

New York Times Bestselling Author of *For the Roses*

JULIE
GARWOOD

*Come
The Spring*

JULIE GARWOOD



Come the Spring



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One White Rose
One Red Rose
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*For my daughter, Elizabeth,
who has the mind of a scientist, the heart of a saint,
the determination of a champion,
and the twinkle of a true Irishman.
Oh, how you inspire me.*

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For winter's rains and ruins are over,
And all the seasons of snows and sins;
The days dividing lover and lover,
The light that loses, the night that wins;
And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.

—From *Atalanta in Calydon*
Algernon Charles Swinburne

Part One



*For winter's rains and ruins are over,
And all the seasons of snows and sins;*

1



But for the grace of God and an untied shoelace, she would have died with the others that day. She walked into the bank at precisely two forty-five in the afternoon to close her account, deliberately leaving the task until the last possible minute because it made everything so final in her mind. There would be no going back. All of her possessions had been packed, and very soon now she would be leaving Rockford Falls, Montana, forever.

Sherman MacCorkle, the bank president, would lock the doors in fifteen minutes. The lobby was filled with other procrastinators like herself, yet for all the customers, there were only two tellers working the windows instead of the usual three. Emmeline MacCorkle, Sherman's daughter, was apparently still at home recovering from the influenza that had swept through the peaceful little town two weeks before.

Malcolm Watterson's line was shorter by three heads. He was a notorious gossip, though, and would surely ask her questions she wasn't prepared to answer.

Fortunately Franklin Carroll was working today, and she

immediately took her place in the back of his line. He was quick, methodical, and never intruded into anyone's personal affairs. He was also a friend. She had already told him good-bye after services last Sunday, but she had the sudden inclination to do so again.

She hated waiting. Tapping her foot softly against the warped floorboards, she took her gloves off, then put them back on again. Each time she fidgeted, her purse, secured by a satin ribbon around her wrist, swung back and forth, back and forth, like a pendulum keeping perfect time to the ticktock of the clock hanging on the wall behind the tellers' windows.

The man in front of her took a step forward, but she stayed where she was, hoping to put some distance between them so that she wouldn't have to smell the sour sweat mixed with the pungent odor of fried sausage emanating from his filthy clothes.

The man to her left in Malcolm's line smiled at her, letting her see the two missing teeth in the center of his grin. To discourage conversation, she gave him a quick nod and turned her gaze upward to the water stains on the ceiling.

It was dank, musty, and horribly hot. She could feel the perspiration gathering at the nape of her neck and tugged on the collar of her starched blouse. Giving Franklin a sympathetic glance, she wondered how any of the employees could work all day in such a dark, gloomy, stifling tomb. She turned to the right and stared longingly at the three closed windows. Sunlight streaked through the finger-smudged glass, casting jagged splotches on the worn floorboards, and fragments of dust particles hung suspended in the stagnant air. If she had to wait much longer, she would incite Sherman MacCorkle's anger by marching over to the windows and throwing all of them open. She gave up the idea as soon as it entered her mind because the president would only close them again and give her a stern lecture about bank security. Besides, she would lose her place in line.

It was finally her turn. Hurrying forward, she stumbled and

bumped her head against the glass of the teller's window. Her shoe had come off. She shoved her foot back inside and felt the tongue coil under her toes. Behind the tellers, dour-faced Sherman MacCorkle's door was open. He heard the commotion and looked up at her from his desk behind a glass partition. She gave him a weak smile before turning her attention to Franklin.

"My shoelace came untied," she said in an attempt to explain her clumsiness.

He nodded sympathetically. "Are you all ready to leave?"

"Just about," she whispered so that Malcolm, the busybody, wouldn't poke his nose into the conversation. He was already leaning toward Frank, and she knew he was itching to hear the particulars.

"I'll miss you," Franklin blurted out.

The confession brought a blush that stained his neck and cheeks. Franklin's shyness was an endearing quality, and when the tall, deathly thin man swallowed, his oversized Adam's apple bobbed noticeably. He was at least twenty years her senior, yet he acted like a young boy whenever he was near her.

"I'm going to miss you too, Franklin."

"Are you going to close your account now?"

She nodded as she pushed the folded papers through the arched, fist-sized opening. "I hope everything's in order."

He busied himself with the paperwork, checking signatures and numbers, and then opened his cash drawer and began to count out the money.

"Four hundred and two dollars is an awful lot of money to be carrying around."

"Yes, I know it is," she agreed. "I'll keep a close eye on it. Don't worry."

She removed her gloves while he stacked the bills, and when he pushed the money through the opening, she stuffed it into her cloth purse and pulled the strings tight.

Franklin cast his employer a furtive glance before leaning forward and pressing his forehead against the glass. "Church

won't be the same without you sitting in the pew in front of Mother and me. I wish you weren't leaving. Mother would eventually warm up to you. I'm sure of it."

She reached through the opening and impulsively squeezed his hand. "In the short while that I have lived here, you have become such a good friend. I won't ever forget your kindness to me."

"Will you write?"

"Yes, of course I will."

"Send your letters to the bank so Mother won't see them."

She smiled. "Yes, I'll do that."

A discreet cough told her she'd lingered too long. She picked up her gloves and purse and turned around, searching for a spot out of the traffic where she could retie her shoelace. There was an empty desk in the alcove beyond the swinging gate that separated the customers from the employees. Lemont Morganstaff usually sat there, but like Emmeline MacCorkle, he too was still recovering from the epidemic.

She dragged her foot so she wouldn't step out of her shoe again as she made her way across the lobby to the decrepit, scarred desk in front of the windows. Franklin had confided that MacCorkle had purchased all the furniture thirdhand from a printer's shop. His thrifty nature had obviously compelled him to overlook the ink stains blotting the wood and the protruding splinters lying in wait for an uncautious finger.

It was sinful the way MacCorkle treated his employees. She knew for a fact that he didn't pay any of his loyal staff a fair wage, because poor Franklin lived a very modest life and could barely afford to keep his mother in the medicinal tonic she seemed to thrive on.

She had a notion to go into MacCorkle's brand-spanking-new office, with its shiny mahogany desk and matching file cabinets, and tell him what a cheapskate he was in hopes of shaming him into doing something about the deplorable conditions he forced his staff to endure, and she surely would have done just that if it hadn't been for the possibility that MacCorkle would think Franklin had put her up to it. The

president knew they were friends. No, she didn't dare say a word, and so she settled on giving MacCorkle a look of pure disgust instead.

It was a wasted effort; he was looking the other way. She promptly turned her back to him and pulled out the desk chair. Dropping her things down on the seat, she genuflected in as ladylike a fashion as she could and pushed her petticoats out of her way. She adjusted the tongue of her shoe, slipped her foot back inside, and quickly retied the stiff shoelace.

The chore completed, she tried to stand up but stepped on her skirt instead and was jerked back to the floor, landing with a thud. Her purse and gloves spilled into her lap as the chair she'd bumped went flying backward on its rollers. It slammed into the wall, rolled back, and struck her shoulder. Embarrassed by her awkwardness, she peered over the top of the desk to see if anyone had noticed.

There were three customers left at the tellers' windows, all of them gaping in her direction. Franklin had only just finished filing her documents in the file cabinet behind him when she fell. He slammed the file drawer closed and started toward her with a worried frown on his face, but she smiled and waved him back. She was just about to tell him she was quite all right when the front door burst open with a bang.

The clock chimed three o'clock. Seven men stormed inside and fanned out across the lobby. No one could mistake their intentions. Dark bandannas concealed the lower part of their faces, and their hats, worn low on their brows, shaded their eyes. As each man moved forward, he drew his gun. The last one to enter spun around to pull the shades and bolt the door.

Everyone in the bank froze except for Sherman MacCorkle, who rose up in his chair, a startled cry of alarm issuing through his pinched lips. Then Franklin screamed in a high-pitched soprano shriek that reverberated through the eerie silence.

Like the others, she was too stunned to move. A wave of panic washed through her, constricting every muscle. She desperately tried to grasp control of her thoughts. *Don't*

panic . . . don't panic . . . They can't shoot us . . . They wouldn't dare shoot us . . . The noise of gunfire . . . They want money, that's all . . . If everyone cooperates, they won't hurt us. . . .

Her logic didn't help calm her racing heartbeat. They would take her four hundred dollars. And that was unacceptable. She couldn't let them have the money . . . wouldn't. But how could she stop them? She took the wad of bills out of her purse and frantically searched for a place to hide it. *Think . . . think. . . .* She leaned to the side and looked up at Franklin. He was staring at the robbers, but he must have felt her watching him for he tilted his head downward ever so slightly. It dawned on her then that the gunmen didn't know she was there. She hesitated for the barest of seconds, her gaze intent on Franklin's pale face, and then silently squeezed herself into the kneehole of the ancient desk. Quickly unbuttoning her blouse, she shoved the money under her chemise and flattened her hands against her chest.

Oh, God, oh, God . . . One of them was walking toward the desk. She could hear his footsteps getting closer and closer. Her petticoats! They were spread out like a white flag of surrender. She frantically grabbed them and shoved them under her knees. Her heart pounded like a drum now, and she was terrified that all of them could hear the noise. If they didn't spot her, they would leave her money alone.

A blur of snakeskin boots, spurs rattling, passed within inches. The smell of peppermint trailed behind. The scent shocked her—children smelled like peppermint, not criminals. *Don't let him see me, she prayed. Please, God, don't let him see me.* She wanted to squeeze her eyes shut and disappear. She heard the shades being pulled down, sucking out the sunlight, and she was suddenly assaulted with the claustrophobic feeling that she was in a casket and the man was pushing the lid down on top of her.

Bare seconds had passed since they'd entered the bank. It would be over soon, she told herself. Soon. They wanted only the money, nothing more, and they would surely hurry to get out as quickly as possible. Yes, of course they would. With

every second that they lingered, they increased the odds of being captured.

Could they see her through the cracks in the desk? The possibility was too frightening. There was a half-inch split in the seam of the wood all the way down the center panel, and she slowly shifted her position until her knees were rubbing against the drawer above her head. The air was thick, heavy. It made her want to gag. She took a shallow breath through her mouth and tilted her head to the side so she could see through the slit.

Across the room the three gray-faced customers stood motionless, their backs pressed against the counter. One of the robbers stepped forward. He was dressed in a black suit and white shirt, similar to the clothing the bank president wore. Had he not been wearing a mask and holding a gun, he would have looked like any other businessman.

He was terribly polite and soft-spoken.

“Gentlemen, there isn’t any need to be frightened,” he began in a voice that reeked with southern hospitality. “As long as you do as I say, no one will get hurt. We happened to hear from a friend of ours about a large government deposit for the army boys, and we thought we might like to help ourselves to their pay. I’ll grant you we aren’t being very gentlemanly, and I’m sure you’re feeling mighty inconvenienced. I’m real sorry about that. Mr. Bell, please put the Closed sign in the window behind the shades.”

The leader gave the order to the man on his right, who quickly did as he was told.

“That’s fine, just fine,” the leader said. “Now, gentlemen, I would like all of you to stack your hands on top of your heads and come on out here into the lobby so I won’t have to worry that one of you is going to do anything foolish. Don’t be shy, Mr. President. Come on out of your office and join your friends and neighbors.”

She heard the shuffle of feet as the men moved forward. The gate squeaked as it opened.

“That was nice and orderly.” The leader oozed the praise