

# WILLA AND THE TRAPPER



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



Sitting on a wooden chair she brought outside from the kitchen, Willa Freeman sat brooding in the morning sunshine. She'd been up before dawn to feed the stock and then prepare for the day's trials. She had fences to mend and a garden to water, and she needed to figure out a way to fix a latch on the door to the sod house she and her brother had built.

Her brother... she looked over west at a small copse of trees. A mound of fresh dirt rose up from the ground. The prairie grass had been cleared a bit so that she and a few distant neighbors could dig the grave. Clayton, fondly known to Willa as Clay, died only five days ago, and she still didn't know which way was up—not really.

When Willa and her brother headed out into the western frontier, Clay had plans to breed the sturdy, dark, Morgan mare and stallion, sell the offspring, and fund the family venture. He figured the animals would fetch a high price in the frontier, as the heavier breed was versatile. Morgan horses were commonly bred and trained as gaited saddle horses, but they were also heavy and big enough to pull carriages, wagons or plows.

Willa pondered the stallion as she looked away from the grave and over south to the corral. The stallion was responsible for

killing Clay and was now frolicking in the cool of the morning. Willa didn't appreciate the horse's sense of independence and decided right then and there that *she* would break it. She would finish the work her brother began.

With newfound determination created by her resolution about the horse, Willa stood up to do more chores. She was going to have to try to bring some thin tree trunks up from the river and attach them to the posts, she and Clay had set, to fix the fence where the milk cow decided to break through in search of greener pastures. She had one of the mules that helped pull the loaded wagon from Iowa; she could use the mule along with the mare that was okay with being harnessed.

Clay sold the other three mules from the team and the wagon that carried all they had in the world. He had decided to sell them to obtain supplies for the construction of the sod house and the livestock pens. Willa remembered how Clay had even bought a second small window for the earthen house to surprise her. He thought she would benefit from the light as she took care of most of the domestic chores. Now, however, she wished she had another mule.

She was also going to have to carry some water from the river to replenish the barrels she and Clay used to store water for the garden. She had a small cart Clay had created out of an old repurposed farm implement he got on the cheap in town. The venture would still take a lot of time. Willa decided she would have to go into town tomorrow for supplies. She needed to lay in some sugar, flour, lard and coffee, and she needed a few boards, nails, rope and other hardware. She wasn't looking forward to talking to the folks in town and bearing their sympathetic glances; instead, she was able to let herself look forward to getting some new spools of thread and a couple of needles for the quilt she planned to piece together from her brother's torn clothes. The ten-mile trip to the settlement and back would take the entire day. Willa sighed and moved away from the chair.



ACCORDING to the hash marks on the back of his map, he came near the town after moving east alongside the Cache la Poudre River for nearly a month. Shamus Harding had left work in the mountain silver mines. The crowded mining camps and the poverty of the 'working' people bothered him. It was difficult, but he managed to stay out of the company store and saved enough money to purchase a few animal traps. In the high mountain meadows, he was able to find enough beaver to get a warm coat put together and then sold off pelts as he got them. Following the river suited him as he seldom came across people and was stealthy enough to avoid most of them if he was not in the mood to visit. Being self-employed and unfettered, Shamus could adjust his working conditions to suit not only the weather, but also himself.

He drank the last of his morning coffee, kicked dirt over the campfire and took a quick inventory of his supplies. He was going to need salt, coffee, cornmeal, and maybe he would be lucky enough to land a jar of peaches or apples. Sometimes a general store owner offered homemade goods for sale. He looked at the river. It was early summer, so the water was still a bit high and swift in places. He would set his traps in a back area where the water was quiet and calm. As he mounted up, he hoped he might snare a rabbit for dinner on his way back to camp.



AFTER GETTING the gelded mule harnessed, Willa grabbed the thick rope, axe and large metal hook from the small tack room Clay had built for the animal supplies. They had planned to build a barn with the help of neighbors but were going to have to wait a few years. She walked behind the mule, holding the reins and speaking softly to him so as to calm the animal as they moved into the unfamiliar trees not too far away. Willa hoped that if she were lucky, she

would find a tree that was already downed. All she'd have to do at that point was chop branches and parts of the roots down to streamline the tree, allowing it to move more easily over the uneven ground.

After tying the reins to a heavy log, Willa looked around and could not believe that she found a fallen tree that had been taken down above the trunk by lightning. It was a bit charred but hadn't exploded when it was struck. It would fill in the fence gap without too much extra work. Willa mused that it was about damn time something went right for her. She set about hacking parts off the tree and was through the roots and onto chopping branches when she had an uneasy feeling – like someone or something was watching her. She looked up to the Remington rifle that leaned against another tree but was within arm's reach. She'd be ready for whatever might happen, as she was confident in her ability to shoot quickly, decisively and well. Clay had seen to it before he ever considered Willa as a partner in their homestead venture. She hoped nothing would come of her unease; she'd be annoyed to have to use a bullet. Willa freed the last branch, tossed it aside, lashed the tree with the rope, hooked the rope to the mule's harness and urged the animal toward home. As she entered the open area beyond the trees, she resisted the urge to look over her shoulder. Better not to let on that she had a suspicion.



A WOMAN WAS the very last thing Shamus expected to see as he was moving downstream from his camp. And not only that, she was beautiful! Strands of her tawny hair had escaped from underneath her gingham bonnet as she put that fallen tree into good order for transportation. She was sturdy, but not too heavy, and she possessed a certain determination and confidence he found quite attractive. But why was she out here in this unsettled area—alone? He had noticed the rifle and axe nearby as she worked, and he had

no doubt that she could use them accurately based on how handily she broke down that tree. Good thing he was heading into town; he needed to ask some questions about this lone woman.



IT WAS WELL after dark when Willa finished fixing the fence and getting the weeds out of the garden and the water onto it. She fed the stock and made herself a simple, yet sparse supper of a small corncake, jerked beef, and a few lovely stalks of fresh asparagus she discovered while she was near the river. She definitely needed to get to town as her provisions were becoming scarce.

Willa was not able to fix the door latch, and that made her uneasy after her perceived encounter with the stranger' watching her work. She wondered who it could have been. A neighbor would have greeted her, and a member of the U.S. Calvary would have reassured her. Ruffian? Freeloader? Worse? The unknown was most unsettling. She finished chewing her last bit of asparagus as she thought about the possibilities. The asparagus was delightful, and she decided she would go back into the trees soon to pick more. She then started making her plans. She would go into town tomorrow and would begin working with the stallion the next day. With her newest resolve giving her courage, she jammed a chair underneath the broken door latch and moved the table over to hold the chair fast. She placed the rifle against the wall, but within arm's reach, and fell into a fitful sleep.



SHAMUS RODE into town with a few pelts lashed to the back of his saddle. The wooded areas near the river had not provided beaver, but he was able to get muskrat and rabbits. The pelts wouldn't fetch a high price, but it would be enough. Besides, it was nearly inconsequential. Shamus was far more interested in finding out about the

woman he saw earlier. She invaded his thoughts as he rode through the tall prairie grass and toward the settlement.

Once there, he lashed his bridle reins to the hitching rail and walked through the door of the general store. The occupants turned to stare. Shamus was used to this, as he was tall, broad and hulking. People were often taken off guard when he appeared, and he found it best to be civil and aloof. He pretended not to notice the silence as he moved to the counter to place his order.

As he was waiting for the clerk to retrieve the supplies from his list, Shamus turned to one of the men from town and said, "I just saw the most unusual woman. She's strange and beautiful—hair the color of a doe, green eyes, the most interesting freckles on her cheeks."

"Miss Freeman? I am sure that's who you saw," an older man groused. "She's all alone up there on her homestead, after that fool of a brother of hers got himself killed. It's just not right for her to be out there all alone. A woman can't run that place."

"She needs a man to tame her; she's wild," stated a well-dressed woman. Shamus pretended to look at supplies as the conversation swirled around him. Alone. Wild. Sounded like his kind of gal. He decided he would make a social call in the next day or so and hoped she didn't shoot him when he showed up. He noticed a few jars of peaches on the shelf and smiled to himself as he added two to his order. The second one, he mused, could act as insurance.



WILLA HATED GOING TO TOWN. Single men, and even a few married ones, offered to 'help' her. She knew what that meant, Clay had told her to be careful. Willa entered the general store and handed the clerk her list. As the storekeeper began gathering her items, Willa noticed a townsman staring at her. Announcing to anyone who would listen, Willa said, "If any of you come to my homestead uninvited, I'll shoot you! You hear?" Her prowess with a firearm



was known throughout the area. Her attitude was cool and confident, and she effectively kept both men and women at a safe distance. Willa added a box of bullets for her Remington and a nice spool of thread for the quilt she would begin piecing together from Clay's clothes.



THE STALLION WAS quiet the next morning. Willa noticed that he seemed calm, so she decided to start working with him immediately. Moving into the corral, she warily eyed the beast as she approached and put a halter on the mare to lead her out of the corral. As the mare plodded behind, Willa noticed the stallion was placidly pulling up and munching grass from alongside the pen. Watching the horse now, it was difficult to believe he had trampled Clay to death. Willa grabbed the lariat she brought from the feed shed. Her tactic was to get the loop over the horse's head and then tie the rope to one of the sturdy posts in the corral. The horse would have limited mobility, and Willa could let him fight the restraint for a while and approach the horse once he got tired.

She opened the gate and held the rope at her side as she carefully slid through the small opening she had given herself. The horse continued with his foraging. Willa carefully walked beside the rails of the corral. She was watchful and completely prepared to throw herself between the rails and to the hard ground on the other side of the corral fence should the stallion challenge her. As she walked, she started talking to the horse in a singsong voice so as not to surprise him and to appear less threatening as she approached. However, as she neared the grazing animal, her long skirt caught on the rough edge of a rail. Willa did not know this until she heard the calico rip loudly. The stallion immediately looked up, and in the time that Willa looked down to try to free herself, the dark horse was charging. The distance across the corral

was no more than twenty feet, and the animal had a large stride. It was bearing down quickly!

Panicked, Willa prepared to jump through the fence, but she had dropped the rope when her dress tore. Her boots became entangled. As she tried to turn into the safety of the far side of the fence, she fell and hit the ground hard. As she tried to crawl across the earth to get under the lowest fence rail, she heard the stallion's agitated breathing right behind her. She looked back as she heard his short and shrill whinny. The stallion reared up, ready to crash his hooves down upon her. Willa frantically scrambled as two large hooves landed on either side of her with a deafening thud. She kept crawling as best she could. She did not look back as she knew the horse would try again to crush her as a perceived threat. She briefly hoped he wouldn't get her legs or feet when his hooves landed again. Before she could pull herself through to safety, however, she felt herself being jerked heavily by her shoulder with a force so powerful that she rolled when she landed on the ground, this time safely on the other side of the fence.

Bewildered, Willa looked back to the corral to see a very large man waving a brown hat. This man was trying to get the horse to shy and move away from the fence. Willa quickly realized that in his fury, the stallion could have easily charged through the corral rails. She then looked up to see a stern and angular face, and for a moment, Willa would have called that face "handsome." His eyes were tinged by panic.

"What the hell!" he said. "You could have died out there!"

Willa caught her breath as she floundered a bit to find her footing. "Then it's a good thing you showed up here uninvited," she hotly retorted.

Shamus was dumbstruck. "What?" he finally sputtered.

"I said it is a good thing that you came out here *uninvited*." Willa spoke slowly, as if she were speaking to a child.

Shamus pushed his long fingers through his hair and bent to retrieve his hat from the ground. He cast Willa an incredulous look

as he straightened. Willa noticed the man's chestnut hair. She had never seen a man with hair color that rich and deep; she was intrigued.

"I think the phrase 'thank you' should probably come to mind," he replied caustically. "I saw you by the river the other day and wanted to introduce myself but had things I needed to attend to."

Willa realized he was the stranger who had been watching her. She felt unnerved by his size and his directness. She could see he was strong. His shirt stretched tightly over his chest and shoulders. His upper arms looked thicker than the corral's fence rails. His auburn hair, no doubt, touched the top of his shoulders, but he had it tied into a leather cord. She imagined he could be dangerous, and too late, she realized she had left her rifle in the house. Yet if he had a mind to visit mischief upon her, why save her?

"Okay. Thanks," she mumbled. "Now, please leave."

"You are serious?"

"Of course, I am! I didn't invite you here, and you need to move on. I appreciate the favor, but don't plan on my repaying it. Now get moving!"

Shamus leveled a disapproving stare. "Where I come from, there is an expectation of a little hospitality when someone goes out of his way." He noticed her stiffen and quickly added, "Such as a cup of coffee."

The tension eased out of Willa's shoulders. "Yes. Of course. But you will move on afterward. My husband is returning soon, and he won't take kindly to strangers on the place."

Shamus smiled to himself. There was, of course, no husband. She would find out he knew that soon enough.

"Come on over," Willa said offering a grudging invitation.

"Be right there," Shamus said as he waked over to his horse. He pulled one of the jars of peaches from a saddlebag. "Two good deeds in one day." He smiled as he showed her the golden fruit in thick syrup.

Willa was happily surprised but wasn't going to let him know it.

She turned on her heel and headed toward the sod house. "Wait outside," she called over her shoulder.



WILLA SET the two kitchen chairs outside and brought out two cups of coffee, two bowls and two spoons. She also brought the rifle and set it next to the chair where she would sit.

"Oh, I am Shamus Harding. Is that gun necessary?" he asked as he eyed the rifle.

"Willa Freeman, and it might be," was her retort.

They looked over the landscape to avoid making eye contact as they sipped the strong black coffee. Shamus looked away from the house and noticed the copse of trees to the west. He also observed the fresh burial mound nearby. Willa followed his eyes to see what he was observing. He saw her do this out of the corner of his eye while opening the peaches. He nonchalantly offered them to Willa who produced the bowls and a spoon. Shamus split up the jar contents and started eating the fruit. Willa took a small bite. Suddenly, she found herself licking the thick syrup from her spoon after realizing the fruit was gone.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Uh," she stammered as she realized she had forgotten about breakfast. "I guess," she replied sheepishly.

Shamus smiled and then levelled his gaze at her. "I know there's no husband," he stated frankly.

Willa looked stricken and then defiantly raised her chin. "I get by," she replied tersely.

"I see. Well, in that case, I have to say that you aren't managing well enough. Anyone who gets so far out of their depth and is so foolhardy deserves to be smacked."

Willa bristled. "Big words," she said. "You don't know the first thing about me or what I am capable of."

“I know you are a danger to yourself and that someone needs to get your attention and turn you around.”

“And who do you propose is going to do that?” she growled as she reached for the Remington.

Shamus calmly lifted his bowl and slowly put the last bite of peach into his mouth. He eyed her over the top of the bowl and evenly said, “Me.”

Willa stood up, grabbed the gun, and grumbled, “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

Shamus stood up, calmly walked to his horse, mounted and thought to himself that indeed it would be he who taught her a lesson. She was clearly defiant and oblivious to the hazards she was creating for herself. Shamus concluded that her rebelliousness was nothing a stern spanking couldn’t change.