

LoRee Peery

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Dedication

To every Nebraskan who was affected by the March, 2019 floods. From farmers and ranchers to home and business owners, rising flood waters weren't partial. The heart wrenching testimonies and videos of loss will remain in our hearts and minds for the rest of our lives.

And to all those who volunteered goods or time, you helped keep the residents of this fine state of Nebraska strong.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your examples of what it means to live in the Heartland of this blessed state of the USA.

What People are Saying

"LoRee Peery has an uncanny way of taking tragedy and pain and turning it into forgiveness and grace through the magnificence of GOD's miracles in nature. I look forward to reading many more of LoRee Peery's stories." ~ Renette Steele, avid reader and writer

"LoRee Peery depicts the feelings of loss in a realistic way that offers vital information for finding your way back to the land of the living. Trust. Trust in the One who has made a plan for your life. LoRee Peery delivers 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." ~ Deborah Stone for Readers' Favorite

1

YOU ARE MY REFUGE IN THE DAY OF DISASTER. ~ JEREMIAH 17:17

It had been six months. Since March, to be exact. But what was time to a person whose spatial concept was all messed up?

Her morning routine was the same. "Fawn Stuart." Stand in front of the mirror and repeat. "Fawn Stuart. My name is Fawn Stuart."

And every day, a thousand times a day, she'd asked herself if she'd ever remember. That is, remember what happened before mid-March. She'd been called a hero because she'd saved her mother. That act had come with a price. Though she'd saved Mom, she'd lost herself. Who was Fawn Stuart? My life changed in the spring, though I don't know what, or who, I was before the change.

With summer on the wane, fall knocked at the door. The breeze had cooled. Grass still grew green, where it grew. Rather than pastures covered in native grasses or alfalfa, the farm where she'd grown up had been filled in with sand during the Nebraska March flood. So she'd been informed. The knowledge meant nothing on an emotional level.

Displaced and homeless, this was Fawn's third

residence since the farm buildings were wiped out. Her father, whom she didn't remember, had been washed down the river when a bridge collapsed beneath his four-wheeler. She'd been hospitalized, rehabbed, and offered solace on a ranch where she could stay indefinitely.

Her mother lived in Sioux City, a town Fawn hadn't known, with Aunt Carol, a female relative Fawn didn't recognize.

Now in early September, she sought sanctuary at Ivy's Inn, a B&B on a ranch near Verdigre, Nebraska. Mom believed the country would be best for Fawn's health and recuperation, so she'd been left here. She heaved a huge sigh as she'd often done since her arrival. Mom was probably right. The country felt like home. If she could remember how home felt. "Look for joy in the newness of each day." Will I always stare into the mirror and talk to my image? "Feeling sorry for yourself gets you nowhere."

A shuffle sounded outside her door.

She entered the adjoining guestroom and opened the door onto the upstairs hallway of Ivy's Inn.

Roni Bennett smiled as she took a step back. "Good morning. I hope you slept well."

"I did, thank you."

"Breakfast is ready earlier than usual. Dawson and I need to speak with you."

"I'll be right down." Roni had turned out to be a good friend, and a generous one.

Noise from below meant Roni and Dawson Bennett's daughter was awake. Precocious Ivy had

announced upon meeting Fawn, "Hi. I'm four. Mom says I'm going on fourteen. But that's really grown up, and I want to stay a kid for years so I can still play with Hugo."

Hugo made Fawn smile as much as Ivy did. The dog must weigh around one-hundred-twenty-five pounds. At that instant, girl and St. Bernard mix raced past the bottom of the stairs toward the dining table.

Fawn followed their boisterous entry. Her steps faltered at the sight of Jarett Raymond. And he claimed they had a history. The man caused quivery things in her stomach she didn't understand. Every time she saw him, she questioned herself as to what they'd meant to one another.

Jarett removed his hat and nodded. The deep tan accentuated the indigo of his eyes. "Morning, Fawn."

She nodded and realized she hadn't seen him much lately, except from a distance on her walks. He came to the house infrequently to update Dawson on fencing issues or anything else that affected Jarett's cow/calf pairs. The more she saw him the more she was drawn to him.

"Take your seats, please." Roni handed Jarett a large coffee mug. "Thanks for coming on short notice. We'll talk business as soon as our stomachs stop rumbling and the coffee wakes up our minds."

Jarett pulled out a chair at the place setting opposite Fawn, ruffled Ivy's hair, and patted the dog where he sat next to the little girl's chair.

Ivy giggled at Hugo and then looked at Dawson. "Sing our prayer, Daddy."

Country singer at heart, he obeyed.

Fawn spoke her amen with the others. She dug into her western omelet and recalled her reaction to Roni's invitation to recover at the ranch. Were all country people as hospitable?

Roni exchanged a meaningful glance with Dawson, and then she touched his arm. "You're positive this is the only way?"

Dawson nodded in response. "It'll work out fine."

Fawn had asked Roni much the same question three months earlier. "You're sure I won't be in your way?"

And Roni had responded, "I'm convinced it's God's will. You love the country. Where else should you be? Besides, living with us could bring your memory back in a week."

Fat chance. Fawn remained an inconvenient guest.

~*~

Jarett wiped his mouth. "You make mighty fine biscuits, Roni."

She stood and then retrieved the coffee carafe for refills.

While he waited, he filled his sight with Fawn. So fair to gaze upon with her light brown hair and everchanging hazel eyes, he had a hard time juxtaposing the new personality with the old.

Once so sure of herself, lively, responsible, and outdoorsy, she now came across as timid and hesitant. And what was with her voice? He hadn't known how

to react the first time they'd met again after ten years. Well, were reintroduced by her mother. Fawn's personality had changed so much that when she spoke, rather than strong, her statements always ended on an uplift as though she asked a question with every sentence.

In a way, her voice was alluring and positive. The light musical tone drew a responsive smile from him every time she spoke. One thing remained constant and familiar. She looked a person right in the eye when she communicated.

Roni poured coffee into the mug at his side, which broke into his rumination.

Dawson stacked his wife's and daughter's plates. "Ivy, honey, wash your face, and you can go swing."

"Daa-ddee, I have to feed Hugo first."

"You're right, sweetheart. Go for it." He settled Fawn's and Jarett's plates at the bottom of his stack.

Roni sat the instant the door slammed. "We need your help, Jarett. And Fawn does too."

"Anything." He glanced between the women. "You know that."

All the while the four adults enjoyed their caffeine infusion, Jarett anxiously awaited disclosure of why he'd been beckoned.

"You met my brother, Wayne, when we interviewed you about continuing to lease our land for your cattle. His wife, Allison, went into the hospital during the wee hours of the morning." Dawson tapped the table.

Roni wiped her eyes.

Fawn stared at Roni. "You said the babies weren't due for six weeks."

Roni patted Fawn's arm. "Twins often come early, but there are complications."

Dawson picked up. "The docs are worried the baby girl won't make it. The little boy has a strong heart. They're preparing Allison for a C-section early this afternoon."

"You have to go." Jarett caught Fawn's startled expression and tried to reassure her with a smile.

"I can't relate to elation over a birth, but I saw how hard it was for Mom, grieving over Dad. She's been my example of a lot of things." Fawn glanced out the window. "I should be crying over the loss of my father. I do feel sad that I don't remember him. But that's more about me than him. Poor Allison and Wayne. Babies should be a happy story of a different kind."

"That's where you two come in." Roni stood and rested a hand on Jarett's shoulder. "I need to finish packing. We don't know how long we'll be in Norfolk."

"Wait a sec, Roni." Dawson glanced from Fawn to Jarett. "We want you to stay here and look after Fawn while we're gone."

Her eyes startled wide. She searched Roni's and Dawson's faces. "Rehab in Lincoln confirmed my ability to understand compound words. Occupational therapy reintroduced me to taking care of my daily needs. I'm sorry that I'm not supposed to be alone."

Jarett kept his gaze locked on Fawn. She had to be sick of other people making decisions for her. If anyone

planned his days, he'd do more than clench his teeth and purse his lips by way of reacting. At least she wasn't crying. "You and I can run the place. They'll only be a call or text away."

Dawson nodded. "Ivy won't like it, but Hugo must stay with you. We think it's the best solution."

What would the days ahead bring? How long could he get by without Fawn remembering what she'd done to him?

2

The next morning Fawn tossed aside the bedding, and kicked the tangled sheet off her foot. How long will I be here? How long will I need Jarett as a baby-sitter? "Lord, I need to get well. Find a way to overcome amnesia and the dreams that plague me." She got up and went to the mirror above the antique tri-fold vanity. "A baby. I'm a newborn baby named Fawn Stuart who has to relearn everything. I only know my name is Fawn because other people tell me."

You are a daughter of the Most High King.

"Yes, dear God. On a deep level I know that. I've been aware of You and believe I can trust You, but who else should I trust?"

She didn't hear an answering voice in her heart, but Jarett's name came immediately to mind. He was more than a baby-sitter. Caregiver sounded better. He knew her from the past and had told Roni they once dated. Instead of heading home for his little house in Verdigre, he'd temporarily made himself at home on the ranch. Well, the apartment in the barn loft of the B&B.

Hugo's pounding paws on the stairs alerted her.

Jarett knocked on her door.

Why jump? Frustrated over her lack of memory,

her insides always reacted to him on some level foreign to her recall.

His voice carried through the closed door. "Coffee's done if you're ready to start the day. Hope I didn't make too much noise and wake you."

"I was awake. I'll be down in five." She took a deep breath, exhaled, and set back her shoulders on her way to the bathroom. Amnesia made her lost and helpless at times, conscious of an uncertain future.

The Bennett family, and now Jarett, were a blessing. They took away some of the loneliness, but she still felt isolated. She had to admit they lifted her spirits. They weren't the only ones who'd been kind. Aunt Carol had given her a cell phone and opened her home in Sioux City to her and her mother. Mom was still swamped in grief and stayed in town.

Neither of them had gone back to the farm to survey the damage following the flood.

Fawn's first memory was of sadness and shock. She and her mother had been at the church. She didn't know how they got there, but she was told later they'd been rescued from the farm. As they drove away from the church, she took in every line of the white vinyl-sided building, complete with a steepled bell tower, where it stood in relief against the dark sky.

Today in the inn's kitchen, she noted the time, senen-o-five, and then took a seat at the breakfast island. "These stools make me feel like a preschooler. My feet are so high off the ground."

His elbow bumped her shoulder as he sat.

A thrill of awareness traveled down her side. She

took a sip of apple juice and set down the glass to pick up her fork. "I'm sorry you have to look after me as though I'm a child. It has to be hard staying with a person who doesn't even have the memories of a small girl."

"Hey, we watched good movies yesterday. And for the record, I don't think there's anything little about you, at least on the outside." He winced. "That didn't sound right."

Fawn wished she had words for the look on his face. His expression made her snort rather than giggle.

Jarett glanced at Hugo, shoveled in a bite, chewed, set down his fork. "Roni doesn't think you're childish, either. She trusts you to watch over the inn, to welcome anyone who stops for a stay, or make a reservation for later."

"I've been here long enough to learn how hard she works and how she runs the place."

"So, as I mentioned when I ran into you again at the church while I was volunteering clean-up after the flood, you and I knew each other way back. The little I've learned about amnesia I've gained by reading a couple articles online." He chomped a bite of waffle smothered in blueberries. "I'm here to listen and help you in any way I can."

What to say? Nothing came to mind. She set to downing her own food.

They finished in minutes, though she stole covert glances.

Jarett did too.

She stood and picked up her plate. "I can load

these in the washer and wipe out the waffle iron."

"That's already done, but you can take the dishes. I'll pour more brew and meet you on the porch."

"Good. The swing made me dizzy at first, but now it's peaceful. I think I could sit out there for hours." She joined him a moment later. "We didn't talk about who will feed Hugo. I don't want to feed him twice."

"Done for the morning." He patted the wooded slats at his side. "How about you take the evening shift?"

"OK."

"So, walk me through what you can remember. For instance, your favorite things. Tell me what you like and don't like. I want to know what I can help you with. Anything. I'm all for us getting to know one another again."

"That'll be short on my part." She rested her mug on her knee, stared off after Hugo chasing a rabbit toward the creek path. "I have no idea what my favorite color is, but I'm guessing it's something found in nature. I know I love watching the sun go down. I don't have a favorite song, but listening to Dawson strum his guitar and lead church worship soothes me."

"You've always been drawn to the outdoors. That's why you stayed on the farm with your parents after high school."

"Yes. It was smart on my mother's and aunt's parts to come up with me staying here rather than with them in town. I feel guilty that I can't work out my keep or somehow repay Roni and Dawson."

"They want you to get better. That's payment

enough. From what I understand, Allison had always planned her grandmother's home to be a place of respite for anyone who needed it. The paying guests more than make up for any deficit."

"My mother says I have something called retrograde amnesia." She preferred looking at him over talking about herself, but he wanted to know.

He nodded. "Go on."

"I can still form new memories, such as what Ivy has said and how she makes me laugh. I know I have a cognitive deficit. I've looked up the definition of numerous words on the Internet. Others I just know. Deep down, there's knowledge of what I've missed out on. A lifetime of memories. I know I love God. I've read that Jesus died for my sins, and I believe it with all my heart."

"That assurance is the most important thing for any of us to know." He cupped her shoulder. "Does anything frighten you?"

"That's easy. Most everything scares me. Going through life without a memory. Meeting people. I'm OK around you." She hesitated, looked away. "I know I can trust you because Roni and Dawson do. I only wish I could remember what we meant to one another."

He removed his hand and set the swing in motion. A cord stood out on the side of his neck. His whole face looked hard.

She set her mug on the cane table. "I have dreams. I'm pretty sure I'm afraid of water."

He flattened his boots on the wooded porch floor

and stopped the swing. He scraped his top lip with his lower teeth and his facial muscles relaxed. "I'm sorry. Your memories of the past were swept away on a rush of icy water. I still can't believe the size of those ice chunks that bowled through town. Some were as huge as flattened pickups. It was other-worldly. That forceful water didn't care what it washed as the Niobrara River went over its banks."

"I saw the ice when we left the church. Later, while I was in the hospital, Mom told me she'd gone to the funeral home to plan my father's service."

"I was there. At the celebration of life. What do you remember about that?"

"The service is all mixed up. Often, I don't think I was there. But I remember seeing the church again, different than when Mom and I stayed there, or on Sunday mornings when I've gone with Roni and Dawson. The sadness. Mom crying. Way too many people. And Dawson singing. Some stranger took me to Lincoln for rehab right after that. I don't remember much about the hospital, except I worked hard and had headaches."

Color rose high on his cheeks. "I'm not surprised you don't remember. Either due to the head injury or I'm pretty sure the doctor had given you medicine. I was that stranger your mom asked to give you the ride."

"I can't believe I don't remember it being you." She jumped off the wooden seat.

"Don't worry about it." Jarett kept the swing from hitting her in the back of the leg.

"I'm lost, Jarett." She stared off at the line of trees hiding the creek. Tears threatened, but she'd shed too many. "It's odd, almost as though I'm a stuffed doll come to life. You're kind to be here with me. I'm supposed to be a grownup at twenty-eight. I've no ability to retrieve old memories. I have no sense of who Fawn once was. Or who I am now."

"I like you just the way you are."

"There you go again, being kind. I can't help but think I like the same things as I once did, such as that peanut butter ice cream Roni has in the big freezer."

He came so close behind her that she could lean right into his chest without backing a step.

"You'll regain what sense of self God wants you to. If you've lost who you were and what you've experienced, He'll replace it with new memories and a new you."

She ran across the porch, slammed through the door, and up the stairs to stand in front of the mirror.

It's called Amnesia. I have brain damage. I'm supposed to be smart. She closed her eyes. Flashes of her recurring dream rushed into her mind as fast as rising water. She opened her eyes and stared at her image.

Who am I? My name is Fawn Stuart. I only know because I've been told. I have no choice but to believe.

~*~

Later in the kitchen, Jarett couldn't hold back his smile.

Fawn sang more than recited her words, in a

lighter soprano voice than she had spoken in her late teens. But she was there, inside those ever-changing hazel eyes that locked on his and seemed to search his soul for answers he didn't have.

He couldn't begin to fathom what her life was like. Fearful, panicky, unsure. All uncharacteristic of her former self.

"I'm glad Roni asked you to cook." She shrugged her shoulders and messed with the ties on her apron. "I go around in circles in the kitchen. I wish I knew what I liked to do." Her uplift sounded as though she'd asked him if that was correct. "That is, what skills I might have. Can I do anything for meal preparation besides helping someone else?"

"You do something wherever you're needed. Roni told me you've been a big help around the inn. Whatever it takes, skills will come back to you. I can't imagine starting out as an adult with a baby's outlook. Sorry, if that doesn't describe how you look at things." He reached out a hand. No. He wouldn't touch her. "You have amnesia due to a head injury."

"I tell myself that every day. First thing in the morning and throughout the day, 'I'm Fawn Stuart and I have amnesia.' Is that an excuse for being dumb?"

"What? No way. You're far from dumb. What you're dealing with is not an excuse. You've gone through trauma, received an injury, were near death with your mother, and lost your father to surging waters. Good reasons for anyone to experience memory loss."

"I have no recollection of how all of that