

DOGWOOD



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For AK, who believed.





“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.” *Isak Dinesen*

“Eternity is a human stream and our stories are the rain, falling, flowing, surging, searching for an end. But there is no end. Never will be. And that’s the great thing about living.” *Ruthie Bowles*

“Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?” *Proverbs 20:6*

“I think that life is full of pain. . . . It’s painful for everybody. . . . Growing is painful. But I think that the only way through it is through it. . . . And anything that helps is a blessing.” *Jackson Browne*

A large, intricate, symmetrical decorative border in a light gray color, featuring elaborate scrollwork, floral motifs, and a central crest-like element. The border is centered horizontally and vertically on the page.

PART ONE



Xarin

Ruthie Bowles once said I would wind up hating her. She was right.

I met Ruthie on a Tuesday afternoon after a sleepless Monday night in my closet, a space littered with poetry and my mother's well-worn Bible, dog-eared at the Psalms. The poetry kept me sane, and the Psalms gave me hope. NyQuil stopped working long ago.

"Whoever fights monsters," Nietzsche said, "should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."

I ran across that in a quote book. At 3 a.m. it looked interesting. Ruthie doesn't quote Nietzsche, but the truth is the truth. I am a student of the abyss, but I get no credit. It's a night class I audit.

When I met Ruthie, I had an ache in my heart left by the echoes of friends and choices. Mistakes. I knew women in the neighborhood, names and faces from church and the local preschool, but I did not have what Anne Shirley would call a bosom friend, and there were few prospects.

My husband, Richard, pastor of the Little Brown Church—

though it is not little and more cranberry if you ask me—has been supportive. “Just give it some time,” he’ll say. “We all go through tough seasons.” I’ve seen him lose a night’s sleep about three times in his life, and I fight resentment when I hear his rhythmic breathing. Sleep is a luxury to anxious minds.

Since childhood I have sung about the “river glorious” of God’s peace. I hadn’t planned on the river running dry.

And the church. I longed for a refuge or oasis. Instead, it became Alcatraz. To me, church has always meant relationships, not a building, but my problems sent me away from people rather than toward them.

In my first fledgling nights in the closet, when sleep and every sense of peace crawled away and hid like a wounded animal, I feared I was losing my mind. I pictured white-coated men strapping my arms and pushing me toward an oversize van while my children screamed and the elders shook their heads. I could hear my husband saying, *“She just needs a little time. We all go through tough seasons.”*

Ruthie walked into my loneliness—or should I say hobbled—at a time when God was trimming the nails of my soul to the quick. Angels laughed so hard at my prayers that they held their sides. So many angels.

And God was silent.

One of my mother’s favorite songs contains these words: “Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at His feet, or we’ll walk by His side in the way . . .” I’ve felt constantly in his way. He seemed too ticked off to tell me to get out of it, so he kept quiet. The ESO, Eternal Silent One.

My constant companions were fears, not God. I convinced myself he was simply on vacation, out carrying someone else on that beach with all the footprints. My heart had shriveled, and my soul was as wrinkled as the prunes Ruthie loved.

I kept a journal—don’t ask me why—and the ramblings tack-

led these fears and questions. Ruthie was the first to tell me that God hadn't abandoned me but was drawing me deeper, calling me out of the shallows, past the abyss, and into the current of his love and mercy.

Yeah, right, I thought. God hadn't asked me if I wanted to go deeper, and thank you very much, I liked the shallows. It's easier to play when there's no current. In the middle you lose your footing; you lose control.

You lose.

However, something drew me to this old woman. Was she an apparition? an angel in disguise? It would be my luck to get an angel with varicose veins. The sliver of hope that she was from God kept me going, but I did not know she had secrets and a closet full of haunted memories. She had seen the abyss long before me and had wrestled monsters of her own.

I suppose we all do.

I grew up in Dogwood. There are memories and stirrings from some other life. My mother and father, Cecilia and Robert Ashworth, still live here. So do *his* parents. At least, Will's mother does.

Ruthie asked me about *him* at that first meal, what she dubbed our "First Supper." She asked innocently, or so it seemed at the time. Something about her questions should have tipped me off that she knew more. She did not know how many *hims* there had been before the pastor. Or that my mind was drawn to someone I could never love. Could never kiss or hold or touch again.

"My husband is a good man," I said. It sounded appropriate, and I hoped she couldn't sense the hurt behind the answer. I knew I had settled for less. Someone safe. Faithful as an old dog but better smelling.

Ruthie let the answer slip away as easily as my children coming down the slide at the park where we watched them play. Tarin is with me during the day. Darin and Kallie are already in school.

I changed the subject. “Do you have children?”

“Grown,” she said. “They fly like birds before you know it. Just when you thought you had the nest figured out. But I guess that’s our job.”

“Your husband?”

She smiled. “He flew too.”

Was he dead? Had he left her? “I’m sorry,” I said.

“I remember when mine were your daughter’s age. I was different then. Wrapped up in froth.”

“Hmm?”

Ruthie scooted forward on the bench. “Like a beer on tap. You spend your life chasing froth and bubbles. I used to think it satisfied, that it could fill me up and make me happy. But froth is froth. Empty. What I needed was underneath, at the root, the soul. Can’t find happiness in froth, at least not for long.”

She sounded like a preacher — or one of those homespun storytellers on public television, dispensing wisdom one sound bite at a time. I wanted to switch channels or leave. Make an excuse. Head for a fictional doctor’s appointment. I needed to get home to the wash. But it was already evening, and I couldn’t fool her. Plus, something drew me. Was it her voice, her eyes, or the way she seemed to wallow in life?

“Come to my house for dinner,” Ruthie said. The idea came out of the blue, like a magician pulling fried chicken out of a hat.

“That’s very kind of you, but —”

“You look like you could use a friend and I love children.”

When I was a child, my brother and I wandered near bushes my mother had ordered us to avoid. We were searching for hidden treasure or a lost baseball — I can’t remember which — when we stumbled upon a hornet’s nest the size of Detroit. Bobby Ray ran, but I stood, paralyzed by the enormity of the nest and all those stingers writhing inside. For a month I had nightmares

about hornets covering my face and arms, stinging every inch of exposed flesh.

As it turned out, one lonely hornet snapped me from my stupor, and I ran to my mother, my arm swollen. She grabbed a fresh onion from the refrigerator, cut it in half, and placed it on the sting. The onion felt wet and slick. "Hold it right there," she said. "It'll draw the poison out."

I have been staring at the hornet's nest called life, afraid to live, too stunned to move. Ruthie was the one who drew the poison from my soul. She became my teacher. Our classroom was her living room or the playground at the Memorial Park. Some of the most intense lessons we tackled while standing in line at Wal-Mart.

"Life isn't pretty, so you've got to hug the ugly out of it," she said one day.

She had no idea how much ugly there was.

WITH GRATITUDE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Fabry is a 1982 graduate of the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism at Marshall University and a native of West Virginia. He is heard on *Chris Fabry Live!* each weekday on Moody Radio, the Love Worth Finding broadcast, and other radio programs. He and his wife, Andrea, live in Colorado and are the parents of nine children. Though he has written more than 50 novels for children and young adults, *Dogwood* is his first novel for adults. You can visit his Web site at www.chrisfabry.com.

READING GROUP QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The setting for *Dogwood* is West Virginia. In what ways is the setting a character?
2. One legend says Christ was crucified on a dogwood tree, which at one time grew straight and tall; then he promised it would never be used for executions again. "Slender and twisted it shall always be, with cross-shaped blossoms for all to see." What significance does this legend have in the themes and characters of the novel?
3. Will Hatfield is a Christ figure. In what ways does his life parallel the life of Jesus? To what lengths does he go to pursue his love? Conversely, what are Will's flaws?
4. Karin is a character who, in a sense, cannot respond to Will's love. How does her life parallel the spiritual condition of every person?
5. Ruthie Bowles is a figure floating between Will and Karin, piecing together their history as she probes their past. In what ways is Ruthie the catalyst to the changes these two experience? Have you known a "Ruthie" in your own life?
6. Describe Will's relationship with his brother, Carson. How does Carson reflect the feelings of the community?
7. Will has a special relationship with his father. In what ways does Will's life mirror his father's? How does his father's love help mold and shape Will?
8. At the end of the novel, we see a change in Karin's life. What circumstances aid in her turnaround? What kind of future do you think she has? Has seeing the truth ever helped you change in some way?
9. Danny Boyd is a plaintive voice throughout the book, giving a behind-the-scenes look at the pain his family has experienced. How did you respond to his counseling experience?
10. How does Karin's brother, Bobby Ray, escape his fate at the end of the novel?
11. One theme of the novel is sacrifice. What would you say to a person who sacrificed for you and pursued you as Will did Karin?