

# WYNN IN THE WILLOWS

Robin Shope

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## **WYNN IN THE WILLOWS**

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## Dedication

To my beloved children Kimberly and Matthew, and  
my beloved grandchildren Kingston and Karter. Also  
dedicated to You. It has always been You.



## Praise

"Robin Shope continues to write captivating books. She is at her best with multi-layered characters." ~ Kyle Saylors, TV producer

"If I were doling out stars, I would give Robin Shope's books five stars!" ~ Loree Lough, author

"Robin writes the most poignant stories I have run across in years. The words sing in your heart and summon you to a deeper, nobler existence." ~ Kathi Macias, author



# Prologue

Wynn Baxter considered life a series of birthday presents. Some she grew out of like a pair of jeans, or purple hair. Some presents came wrapped in paper, but once the paper was removed, she'd know in a glance if she loved it or hated it. The very worst gifts came unexpectedly and stuck around for a lifetime, such as the memory of her father lying in his casket on her sixth birthday, and her mother taking off.

Her mother, Ruth, suddenly developed an inexplicable burden for the Pygmies of the Ituri Forest in Central Africa.

Who knew? Certainly not Wynn. Not Grammy or Gramps, either. Not even her mother's twin sister, Roxie. But her mom was gone and quickly dubbed as the black sheep of the family.

After that, Wynn was referred to as the lost lamb.  
That was twenty years ago.

# 1

*"For whatever we lose (like a you or a me) it's always ourselves we find in the sea." ~ Frederic D. Oberland*

Wynn smiled. It was early morning, plenty of time for birding. Her backpack was fully equipped, packed with binoculars, cameras, and the basics for fieldwork. She added a logbook and electronic tablet from the desk, cradling it between the soft pads in the pack, and then drew one of the arm straps over her left shoulder. Outside, she walked down the tree-shaded path to her Aunt Roxie's cottage.

A flicker of wings caught her attention. A Kirtland's warbler darted back into the island's foliage.

Wynn cupped hands over her eyes, but she didn't see the bird now. As soon as she could make an entry into her Life List she'd note its sighting.

Just ahead was her destination, a blue clapboard cottage trimmed with white shutters and heart cutouts. Wynn zigzagged across the yard to keep from bumping her head into all the birdhouses hanging from tree limbs.

People talking rolled from one end of the porch to the other. Through the wavy, old glass she saw that Aunt Roxie's Bible Club was in session. Wynn had assumed the club would meet later in the day. What should she do?

She'd simply go birding alone.



The sun stretched a welcoming pool of light across the front lawn. Twenty feet below the granite cliffs was Lake Michigan, turquoise blue and white capped today. The island ferry was moving down the shore to dock at the Yacht Club, blowing its horn in salutation, announcing its impending arrival.

Wynn paused at the sound of her aunt's angry voice through the open windows, "Stop it, stop it! Think about what you're saying for once, will you? Every time you bring up that subject, it does nothing but stir up trouble on the island for many of us old timers who've experienced similar situations. My niece sure can't find out about what I did. It's taken me years to get her back here and I won't let you, or anyone else, ruin my plan. Promise me, no more talk about it! Ladies? Promise me."

A flood of agreements followed.

Ruin her plan? What was Aunt Roxie talking about?

Wynn ducked her head. Too late.

"Wynn, is that you? Wynn! Come inside and meet my friends."

"I'm coming!" Wynn called.

The door opened with a whine of complaint.

Five female Bible club members got their good first look at the island's latest summer tenant.

Wynn's large eyes, the color of wet green leaves, stared back. With that, the day took a new direction.

"Ladies, I want you to meet my niece, Wynn Baxter." Roxie announced a bit too cheerfully. "She's staying in my garage apartment. Lemonade, dear?" Still clearly upset, she forced a wide smile while holding up a pitcher loaded with ice cubes and fat lemon wedges.

"Sure." Wynn answered as she slipped into one of the wicker chairs. She awkwardly pulled at the strap on her backpack. "Sorry, I forgot today was your Bible club. I came to ask you to go birding with me. But I can go alone."

"Nonsense, we'll go birding another day. We're glad you're here, aren't we, ladies?" Aunt Roxie asked, quickly obligating Wynn to stay by handing her a glass. "If you had come earlier, you could have joined our meeting. Now we're to the eating part. You must stay and get to know everyone."

"I don't know how to play bridge, but I sure know how to eat. I've come at the right time." Wynn took a long sip.

The women chuckled and nudged each other as though they shared some private joke; what had Roxie told them about her?

"What's so funny?"

"We don't actually play bridge, my dear. Our official name is Bridge Over Troubled Waters Ladies Club. Quite a mouthful, I know. You see, God is our bridge and the troubled waters are life. And here we are...the ladies!" Roxie curtsied.

"Ahhh. I see." Wynn smiled at them.

"How are you enjoying your time here on the island, Wynn?" A blonde woman asked just as her cell phone played. "Sorry...I have to answer this call." Turning her back she flitted to the far end of the porch.

"I just had an idea!" a blue-jeaned lady said. "How about we all plan a girl's day together with Wynn to get to know her better?"

"Ladies, although I'm overjoyed to have my niece with me, Wynn's real purpose here is to study plant life. She has no time for socializing, at all. But before

she leafs in the fall, I'm hoping she'll cure my rose's mold problem. Get it? Before she leafs in the fall?" Roxie chortled.

"Actually, I'm here on a grant from the University of Wisconsin to create a record of the island's rare plant species. I'm also interested in learning more about the aquatic life. They're all inter-related." Wynn threaded her fingers together. "And, as for your rose mold problem, Aunt Roxie, try mixing two tablespoons of fine horticultural oil with one tablespoon mild dish soap and a large tablespoon of baking soda. Mix with one gallon of water and stir until it's dissolved. A clean paint brush is ideal to apply the mixture."

"God blessed my twin sister with a smart child, didn't He?" Smiling broadly, Roxie kissed the top of her niece's head.

"And what a dark-haired Irish beauty she is, too."

"Ladies, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourselves to Wynn?"

"Me first! Hello Wynn, I'm..."

"Sheri," Wynn interrupted with a smile.

"How did you ever know? Did someone tell you my name? Don't tell me you are psychic? Not that I believe in those sort of things, oh no...I do not."

Wynn pointed at the nametag pinned to her blouse.

"Oh, you!" Sheri laughed.

"Sheri Mills runs one of the island's most popular tourist shops," Roxie said.

"Maybe you've seen it? We're right on the beach and its shrimpy pink."

"Hard to miss," Wynn said, remembering the building.

"Thank you. We sell souvenirs, postcards, straw

hats, and wild t-shirts, among other trinkets." Sheri wiggled her gray eyebrows. "If you drop by sometime, I'll give you a beach snow globe."

"Wynn, it's such a blessing to meet you. I'm Faith. Here, try one of my éclairs." The cell-phone lady had ended her call and now held out a platter.

"Sure. Thanks, Faith." Wynn slipped one onto a china plate circled in pink roses. "They look wonderful. Homemade?"

"Nothing but!"

"Faith Montgomery bakes heavenly desserts when she isn't selling real-estate," said a large woman in a flowered caftan.

"I give all the glory to God. And praise the Lord, these days, real-estate is sizzling on the island. Tourist money just keeps rolling in on the waves." Faith's cell rang again. "See what I mean? Pass these out for me, will you, Wynn?" Faith handed the platter to Wynn as she answered the cell. Her voice faded as she walked away.

Steadying the platter with one hand, Wynn set her éclair back on her plate and began serving the women.

"I better pass on those éclairs, Wynn. My clothes are starting to get a bit tight." A petite brunette tugged at the waist of her linen capris. "I'm Jackie Bennett. My husband is in the import business. We live in a mid-century house above the granite cliffs. Perhaps you've seen it. It's the best house on the island with the loveliest gardens, thanks to Owl's nephew, Doug Reed."

"It's nice to meet you." Wynn smiled.

"When is Boone due back from his business trip to...where did you say he was?" Sheri asked Jackie.

"Boone went to Nepal this time," Jackie answered.

“Right now, he’s most likely trudging down the Himalayan slopes alongside Sherpas who are loaded down with rare Asian artifacts for his business, and for me—of course. Communication is nonexistent when he is out so far, but he managed to find a cyber café in Kathmandu, where he emailed me to say he would be home soon. I can’t wait. It’s hard sleeping without him right beside me.”

Wynn handed the empty tray to Roxie and returned to finish her éclair, but it was gone.

“I think you’ve met everyone except for Wilda.” Roxie referred to the woman in a flowing caftan, who was busily devouring both her dessert and Wynn’s.

“Most people call me Owl.”

“Isn’t that my éclair?” Wynn pointed.

“Of course it is. Owl always finishes what we leave behind,” Roxie whispered to Wynn in an informative tone.

Owl licked her fingers. “Yes, I do. I hate waste. Waste not, want not. And I also like to register my opinion, Wynn. People know this and come to me for advice. You might do well to remember that.”

“Undoubtedly, I will.”

“Since you’re new to the island, let me tell you about its history and some of its mysteries. I’m known around these parts for shooting from the lips because I say things straight out. It’s the only way to be.”

Wynn rubbed her temples against a migraine. The unexpected calling of a nearby loon eased the pain. Now if she could just see the bird. Dare she go for the binoculars inside her backpack?

As if sensing her discontent, Roxie scooted her chair closer to Wynn, and patted her hand to get her attention.

"I bet this is a fascinating story. Tell me every detail," Wynn prodded, hoping to please Roxie.

"I will." Owl began, "In the late 1800's my ancestors, Joseph and Anna Reed, bought the string of Willow Islands and built a mansion on the south end of this one. It was real fancy, no doubt about it. Italian plasterers did the first floor walls. Not only were there European imported marble fireplaces, but also marble windowsills a foot wide. Anna wouldn't have any but the very best wallpaper for the second floor, and every piece of furniture was handmade to her specifications. It took four years to build the manor, and six months more just to ferry over all their furnishings from Egg Harbor.

"But then tragedy struck and what happened next has affected the island to this very day. Because of it, there are those who refuse to take a step onto the island for fear of..."

Nonchalantly, Roxie reached out and pinched a flap of skin on Owl's arm.

"Ouch!" Owl cried rubbing the red mark. "Roxie! Why did you do that?"

"There was a crumb on your arm I was trying to brush away. Sorry Owl." Roxie excused herself and left the room.

Wynn wondered what had just happened. Had Roxie warned Owl in some way to keep her from continuing the story?

Owl grew silent, as if in a trance, and then the words poured from her lips like a stream down a mountain. "On the Reed family's last trip to the island before winter set in, the boat capsized in a horrific storm. Anna was able to save her two little boys, James and Joel, but her husband drowned and his body was

never found. Anna searched the shoreline for years hoping her husband's body would someday wash up so she could give him a good Christian burial. It never did." Owl leaned forward. "For many years this island was referred to as...Widow Island. There's been a curse on the island ever since. Like a summer cold, only some residents get it."

"A curse?" Wynn asked, intrigued.

Maybe this quiet island had some mystery, after all.

## 2

The air was fragrant with lilac. Bits of sky could be seen through the throng of summer leaves where a mosaic in blue and green shifted gently in the wind. A squirrel bounded across a limb, its thick tail raised.

Wynn hadn't told Aunt Roxie she'd come home to find out what really happened to her dad. She was brought back to the present by Owl's voice.

"I'll explain the circumstances." Owl took the last sip of her lemonade.

Roxie brought a new plate of éclairs out and held it in front of Owl. "All these are for you, Owl. Eat them while they're still fresh."

"Ohh-h, Rox-ie! Thank you!"

Wynn pulled on a tendril of hair.

Aunt Roxie was keeping Owl from talking about the tragedy.

After her grandparents moved Wynn off the island, she'd never had a chance to really get to know Aunt Roxie. On the day of Wynn's high school graduation, a letter arrived with a fat check inside. It was enough to pay for her entire college education and then some. And now, Roxie opened her home to Wynn for the summer.

Wynn jumped at the chance to know her family better.

Only now it seemed her aunt was hiding something. Could Roxie be trusted, or not?



"What were you saying, Owl?" Wynn prodded, leaning forward.

Much to her chagrin, Owl's mouth was filled with creamy éclair. She pointed at her sealed lips. But those éclairs wouldn't last forever.

Wynn could wait her out.

Faith returned, rewinding the conversation. "How long ago was the name changed from Widow Island to Willow Island, Owl?" she asked.

Owl swallowed hard. "It's been about fifty years now. I was in fifth grade at the time." She picked up her empty glass. "I'll need more lemonade, Roxie, if I'm going to finish telling the story properly."

Roxie poured lemonade to the rim, squeezed extra lemon into the glass, and then handed it back.

Owl slugged down a few inches of lemonade, puckered, and coughed. "That tastes a bit more sour than my last glass...I can hardly speak."

"Then I'll finish the story," Roxie happily cut in. "Where were you? Oh yes, the island officials felt the name change was better for tourism."

"And it certainly worked!" Faith agreed. "The prices of cottages on this island have skyrocketed in the last twenty years. See Jackie? You aren't the only wealthy woman here."

"Girls, girls, be nice," Roxie scolded. Her face flushed nearly the same color red as her hair. "This is Wynn's first club meeting with us, and you don't want her to hear us bickering already, do you?"

"Of course not." Jackie and Faith agreed in unison.

Wynn moved to a chair closer to Owl. "So what became of the Reed mansion? Does anyone live there now?"

"Oh yes, it's become an icon of Willow Island!

About thirty years ago Joel Reed's grandson sold it and the new owners made it into a bed and breakfast. The old Reed Mansion is once again a showplace. Wynn, you must visit it. They have a wonderful chef, who is none other than Faith's brother. Also, the vistas of Lake Michigan from the verandas are gorgeous. That alone is worth the price of a meal, although I must admit Roxie's view is almost as breathtaking."

"My vistas are even more breathtaking," Jackie interrupted.

"Instead of a girl's day out, let's hold our next Bible club meeting at the Willow Inn and afterwards have brunch," Sheri suggested.

"Good idea. I'll text my brother right now with the reservations." Faith went for her phone. "I'll also ask Frank to personally prepare our meal."

"I just remembered. Wynn has a birthday coming up. Let's celebrate it at our next Bible club," Roxie said. "I'd never forget your special day. We must celebrate it in high style to make up for all the birthdays we weren't together."

"No, no!" The last thing she wanted was birthday recognition. Celebrating would be pure torture. Wynn always spent it in her own way, and it usually involved exploring waterways.

"What a wonderful idea. I'll have Frank bake you a cake, too. Is chocolate OK?" Faith began texting.

"Roxie, please don't..." Wynn had terrible visions of someone walking in with a chocolate cake while the servers sang to her, holding balloons.

Maybe there'd even be a red-nosed, freakish clown in the vicinity. Everyone would turn and look at her. Nightmares were made of this. It was hard focusing on the conversation while trying to figure out a way to get

out of attending her birthday bash. Suddenly she knew what she'd do. She'd call in sick.

"Pay attention, Wynn," Aunt Roxie nudged her. "Owl is asking you a question."

"Oh, sorry...what did you say?"

"I said, do you know that people still dig through the sand trying to uncover poor Joseph Reed?" Owl's eyes widened for emphasis.

"You're kidding."

"When you go to the beach Wynn, you'll see cute police signs that say, 'No digging for Joseph Reed'," Sheri said.

"That's actually a problem?" Wynn asked.

"Oh, yes indeed, we've lost shoreline because of it. Digging used to be one of the island's tourist draws, but now it garnishes a hefty fine."

"That's right. Thanks to my nephew's complaints to the town board," Owl pointed out. "He is concerned about the damage to the island."

"I see him out in his sailboat quite often," Jackie commented. "Last summer he took Boone, his mother, sister, and me out on it for the day."

"Isn't it a sloop?" Faith asked.

"No, a schooner." Owl corrected and continued with her story. "Anna grew to be an old woman on this island and never remarried. Poor thing."

"Her two sons went to boarding school on the mainland." Roxie said impatiently. "End of story."

"One of them remained there and lost his inheritance as a result. The other child, Joel, came back and never left," Owl said.

"True and he built a lovely home just down the road from here. But have you noticed the newest residents painted it an awful shade of ochre? It's the

only house on Zoha Lane. It's much smaller than the grand mansion, of course, but still quite nice." Faith stated.

"Zoha Lane? Isn't that the house where my parents and I once lived, Aunt Roxie?" Wynn asked as a long ago memory floated to the surface.

"Oh," said Roxie. "Yes, I believe it was."

"Your family once lived in the Reed house?" Faith nearly came up off her chair with curiosity.

Wynn opened her mouth to answer, but Roxie took over. "Yes, but they decided to move away. We're fresh out of éclairs, but there's more lemonade. Anyone?"

"We moved after my dad died." *Instead of my sixth birthday party, there was a funeral.* But Wynn didn't say that out loud.

"Your dad?" Owl asked.

"Yes, he ran a greeting card shop on the beach. My mother sold it. We left the island." Wynn wanted to know more about the mystery. "Earlier, you said something about a curse."

"Don't pay any attention to that kind of talk, Wynn. The Bible speaks against it. There's no such thing as curses, and it'll just upset you, and drive down the real-estate prices." Faith's phone rang again. "OK, that's it ladies, I really have to be getting back to the office now." She picked up her briefcase, tucking the cell against her chin. "Hello? I'm on my way to the office this moment." Faith closed her call. "Wynn, I enjoyed meeting you. If you ever decide to make Willow Island your residence, I have a listing you might be interested in seeing...just don't wait too long."

"Thanks, but I'm quite content staying in Aunt Roxie's tree house."

“You’re staying in a tree house?” Faith’s hand fluttered.

“It’s actually Aunt Roxie’s efficiency apartment over the garage, but its tree top level. It’s my tree house.”

“You and I are going to be great friends, I can tell.” Faith hurried out the porch door.

Faith’s departure created a domino effect. They hugged Wynn one by one, calling her a blessing.

Wynn felt their sincerity. She now belonged to the Bridge Over Troubled Waters Ladies Club.