glass. Peer into the eyes of our Lord. Accept His outstretched arms. Rest in Him. Trust Him with whatever lays on your heart. Open your Bibles to the middle. Find the Psalms."

Pages turned. The riffling sound drew a comforting response within her heart.

"You should be used to this by now, but stick something in the Psalms and go further back to Second

Samuel. Find chapter twenty-two, verse three. ‘My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior.’” Pastor looked out over his flock. “I want you to read this again. Every day this week. How can we not trust our great Savior who promises that we have refuge in Him?”

Roni turned to each verse in Psalms Pastor asked them to find. Psalm 7:1, *LORD my God, I take refuge in you; save and deliver me from all who pursue me;* Psalm 9:10, *Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.* Psalm 16:1, *Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.*

Through the remainder of the service, her heart cried out in pain. Jim had always held her hand in church. He’d balance the Bible on his leg while she turned the pages with her free hand.

The hole in her heart gaped wide open. *Forgive me. I do trust You, Jesus. It’s so hard at times. Be patient with me. Show me the way to trust You with my future as I face it without my husband.*

2

Dawson hurried to snap his guitar in its case.

Roni remained behind him, leaning with her hands on the pew in front of her, head down. Praying or ill? He'd been pleasantly surprised to see her with his brother and sister-in-law, Allison.

He propped his guitar case in the corner of the pew between them and waited in the aisle.

Wayne touched her shoulder and she looked at him as they approached the aisle. "Allison went to get Ivy. Do you still need a moment?"

Dawson extended his hand to his brother behind Roni's back. "Hey, man. Good to see you for real in place of the phone."

Roni swiveled and their gazes met. Nicely arched brows accented her beautiful blue eyes. Her cheekbones were more prominent than he remembered. She looked at him directly, but didn't smile. "Welcome home, Dawson. Your song said so much. Thank you."

She still stole his breath. All he wanted to do was sink into her eyes and stay a while.

Wayne cleared his throat.

A blonde whirlwind in layers of ruffles rushed past him and threw her arms around Roni's legs.

“Mommy. I have my own story book to take home and bring back next week.”

“I’m glad, sweetheart. Slow down, please. Next time you barrel by a nice man, please ask to be excused.” She turned the girl by her shoulders to face Dawson. “Ivy, this is Dawson Bennett.”

He crouched down to her eye level. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“S’cuse me. My name is Ivy Marsden. I’m hungry. Your last name is the same as Unca Wayne. Are you going to eat lunch with us?”

“Ivy,” Roni admonished with a hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

The other three adults chuckled.

Dawson’s sister-in-law wrapped her arms around him. “What a beautiful song, Dawson. Thank you. And of course, you’re having lunch with us.”

Allison released Dawson and then exchanged a meaningful look with Wayne.

He tried to put together why Roni was in church with her old boyfriend and his wife, all the while searching for Ivy’s father. They were the last group to leave the church.

Wayne nudged him in the shoulder “You’ll like the place. It’s been in Allison’s family over a hundred years. We drive up as many weekends as we can.”

“Yes, appreciate it. Anything sounds better than a visit to the grocery store for a cold sandwich. I got to the motel too late last night to eat anything other than snacks.” He grabbed the guitar and slapped his hat in place.

They trailed the women outside.

“Remember, as soon as we get back to the country, you need to change your dress.” Roni helped Ivy into the back of Wayne’s club cab truck, shut the door, and glanced at Dawson over her shoulder.

He fell in step and walked her to the driver’s side. Wayne slapped him on the back and opened both doors on his side of the truck. Roni hustled in the backseat next to her daughter.

Dawson turned the key to start his old pickup, questions juggling to distract him. Why were Roni and Ivy riding with Wayne and Allison? Did she live around here now? Where was Roni’s husband? Why was she so thin?

He kept Wayne’s truck in sight but took time to enjoy the crimson sumac and yellow-leafed cottonwoods. Off the blacktopped state road onto gravel, Dawson let up on the gas to keep back far enough to prevent him from choking on the billowing dust. On the way to the ranch house, he again took in the sights of autumn. Some trees held onto their October-colored leaves, others were naked of foliage, and a few other varieties were half dressed.

Too bad the house in town where he’d grown up had been sold. Too bad Dad’s health had him living with others his age in another town. *Too bad, so sad. Quit whining.*

He drew to a stop alongside Wayne’s truck, where he waited in the drive. The large, two-story ranch house welcomed with its wrap-around porch. Two adult rocking chairs with multi colored cushions and

colorful pillows sat as though waiting for occupants. A rustic swing composed of pine logs swayed at one corner. Decorated with colorful pillows, it looked as if it had recently been given a coat of varnish.

Dawson grabbed his Stetson and climbed out of the cab. He tucked his hair, but didn't set the hat in place.

"I have to admit, you sure look the role of a country star." Wayne teased in a relaxed manner.

Dawson had been prepared to fight against the tension of their youth, but he was also strangely at ease. Due to absence or because they'd just attended church?

A twinkle came into his brother's eyes. "All except for the long hair."

"Ask the ladies how they like it." The corner of his mouth twitched against a grin.

Wayne slapped Dawson's shoulder. "Not my gal. She'd better have comments only for me."

"Allison's good for you, I can tell."

"I agree. Dad likes her too."

Dawson had to say her name. "I'm surprised to see Roni. When you two dated, I envied you because of her gorgeous model looks. Spit dried right up in my mouth any time she looked at me." He tucked his hair behind his ear, settled his hat in place. "I don't get what she's doing here."

"Allison and Roni are best friends. They went to college together in Norfolk." Wayne stopped. "Dawson."

"Yeah?"

"Roni's in a bad place. Last spring, she lost her husband, Jim. He got a late bout of the flu that hit his organs. He died."

And Dawson believed he had troubles?

They entered the house and were greeted by feminine laughter along with the mouthwatering aroma of cooking beef.

Wayne removed his cap. Allison rushed to welcome him with a kiss.

Roni waved a plate and glass from the table.

"Hi, Mr. Dawson," Ivy piped up. Mommy told me you and Unca Wayne are brothers. Can I call you Unca too? I set your napkin next to your silverware."

He removed his hat and hooked it on an empty peg secured to a rack. "Thanks, little miss. Call me anything you want as long as it's nice. I need to wash my hands. Can you show me where?"

"Sure." Without reservation, the pixie with blonde ponytails took his hand. "I'm a big girl. I help Mommy when I do things she wants. Do you like my new jeans? It's getting colder now so I can't wear shorts. This is the bathroom we use downstairs. Mommy and I are sleeping upstairs. There's a lot of rooms here. Lots more than my old house in Norfolk. It's too quiet there without Daddy. He's gone to heaven."

"Ivy. Come on back. You'll wear him out before he even sits down." Roni's voice expressed love and patience, with a hint of tired sadness.

At the table, Wayne expressed a prayer of grace that touched on refuge and trust. They all wanted to know about Dawson's singing, including Ivy, and

especially what brought him to Verdigre from Nashville.

“How could you ever leave Music City? I’ve never been there. But it all sounds so exciting. And romantic.” Allison touched her husband’s hand on the last word.

Dawson finished chewing and swallowed the savory roast. “It is a great city, but it’s getting expensive.”

“What happened again?” Wayne must have asked for Roni’s sake.

“I had a bad break in Nashville. My first album was scheduled for release. The producer up and quit the company, took all the backing money with him. Without his involvement, the owner dissolved the company and went back to California.”

“Didn’t you have a contract of some kind to protect you?” Roni smoothed the collar on Ivy’s denim vest.

“It’s a risky business. Very few guarantees. At least I have my music on a few recorded videos. Most starving musicians share a place with several others. I did, too, but rent and housing is way up there. My bank account was near red.”

“Tough, man.” Wayne drank from his water glass. “Not enough work to still record and wait for production?”

“Without your own studio, renting and paying for techs, recording costs thousands. I played a few gigs, knew without going back to waiting tables that I couldn’t make ends meet. Tried to write. No new

lyrics. No new melodies. I figured a change of pace and a lower cost of living back home might change things. But with our house gone in town, I can't afford the motel indefinitely. Only God knows where I'll go or what I'll do."

Wayne and Allison exchanged another telling look. She nodded.

"It's too bad you guys had to sell the house." Roni must have wondered too. "But I understand your dad will have help once the rheumatoid arthritis gets real bad. I've heard good things about the new senior housing in Neligh."

"Right. They have job openings in the assisted living part," Allison added. "Do you plan to see Arnie?"

"I'll be visiting Dad in a day or two. He doesn't know I'm back unless you guys told him." *See if it's possible to make peace with Dad.*

Wayne shook his head. "No. But you'd best call first so you don't shock him into a heart attack."

He and Allison communicated silently again.

Allison stood. "I'll make coffee."

Wayne scooted back his chair and faced Dawson.

Neither spoke.

Ivy squirmed in her chair. "Is there dessert?"

Roni lifted Ivy out of the booster seat. "You may take two cookies out to the porch swing. But don't wander off."

"Dawson, we have an unusual situation here. Unknown to me, on the same day I said you could come stay on the ranch, Allison invited Roni and Ivy to

vacation here for as long as they need.”

“There’s plenty of room for both of you. We want you to stay as long as you need. Maybe the setting will inspire your song writing.” Allison approached with a coffee carafe. “This place has to be as good a muse as it is a retreat for anyone who’s hurting.”

Dawson’s inner reaction matched the shock on Roni’s face. “Right now, I’m without inspiration, without a song. I can’t write. I’m here to find myself. Find my purpose. Find my music.”

How in the world could he accomplish that with Roni’s beauty and Ivy’s enthusiasm always around to distract him?

3

It took concentrated effort on Roni's part to not slam cupboard doors as she put away clean dishes. Her back teeth were so clenched she wouldn't be surprised if she cracked one. So much for having the place of solitude she'd counted on. Allison's getaway was not that far from home, even if she and Ivy needed a respite before the next step, whatever that might be. Quiet would be mighty difficult to achieve with a virile man around every corner, interacting with her daughter, reminding Roni that she no longer had a husband.

How could she behave like an ungrateful, spoiled ninny? She turned to observe Wayne ease away from Allison where she'd fallen asleep on the couch.

He entered the kitchen and didn't speak until he drew within whispering distance. "I can tell you don't approve of our invitation for Dawson to stay. But Allison and I agreed before we were married to keep her family home and never turn away a person who needs a quiet place to work out their troubles. God gave us a refuge we're convinced He wants us to share."

Roni leaned against the counter, head down. Her heavy braid swung forward. She whipped it off her

arm. "I have no reason to be worked up this way. Especially since you've been gracious enough to let Ivy and me stay here. Maybe we should go home. Dawson needs the sanctuary more than we do."

"Allison reminded me there's room for both of you. I wasn't about to argue with my wife. Try to remind yourself of Who's in control of the timing. There are no coincidences with God. We believe He orchestrated the two of you here at the same time."

"I know. God has His reasons." She whirled to face him, and her braid flopped against her arm. It was a nuisance lately. "Having Dawson around will feel awkward."

"Understood. This isn't the time for any of us to wonder why Dawson is back. Let God work in his life."

"I'm here to heal, to figure out the future for Ivy and me."

"Same for Dawson. You knew him as a kid, so he's not a stranger. He's a good man. He tries to honor God. I wouldn't allow him to stay if I thought you wouldn't be safe."

"You have to say such a thing, Wayne." She grinned and nudged him with her shoulder. "He's your brother."

Ivy ran in. "Mommy, Mommy. You promised to swing with me."

Roni tapped her forehead. Ivy was her first priority, and she'd had the singing country boy on her mind. She smoothed a hand over Ivy's hair. "That I did. Find a book and I'll read to you."