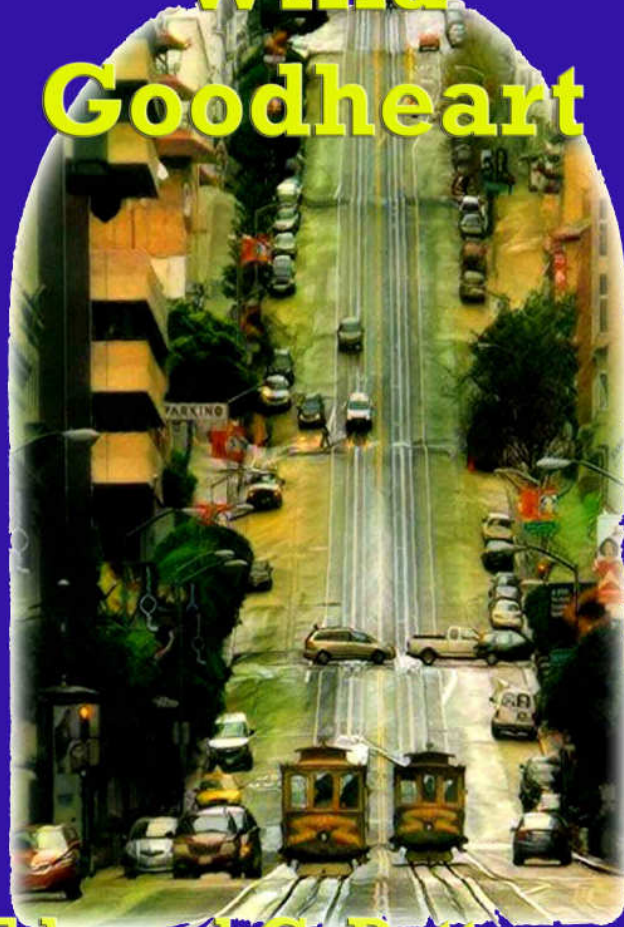


Willa Goodheart



Edward C. Patterson

Sample Chapter

Willa Goodheart

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Sample Chapter – Willa Goodheart
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Chapter One

Somewhere New and Different

1

“Stop here,” Willa said.

The cab driver hit the brake which, in the teeming rain, could have been a disaster. Willa lurched forward.

“Sorry, Miss,” the driver said.

Willa fumbled about her bag for the fare. She was disorganized today. Generally she didn’t take a cab, but this was her first day on the new job — a promotion, and she had overslept. It was a two cable car ride from Larkin Street down to California and, in this rain, she’d be a mess. She had her hair styled for the occasion, but it was limp already; and her new suit looked like it came from a Turkish bath. She handed over the fare.

“Keep the change.”

She slid across the vinyl, popped open the door, and then stepped in a puddle.

“Damn,” she said, almost dropping her brand new attaché case. It was empty, but she was sure that Ms. Jones — Ms. Lavinia Jones, assistant to Jr. Vice President Argus Penrose III, would fill that attaché case to the brim.

On cue, the rain increased; and Willa Goodheart reached back for her umbrella, but the cab had sped away down California Street.

“Stop,” she cried. “I need that. I need it.”

The taxi veered left at the corner of Sansome Street, disappearing.

“Damn.”

Willa was getting wet, and she was late, and she was getting wetter by the minute, standing in the morning rush which brushed by her like a buffalo stampede. She made a dash for the entrance to the Fidelity Fiscus Building, the revolving door spinning as if to mash her. She paused, and then jumped in avoiding a speeding bicycle messenger, who slammed on his brakes just inches from the place where she stood.

That’s all I’d need now, she thought. Road kill.

This was a special day — an important one, filled with promise. For the last four years, Willa had staffed a collection desk in a sea of collection desks at Fidelity Fiscus, droning the same messages daily to the world of dead beats who did nothing but yell at her, or pleaded, or sang the great chorus *the check is in the mail*. How she had managed for four years was beyond her, because she was a cream puff, never collecting much, always cowering to the bully debtors and sympathizing with the widows and orphans. How fate selected her from among ten candidates to be the assistant to the assistant was even further beyond her. Still, she didn’t question fate.

The elevator, packed, further exacerbating Willa’s wet-rat couture. She slammed into the back wall holding the attaché case to her chest. The same backs of heads faced her, babbling empty *good mornings*, chirping the gossip of the day and chortling about the latest string of murders to hit the Bay Area. The nattering buzzed about her head while, in her noggin, more questions than answers ricocheted, her new duties not clearly defined.

The floor bell pinged at seven.

“Excuse me,” she said, pushing her way off, tripping out onto the landing.

Willa took a deep breath, and then marched through the glass doors into a sea of collection stations, down three aisles and into the third row, to her accustomed place. The sound of phones

ringing grasped her, as they had each morning, accompanied by a mantra of collector's voices demanding payments.

"Holy crap," came a voice. She knew that voice – male; flighty, and with a slight *Latin* twinge. "Willa."

"Morning, Jose."

"Willa, what are you doing here?"

Willa was staring at her desk — empty now, as it was no longer hers. *What was she doing here?*

"Jose," she said. "I forgot. I got off at seven."

"Eleven," Jose stammered.

He was thin and wiry, but had become her fairy godmother. Oh, how she could use pixie dust now.

"I'm late as it is," she said. "They'll pitch me out on the first day."

"Easy, cupcake," Jose replied, guiding her by the arm as if she were a manikin on wheels. "Back to the elevator with you. And . . . what's with the hair?"

"Damn," she said. "I look like the Wicked Witch of the West."

"You? Wicked. Never. But when you get upstairs, you might want to find a mirror."

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall," Willa said absently.

"At least you're not like *The Lash*."

He was referring to Mrs. Mindy Kablashky, the floor supervisor, and a real witch if there ever was one.

"I'm out from under her thumb now," she muttered.

"I wish we all were. Still, your hair's like Bozo the Clown." He laughed. "Well, maybe not that bad, cupcake. But it makes you safe from the Bay Ripper."

"Yeah," she said. "What's with that? Everyone's got a theory."

"Don't worry."

Willa turned to Jose at the elevator bank, coming out of her tizzy.

"You can't be too careful," she said. "One a week is dropping. I don't think it's the same guy doing it. Man — woman. You take care, Jose."

"Don't worry about me," Jose said. "He hasn't hit the Castro."

"Are you sure it's a *he*?"

"As long as it's not . . ."

"I know," she chuckled. The elevator came, packed like pickles in a barrel. "As long as it's not your Sparklet's delivery guy."

Willa wedged her way in, and then turned to see Jose, who mooned over the thought of his perfect mate — a beefy specimen who tripped the floor fantastic at Fidelity Fiscus. That Sparklet's delivery man wore tight revealing shorts, after all.

The elevator doors closed, almost catching Willa's attaché case.

2

Willa pushed the heavy glass doors open. She had only been to the executive offices once — for the interview. She hadn't a notion where to go.

"Are you Willa Goodheart?" came a bullfrog voice from behind the reception counter.

"Yes," Willa stammered.

The receptionist, prim, with her hair in a bun and her face puckered, gazed over her half spectacles, inspecting the young woman who wore the frumpy suit and sported frizzy blonde hair.

"You're late," she snapped. "Not a good start. Ms. Jones has asked if you had called in . . ."

twice.”

“Sorry, I got lost.”

“After four years coming to the same building, you got lost?”

“I mean . . .”

“Don’t bother. Go through those doors. Your desk is the third one on the right.”

Willa pulled herself together. She didn’t know if she should curtsy to this gatekeeper or just give her a good old-fashioned nod. She stumbled toward the door, but it opened as she tried the knob. On the threshold was a stylishly dressed executive, who grinned upon seeing her. That grin soon turned sharply professional.

“Ms. Jones,” Willa stammered. “I’m sorry to be . . .”

“Late. Yes. I’m sure it won’t happen again. Follow me.”

Lavinia Jones marched toward the third desk on the right.

“You may call me Lavinia, except in front of Mr. Penrose.”

“What shall I call you then?” Willa asked, thinking maybe she should take notes.

“Nothing. You’re never to speak when we’re with Mr. Penrose. Now put your stuff on that desk. If you were on time, you might’ve enjoyed the luxury of arranging things as you’d like, but now you’ll do it after-hours.” She stared at her. “There’s no time for you to do something with your hair either.”

“The rain.”

“They invented umbrellas in ancient China, you know. They’re not a new preventative measure for precipitation.”

“No, Ms . . . I mean, Lavinia.”

“Take a pad. We’ve a meeting with Mr. Penrose. You’re to record everything. I’ll tell you later what you’re to do with it.”

Willa pulled herself together as best she could, and then followed Lavinia Jones down the long row of executive offices until they reached one with a big oak door. Lavinia sniffed, and then turned to her new assistant.

“Where on Earth did you get that suit, Goodheart? Did you stop by the Salvation Army?”

Willa wanted to tell her it was new and a Neiman Marcus purchase, on special, but Neiman Marcus, nonetheless. However, Lavinia opened the door greeting a dashing man, who stood as they entered.

“Lavinia,” Argus Penrose III said.

“Argy,” Lavinia replied. “Sorry we’re late, but . . .”

“No need to explain,” Argy said.

He invited her to sit on the couch, and then, noticing the pretty, but frumpy creature who accompanied his assistant, he smiled. Willa caught a rogue’s smile, but tried not to think about it. She had enough on her mind.

“This is Willa Goodheart, Argy,” and then as an afterthought, “my new assistant.”

“Goodheart,” Argy said. “Fetching name.”

Willa wanted to explain to him that many people noted her name, but she observed the silence Lavinia’s eyes commanded. Willa sat, poised to write.

“Blasted weather,” Argy said, returning to his desk. The rain beat on his picture windows — a view of the Bay Bridge and the Embarcadero fractured through the pane. He looked to Willa for confirmation, but she held the pen wondering if she should record the weather report. “Well,” he continued. “At least it might deter that bastard who’s making short work of the girls in this city.”

“Only one was a . . . girl, Argy,” Lavinia said. “And the latest was a man. Besides, I don’t think the weather deters a serial killer.”

"I suppose not. Who called this meeting — me or you?"

"You did. You're planning a trip east — to all the garden spots."

"Yeah. Detroit, Cleveland, Indianapolis and Baltimore." He leaned toward Willa. "I hate these junkets, but we go where they need us."

"Well," Lavinia said, "you still manage to chalk up some fine hotel bills even in the grungiest places."

Argy Penrose chuckled.

"A man needs to live. My grandfather founded this company on a principle. If a Collection Agency executive looks like a Collection Agency executive, he'll never make a dime. When I go to Detroit, I exude Ford Motors."

"So what do you need for this trip, Argy? I'll be sure everything's ready, no matter how high the moon and how deep the sea."

Argus Penrose III leaned back in his chair and expounded his itinerary from the first five-star hotel in Detroit to the best steak houses in Indianapolis to the finest crab brothels in Baltimore. He rattled off the list of prospects and client visits by the yard and sales inspections by the mile. Lavinia nodded — a rhythm forming, listening to the details of Mr. Penrose III's every need. Willa just scrawled — seven pages of scrawl. She hoped she could read the handwriting when it came time to transcribe it, which she assumed would need to be done.

The meeting lasted an hour, and then after Penrose arched his back before the rain-streaked window, he bade them farewell. Once clear of the oak door, Willa thought she might chance conversation.

"I'll transcribe these notes, Ms . . . Lavinia."

"No need."

They had reached the third desk on the right.

"I thought . . ."

"Don't think. Just do. Those notes are your to-do list this afternoon."

Willa looked at the seven pages and realized what an assistant to an assistant did for a living. They *did* the assistant's job.

"Yes, Lavinia."

"I expect all arrangements completed by closing time. I've a luncheon engagement and a doctor's appointment and will check back later." Lavinia swept toward the threshold. "And please be on time tomorrow. And do something with your hair."

Willa stood by her desk stunned. She gazed at the other executive help — all quiet and aloof, engaged with the important work of other people's work. Willa looked at the first item — *a flight to Detroit, first class, direct, leaving no earlier than 8 am but not later than 9:30 am on June 2nd to arrive at Detroit in time for lunch at Le Grand Prix (reservations for four).*

Willa sighed and hoped her telephone worked.

3

"I nearly bumped into your dreamboat," Willa said to Jose during her lunch break.

Willa usually packed lunch, but had no time this morning, at least not enough to stop at the deli on Market Street. Besides, she bemoaned the loss of her umbrella. So she grabbed a bag of chips and sat opposite Jose, who munched on a Twinkie, making lewd gestures with it when she mentioned his *dreamboat*, the Sparklet's delivery man.

"Oh, honey, he stopped on our floor too." Jose rolled his eyes. "Someday I'm going ask him to deliver himself to me in a big brown FedEx box."

"White," Willa said.

Crunch. Crunch.

"I don't get it."

"Brown is UPS."

"Don't tell me about the UPS one."

"Ugly?"

"A woman with more muscles than Arnold Schwarzenegger."

Munch. Munch

"And then there's a cute messenger guy," Willa said. "He nearly mowed me down with his bicycle."

"I don't remember seeing him."

"I'll point him out. I think I've seen him in the building. I'm surprised you haven't noticed him. You notice all the cute young ones."

"He's probably a mama's boy."

Suddenly, there were sighs from the far table. Bonita, Gail and Rosemarie huddled before the TV watching *Days of Our Lives*. A good scene stirred them. Jose turned.

"Soaps," he said. "They should watch reruns of my life."

"Or mine," Willa added.

"So how did it go up there?"

Jose pointed.

"I couldn't tell you. I mean, she's very . . . imperial."

"You mean a bitch. As bitchy as *The Lash*?"

"No." Willa rolled her eyes. "At least, I hope not. I hate being micromanaged. No. This one's demanding. I knew the job would be a challenge."

"Nothing can be worse than the seventh floor," Jose said.

He demurred, as if he had touched upon his fate.

"It's not so bad," Willa said. "I mean, not everyone's like *The Lash*. And there's good people, like you and . . . old man Conlon."

"If you like poetry and history."

"You can learn a lot from the old guys." Willa smiled. "Besides, everyone's allowed their moments. I bet Mindy has a good side somewhere."

"If she does, she leaves it at home. Imagine waking up beside her every morning."

"Well, I didn't think you could imagine waking up beside any woman."

Jose grinned broadly.

"Well, you like everyone, cupcake. That's good, but also could be bad."

"I like this place. I think this new job will challenge me." She looked into the empty chip bag. "In fact, this is my last chip, and then I'm going back upstairs."

"Dedication," Jose said with more than a little *Latino* intonation. "One day on the job and already you're looking for the boss's position."

Willa crunched the last chip, and then crushed the bag. Suddenly, the three *soapers* cried out.

"No. Not fair."

We interrupt this program with a special edition on the Nob Hill murders. Last night . . .

Bonita stood and shook her fist at the screen, while Gail just collapsed onto the table. Rosemarie shut the set off, and then marched out.

"There oughta be a law," Jose said.

"I'm out of here," Willa announced. "If I bump into any delivery people, I'll send them your way."

"Not the UPS lady," he said. "But you can send the mama's boy on the bicycle over so I can get

a look-see. Oh, and do something with your hair.”

Willa stuck out her tongue, and then headed for the elevator. She had a long afternoon before her, making reservations and checking lists before Lavinia returned. *Confident*. Then the elevator doors opened. Inside, with bulging arms around a brown box, was the UPS lady. Willa rolled her eyes. It would be a very long afternoon.

End of Sample Chapter – Willa Goodheart
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Author Edward C. Patterson has been writing novels, short fiction, poetry and drama his entire life, always seeking the emotional core of any story he tells. He has currently 30 published books. He is known for spinning magical and fantasy yarns grounded in history and favors epic tales revealed in books series. His flagship works are The Jade Owl Legacy Series, The Southern Swallow Series, The Farn Trilogy and the Nick Firestone Mysteries.

In many of Patterson's novels, he combines an imaginative touch with his life long devotion to China and its history, having earned an MA in Chinese History from Brooklyn College with further postgraduate work at Columbia University. This background is the cornerstone for The Jade Owl Legacy, The Southern Swallow Series and Master Wu's Bride, works drawing on Sung and Ming Dynasty History and Culture. History has played a major part in the coming of age tale Little Vin at Dreamland.

Patterson's military experience is reflected in such works as Surviving an American Gulag, The Road to Grafenwoehr and Pacific Crimson - Forget Me Not. His gay life-way and work in diversity is reflected in his novellas No Irish Need Apply, Cutting the Cheese, Bobby's Trace and Mother Asphodel; and in larger works - Turning Idolater and Look Away Silence.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Patterson has spent over five decades as a soldier in the corporate world gaining insight into the human condition. He won the Year 2000 New Jersey Minority Achiever Award for his work in corporate diversity and is a proud U S Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. Blending world travel experiences with a passion for story telling, Patterson's adventures continue as he works to permeate his reader's souls from an indelible wellspring.

His novel No Irish Need Apply was named Book of the Month for June 2009 by Booz Allen Hamilton's Diversity Reading Organization. His Novel The Jade Owl was a finalist for The 2009 Rainbow Awards.

Edward C. Patterson is the proud founder of Operation eBook Drop which, in its heyday, distributed over a million eBooks to deployed Armed Forces members from over 2,000 independent authors. He has guest blogged extensively and has appeared on the Bobby Ozuna - Soul of Humanity Show. He is also proud of his Cherokee heritage, knows seven languages (including Cherokee) and is a contributing member of the ACLU.

“The little voice from between the lines can become a lion's roar, one listener at a time.”

Contact author at edwpat@att.net — Feedback is always appreciated
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