

Dogwood Winter is a touching tale of second-chance love in face of adversity, a story of heartache and healing that is certain to leave its mark on your heart.

— CYNTHIA ROEMER – AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
OF *UNDER MOONLIT SKIES*

Dogwood Winter follows the wonderful friends we have made in Valley Creek through yet another masterfully crafted story. Two experienced souls reach for the promise of spring through great loss and longing, their love blossoming in an unlikely place and circumstance.

Moving and tender, this story explores hopes deferred and longings fulfilled in the rich and lyrical prose of this nuanced writer.

— KATHLEEN L. MAHER, AUTHOR OF THE SONS OF THE
SHENANDOAH SERIES

VALLEY CREEK REDEMPTION • THREE

A TIMELY BEGINNING
FROM AN UNTIMELY END

Dogwood
WINTER



CANDACE WEST



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*To Uncle Randall—an anchor, a rock, my second dad, whose voice
still whispers to me. You left us far too soon to enter God's glory, your
long-awaited home.*

*But not soon enough for you.
You never belonged to this world.*

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*I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds,
saith the Lord. ~ Jeremiah 30:17*

PROLOGUE



Tiptoeing barefooted through the fresh-fallen snow didn't sting Ella's feet as she wound through Mother's grove of dogwood trees.

A refreshing cold without the chill.

Ella's eyes flew open. Peering through the semi-darkness of dawn unfurling within her bedroom, she clung to the receding landscape within a hidden corner of her mind as she awoke. Through the years, the scene had never changed—an elusive riddle with no end.

A dream of such strange contradictions. The sunlight caressing her face; the snow encasing her feet without burning them; the warm, spring breeze sweeping over her bare, outstretched arms, the sensations still lingering on her flesh while she lay there awake. Always, Ella moved toward something.

Always, she failed to reach it.

Instead, she remained in the haven of Mother's dogwoods. The blossoms brushed against her pale pink frock. Against her fingertips. Embroidered on the bodice of her dress, more

dogwood blossoms spread around her waist. Covered her aching heart.

Yet, the sunlight spilling onto her face radiated pure joy.

In the fading darkness, Ella rubbed her arms and blinked away the fragments of the scene. Mother once said happy dreams were promises carried to mortals on the wings of angels. No one had made promises to her, though.

Not in an age.



May 1912

Ella's head reeled but not from the headache pounding her temples. Dread bubbled up her throat.

"Are you certain?" she said, hating the waver in her voice.

"Unfortunately, yes." The doctor snapped his bag shut, the corners of his mouth set in tight lines. "I've seen my share of cases. You have all the symptoms." Shaking his head, he puffed out a breath and turned toward her brother Douglas who stood just inside the doorway. "Give this to her for the fever."

The wooden floor creaked beneath the Persian rug alongside her bed as Ella's brother moved closer to take the bottle from Dr. Weaver. Strange how she could still fret that his muddy boots, fresh from a newly plowed field, would soil it.

Douglas breathed deep, his navy-blue eyes peering into hers. "Will she get worse?"

"It's hard to say. Time will tell, though."

"Is that the best you can do?" Douglas tunneled a hand through his hair as he turned to Dr. Weaver.

"Douglas." Ella reached for his sleeve, but he jerked away.

“There’s got to be something you can do.” In two strides, he stood between the doctor and her bedroom door. “Is there a treatment, some kind of medicine? Anything?”

“Mr. Steen.” A sigh edged Dr. Weaver’s voice. “There’s nothing else that can be done except wait.”

The muscles in Douglas’s neck tensed. “That can’t be.”

“Little is known about this disease. It affects some folks worse than others. Your sister may recover fully ... or not.”

Hot moisture pricked Ella’s eyes, threatening to sweep away her last ounce of bravado. She chewed her bottom lip. Perhaps the outward pain would erase the inner one, however momentarily.

Dr. Weaver plucked his hat from the settee. “Until then, you’d best move her to the main house where she can be cared for properly. Make her as comfortable as possible.”

A hint of desperation flickered in Douglas’s face. He spread his palms outward as though pleading. “Are you certain there’s no place that can help her?”

“None to my knowledge.” Dr. Weaver sidestepped Douglas and turned the doorknob. “I’ll come tomorrow to check on her. All you can do is pray, Mr. Steen, if you believe.”

His retreating footsteps clipped down the stairs and filled the silence between Ella and Douglas. Holding her breath, Ella waited for her brother’s troubled stare to fasten onto hers. He took his time, rubbing the back of his neck. His glance bounced to the rose-patterned wallpaper, the crown molding, the floor.

Then her.

Ella felt her bravado crack. “Well, you always fussed about my living here alone.”

Douglas’s lips stretched thin. “Ella.” His tone brooked no nonsense. Against her will, she gulped a shuddering breath and turned her head. A moment later, the foot of her mattress sagged under his weight as he sat.

“Infantile paralysis,” he said, his gravelly voice barely a whisper.

The words nearly froze Ella’s heart as she swallowed against the lace collar of her nightgown. “Do you think the doctor is right? That I contracted it from the river?”

“There’s no other explanation. You should’ve never waded into it.”

Ella’s eyes stung, both from Douglas’s words and the stabbing pain in her legs. “I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Douglas shook his head, his voice thick. His sunburned hands gripped his knees. “I should’ve told Caleb no picnic, and there would’ve been no swimming.”

“The day was warm and beautiful. Caleb needed to get out, especially after everything you’ve both been through. It was the first time in months he’d laughed.”

Douglas pulled in a slow, deep breath, no doubt struggling to control emotions still too raw from his wife’s untimely death during the winter. His shoulders sagged as he released it and cut a glance at her. “You’re feverish. I’ve got to get you home now.”

“But how?” Ella’s words rose with another wave of pain.

Douglas rose and drew back the bedcovers with as much tenderness as their departed mother. “I’ll carry you home in the buggy and send Mrs. Hawthorne to gather some of your things. Come now.”

An unseen weight pressed against Ella’s legs as she scooted them to the edge of the mattress. “I can hardly move them, Douglas. They feel so weak and heavy.” Cold, icy fear wedged into her heart and reflected from her brother’s darkened expression.

“Hold still. I’ll carry you.”

Before she could argue, Douglas scooped her up as though she weighed no more than a rag doll. The thud of his boots

echoed through the silent house and down the staircase, shrouding the pounding of Ella's heart. What would happen to her? Would she die? Be crippled?

As he stepped out on the porch, the warm sunshine struck Ella across the face like an angry slap. Her eyelids pinched shut as she hid her face against his sturdy, broad shoulder. A few moments later, she felt him transfer her onto the buggy seat.

"Do you think you can sit up?"

"Yes, no farther than we have to go."

His calloused hand brushed her forehead. "Your fever's rising."

Ella gripped the armrest as Douglas joggled to the opposite side of the buggy and climbed up. A second later, the rig lurched forward. One of Douglas's arms encircled her shoulders and drew her closer.

"Lean on me, Ella Mae."

He hadn't called her that in years. She must be even worse off than she realized. Too tired to resist, Ella wilted against him and lowered her head onto his shoulder.

Slow, murky darkness surrounded her like a rising tide and swept her away.



"YOU KILLED HER. You killed my baby." The distraught woman's voice shrieked along the corridor and raised the hairs on the back of George Curtis's neck.

Her husband lunged at him. A fist collided with George's jaw, snapping his head to the side. Everything dimmed while two hands clutched the front of his surgical gown and jerked him forward.

"You said it would be fine. Very little danger. You dirty liar." The father's hot breath blasted across Dr. Curtis's face.

“Thomas ... I’m sorry.” His voice sounded far away, as though belonging to someone else.

Biting back a cry, Thomas pulled his fist back for another blow. Just before it smashed into George’s face, three orderlies thrust between them and wrenched him loose.

The scene moved both with speed and slow motion. Claudia’s screams and Thomas’s threats clattered around him while the shouts of the orderlies, the push and swirl of the nurses around the distraught mother, anchored his feet to the floor. The only solid, stable thing in the corridor.

Dr. Curtis, will I see you in just a little bit?

George shivered at the memory of the little girl’s voice, her last words before the ether closed those brown eyes full of trust and a touch of fear.

Was this really happening? A numb wave of shock rolled through him. No professional demeanor could brush it off, especially when it involved his two friends.

“Let me go!” Thomas twisted from their grasp and staggered toward his wife. “It just can’t be. Lilith gone. God help us.”

“My girl, my girl!” Claudia collapsed into a chair, wringing her hands. “Thomas. Our girl can’t be dead.”

Chin quivering, Thomas pointed at George. “You killed her, and I’ll make sure you pay. You’ll never practice again if it’s the very last thing I ever do.” Tears streaked down his face. “A simple surgery, you said.”

What could he say? No words could bring Lilith back.

Dead. The little girl was dead.

Dr. Curtis, will I see you in just a little bit?

“Did you hear me, George?” Thomas stumbled forward, raw grief blazing in his face. An orderly caught his arm.

“Thomas, Claudia, I’m so very sorry. I—”

“You’ll be even more sorry before this is over.”

Behind George, the doors leading to the operating room

swung open as his fellow surgeon Alec Howard strode toward them.

“Dr. Curtis, you’re no longer needed here. I’ll take over.” A touch of sympathy warmed the somber lines around his mouth.

He was only too glad to get out of there. The broken sobs of the mother pounded his temples with each hurried step he took away from the scene. Past the doors, down the hallways to the dressing room, he almost blindly ran.

Stripping off his surgeon’s cap and gown, he approached the sink. Minutes earlier, before breaking the news to her parents, he had scrubbed away her blood, watched it wash down the drain. George reached for the soap and lathered his hands, scouring the skin until it stung. No matter how hard he had worked, he had failed to stop the bleeding.

Mechanically, George scrubbed his face next. Only then did he feel the throb in his jaw. He glanced into the mirror.

Dr. Curtis, will I see you in just a little bit?

His fingers clenched the sides of the sink. Water gurgled down the pipes, the sound filling the room. If only he could pour his life into that lifeless little body, trade his breath for hers.

George’s gaze traveled down to his feet. On the toe of his shoe, a missed speck of her blood cried out to him like Abel’s must have cried out to God.

Guilt seared his heart like the mark on Cain’s forehead.

He was no better than a murderer.