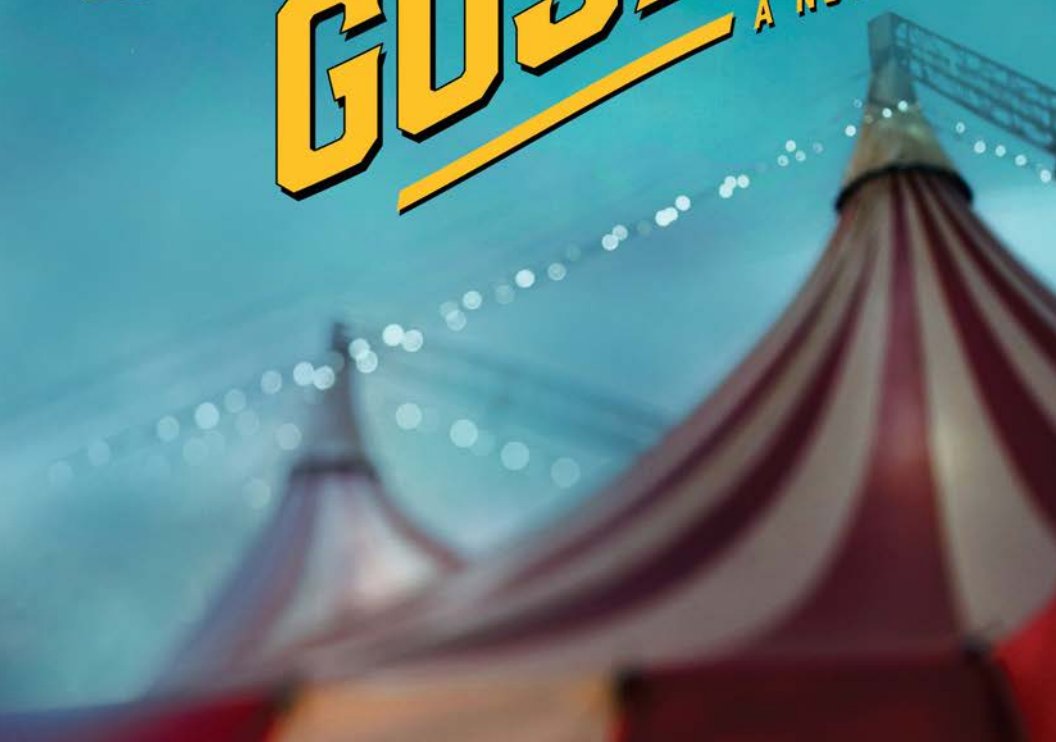


CINDY MORGAN

THE
DOGWOOD
GOSPEL
A NOVEL



Praise for Cindy Morgan

Kudos to this Southern voice telling a tale of innocence lost, secrets buried, and hunger for a home nearly forgotten. Add the lure of a carnival world with golden snakes and gypsy souls and a bareback rider on a spectacular stallion, and you will be mesmerized. *The Dogwood Gospel* carries strains of *This Tender Land* and *West with Giraffes*—but be forewarned: the compelling, quick-paced chapters will have you turning pages late into the night looking for redemption.

LEAH WEISS, bestselling author of *If the Creek Don't Rise* and *The Creek, the Crone, and the Crow*

An absolute masterpiece of Southern historical fiction told in lyrical, immersive prose, Cindy Morgan's sophomore novel, *The Dogwood Gospel*, is a story of struggle and mystery, but most importantly, hope—about how best-laid plans sometimes fracture and well-intentioned people let us down, yet love and purpose perseveres. This is a novel that will stay with me for years to come.

JOY CALLAWAY, international bestselling author of *The Star of Camp Greene*

The ink in Cindy's pen is windsong and wonder. This is no surprise for she is a poet, a songstress, and a minstrel. You will hear music in her words and in the lives of her peopled story. . . . [*The Dogwood Gospel* is] an adventure that will keep our toes tapping and our hearts singing.

PATSY CLAIRMONT, author and leader of Patsy's Picks book club

The writer who has given the world so many great songs has captured our imaginations and hearts in a great new story. . . . Just try to put it down!

GLORIA GAITHER, Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter, on *The Dogwood Gospel*

Cindy Morgan is a storyteller. So, she is a truth teller. And one of the greatest. *The Dogwood Gospel* validates this . . . once again.

ANDREW GREER, songwriter and author of *More Than a President: Sundays with Jimmy Carter*

Some stories are told; others, like *The Year of Jubilee*, are woven into the reader's heart. With honesty and bravery, a compelling coming-of-age heroine confronts ignorance and racial prejudice in the deep South while wrestling with her own past demons—and learning the price of forgiveness. A beautiful story wondrously told!

TAMERA ALEXANDER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *In These Hills*

A poignant coming-of-age story set during a turbulent time in our country's history. . . . This one is sure to stir your heart.

T. I. LOWE, bestselling author of *South of Somewhere*, on *The Year of Jubilee*

[Cindy Morgan's] prose is as lyrical as her music. This heartbreaking coming-of-age story eloquently portrays the hellish and heavenly nature of Kentucky life in the 1960s with great detail and sensitivity.

ROBIN W. PEARSON, Christy Award-winning author of *The Stories We Carry*, on *The Year of Jubilee*

Fans of classic coming-of-age stories . . . will enjoy this unflinching tale of an American family longing for a “Year of Jubilee,” where debts are forgiven and captives are set free.

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *The Year of Jubilee*

[A] thoroughly atmospheric novel [that] brings to life the goings-on of a 1960s Southern town. There is a beautiful sense of vulnerability in the characters that makes them feel realistic and relatable. The Mockingbird family, Miss Adams, and the other inhabitants of Jubilee are equally mesmerizing.

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY on *The Year of Jubilee*

The Dogwood Gospel

CINDY MORGAN

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GOSPEL



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For my aunts—Sue, Goldie, and Willa Mac,
who survived the unsurvivable.



To forgive heals the wound,
to forget heals the scar.

P.T. BARNUM



The Southland Carnival

PROLOGUE

The dogwood swayed beneath the powder-blue sky of an unusually warm autumn day. She welcomed them under her branches as they stared down at a small grave. She reached for them like a mother hen gathering her chicks close, for protection, rest. And as strange as it seemed, this burial would bring rest. She could feel their ache for it. The way she ached for the sun on gray winter days.

Of those gathered, her attention was drawn to a pale girl with hair the color of summer strawberries. She stood erect beside an older woman with slightly stooped shoulders and a kind, sun-kissed face. The girl watched, dry-eyed, as the older woman shed tears over the fresh grave.

A man with the arms of an oak wiped his shimmering brown skin with the sleeve of a white button-down shirt and told an ancient story. One she knew well. Two other women stepped forward with him, their skin glistening in darker shades of brown as they sang a mournful song.

A sudden breeze brought them relief, as did the dogwood's verdant green canopy.

Then a captain eased a wooden box inside the grave, brushing the dirt away so it lay pristine, for now at least.

A strong wind blew her branches, preventing her from seeing what happened next, but when the wind died down, she noticed the strawberry girl's face had changed. Melting like wax into another kind of face, more alive and tender. Then, from the girl's eyes flowed tears.

The dogwood divined that these were newborn tears, first tears. A rare thing to witness. She wanted to offer something in gratitude for this sacred moment.

And so, she whispered deep into her roots, and into the roots of nearby trees who stood ready to help a brother or sister in need. She asked them, *Send new life*. It was fall, the time for that far spent, but she hoped if they all reached down deep, maybe there were a few drops left.

She felt it beginning at her feet, then moving through her body, then her limbs, finally shooting out from her leafy hands. She watched as the mourners' eyes sprang wide open, the glorious fragrance changing their faces. Then they did the most wondrous thing. They laughed. Like children, they laughed. As if they had all jumped into the river, at the same moment. Baptized and reborn.

WINSOME

APRIL 1941

Winsome Carter knew he would never live up to his name. He walked favoring his left leg to compensate for the heavy load he carried in his right hand. His wrist ached from the strain of the baby-blue suitcase that held a selection of household goods most ladies couldn't resist riffling through and, occasionally, purchasing. The small sales added up, making it worth the hours walking for what seemed like miles in the ill-fitting church shoes that had once been his father's.

He had bought the items from Dooley Jones, also an ex-con he knew from grade school. Winnie figured everything in the suitcase was stolen, but what was the harm of giving these nice ladies a good deal at such a tough time in the world? The war over in the Old Country had everybody on edge. Selling door-to-door wasn't his first choice, but there were only so many jobs that a former resident of the Kentucky State Penitentiary could get. His mother had died of complications from pneumonia the summer before his sophomore year of high school. He had a distinct memory of her hand resting on the back of his neck, softly saying, "My sweet Winnie boy," before she disappeared into a coughing fit. She had been tender and patient. After she died, his father had asked Miss Addie, an older lady who lived next door, to help out while he worked long hours at the tanning factory.

His father was equal parts sour to his mother's sweetness. He had told Winnie more times than he could count, "I reckon you ain't got the good sense God gave a noodle."

A teenage boy with a strong will is a stick of dynamite. Winnie's father was all the match he needed to set fire to what could have been an uneventful senior year. After one of the last football games, he met a girl at the Sundowner and they ended up parked by the river in the back seat of his dad's DeSoto. A few weeks later, she tracked him down with the news that she was pregnant. He took her word for it that he was the father, and a couple weeks after his high school graduation, he tried to do right by marrying her.

Anxious to make some money to support the baby on the way, he agreed to drive the getaway car for a couple of local boys who'd planned to rob the small bank in a neighboring county that they deemed an easy touch.

Even though Winnie knew this was a bad idea, he was tempted by the amount of money they had offered him for only a couple hours of driving. He did the math and figured out it would take him a week to earn that much. His wife kept going on and on about how expensive diapers were. Against all good judgment, he did it.

Teenage boys with their testosterone-fueled confidence lacked any kind of sound planning skills. When Rhonda Rhodes, a beefy farm gal, saw them demanding money from the bank teller next to her station, she alerted the manager, then pounced on them. They heard police sirens in the distance and managed to run out the back door and into the alley. Winnie, on the other hand, sat waiting out in front of the bank in the getaway car when the blue lights came blazing up behind him. They were on him before he could get out of his poor parallel parking job.

When they got him to the station, an older police officer came to talk to him in his cell. He said, "Your buddies that got away already have a rap sheet as long as your arm. But this is your first offense. If you help us nab them, we will try to persuade the judge to go easy on you."

This made sense to Winnie, and given that he was a new husband and about to be a father, it seemed like he had no choice but to agree to their terms. He told the cops all he knew about his accomplices. They had them in cuffs a few hours later. Winnie got three years, including time already served.

Six months after he was sent off, it was a sad sight to see his newborn son in the visitors' area. Though he was grateful to be housed in the small minimum security unit just a few hundred yards from the maximum security building. At least in his unit the guards were more relaxed. His wife, Marnie, had arrived with his father and Miss Addie for a visit. Miss Addie had brought along a picnic to celebrate, bless her soul. He thought his young wife seemed different, unsettled.

One Sunday, not long after that, his wife dropped Sammie off at Grandpa's house for a visit and never came back. His father, overwhelmed at the prospect of caring for a baby, enlisted Miss Addie again.

A year later, Winnie's dad fell face forward in a plate of meatloaf and grits. A "widow-maker" was what the doctor had called it. This left Addie to raise Sammie on her own.

Addie told Winnie she was grateful for the company Sammie gave her to fill the long days in an empty house. She had never been married or had children of her own. She looked after Sammie with enthusiasm, even made the weekly drive so Winnie could see him on visitors' day.

After nearly three years in lockup, Winnie was released a few days before Christmas.

The first meal Addie made him was chicken fried steak and creamy potatoes. He had never tasted anything so heavenly.

Now here he was, a few months later, going door-to-door trying to scratch out a living as best he could. He was grateful Miss Addie was still willing to watch Sammie while he worked. He wanted 1941 to be a good year. He was determined to do better for himself and his boy.

Winnie had memorized the grid of the streets in Hurt, Kentucky.

Miss Dot on Maple Street was always good for a purchase. She was lonely since her husband had passed earlier that year. She had a decent nest egg from the car lot her husband had run but worried that their no-good son, whom it had passed to, would run it into the ground.

Winnie's weekly visits served as a chance for Miss Dot, and many of the fine ladies on his route, to let out their frustrations and regrets. He didn't mind it. In some ways Miss Dot reminded him of his mother.

He timed his every-other-Tuesday visits around suppertime, which for older folks was four o'clock. Miss Dot always had a pan of fried chicken, cornbread, and a pot of soup beans simmering on the back burner. He had one more stop before her house, and his stomach rumbled at the thought of a hot meal and a place to rest his feet. He was glad he had parked his father's DeSoto, now his, close by.

He squinted against the last shards of the fading sun and saw his next stop up ahead. A small white house tucked back in the trees. He thought of Maggie and a smile curled on his lips. Even though he figured Maggie barely had two nickels to rub together, she would buy something small and offer Winnie an encouraging word. Her little girl, Charlie, was the sweetest thing, with reddish-blond ringlets around her face that set off her green eyes. She looked two or three, not old enough to be in school yet.

Maggie was new to town, and he knew she kept to herself since she carried the stigma of unwed motherhood. He couldn't imagine how she survived as a single mother. Her poor tiny hands were always so red and chapped from the laundry she took in to make whatever money she could.

Winnie thought of the visit a few months back, when Maggie had been upset over a letter she had received with bad news from her kin. He'd been surprised to see the mason jar on her counter. Any Southerner could identify it at fifty paces. She'd set two small orange juice glasses, filled to the brim with moonshine, on the small round kitchen table and invited him to sit a spell.

Moonshine is said to reveal the contents of a person's heart. "Whatever's in the well comes up in the bucket," his mother used to

say. As Maggie's story poured out, it was clear that her well was full of pain and disappointment.

She'd told him about Charlie's dad. "A summer romance with a rodeo star passing through." Winnie recalled her saying, "I had to fight to keep her." He'd wondered exactly what she meant by that, but he hadn't asked questions. He'd just listened.

"Charlie is the best thing that ever happened to me," she'd said as she drained the last few drops from the glass. *"Her daddy doesn't even know she exists."*

As she'd revealed more of the complexities of her past, he'd understood even better why she had arrived a few months before and kept to herself. Folks who grew up in a two-parent home with a steady job and three hot meals on the table were always saying, "They ought to pull themselves up by their bootstraps." It was easy to say when you had little understanding of what it was like to be born without a boot or a strap.

Miss Dot, who had a voracious appetite for all the juicy details of what went on in her neighborhood, had drilled Winnie on several occasions for what he knew about the mysterious woman who lived in the small white house. Winnie had kept Maggie's secrets and his word to her.

Winnie brought himself back to the present as he tripped on the uneven sidewalk and went down. He swore under his breath, knocked the dust off his clothes, and got back up. His suit and tie from the thrift store were starting to choke him.

Winching against the sharp bits of gravel that had made their way into the black church shoes that had once been his father's, he continued carefully down the walkway made of broken blocks of brick and patches of creeping Jenny. He noticed a few promising buds on the rosebush that Maggie had planted against the house during his last visit. She had told Winnie she thought the white house would be the perfect backdrop to set off the yellow roses once they were in full bloom. Three wooden steps led up to the front door. He tucked in his shirt and knocked off a bit of gravel from his jacket, mindful

of looking his best around a beautiful woman like Maggie. He lifted his hand to knock, but the door creaked open as soon as he touched it. Winnie cocked his head. Maggie never left the door unlocked, much less open.

“Maggie?” he called out.

He could hear music in the house: the radio. He eased through the doorway, leaving his suitcase outside. The small living room looked messy. Something wasn’t right; Maggie always kept her house tidy.

“Maggie? Charlie?”

He kept calling as he walked into the house and felt the toe of his shoe slip on something. There was a thin red trail, from the living room into a hallway, made of tiny footprints. Blood?

The hair on the back of his neck stood straight up. Everything he’d learned about danger in prison was sending him a flashing red light, sounding the words *stop, get out*.

But what if Maggie was in trouble? The blood trail led to a doorway.

“Charlie . . . ,” Winnie said, his voice shaking as he opened the door. He placed his hands out in front of him, trying to create a barrier between himself and what Charlie didn’t seem to notice. His stomach lurched at the sight and smell of the room.

“Oh, Charlie.”

She looked up at him as she rested her small hand on her mother’s shoulder. “Can you wake up M-M-Mommy?” Her words broke in pitiful sobs, barely able to catch her breath.

Winnie stared down into her eyes. “I’ll be right back, Charlie. I’m going to lock the front door.”



He knew that he would have to go unseen or else he would be back in prison. When it got late enough that all decent folks were asleep, he made two trips—first carrying his suitcase, then the large wicker laundry basket to his car. He thought of pulling the car even closer

to the house but feared it might wake the neighbors. By then Charlie was in a deep sleep. He reached for her small blanket and put it around her shoulders. He could feel the stiff, crusty blood at the bottom of her nightgown as he picked her up.

She whimpered, "Leave Mommy alone," then shoved her thumb deeper into her mouth, a tear streaking down her hot round cheek. He reached for the handkerchief he always carried in his pocket and dabbed her tears dry.

She slept as he carried her down the street. He could see dim lights through a few windows in the neighborhood, but no one seemed to be watching. He walked—slowly but with purpose—to the car, trying his best to conceal the small bundle in his arms. Once he reached the car, he looked around one last time, then placed her carefully across the back seat.

He drove with his headlights off until he got to the main road and slowly made his way to his destination: a farm on the outskirts of town.

He turned down the dirt road, killed his lights, then the engine, and rolled silently beside the barn.

Hiding behind a row of boxwoods, he was haunted by the scene of an ample-figured woman walking into the night, a light breeze lifting her long skirt, alongside the silhouette of a farmhouse. He watched her stoop to pick a bunch of spring wildflowers with one hand and carry a limp doll in the other. She stopped at a grave with a small tombstone, then collapsed with the flowers still in her hand. He figured this must be Rose.

The sound of a howling coyote startled Winnie. The sky was as black as coal with diamond-speck stars stretching into oblivion. Winnie saw Rose walking back toward the house and waited until she went inside. He eased up each step and left the basket with the precious cargo by the door. He knocked, then dashed away.

A few seconds later, Rose leaned out of the doorway. "Who's there?"

As Winnie shuffled through the bushes back to his car, a cat

dashed across his path and he tripped and fell into the boxwoods. He got up slowly, dusting the dirt from his knees. The cat rubbed against his leg and purred loudly.

"Who's there?" Rose said again. Then, seeing the basket on the step, she gasped. "What in the world? It's a little girl."

Winnie stayed in the shadows. He figured if he could just stay hidden while he explained, she might not call the law. So he whispered into the night air.

"You don't know me, but my mother knew you. This little girl, she ain't got no ma."

"What happened to her ma?"

"She's gone is all I can tell you, but she was a friend. I just couldn't let her little girl end up in one of them orphanages."

He watched Rose squinting out into the darkness, trying to see him. Then she gazed at the slight figure in the basket. Winnie knew he should shut up, but he kept talking.

"I heard about you losing your little girl. Thought maybe you'd be up for taking her in."

Rose raised her hands to her mouth. "What's her name?"

"Charlie. I'm guessing that's short for Charlotte, but I ain't sure."

"I had a great-aunt Charlotte; she died a few years ago." Her voice trailed off. She lifted Charlie from the basket and swayed back and forth, the way mothers do with their newborn babies.

Winnie backed away slowly, careful not to trip again. He made it past the barn, heart pounding as he slipped into his car.

He thought about poor Maggie. He had done what he could; the rest was up to God. Winnie wanted more than anything to go home and talk to his mother, her absence hitting him all over again. He shook it loose. There was a long night ahead, and a phone call to make. He had to grab Sammie, pack a bag, and disappear in case the scene at Maggie's house got traced back to him. He shouldn't have told Rose the child's name. He chided himself for such carelessness. He would have to act fast, before they found Maggie. He made a plan as he drove under the black sky of Hurt, Kentucky.