



JAN WATSON

Willow
SPRINGS



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Willow Springs

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CHAPTER I

1883

With each turn of the buggy's wheels, each jaw-jarring rut in the well-traveled road, Copper Brown Corbett felt more alone. She wished she could rewind the clock, take back the day, and return to Troublesome Creek. Why was she here? Who was the stranger beside her? She'd never known a man who wore a piece of silk knotted at his throat like a notice saying who he was, and she wasn't sure she wanted to. Why didn't Simon take off his coat and roll up his sleeves?

This was all a mistake. She never should have married him.

The early summer sun beat down on the rolling carriage. Taking off her hat, a silly concoction of feathers and lace, she fanned herself with its brim. Perspiration soaked her hair at the

temples. If she were home, she'd run to the creek, and if Mam wasn't watching, she'd shuck her dress and jump in for a swim. It would be so cool there where the willows wept upon the bank.

The sway of the buggy lulled her. She leaned back and propped her unshod feet on the old dog who snored on the buggy's floor.

Clip-clop. Clip-clop . . . The horse's hooves pounded on the packed-dirt trail. *Click-click-click . . .* A stick announced its presence, trapped in the spoke of a wheel. Sunlight sparkled through a canopy of leaves as the buggy entered a shaded tunnel of towering beeches, oaks, and maples. Copper's hat dropped to her lap. Resting her head against the leather seat, she dreamed of home. . . .

Compared to the other houses up and down the holler, the cabin on Troublesome Creek was spacious with its big front room and two tacked-on bedrooms. Copper Brown's great-grandparents had first homesteaded on the creek. There had still been a few marauding Indian bands about when her grandfather built the sturdy cabin, but most of the uprising was over, settled by Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton and their ilk many years before. They'd had more trouble from bears and wolves than from scalp hunters.

Copper could see her family—Daddy with his bushy white beard; Mam, shoulders squared, her hair pulled back in a bun; and the twins, Daniel and Willy, teasing each other, causing no end of trouble—sitting around the round oak table for supper. They'd all clasp hands, and Daddy would say grace. But there was no plate set for her. She wouldn't have a piece of the crispy-brown fried rabbit. Her chair sat empty and forlorn, pushed back behind the door.

The dream of supper made Copper's stomach growl. She cast a sideways look at her husband and hoped he hadn't heard the indelicate sound. Sitting up straight, she gazed ahead; then disbelieving what she saw, she got on her knees to look out the back. The mountains—*her* mountains—were behind her now. Way in the background she could see their proud silhouettes, like the humps of kneeling camels, a shadow land fading from view. The horse pulled the carriage up puny knobs and across fields as flat as a skipping rock.

Panic seized her heart in a moment of wild fear. "Stop! Let me off."



Simon Corbett turned his head at the sound of Laura Grace's voice. "What is it? I thought you were sleeping." He reined in the horse, glad for a moment's rest, and reached for the hand of his seventeen-year-old bride.

Ignoring the offer, she jumped down from the buggy without his help. He watched as she hitched up her long skirts and ran back the way they had come.

She didn't run far, and he caught up with her easily enough. "Laura Grace?"



She flinched at the touch of his hand but more so at the name he used. Her name was Copper. Copper Brown. Nobody but Mam ever called her Laura Grace and that too often in reprimand.

She looked toward the mountains. A fool could see their colors ebbing, the trees bunching up, the rock faces wavering,

running together like a watercolor painting left out in the rain. A spurt of hot tears stung her eyes.

“You never told me this would happen, Simon,” she sobbed. “You didn’t tell me the mountains would disappear.”

Resting his hand on her shoulder, he said, “Oh, sweetheart, I never thought you wouldn’t know.”

“How was I supposed to know they’d be all ironed out flat like this?” Her voice hitched. “How do you catch your breath when there’s nothing to hold things in place?”

He took her arm and turned her toward him. “Close your eyes and take a deep breath.”

Stubbornly she tucked her chin.

He raised her head. “Breathe!”

Her breath was ragged and painful when it hit her lungs.

“Deeper,” he insisted, his fingertips pressing into her soft flesh. “There, that’s better. Now keep your eyes closed and tell me what you smell.”

“Trees and grass,” she murmured, “and, oh, there’s lavender and day’s-eye blossoms.” Her eyes popped open. “Wet moss and rocks. There’s a creek nearby!” Comforted, she leaned her face against his chest.

“The air you breathe is the same everywhere,” Simon said. “It’s a gift from God that goes wherever you go. All you have to do is close your eyes, and He will send the mountains back to you.”

Copper took in the fresh, starched-linen scent of him, relished the strength in his embrace, felt the tickle of his mustache against her cheek, and remembered, with a rush of feeling, why she’d left

her dear mountain home, why she'd married this stranger. Oh, the heart was a treacherous thing.

Stretching up, she kissed his cheek, then danced away.

"We've got to find that creek."

"I'll unhitch the horse," he replied. "We can use a break."

"Oh, look!" She laughed and pointed at the gray-muzzled hound loping toward them on three legs. Her black high-tops dangled from his mouth.

"Paw-paw, you silly old thing. Thank you." She knelt to retrieve her shoes and patted his head. "Come on, boy. Let's go get a drink."



"Can't we stay here tonight, Simon?" Laura Grace asked from her perch on the bank of the gently flowing stream.

Simon Corbett looked at his young bride. Her discarded hose lay beside her, and she splashed water with her naked feet. He was mesmerized. Had there ever been an ankle more perfectly formed? an arch in a foot so exquisite?

"Harrumph." He cleared his throat, then took off his spectacles and cleaned them with the corner of a spotless handkerchief. "I had thought to have our supper at the Wayside Inn, where we will trade out the horse, Laura Grace. I've secured a room there for the night."

"This is ever so much better. Don't you reckon?" The eyes that looked up at him were the same curious silver green as the underside of the leaves that shaded her there. "We have that picnic Mam packed," she pleaded. "There's sure to be pickled eggs and fried chicken and cake. Makes me hungry just to think on it."

Inwardly Simon groaned as he hooked his wire-rimmed eyeglasses behind his ears. He'd looked forward to this night. He'd arranged for a spacious room with clean linens and a bouquet of fresh flowers picked from the innkeeper's garden for his bride. *Time enough*, he cautioned himself. *Time enough when we get home.*

With a sigh, he gave in. "Of course we shall stay here if that pleases you, my dear. I'll fetch the basket."

The young couple spent their wedding night on a creek bank somewhere between her home in the serene mountains of eastern Kentucky and his in the bustling city of Lexington.

The groom was happy. So happy, even though he had to share his bride with the raggedy hound who slept at her feet, twitching the night through in his old dog way, chasing rabbits in his dreams . . . aggravating Simon's sleep, but he didn't mind, really. He was content to finally hold Laura Grace as she slept, his nose buried in her glorious red hair.



The folded quilt the bride slept upon did nothing to protect her from a maze of disquieting dreams of rushing water and endless hallways leading to countless doors, none of which opened for her.



And much farther up the road, Alice Corbett Upchurch couldn't sleep at all. She threw back her covers and eased out into the

hallway. Bending her ear to her husband's bedroom door, she was rewarded by seesawing snores.

"Why can drunkards sleep when I cannot?" she muttered. But all the same, she was glad for his slumber. It gave her a measure of peace. Tugging the sleeve of her dressing gown over the ugly place on her wrist, she tiptoed down the winding staircase and into the kitchen.

All she wanted was a cup of tea; no need to wake Cook. But where was the tea? Where was the tea ball? Why had Cook moved the everyday spoons? She rummaged through drawers and cabinets. At least the stove still gave off heat, and the kettle held hot water.

"Ma'am?" She heard Joseph's soft drawl. "Will you be taking tea in the dining room?"

The butler soon had her seated at one end of a long table, a tea service before her, one cup already poured.

"Will you want anything else?"

A question formed on Alice's lips, but it wouldn't do to have a conversation with a servant. "No, thank you, Joseph." She dismissed him with a flick of her wrist. *Does the man ever sleep?*

She drummed her fingers against the gleaming cherrywood tabletop. Portraits of her husband's ancestors—all round-headed, bald men with ears that stuck out like sprung screen doors—looked down on her from their lofty positions on the dining room walls.

She couldn't believe Simon was doing this to her. He'd thought she would accompany him to his sham of a wedding. Humph, Mrs. Benton Upchurch consorting with backward hill

people? She thought not. She had a reputation to uphold; Benton *was* the president of the bank after all. And what of her plans for her brother?

Well, we shall see. All I have to do is show Simon what a monumental mistake he has made. It shouldn't take long.

Taking herself to the library, Alice retrieved a sleeve of onionskin, her favorite tortoiseshell pen, and a small bottle of black ink from the lady's desk. She returned to the dining room, turned up the gaslight, sat down, and began to write. The words flowed as she scripted the menu for a special dinner party. Everything would be just so: flowers, candlelight, several courses of food, and invitations to all the best people in town. Laura Grace Brown—Alice refused to acknowledge the Corbett—wouldn't stand a chance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A retired registered nurse of twenty-five years, Jan Watson specialized in the care of newborns and their mothers. She is a charter member of Southern Acres Christian Church and lives in Lexington, Kentucky. Jan has three grown sons and a daughter-in-law.

Willow Springs is the sequel to Jan's award-winning first novel, *Troublesome Creek*. Her awards include the 2004 Christian Writers Guild Operation First Novel and second place in the 2006 Inspirational Readers Choice Contest sponsored by the Faith, Hope, and Love Chapter of the Romance Writers of America. *Troublesome Creek* was also a nominee for the Kentucky Literary Awards in 2006.

Jan's hobbies are reading, antiquing, and taking long walks with her Jack Russell terrier, Maggie. Currently she is writing the third book in her Copper Brown series, *Torrent Falls*.

Jan invites you to visit her Web site at www.janwatson.net. You can contact her through e-mail at author@janwatson.net.