

What People Are Saying about Sharlene MacLaren and *Livvie's Song*

Forever on my favorites list, Sharlene MacLaren is one of those rare authors who write “real” historical romance that quickens the pulse and nourishes the soul! Her books are page-turners that keep you up long into the night, and *Livvie's Song* is no exception—sleep deprivation at its very best! You won't want to miss this first book in MacLaren's newest series.

—Julie Lessman

Author, the Daughters of Boston series

In *Livvie's Song*, Sharlene MacLaren once again weaves words in her own special way, drawing her readers into life in 1926 Wabash, Indiana. From the first page, you'll walk off the street and straight into Livvie's Kitchen, where you'll feel right at home with the regulars. Sharlene brings Livvie, Will, and all the rest of her well-depicted characters to life in a way that pulls you into the story and holds you captive.

—Janet Lee Barton

Author of 16 novels, including her latest,
I'd Sooner Have Love

A historically accurate setting, relatable characters, and a storyline guaranteed to grab your heart can be found in every Sharlene MacLaren novel. For an enjoyable read, treat yourself to one of her stories today.

—Kim Vogel Sawyer

Best-selling author, *My Heart Remembers*

Romantically inspiring and uplifting, *Livvie's Song* gave me a new sense of nostalgia for Wabash, the town I call home. Heartwarming to my soul, this book was a true joy to read!

—Heather L. Allen

Archivist, Wabash County Historical Museum
Wabash, Indiana

Charming, fresh, and entertaining, *Livvie's Song* will not disappoint. Sharlene MacLaren has penned another winner with a new set of compelling characters in book one of the River of Hope series!

—**Miralee Ferrell**

Author, *Love Finds You in Tombstone, Arizona*,
and *Finding Jeena*

Livvie's Song

SHARLENE MACLAREN



WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's Note:

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

LIVVIE'S SONG

River of Hope ~ Book One

Sharlene MacLaren
www.sharlenemaclaren.com

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Dedication

To the fabulous “Baker Beauties,” composed of
Charity, my beloved sister-in-law,
and her three gorgeous daughters,
Jamie, Jill, and Wendy;
my marvelous “adopted” niece, Shelly;
and, of course, my lovely daughters,
Kendra and Krista.
Y’all are so much fun to “play” with.
I love you more than you know!

Other Titles by Sharlene MacLaren

Tender Vow

Long Journey Home

Through Every Storm

The Little Hickman Creek Series

Loving Liza Jane

Sarah, My Beloved

Courting Emma

The Daughters of Jacob Kane Series

Hannah Grace

Maggie Rose

Abbie Ann

Acknowledgments

I first rode through the picturesque town of Wabash, Indiana, while on a road trip with my husband. Its tree-lined streets, attractive old homes, and charming, well-preserved historic buildings caught my attention and compelled me to ask my hubby to slow down so I could take it all in. It was the river running through town, though, that truly cinched it. No question, I had to write a series about 1920s Wabash and include colorful, exciting, God-fearing, upstanding characters (and some not-so-upstanding characters). Story ideas started flowing almost immediately, and not long after that initial ride through Wabash, I drew up three somewhat sketchy outlines for the books that would comprise my River of Hope series.

Writing any type of fictional series, particularly one of a historical nature, always requires research, so, sometime later, my husband and I set off on another road trip, this time with Wabash, Indiana, as our destination. There, I met some very lovely, cordial, and generous people who were more than willing to answer my myriad questions and provide useful information regarding Wabash history. While this series is entirely fictional, many of the streets, locations, businesses, stores, and other sites are real. Therefore, I would like to thank the following people for their helpful insights and resources:

Ware Wimberly III, director, Wabash Carnegie Public Library;

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A great big thank-you to all of you!

Chapter One

*May 1926
Wabash, Indiana*

*"Praise ye the LORD.
Sing unto the LORD a new song."
—Psalm 149:1*

Smoke rings rose and circled the heads of Charley Arnold and Roy Scott as they sat in Livvie's Kitchen and partook of steaming coffee, savory roast beef and gravy, and conversation, guffawing every so often at each other's blather. Neither seemed to care much who heard them, since the whole place buzzed with boisterous midday talk. Folks came to her restaurant to fill their stomachs, Livvie Beckman knew, but, for many, getting an earful of gossip was just as satisfying.

Behind the counter in the kitchen, utensils banged against metal, and pots and pans sizzled and boiled with smoke and steam. "Order's up!" hollered the cook, Joe Stewart. On cue, Livvie carried the two hamburger platters to Pete and Susie Jones's table and set them down with a hasty smile. Her knee-length, floral cotton skirt flared as she turned. Mopping her brow and blowing several strawberry blonde strands of damp hair off her face, she hustled to the counter. "You boys put out those disgusting nicotine sticks,"

she scolded Charley and Roy on the run. "How many times do I have to tell you, I don't allow smoking in this establishment? We don't even have ashtrays."

"Aw, Livvie, how you expect us t' enjoy a proper cup o' coffee without a cigarette?" Charley whined to her back. "'Sides, our saucers work fine for ashtrays."

"Saucers are not ashtrays," stated old Evelyn Garner from the booth behind the two men. She craned her long, skinny neck and trained her owl eyes on them, her lips pinched together in a tight frown. Her husband, Ira Garner, had nothing to say, of course. He rarely did, preferring to let his wife do the talking. Instead, he slurped wordlessly on his tomato soup.

Livvie snatched up the next order slip from the counter and gave it a glance. Then, she lifted two more plates, one of macaroni and cheese, the other of a chicken drumstick and mashed potatoes, and whirled back around, eyeing both men sternly. "I expect you to follow my rules, boys"—she marched past them—"or go next door to Isaac's, where the smoke's as thick as cow dung."

Her saucy remark gave rise to riotous hoots. "You tell 'em, Liv," someone said—Harv Brewster, perhaps? With the racket of babies crying, patrons chattering, the cash register clinking as Cora Mae Livingston tallied somebody's order, the screen door flapping open and shut, and car horns honking outside, Livvie couldn't discern who said what. Oh, how she wished she had the funds to hire a few more waitresses. Some days, business didn't call for it, but, today, it screamed, "Help!"

"You best listen, fellas. When Livvie Beckman speaks, she means every word," said another. She turned at the husky male voice but couldn't identify its source.

"Lady, you oughtta go to preachin' school," said yet another unknown speaker.

"She's somethin', ain't she?" There was no mistaking Coot Hermanson's croaky pipes. Her most loyal customer, also the oldest by far, gave her one of his famous, toothy grins over his coffee cup, which he held with trembling hands. No one really knew Coot's age, and most people suspected he didn't know it, himself, but Livvie thought he looked to be a hundred; ninety-nine, at the very least. But that didn't keep him from showing up at her diner on Market Street every day, huffing from the two-block walk, his faithful black mongrel, Reggie, parked on his haunches under the red and white awning out front, waiting for his usual handout of leftover bacon or the heels of a fresh-baked loaf of bread.

She stooped to tap him with her elbow. "I'll be right back to fill that coffee cup, Coot," she whispered into his good ear.

He lifted an ancient white eyebrow and winked. "You take your time, missy," he wheezed back before she straightened and hurried along.

Of all her regulars, Coot probably knew her best—knew about the tough façade she put on, day in and day out; recognized the rawness of her heart, the ache she still carried from the loss of her beloved Frank. More than a year had come and gone since her husband's passing, but it still hurt to the heavens to think about him. More painful still were her desperate attempts to keep his memory alive for her sons, Alex and Nathan. She'd often rehash how she'd met their father at a church picnic when the two were only teenagers; how he'd enjoyed fishing, hunting, and building things with his bare hands; and how, as he'd gotten older, his love of the culinary arts had planted within

him a seed of desire to one day open his own restaurant. She'd tell them how they'd worked so hard to scrimp and save, even while raising a family, and how thrilled Frank had been when that dream had finally come to fruition.

What she didn't tell her boys was how much she struggled to keep her passion for the restaurant alive in their daddy's absence. Oh, she had Joe, of course, but he'd dropped the news last week that he'd picked up a new kitchen job in a Chicago diner—some well-known establishment, he'd said—and he could hardly have turned it down, especially with his daughter and grandchildren begging him to move closer to them. Wabash had been home to Joe Stewart since childhood, but his wife had died some five years ago, and he had little to keep him here. It made sense, Livvie supposed, but it didn't make her life any easier having to find a replacement.

She set down two plates for a couple she'd never seen before today, a middle-aged man and his wife. Strangers were always passing through Wabash on their ways north or south, so it wasn't unusual for her not to know them. "You folks enjoy your lunch," she said with a smile.

"Thank you kindly," the man said, licking his lips and loosening his tie. "This meal looks mighty fine."

Livvie nodded, then made for the coffeepot behind the counter, sensing it was time for a round of refills.

A cloud of smoke still surrounded Charley and Roy's table, though their cigarettes looked to be nearing their ends. She decided not to mention anything further about their annoying behavior unless they lit up again. Those fools had little compunction and even less consideration for the feelings of others. She would have liked to ban them from her restaurant, if

it weren't for the revenue they brought in with their almost daily visits. Gracious, it cost an awful lot to keep a restaurant going. She would sell it tomorrow if she had a backup plan, but she didn't. Besides, Frank would bust out of his casket if she hung a "For Sale" sign on the front door. The diner had been his dream, one she'd adopted with gusto because she'd loved him so much, but she hadn't envisioned his leaving her in the thick of it before they'd paid off their mortgage on the three-story building and turned a good profit on the restaurant.

Oh, why had God taken Frank at such a young age? He'd been thirty-one, married for ten years and a restaurant owner for five. Couldn't God have intervened and sent an angel just in time to keep Frank from stepping in front of that horse-drawn wagon hauling furniture? And why, for mercy's sake, did the accident have to occur right in front of the restaurant, drawing a huge crowd and forever etching in her mind's eye the sight of her beloved lying in the middle of the street, blood oozing from his nose and mouth, his eyes open but not seeing? Coot often told her that God had her best interests in mind and that she needed to trust Him with her whole heart, but how could she, when it seemed like few things ever went right for her, and she had to work so hard to stay afloat? Goodness, she barely had a minute to spare for her own children.

Swallowing a sigh, she hefted up the coffeepot, which had finished percolating, and started the round of refills, beginning with Coot Hermanson.



Will Taylor ground out his last cigarette with the sole of his worn shoe as he leaned against the wall of

the train car, his head pounding with every jolt, the whirl and buzz of metal against metal ripping through his head. He stared down at his empty pack of Luckies and turned up his mouth in the corner, giving a little huff of self-disgust. He didn't really smoke—not anymore. But, when he'd left Welfare Island State Penitentiary in New York City in the wee hours of the morning, one of the guards had handed him a fresh pack, along with the few belongings he had to his name, and he'd smoked the entire thing to help pass the time.

Sharing the mostly empty freight car with him were a dozen or so other men, the majority of whom wore unkempt beards, ragged clothing, and long faces. They also stank to the heavens. He figured he fit right in with the lot of them. Frankly, they all looked like a bunch of bums—and probably were, for that matter. Why else would they have jumped aboard the freight car at various stations while the yardmen had their backs turned instead of purchasing a ticket for a passenger car? Will had intended to pay his fare, and he'd even found himself standing in the queue outside the ticket booth, but when he'd counted his meager stash of cash, he'd fallen out of line. Thankfully, the dense morning fog had made his train-jumping maneuver a cinch. If only it could have had the same effect on his conscience. He'd just been released from prison. Couldn't he get through his first day of freedom without breaking the law?

"Where you headed, mister?" the man closest to him asked.

He could count on one hand the number of minutes anybody on that dark, dingy car had spent engaged in conversation in the hours they'd been riding, and he didn't much feel like talking now. Yet he turned

to the fellow, anyway. "Wabash, Indiana," he answered. "Heard it's a nice place."

Actually, he knew nothing about it, save for the state song, "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away," which spoke about the river running through it. He'd determined his destination just that morning while poring over a map in the train station, thinking that any other place in the country would beat where he'd spent the last ten years. When he'd overheard someone mention Wabash, he'd found it on the map and, knowing it had its own song, set his mind on going there.

He didn't know a soul in Wabash, which made the place all the more appealing. Best to make a fresh start anonymously. Of course, he had no idea what he'd do to make a living, and it might be that he'd have to move on to the next town if jobs there were scarce. But he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

His stomach growled, so he opened his knapsack and took out an apple, just one of the few items he'd lifted from the jail kitchen the previous night—with the approval of Harry Wilkinson, the kitchen supervisor. The friends he'd made at Welfare Island were few, as he couldn't trust most folks any farther than he could pitch them, but he did consider Harry a friend, having worked alongside him for the past four years. Harry had told him about the love of God and convinced him not six months ago to give his heart over to Him, saying he'd need a good friend when he left the island and could do no better than the Creator of the universe. Will had agreed, of course, but he sure was green in the faith department, even though he'd taken to reading the Bible Harry had given him—his first and only—almost every night before laying his head on his flat, frayed pillow.

“Wabash, eh?” the man said, breaking into his musings. “I heard of it. Ain’t that the first electrically lighted city in the world? I do believe that’s their claim to fame.”

“That right? I wouldn’t know.”

“What takes you to Wabash?” he persisted, pulling on his straggly beard.

Will pulled on his own thick beard, mostly brown with some flecks of blond, briefly wondering if he ought to shave it off before he went in search of a job. He’d seen his reflection in a mirror that morning for the first time in a week and had nearly fallen over. In fact, he’d had to do some mental calculations to convince himself that he was actually thirty-four years old, not forty-three. Prison had not been kind to his appearance; he’d slaved under the hot summer sun, digging trenches and hoeing the prison garden, and spent the winters hauling coal and chopping logs. While the work had put him in excellent shape physically, the sun and wind had wreaked havoc on his skin, freckling his nose and arms and wrinkling his forehead. When he hadn’t been outside, he’d worked in a scorching-hot kitchen, stirring kettles of soup, peeling potatoes, cutting slabs of beef, filleting fish, and plucking chickens’ feathers.

“Wabash seemed as good a place as any,” he replied after some thought, determined to keep his answers short and vague.

The fellow peered at him with arched eyebrows. “Where you come from, anyway?”

“Around.”

A chuckle floated through the air but quickly drowned in the train’s blaring whistle. The man dug into his side pocket and brought out a cigar, stuck it

in his mouth, and lit the end, then took a deep drag before blowing out a long stream of smoke. He gave a thoughtful nod and gazed off. "Yeah, I know. Me, too." Across the dark space, the others shifted or slept, legs crossed at the ankles, heads bobbing, not seeming to care about the conversation, if they even heard it.

Will might have inquired after his traveling companion, but his years behind bars had taught him plenty—most important, not to trust his fellow man, and certainly never to divulge his personal history. And posing questions to others would only invite inquiries about himself.

He chomped down his final bite of apple, then tossed the chiseled core onto the floor, figuring a rodent would appreciate it later. Then, he wiped his hands on his pant legs, reached inside his hip pocket, and pulled out his trusty harmonica. Moistening his lips, he brought the instrument to his mouth and started breathing into it, cupping it like he might a beautiful woman's face. Music had always soothed whatever ailed him, and, ever since he'd picked up the skill as a youngster under his grandfather's tutelage, he'd often whiled away the hours playing this humble instrument.

He must have played half a dozen songs—"Oh, Dem Golden Slippers," "Oh My Darling, Clementine," "Over There," "Amazing Grace," "The Sidewalks of New York," and even "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away"—before the shrill train whistle sounded again. They must be arriving in Wabash. Another stowaway pulled the car door open a crack to peek out and establish their whereabouts.

Quickly, Will stuffed his mouth organ inside his pocket, then stretched his back, the taut muscles

tingling from being stationary for so long. At least his pounding headache had relented, replaced now by a mess of tangled nerves. “Reserved excitement” is how he would have described his emotion.

“Nice playin’,” said a man whose face was hidden by the shadow of his low-lying hat. He tipped the brim at Will and gave a slow nod. “You’ve got a way with that thing. Almost put me in a lonesome-type mood.”

“Thanks. For the compliment, I mean. Sorry ’bout your gloomy mood. Didn’t mean to bring that on.”

“Ain’t nothin’. I been jumpin’ trains fer as long as I can remember. Gettin’ the lonelies every now and again is somethin’ to be ’spected, I s’pose.”

“That’s for sure,” mumbled another man, sitting in a corner with his legs stretched out. Will glanced at the sole of his boot and noticed his sock pushing through a gaping hole. Something like a rock turned over in his gut. These guys made a habit of hopping on trains, living off handouts, and roaming the countryside. Vagabonds, they were. He hoped never to see the inside of another freight car, and, by gum, he’d make sure he didn’t—with the Lord’s help, of course. He had enough money to last a couple of weeks, so long as he holed up someplace dirt cheap and watched what he spent on food. He prayed he’d land a job—any job—in that time. He wouldn’t be choosy in the beginning; he couldn’t afford to be. If he had to haul garbage, well, so be it. He couldn’t expect to do much more than that, not with a criminal record. His hope was that no one would inquire. After all, who but somebody downright desperate would hire an ex-con? Not that he planned to volunteer that bit of information, but he supposed anybody could go digging if they really wanted to know.

He hadn't changed his name, against Harry's advice. "I'm not going to run for the rest of my life, Harry," he'd argued. "Heck, I served my time. It's not that I plan to broadcast it, mind you, but I'm not going to carry the weight of it forever, either. I wasn't the only one involved in that stupid burglary." Though he had shouldered most of the responsibility for committing it. The others had left him to do most of the dirty work, and they'd run off when the law had shown up.

Harry had nodded in silence, then reached up to lay a bony hand on Will's hulking shoulder. Few people ever laid a hand on him and got away with it, so, naturally, he'd started to pull away, but Harry had held firm, forcing Will to loosen up. "You got a good point there, Will. You're a good man, you know that?" He hadn't known that, and he'd appreciated Harry's vote of confidence. "You just got to go out there and be yourself. Folks will believe in you if you take the first step, start seeing your own worth. The Lord sees it, and you need to look at yourself through His eyes. Before you know it, your past will no longer matter—not to you or to anyone else."

The train brakes screeched for all of a minute, with smoke rising up from the tracks and seeping in through the cracks of the dirty floor. Will choked back the burning residue and stood up, then gazed down at his strange companions, feeling a certain kinship he'd never expected. "You men be safe, now," he said, passing his gaze over each one. Several of them acknowledged him with a nod, but most just gave him a vacant stare. The fellow at the back of the car who'd spent the entire day sleeping in the shadows finally lifted his face a notch and looked at him—vigilantly, Will thought. Yet he shook off any uneasiness.

The one who'd first struck up a conversation with him, short-lived as it had been, raised his bearded chin. The two made eye contact. "You watch yourself out there, fella. You got to move fast once your feet hit that dirt. Anybody sees you jumpin' off is sure to report you, and if it's one of the yardmen, well, you may as well kiss your hiney good-bye. They got weapons on them, and they don't look kindly on us spongers."

"Thanks. I'll be on guard." Little did the man know how adept he was at handling himself. The years he'd served in the state pen had taught him survival skills he hoped never to have to use in the outside world.

When the train finally stopped, he reached inside his shirt pocket and peeked at his watch, which was missing its chain. Ten minutes after seven. He pulled the sliding door open just enough to fit his bulky body through, then poked his head out and looked around. Finding the coast clear, thanks to a long freight train parked on neighboring tracks, he gave the fellows one last nod, then leaped from the car and slunk off into the gathering dusk, his sack of meager possessions slung over his shoulder.

First item on his short agenda: look for a restaurant where he could silence his grumbling stomach.