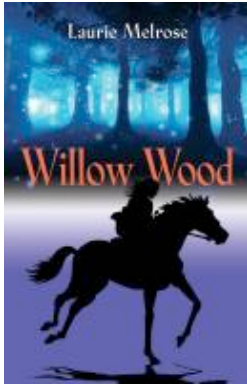


Laurie Melrose

# Willow Wood





*This middle grade novel delivers everything young girls love - summer vacation, adventure, Fairies, horses, and a twelve-year-old heroine. In disbelief, our protagonist learns that she's part Fairy, and royalty to boot! As she comes to accept her heritage, magic trespasses into her everyday life. Pixies harass her, animals talk to her, and Spirit Orbs float in the barn. How will her newfound status alter her once ordinary life? What dangers await her?*

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# **WILLOW WOOD**

**Laurie Melrose**

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First Edition

**Believe in the magic**

**that is you!**



## Prologue

### The Wreck of *The Lyric*

1850

"I see land, sir!" shouts the mate. Barely heard over the shrieking wind he clings to the clipper's mast. From his post he feels as if he's atop a bobber, tied to a string, hooked to the granddaddy of all fish. Tossing back and forth, up and down, it's a miracle that he ever saw the thin strip of land in the pale morning light.

"Where?" shouts his captain.

"Directly ahead, sir. I see trees, along a ridge, about two miles away."

*Still far away*, thinks Captain Conway.

"Continue course," he instructs his first officer.

*The Lyric* charges ahead, slicing through the frigid gray water off the Northern California coast. Bound for

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the Gold Rush city of San Francisco, the captain is in a particular hurry. He's just sailed six thousand miles from China and his ship is laden with supplies. Forty-niners with new-found wealth are eager to purchase his fine blue and white porcelain bowls, brightly colored silks, camphor trunks, shiny lacquered ware, and gold filigree jewelry.

Not only is the captain anxious to sell his wares but he looks forward to visiting his Irish friends in San Francisco. He sailed from Cork many months before and he misses Ireland. He's stocked *The Lyric* with good Irish ale from the homeland to share with his friends. He expects a good time!

The wind rattles the rigging as gulls battle the gale to greet the clipper with piercing calls of *Come along* and *Go away*. It's hard to tell which. As *The Lyric* plows ahead towards the coastline, waves relentlessly pound her hull. The icy cold is bone chilling, turning fingers and nose-tips numb and blue. A misty sea fog dances across the deck



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and over the surface of the water so that all looks like an illusion in a frosted mirror. Briny wind-tossed spray kicks up from the sea to land in shout-opened mouths. Time is lost in the frigid gray world.

Suddenly, a break in the fog.

“Land sir! Ahead sir! Just off the starboard bow!”

“Hard to port!” cries the captain. *The Lyric* shudders, hangs, and lurches left. Gulls shriek, *Come along. Go away.*

A low coastal terrace lies in wait beneath the liquid surface as black sea stacks whip the water into yellow foam. Struggling against the current, *The Lyric* creaks as she dips and rises, narrowly missing the largest juggernaut. Bottles of Irish ale rattle in the hull.

“Pull us out of this!” shouts Captain Conway. *The Lyric* strains, and with sails beating, she dodges yet another black monolith. “Hard to port!”

Groaning, the wooden hull compresses under the force of a crushing wave and holds fast. Fighting for her

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life, *The Lyric* looks for open seas but, pitched into a trough, she bobs closer to shore. *Come along! Go away!*

“Mister Murphy, hard to port!” shouts the captain.

Too late. She’s surrounded by the black demon rocks. A series of waves rolls in and spins the clipper like a top. She crashes into the rocks. The first blow snaps off her rudder, the second splinters a hole in her hull. *The Lyric* is stuck on the sandy coastal terrace, buffeted, listing, and taking on water. The crew scrambles to abandon ship. Out of the fog looms a massive wave. It descends and scoops up our brave *Lyric*, holds her high in the air for all to see, and throws her onto the jagged rocks.

Spilling from her cracked hull are the China treasures: blue and white porcelain bowls, brightly colored silks, lacquered ware, camphor trunks, and gold filigree jewelry—six thousand miles of sea voyage.

## Chapter One

### Welcome Back

Present Day

Caitlin O'Toole and her brother Harrison visit their aunt every summer, for the whole summer. It was great when Caitlin was little, but she's twelve now and she misses her friends. And her brother is a pain. He's seven and he smells. Like dirt.

Their aunt is okay. Amazing, actually. She's eccentric. Aunt Maeve lives in a very small village in Northern California, in a 'green home'. It has solar panels on the roof, a windmill in the backyard, and all sorts of energy-efficient devices. She recycles everything. Reduce and reuse. It's fun and easy, because Aunt Maeve has the household completely organized. Which is somewhat unusual because she herself is *disorganized*.

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Maeve is an artist, a painter, and she lives in an artist community. But like a lot of artists, to non-artists, she appears disorganized, unusual, eccentric.

So it was with quite a lot of hesitation that Caitlin's mother Delma, Maeve's sister, finally allowed Caitlin to visit four years ago. "Maeve can't do too much harm in just one weekend," said Caitlin's father, Ross. Caitlin's bag was packed, her pillow snatched off the bed, and her favorite snacks stuffed in a brown paper bag. Delma, Ross, baby Harrison, and Caitlin climbed into their gas-guzzling SUV for the three-and-a-half-hour drive to Maeve's village north of The City.

The O'Tooles still remember that first drive. The summer fog drifted across the bridge towers as they left their city. The early-morning bikers were already vying for space with joggers. The family looked far into the bay. Boats moved in slow motion, pulling thin trails of bright white sea foam behind them. The tall buildings of The City stood clustered on the hills, peaceful in the distance.

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Turning inland, one city blended into the next as they barreled along the freeway, Harrison throwing Cheerios at Caitlin from his car seat. Yes, Caitlin would have fun with Aunt Maeve. Just the two of them.

Slowly the cement gave way to vineyards, and ranch homes replaced skyscrapers. The high-speed drone of tires on asphalt was replaced with a stuttering zigzag pace through hilly curves. The summer heat pressed in on the family and the air conditioner only reminded them that they were trapped in a car and not allowed to roll down the windows. Finally they reached a dark, thick redwood forest, Caitlin's favorite part of the drive. The grove felt like a sanctuary. Off went the air conditioner, down went the window, and out poked Caitlin's head. A hushed peace enveloped the car as it swooped down the road, brushing past ferns dripping in dew. From somewhere far far above, thin sunbeams filtered down through the branches of the ancient trees, illuminating the floating dust. Tiny flying insects caught in the beams

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sparkled as they danced. Happily, this was a large grove. But all too soon, around a turn, the road opened up onto a bright, unshaded river winding slowly to the sea. They had reached the coast.

Turning north, they steered their way along the coastal highway; sheer drop-offs on their left, rolling brown fields on their right. Ahead, Maeve's village emerged from the mist. The buildings sat perched on the cliffs, like a group of gulls ready to leap. Reminiscent of New England, the buildings were simple structures. They wore no flashy accessories like the Victorians in The City. Strong, sturdy. They had to be to stand up to the battering storms that blew off the sea in winter and the salty fog that slowly destroyed in summer.

Caitlin's parents dropped her off Friday at noon and picked her up Sunday at three. That was four years ago. What started out as a three-day weekend for Caitlin and her Aunt Maeve has turned into the whole summer for Caitlin, Aunt Maeve—and Harrison.

WILLOW WOOD

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“Yoo hoo! Yoo hoo!” Maeve calls out from the door of her art studio. Harrison tumbles out of the car, arms and legs flying as he makes his way through the knee-high grass to Aunt Maeve.

“Watch the gopher holes!” yells Delma just as Harrison trips and falls out of sight.

Popping open the back of the SUV, Ross unloads the suitcases. Not as many as in previous years. It’s down to a science. Just the necessities. Maeve has everything else. River trekking shoes? Aunt Maeve. Garden overalls? Aunt Maeve. Riding boots? Aunt Maeve.

“And all toys and electronics are to be left at home,” were Maeve’s instructions that first year. Aunt Maeve has endless entertainment: bicycles, fishing poles, binoculars, bug jars, art supplies, garden tools, kayaks, books, star charts, tide charts, cooking supplies, ping pong, camping gear, a horse—and interesting friends.

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“Caitlin, can you carry your bag up to your room?” asks Ross.

“Okay.” Caitlin knows the routine. Take the bags to the room, then meet in the kitchen. She grabs her pillow and bag, walks through the kitchen door and up the back stairs to the yellow bedroom that overlooks the horse pasture. As she sets her pillow on the bed, she notices that Maeve has placed pink Cosmos on the antique oak dresser. Caitlin loves her room. The pale yellow walls and creamy white wood trim make her feel happy. A floral-print rug warms the wood floor between the dresser and antique iron bed. Her hats spill from their racks to the floor in the corner. But her favorite thing about her room is the feather mattress. She can’t tell if she sinks into it or if it fluffs up around her. It really doesn’t matter. Either way, it hugs her.

“Caitlin, are you done up there?” Delma calls out.



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“Yeah. I’ll be right down.” Caitlin catches her reflection in the six-foot mirror that leans against the wall by the door. “Yeah. Okay, I see you,” Caitlin says.

She’s never happy with the way she looks. Maybe it’s her dark auburn hair that has a mind of its own. Kids love to pick on redheads. “Hey Red!” And old ladies always fawn over her. “Ooooo, what beautiful red hair!” Or maybe it’s her blue-green eyes that *really* stand out against her red hair. “Hey, are you Irish?” Or maybe her milky pale skin with just a hint of freckles. “Hey, you must be Irish!”

“Caitlin, are you coming?”

“Coming!”

Caitlin bounds down the stairs, skips the last two, and lands with a soft thud on the back of Maeve’s giant black Newfoundland dog.

“Padraig! I’ve missed you!” says Caitlin as she hugs his massive neck.

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“He’s missed you, too,” replies Aunt Maeve. “I swear he knows when you’re coming. Two days ago he began walking down the drive and laying by the gate. Waiting for you, I think.” Maeve has lunch set out on the kitchen table: egg salad sandwiches, celery and carrot sticks, fresh apple juice, and home-baked peanut butter cookies.

“Caitlin, can you find your brother? It looks like lunch is ready,” says Delma.

“We’ll both go. Come along Caitlin,” replies Aunt Maeve. “Bring Paddy with you.” Maeve washes her hands with her favorite lavender soap before opening the screen door to the back porch and going down the stairs to the grassy yard.

Once outside, Aunt Maeve gives Caitlin her traditional welcome. Years ago they started the ritual. First, they wrap their arms around each other and squeeze—hard. Second, a kiss on each cheek. Third, they place their hands on the other’s arms and look each other over, carefully noting the changes from the previous year.

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Fourth, they link hands and spin round and round, giggling and laughing until they can't continue a minute longer, all the while under the scrutiny of Paddy.

"Well, I must say..." states Aunt Maeve, "...you're coming along quite nicely!"

"Oh please!" laughs Caitlin.

"What, you want me to say that you're in a complete state of disrepair?"

"Well, no."

"Then graciously accept a compliment when received, but no gloating!"

"Okay."

"So where *is* that brother of yours anyway?" Maeve puzzles.

Padraig bounds off ahead as Caitlin and Maeve walk arm in arm across the yard in search of Harrison. Maeve is Delma's younger sister by ten years and, whereas Delma's hair matches Caitlin's dark auburn mane, Maeve's hair is light making her appear much younger

than her twenty-seven years. Once an irritation, now an accepted occurrence, Caitlin is often mistaken as Aunt Maeve's younger sister.

Maeve's strawberry-blond hair is pulled back in her trademark ponytail. Her blue-gray eyes change color with the daily sweater, today teal, which she wears over faded jeans. Aunt Maeve must have twenty pairs of jeans: faded jeans, indigo jeans, stone-washed jeans, white jeans, torn jeans, paint-splattered jeans. They're 'her uniform.'

"There he is!" says Caitlin. "Over by the chicken coop."

"I should have known. He loves those chickens," replies Maeve. Trudging up the path to the coop, they notice that Paddy long ago found Harrison and has engaged him in a wrestling match that has the chickens in quite an uproar.

"Harrison, lunch is ready. Why don't you let those chickens out to roam?" says Maeve.

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Tearing himself away from Paddy's slobber, Harrison replies, "Okay." and unlatches the gate to the coop. The hens scurry out, happy to hunt for bugs in the garden while the humans return to the kitchen to eat egg salad sandwiches.

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The three stand on the front porch waving good-bye to Delma and Ross. Padraig watches the car as it rolls down the drive, hesitates, and turns left onto the country road. Soon it will be on the coast highway that leads to the redwood forest, and the vineyards, and the freeway, and The City.

"What shall we do first?" asks Aunt Maeve.

"Catch bugs!" squeals Harrison as he jumps up and down.

"Ride Iona," Caitlin adds calmly.

"We'll do both," states Aunt Maeve. "Harrison, get the bug gear. You know where it is. Caitlin, I'll meet you

in the barn." And with that, Maeve turns and walks into the house.

"I win. We're catching bugs!" yells Harrison as he darts off to collect his gear.

"Great," says Caitlin. "He's going to smell like dirt *and* bugs! Come along Paddy, let's saddle Iona."

Aunt Maeve got Iona as a filly. She's sixteen now. She named her after a tiny sacred island known for its beauty, which lies in the sea between Ireland and Scotland. Turquoise-blue waters lap the sugar-white sand beaches that nestle between slate-gray rocks on the isle of Iona. Iona, the mare, is slate gray and, when the sun strikes her just the right way, her shiny coat reveals a dappling that looks like a dark ocean, calm just before a storm. Her mane and tail are sugar white, and she has four white socks and a wide white blaze.

From her pasture, Iona sees Caitlin, lifts her head suddenly, and calls out with a gleeful whinny. Caitlin mimics the whinny as they both break into a trot.

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“Hi Iona, I missed you so much!” coos Caitlin. Iona answers with a low, throaty rumble. “We’re going for a walk!” Caitlin replies and squeezes through the pass-through. Iona follows her to the barn. A quick brush, hooves cleaned, saddle on, bit in, and they’re ready, just in time to meet Maeve and Harrison by the gate. Aunt Maeve has fitted Paddy with his dog pack, stuffed with snacks, water, cell phone, and first aid kit. “You can’t be too prepared, but you can be too careful!” Maeve’s been known to say.

“Perfect. Looks like we’re all set. Where to?” asks Maeve.

“The meadow!” yells Harrison.

“I’d like to go to the stream,” replies Caitlin.

“The stream then.”

“But what about the meadow?” Harrison whines. He’s anxious to start his hunt.

“Better bugs at the stream,” replies Aunt Maeve. “Leg up?” Maeve asks Caitlin.

"Please." And they're off.

Paddy leads the procession, followed by Harrison, Aunt Maeve, and Caitlin on Iona. From time to time Harrison drops to the ground, rummages in his canvas bag, and pulls out a thick magnifying glass. Carefully parting the summer grass he bends low, butt up (like a stink bug himself) and surveys the hidden world between the blades.

Harrison can't remember when he first became interested in bugs. He just knows that bugs fascinate him. He feels like he's looking into a secret world whenever he lifts up a stone and finds a little village of pillbugs.

"Paddy, keep him company. Catch up as you can, Harrison," Maeve calls out as they continue down the path to the stream.

"Okay," he replies, and he returns to his investigation.

Brown summer grasses rustle against their legs. The strip of blue ocean off to their right sparkles in the sun.



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Birds chirp and flit from bush to bush while a hum of crickets plays in the background. A grove of evergreens ahead marks the fork in the path that will take them to the stream.

"Here he comes," says Caitlin.

"Good."

"Look what I found!" Harrison sputters as he holds up his jar.

"Let's see," Aunt Maeve says, bending down to get a closer look. "How interesting. I've never seen a bug like that."

"See! See!" yells Harrison, jumping up and down to show Caitlin.

"I don't *want* to see it!"

"But it's *weird!*" he insists.

"I don't care."

"That's okay, Harrison. Put it in your bag. You can take it home," replies Maeve. Harrison mumbles

something, stuffs the jar in his bag, and the parade moves on.

As they step from the sunlit path into the grove they exchange one world for another. Cool dark air greets them, quiet engulfs them, and soft evergreen needles cushion their footfalls. Even Harrison succumbs to the mood, walking peacefully, not talking, along the path.

Deeper into the grove they go, guided by a faint gurgling, the path lit by beams of sunlight. Before long the trail opens up onto a sandy bar, the trees overhead part, and light pours down onto the trickling stream.

“We’re here!” exclaims Maeve.

“What’s happened to the stream?” asks Caitlin. “It’s so puny.”

“Dry winter. Not much water,” replies Aunt Maeve, matter of factly. Harrison is already searching for crawdads before Caitlin has Iona tied to a nearby branch.

“It doesn’t even look the same. I don’t remember this beach being here,” complains Caitlin.

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“No. That used to be under water.”

“Can we still go fishing?” asks Caitlin.

“I’m not sure. I’ll ask The Whistler,” says Maeve.

The Whistler works at a local B&B and lives down the road from Maeve. He knows everything about the village: who’s sick, who has the best tomatoes, what books are on sale at the local bookstore, and where the fish are biting.

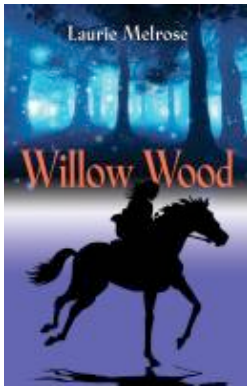
Maeve removes Paddy’s pack, pulls out a blanket, and lays it over the sand. Drawing pads, colored pencils, kneaded erasers, dried fruit, bottled water, almonds, apples, and two carrots follow. All are tossed on top of the blanket. Maeve drops onto the fuchsia square, rolls onto her back, and looks up through the branches to the sky above.

“How lovely,” she sighs.

“Lovely,” adds Caitlin as she lies down next to her.

For the longest time they watch insects dance in the sunbeams.





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