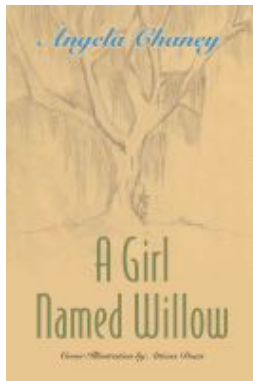




Angela Chaney

A Girl
Named Willow

Cover Illustration by Atticus Doan



Someone's stalking Willow. Willow Fairchild and Fin Pennington have been best friends since college. Through the years, there have been people who tried to break them apart. This latest attempt may just do the trick. As Willow tries to escape the threats to her life, she will do whatever it takes to protect the ones she loves even if it means relinquishing the friendship she treasures most...

A Girl Named Willow

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Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

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Angela Chaney

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ISBN 978-1-63263-577-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition

Dedication

To John for being so supportive.
To Mom for being my biggest fan.

Prologue

It was a dark and stormy night. No, really, it was. It was pitch black and the rain was pouring down. The loud bang of thunder made me jump. Normally I love these stormy nights. The air is filled with static electricity and the potential for anything. I usually sit out on the balcony with a drink and just enjoy the light show.

Not tonight. Tonight I was lying in bed waiting for some maniacal person to kill me. Seriously! Maybe that made me as crazy as the person I was waiting for but I had to do something, right? I couldn't let this person keep stalking me. It was getting way out of hand. There were break-ins to my apartment, confrontations in the street, what's a girl supposed to do?

I just hoped that my flimsy plan worked. Otherwise, I'd be toast. I felt pretty ridiculous. The only thing that kept running through my mind was that I was just like the idiot in all those horror movies that doesn't have enough sense to get the hell out of there.

I sure hoped the events of the evening didn't ruin it for me for other stormy nights. Then I'd really be pissed. That song by Eddie Rabbit kept running through my head..."I love a rainy night".

I sighed.

At this point I was wishing the maniac would just show up and get it over with already. I mean come on! How long was I supposed to lie here?

As I lay there, I kept thinking to myself how did this happen? How do I get myself into these messes? And let me tell you, I've been in some messes.

It started back in college when I met this guy.

Chapter 1

I was a freshman at the University of Texas at Austin back in the mid-80s. I was eighteen years old and it was the first day of class. I was in English Lit. I looked around the class and there must have been 100 kids in there. It was overwhelming! I made sure to sit in the back because I was kind of nervous and I wanted to fly under the radar.

My English professor was new. This was her first year teaching at a university and she was very enthusiastic. She handed out the syllabus and then began to tell us the structure of the class.

"I'm Ms. Underwood. I'll be your instructor for English Lit this semester. I'm very glad to be here. As you are probably aware, there will be papers due in this class. There are one hundred and eight of you and only one of me. I have two other classes this size. There is no way I can read three hundred papers. So, what I've decided to do is break you up into groups of four. You will all turn in one paper per group. You'll remain a group for the entire semester and will turn in group papers for all the assignments."

There was a collective groan from the class.

"Oh come on! It won't be that bad," she said. "Now, I know that you all are freshman and a lot of you are from other places and you may not know any of your neighbors so, I've decided to assign the groups myself," she said proudly. "This is going to be so cool!"

Ms. Underwood went back to her roll and started calling out names.

"Andrews, Michael. Oh, come on up here when I call your name. Then when your group is complete, you can move off to the side. Winslow, Eddie..." She continued to call out names and group people together.

"Fairchild, Willow; Pennington, Finlay; West, Tiffany; Adams, Winston, come on down! You are group number fifteen."

We stood around looking at one another. I've never been more uncomfortable in my life. In high school I hadn't exactly been popular but at least I was smart. In this group, who knew? I really just wanted to drop this rotten class. I'd heard Ms. Underwood was a newbie and I had been hoping that this would be an easy class. You know, read a few books, write a few papers and move on. But groups?

My group moved off to the side. My group consisted of Finlay Pennington, aka "Fin" who was drop dead gorgeous. He looked like a surfer with the blonde hair and blue eyes and a bitchin' tan (that's what we used to say back then). He was pretty muscular and about five feet ten inches. He reminded me of Robert Redford but better looking. If I had to guess, I'd have said he played some kind of sport in high school. Fin was a native of Austin.

Next there was Tiffany West. She was from Crum, Texas where she was a cheerleader and homecoming queen. I could see it. She was pretty...almost too pretty really. She could have been Fin's twin with her blonde hair, green eyes and flawless complexion. She was Barbie to his Ken. She was statuesque at five feet seven inches. Considering the fact she was prom queen and all, she seemed to be pretty down to earth.

Then there was Winston Adams, aka "Winnie". He was pretty nice looking himself. He had skin the color of coffee with cream with eyes so brown they were almost black. He was as tall as Fin. He wore his hair in Jheri Curls like Michael Jackson (remember, this was the '80s). When he smiled, the whole room lit up. Winnie was from Las Vegas and was here on an academic scholarship. Wow.

That left me, Willow Fairchild. I preferred to go by Will and said so. My parents were flower children so I was lucky that I only got stuck with Willow. I was from El Paso. My parents were killed in a car wreck when I was four and my grandmother raised me. I was nowhere near as pretty as the people in my group. In fact I was rather plain. I had mousy brown hair that I wore permed. To do otherwise meant that I would have limp, oily looking hair. I had normal brown eyes and olive skin. I did have flawlessly smooth skin, though. I was only five feet five inches tall, which made me the shortest one in the group.

After all the groups had been assigned, Ms. Underwood called order.

"Alright. Let me assign the first book and then you can all spend the rest of the class period getting to know one another. The first book we're going to read is *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. I want you all to pick a theme that resonates throughout the book and write your paper on that. The paper is due in two weeks. Ready? Go!"

A Tale of Two Cities! I hated that book. Of all the Dickens books she could have picked, why that one?

"Well," said Winnie, taking charge. "Have any of you read that book before?" We all shook our heads no. What? I didn't want the whole thing to fall on me so I...fibbed a little.

"Let's do this," said Winnie. "Let's all agree to read the first five chapters by Thursday. Then let's meet somewhere and we can talk about what we've read so far and start building our paper from there."

Everyone agreed. We set the time at seven pm and the place at Fin's house. Apparently, Fin was not in the dorm like the rest of us. He owned a duplex where he rented out one side and lived in the other. Lucky Duck!

I read the chapters like the others so that I could remember the plot line. I was reminded of why I didn't like this book. Boring! *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist* and even *David Copperfield*, those were good. Dickens was off his game with *Tale*.

At seven sharp, I knocked on Fin's door. A beautiful redheaded girl answered it. I say "girl" but she was probably about my age. She had emerald green eyes and introduced herself as "Rachel, Fin's fiancée". Really? Fin was engaged at eighteen? Well, good for him.

Fin stuck his head around the corner and yelled, "Hi, Will. We're in here." "Here" was a study off the kitchen. It was a nice sized room with a wood floor and paneling. Fin had set up a table and chairs so we'd have some space to work.

Winnie was already there. We were just waiting on Tiffany.

As I was unpacking my stuff, I heard the phone ring and Rachel answer.

"That was someone named Tiffany," said Rachel sticking her head in the door. "She said she couldn't make it tonight. Something about a last minute sorority function." Rachel shrugged her shoulders and left.

I made a face of disgust. Prom queens.

"Well, let's go on anyway. We'll assign her the next hard part," said Winnie. "Did you guys pick up on any themes yet?"

"Sacrifice," I said absently. Both guys looked at me. "What? You don't think so?"

"No," said Winnie grabbing a pen. "Sacrifice is good. Keep going."

"Violence and oppression?" suggested Fin. I was impressed. It would seem pretty boy had a brain.

And so we went on listing what we thought the themes of the story might be. Then we picked one to write about so that we could be on the lookout for it through the rest of the story.

At the end of the evening, we decided to split up the remaining chapters. Fin and I would take chapters 1 – 24 in the second section and Winnie would take chapters 1 – 15 on the third section. We figured that Tiffany was going to be useless. We agreed that if she didn't contribute anything, we'd discuss it with Ms. Underwood.

Over the next two weeks Fin and I worked pretty closely together on our part of this silly paper. Turns out he was pretty smart. He was also rather funny. We had similar personalities and we got along great.

After one of our meetings, he asked if I wanted to grab a bite.

"Sure," I said. "But don't you think Rachel will be upset?"

Fin just shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay," I said as we headed over to 'Ye Olde Sandwich Shoppe' which was a goofy restaurant right off the campus. At least they made decent sandwiches.

"Well, you know..." Fin sighed. "Can I tell you something?" Fin had a southern accent that wasn't really 'Texas'. It was like one of those genteel aristocratic accents from the old south. I loved to listen to the cadence of his voice.

"Sure."

"I don't want to get married and certainly not to Rachel. She's a horrible cook and she's leaves her stuff everywhere. It's gross. Plus she has these nasty habits like talking with her mouth full. And, she's rude to waiters." Fin was vomiting his disinterest in his fiancée and it was a little distressing.

"Then why did you get engaged?" I asked between bites of my sandwich. We'd ordered and found a table at the back of the restaurant.

"It was kind of expected."

"Break it off."

"You think I should?" Fin looked surprised.

"Fin, I can't tell you what to do especially on something as important as this. But marriage is supposed to be for the rest of your life. If you're not happy before you get started, then you're probably screwed."

The next time we all met at Fin's, Rachel was gone. Fin pulled me aside.

"Will, I thought about what you said and I did it. I broke up with Rachel," he said proudly.

"Good for you?" I hoped I hadn't caused any trouble with my flippant advice.

"You know, it was liberating. I felt really bad but it turns out she didn't want to get married either. We're only eighteen for Pete's sake. She said she'd tell our families and I told her she could say she dumped me. That way she looks better."

"That's great," I said. "You're, uh, quite the gentleman."

"I was thinking of joining a fraternity. What do you think? Rush week is coming up so I'd have to sign up. Which one do you think I should go for?" he asked me as he pulled out a bunch of brochures.

I shook my head. It would seem I was now Fin's social advisor.

Chapter 2

I lived in Jester East, which was a co-ed dorm on campus. (My grandmother almost lost it when she found out it was co-ed. It took a considerable amount of convincing for her to realize the *rooms* weren't co-ed – just the dorm itself.) I had a roommate. Her name was Felicia Morales. Felicia was beautiful. She was 5'3" with jet-black hair, eyebrows that were tattooed on and a wide mouth. She was from Miami. Felicia was a party animal...at least she was now. Apparently, her parents were very strict when she was growing up and as soon as they left after getting her settled into the dorm, Felicia cut loose. She went to all kinds of parties and participated in several school-sponsored events. She even pledged a sorority. I don't know how she ever made it to class.

She was, however, rarely in the room, which made her the perfect roommate.

I was sitting in my dorm studying one night about a month into the first semester when there was a pounding on the door.

"Will, it's me, let me in." It was Fin.

I opened the door and Fin rushed in and slammed the door shut. He was very agitated and somewhat drunk. It was rush week and Fin was pledging some fraternity... Gamma Gamma Gamma? Who knew?

"Oh God. I've done something terrible," he said.

"What?"

"You have to promise not to hate me."

"Jeez, Fin, did you kill a person?" When he didn't respond right away my eyes got huge and I said, "No!"

"No, I didn't kill anyone. Worse."

"What could be worse than that?"

"I had sex with someone," he whispered.

"I thought you'd done that before," I said wryly.

"With a guy," he said so low I could barely hear him. I stared at him a minute.

"What's wrong with you?" I yelled, smacking him on the back of the head.

"How could you think that was worse than killing a person?"

Fin stared at me. Then he threw his arms around me and squeezed.

We talked into the wee hours of the morning.

"So what made you decide to uh...participate?"

"It was part of the fraternity hazing."

"They make you sleep with other guys? What if you...uh...couldn't?"

"I don't want to talk about that part. Let's just say it was better for you if you could."

"Jeez, what kind of crappy fraternity makes you do this stuff anyway?"

Fin shrugged. "It's the most popular one."

I winced.

"What if I'm gay, Will?"

"Why? Because you could? Would that be so tragic? Lots of people are gay. I don't expect that it would be easy but it's not unheard of."

"I don't know. My family would be embarrassed."

"Maybe initially but the cool thing about family is they have to let you in, no matter what. Besides, I've met your family and I think that after the initial shock, they would be fine."

"Will," he whispered. "I don't want to be gay." He looked like he was on the verge of tears.

"So, do you think you are?"

"I had sex with a guy. Doesn't that make it so?"

I rolled my eyes. "I think it's more about attraction. If you were drunk and had sex with a guy, I don't think that qualifies you as gay. If you prefer to be with men rather than women, then that may be what gets you in that club."

"I just don't know."

"Then don't worry about it. I think we'll just have to see how things go," I said stroking his hair. "You're still you, Fin. It's all good."

"Really? You'll stick by me?"

"Until you kill a person."

That night Fin curled up with me in my bed and slept over. That was our first "slumber party".

The rest of the semester, Fin was a chick magnet. Every week he was with a different girl. He went to all kinds of parties and drank a lot. It was like he was going out of his way to prove to himself that he wasn't gay.

At least once a week, he ended up sleeping over in my dorm room and we'd stay up all night talking about his insecurities. For a good-looking guy, he sure had a lot of them.

One night I asked about all the girls.

"Do you have a revolving door at your duplex?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Isn't Cindy the fifth girl you've dated in the last month?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So nothing. I was just asking."

"I like variety," he said shrugging his shoulders. "What about you? Why aren't you going out with anyone?"

I shrugged.

"I should hook you up with one of my fraternity brothers. Jason. He's a great guy. I really think you'd like him." He'd passed whatever test there was during rush week and now he was in the fraternity...Alpha Beta Chi? Does anybody ever really know the name of these Greek fraternities?

"Oh, no. No thank you. I can find my own dates."

"You don't seem to be doing that very well."

"Hey! You don't know. Besides, I'm not looking."

"Come on, Will. Just go out with him once. It'll be fun. We'll double date."

I groaned inwardly. I hated blind dates.

We double dated. My date was Fin's fraternity brother, Jason Randall. Jason was a pretty nice looking guy. He had dark hair and brown eyes. He was stockier than Fin and a little shorter. He was a really sweet guy and he had a wicked sense of humor. Fin was right. I did like Jason.

Fin was still with Cindy. He hadn't dumped her yet and I think this was their fourth date, which was a record for him. Cindy was very cute and petite. She had sandy blonde hair, brown eyes and lots of freckles. Like I said, she was cute. Her only drawback was her laugh. It was a goofy over the top giggle and she giggled at everything that Fin said...even stuff that wasn't funny.

We went to a club where it was easy for us to get drinks. And we did. Lots.

We were sitting at a table in the corner. Jason was next to me and then Fin and Cindy across from us. Fin was telling a story and had to lean in so we could hear him. That's when I noticed that Jason was staring at Fin. He looked hungry. I was surprised. I blinked a few times to make sure I was seeing this right.

I sat back to watch. Maybe I'd had too much to drink but it was like I was watching the scene from above.

Fin was very charismatic. I could see where both guys and girls would want to be around him. As if by being around him, you'd be cool by association. But this was different.

As Fin was talking, he looked over at Jason and smiled and then finished his story. It was so quick, if I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have seen it.

Fin must have felt me staring because he looked over at me and gave me a crooked grin and then he blushed up to his ears.

"Hey, Willie, let's go dance," he said grabbing my hand and pulling me out to the dance floor. Cindy wasn't happy.

"Everything okay?" he asked as we got out to the dance floor.

"Sure," I said smiling.

"What do you think of Jason?"

"You were right. He's a nice guy. I think we can be friends."

"Why just friends?"

"I think he's interested in someone else," I said.

"Who?"

I looked at Fin pointedly.

"You think?" he asked.

"I do."

Fin looked a little disconcerted.

Chapter 3

The rest of the semester, Fin and I were inseparable. We hung out all the time. Sometimes it was just the two of us, other times it was with a group of Fin's friends. In fact, it was usually with a group of Fin's friends. Since Fin owned the duplex he was living in, he chose to stay there instead of moving into the fraternity house. That worked out well since there was a shortage of rooms and only the juniors and seniors could live there anyway.

Our group got an A in English Lit. After the worst Dickens ever, we muddled through *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Silas Marner* and then *Jude the Obscure*. Tiffany ended up dropping the class. That worked out well because we'd have had to kick her out otherwise. Winnie, on the other hand, was brilliant. I learned a lot from him about writing papers.

I didn't have any other classes with Fin that semester but we had a very similar class schedule. On Friday's we were both out by noon. Invariably we'd meet up and then go out to Lake Travis or up to Mount Bonnell. Sometimes we'd just hang at his place and he'd have friends over.

Fin had lots of friends. Winnie and me, of course. There were his fraternity brothers, Dave, John and Jason. Susannah and Phil were people he met in his political science class. Then there was Andy. Andy was a guy he knew from high school. I really liked Winnie. He was terribly funny for such a smart guy. My favorite, though, was Dave. That guy always had me in stitches.

In addition to the guys, their girlfriends always hung out with us as well. I was generally the only one without a significant other but that was okay. I was sort of their mascot.

Fin loved to cook and he was really good at it. When he'd have gatherings at his place, we were all guinea pigs. He'd try out new recipes and we'd all give our opinions. I really thought Fin would end up being a Chef.

Fin was very popular and he was invited to all the parties on campus. All the girls wanted to go out with him. He dated some but he took me to all the big fraternity events. After being such a wallflower in high school, it was kind of fun to see all these beautiful, empty-headed sorority girls just pea-green with envy. Childish I know but there you have it.

There was one event in particular that he took me to that was amazing. We had to get all gussied up. Fin wore a tux and I had to get a formal gown. It was almost like the Senior Prom (which I did NOT go to, thank you very much).

"Are you sure, Fin? Wouldn't you rather take Cindy?"

"Cindy and I broke up. Besides, I'd rather go with you. You're way more fun than she was."

The rest of the weekend, I worked. I got a job waiting tables at a local restaurant. Used to dealing with college students, the restaurant manager was very flexible with everyone's work schedule. All the servers wanted Friday or Saturday nights because that's when the best tips were. Generally speaking, you were either on the schedule for one night or the other. I almost always got Saturday night.

Fin, on the other hand, didn't have to work. He would occasionally come up to the restaurant with his friends or his girlfriend of the week and sit in my station. He always left me a good tip.

Chapter 4

Over Christmas break I went back to El Paso to spend it with my family, which consisted of my grandmother and two uncles. Neither of the uncles ever came over which was good. When I was younger, one of my uncles had a bad habit of flashing me when no one was looking. Gross! The other one was just indifferent. So, for the majority of the time, it was just my grandmother and me.

I was in El Paso for a month and was bored out of my mind. I didn't have a lot of friends in high school so I didn't really have anyone to hang around with. As soon as we were allowed to go back in the dorm, I raced back to Austin. Don't get me wrong, I loved being with my grandmother but no friends and no job made Will a dull girl.

As soon as I got back into the dorm, the phone rang and it was Fin. It was like an alarm went off in his house signaling I was back in the room.

"Feliz Navidad!" he said.

"Merry Christmas to you, too. You know I don't speak Spanish, right?" I was terrible. I never learned. I spoke so little Spanish that I only got a B in that class in high school. How lame is that? My grandmother was Mexican for Heaven's sake.

"I know. So how was your trip home? Are you unpacked? Wanna get a pizza?"

"Okay, yes and hell yes!"

"Why don't you come over and I'll order one? The usual?"

"Who's over?"

"No one. It'd just be you and me."

"Oh. Okay, I'll be there in ten." I was a little surprised. Fin usually had a crowd of followers that flocked to his place.

I knocked on the door and found that the pizza guy beat me here. Luckily, it wasn't by much. There was only one piece missing from the pie.

"Where is everyone?" I asked between bites.

"What do you mean?"

"You know like Andy, Phil, Jason, Susannah, you know...everyone." These were some of the 'groupies' that followed in Fin's wake. "I figured Dave and John would be over for sure. You guys are joined at the hip."

Fin shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't know, don't care. As long as you're around, I'm good."

"Aww, Fin, that's so sweet. So what's going on?"

"Nothing. Just tired of people. I felt like a quiet evening with my best friend."

"Now you're making me cry."

"Come on, Will. Is it my fault if I missed you while you were home? Don't make me regret asking you over."

“Wow. How lovely for me. I missed you too actually.” I stood up to go get a coke.

“Will?”

“Yeah?”

“Beer me?”

So much for the lovely sentiment.

Chapter 5

Fin practically disappeared once spring semester started. I caught him at home one afternoon.

"Where have you been?" I asked. "I've been trying to reach you for a week."

"I've been at practice," said Fin.

"Practice for what?"

"Baseball."

"Huh?"

"Will, I play baseball. Didn't I tell you that?"

"No. Who do you play for?"

"UT, you goose. Who else would I play for?"

I was stupefied.

"Since when?"

"Since I started here in the fall."

"Well, I'll be. When is your first game?"

"We've already had our first game. It was last Wednesday."

"Fin, why didn't you tell me? I'd have gone."

"It was at Baylor. But you can come to the next one. We're playing at home against A & M. It's on Friday at 7."

I felt like I was talking to a stranger. How is it that he never told me this?

"Will? You there?"

"Yeah, I'm just...I don't know. Stunned? What position do you play?"

"Catcher. So you'll come?"

"Of course."

That Friday, I walked over to the baseball stadium and bought a ticket as close to home plate as I could. I'd never seen Fin in his uniform but I could only imagine. The team was introduced and when they called 'number 8 at catcher, Finlay Pennington,' I screamed like a groupie.

He looked very good. He played even better. When the team walked out on the field, I could see Fin looking around. Then I saw him wave but it wasn't in my direction. I looked over and there were about three or four tall leggy blondes that were waving back. That was Fin's "type". I rolled my eyes and sat back down.

When Fin went up to bat I yelled as loud as I could.

"Come on, Finney! Hit me a homer!"

Fin didn't look at me but I saw him break out in a smile.

He didn't hit a homer but he got a double and knocked a runner in. That was almost as good. Fin had a dramatic slide into second base. How do they do that anyway? That whole sliding thing? I'd have to ask Fin to show me.

One thing about baseball that I don't really like is that it can go on forever. We were finally down to the bottom of the ninth and it was tied. There was a guy on first that tried to steal second and got caught. He was thrown out. The next guy popped one up to left field and it was caught. One more out without a score and it was extra innings.

God almighty, Fin was up next. I was holding my breath.

The first pitch was a strike. Fin stepped out of the batter's box and did a bunch of moving around. He tapped his shoes, he stomped his feet and took a couple of swings. He had a whole ritual going on. Then he stepped back in and the pitcher threw the ball. Fin swung and I heard a crack.

Fin took off running. Come on, I thought. Go, ball go!

The guy in left field was running and running. He made a herculean leap to catch the ball but it went over his head and out of the park.

Everyone in the bleachers stood up and yelled. It was beautiful. Fin jogged the rest of the way around the bases and tagged up at home where all his teammates were there to greet him. It was an awesome sight. I cheered until I was hoarse.

The team went into the locker room and I waited for a bit. Then I saw all the blondes waiting by the locker room door. I decided I'd congratulate Fin later and headed back to the dorm.

I'd been back in my room about thirty minutes when there was a knock at the door.

"Will, open up, it's me," said Fin from the other side.

"Hey, congratulations!" I said when I opened the door.

"Thanks. Thanks for coming."

"Sure. I had fun."

"I heard you, you know," he said grinning.

"I was kind of loud."

"I brought you something," he said. Then he handed me a bat.

"What's this?"

"It's the bat I used when I hit the home run. Since you made the request, I thought I'd give you the bat."

"But aren't you guys all superstitious? Shouldn't you keep the bat until the end of the season?"

Fin chuckled.

"Not all of us are superstitious. I signed it for you." I looked and saw that he'd signed his name.

"Cool. When you become a famous baseball player, I can say I knew you when."

"Will you come to the next one?"

"Sure."

Fin bent down and kissed my cheek. I blushed.

"I've gotta go."

"Hot date with one of those blonde chicks?"

"Something like that," he said grinning.

"Thanks for the bat, Fin."

"Yeah. 'Night, Will."

I went to the next home game and had an equally fantastic time. Fin was amazing. I tried to learn about baseball but good grief, there were a lot of rules.

I knew that catcher kind of ran the game since he could see the whole field. I'd see Fin stand up and make a bunch of hand signals, then pull his mask down and squat. Guys on the other team would try and steal bases and if it was during a pitch, Fin almost always threw the guy out.

A couple of times I went to the games with John, Dave and their dates. When Jason would go, I'd be his date. We always had fun.

A few games into the season, I got a call from Fin's mom.

"Willow, dear? It's Greta Pennington." Fin's mom didn't believe in nicknames.

"Hi Mrs. P."

"Finlay mentioned that you were going to his game this Thursday."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would you like to sit with us? We have an extra ticket."

"Oh, uh, sure. That would be great."

"Wonderful. Lawrence and I will meet you at the north entrance of the stadium thirty minutes before the game."

"Great. See you guys, Thursday."

"Goodbye."

Yeah, going to the game with Fin's parents. I guess I'd best be sedate. No yelling or calling him Finney. But, that's okay. I liked Fin's parents. They were very easy to be around.

The phone rang again and this time it was Fin.

"Hey, my mom called and said you were going to the game with them."

"That was fast. I just hung up. So, is that okay?"

"Yeah, it's great. I just wasn't expecting that."

"Oh. Well, your mom just called me and asked. I'm sorry. I can call and cancel."

"No, no, no. It's fine. I'm just glad you're going. Hey, I'm off tonight. Want to grab a drink?"

"Sure."

"I'll pick you up in ten." Then he hung up.

I looked at the phone. What a weird conversation. I changed and went downstairs to wait.

Fin picked me up and we went to a pub not far from campus. We found a table in back and sat down. When the waitress came by, I ordered a gin and tonic and Fin ordered a beer. I grimaced.

"How can you drink that stuff? It smells like pee."

Fin laughed. "It's an acquired taste."

"If you say so. So what's up, buttercup. You've been acting all weird," I said as the waitress brought our drinks.

"I don't know. I've just been thinking about you lately."

"Thinking how?"

Fin shrugged and took my hand. He laced his fingers with mine and stared at me.

Oh boy.

"You know, my parents think we're dating," he said.

"Is that why your mom called me?"

"Probably."

"Why didn't you just tell them you were dating the blonde chick that was flashing her boobs at you during the last game?" Fin laughed.

"There were no flashings during the game. I'd have noticed that for sure."

I took a sip of my drink. This was really awkward. I've never felt uncomfortable with Fin but I was looking at the clock this evening.

"So what do you think?" he asked.

"About what?"

"You want to give it a shot? You know, and go out?"

Actually, I was very interested. Good grief, Fin was a hunk. He had long blonde hair that skimmed his collar and very blue eyes. He had a fantastic body and he made me laugh more than any person I've ever met. But this was just weird. Plus the way he asked made it sound like a business proposition.

"What if it doesn't work? Would we stop being friends?"

"I don't know."

"Fin, I care about you a lot. I'm very attracted to you and I think we'd be good as a couple but you're my best friend. I couldn't bear it if we failed as a couple and it ruined our friendship. I don't want to be one of those girls that you toss to the side when you're done. Besides, we go out all the time. Doesn't this count?"

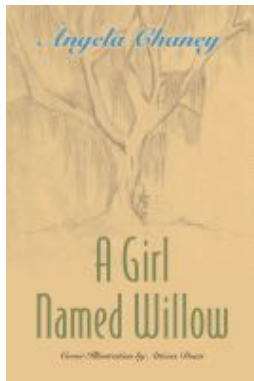
"What is it about you, Will, that makes me crazy? I think about you a lot. I have fun with you when we're together. You make me feel good about myself in a way that no other girl ever has. Everything is easy with you. I don't feel like I have to be anyone but me when I'm with you. You accept me, as I am, warts and all. But in the end, I would hate to lose that friendship too." Fin sighed. "Maybe we can be friends with benefits," he said raising his eyebrows up and down.

I burst out laughing.

"Always, angling, aren't ya?" I said. Then just like that, whatever weirdness had been hanging over us was gone. We were back to just being Fin and Will and it was great.

Fin took me back to the dorm holding my hand the whole way. He walked me up to my room and kissed me goodnight. It was a nice chaste kiss.

"If you're good," I said to Fin grinning evilly. "Maybe we can work up to the benefits." I gave him a big hug and went inside. I could hear Fin laughing as he walked away.



Someone's stalking Willow. Willow Fairchild and Fin Pennington have been best friends since college. Through the years, there have been people who tried to break them apart. This latest attempt may just do the trick. As Willow tries to escape the threats to her life, she will do whatever it takes to protect the ones she loves even if it means relinquishing the friendship she treasures most...

A Girl Named Willow

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