

# Prologue

## Where Dark Forces Gather

Long Ago...

Willow was a grounded person; not given to ethereal ideas and genuinely in touch with the natural forces that surrounded her. She wasn't easily spooked and could certainly deal with any genuine threat. Strange, then, that she felt unnervingly afraid; though of what she couldn't say. Stranger still, that she sought protection to guard her home from those who might try to take it from her or lay claim to it after her time.

She had ordered, from a specialist craftsman, an exact replica model of her home and when it was delivered she was truly overwhelmed by its detail. It really was quite remarkable. She instructed the delivery men to carry the house into the entrance hall and place it in the centre of the tiled floor, almost covering the large, inlaid pentacle; a five-pointed star inside a brass-edged circle that dominated the spacious floor. The men seemed confused that she wanted the big, heavy piece left in the middle of the hallway. They seemed quite intent on carrying it to the corner of a room and setting it on its stand. She did, however, allow them to carry the stand through and place it in the room that would become its eventual home. She barely acknowledged their comments about the useful cupboard underneath where she could store the furniture and accessories that she would no doubt acquire for the house over time.

Willow watched the van begin the long drive back down to the road and then closed the heavy, oak door. She walked straight across the hall to a narrow side table and picked up a small wicker basket containing a piece of charcoal, a candle, matches, assorted crystals and gemstones, a thurible with dried sage leaves inside, a small black book and a roughly-made wooden doll. She placed the items down in front of the house and using the charcoal, drew a large circle on the floor around the entire house, keeping herself within the perimeter

and making sure she joined up the two ends to complete the ring. She lit the candle and burned the sage leaves to purify the area, then placed the crystals and gemstones in carefully measured positions around the edge of the circle. She put the wooden doll in the main bedroom of the model house, then, finally, she opened the book.

Before reading, she sat for a few minutes and meditated quietly in the circle, clearing her mind of all other matters so that she could concentrate on the job in hand. When she was ready, she picked up the book, stood up and read the words aloud; the sound came from her voice, but the sentiment from her heart. For a moment nothing happened and then came a brilliant flash of lightning, a loud roll of thunder and in true dramatic style a window was blown open by the force of the wind and the candle was extinguished in the icy rush of air. Willow was knocked to the floor by an unseen force and lay motionless inside the circle. When she finally opened her eyes, she felt the stillness of the house, breathing-in its silence, with only the gentle, rhythmic sound of the nearby grandfather clock that ticked in perfect time with her heart.

Feeling calmer and at peace, she sat up and looked at the house. It had come to life, with smoke drifting softly from its chimneys and from inside its miniature hallway, the ticking of its very own grandfather clock marking time. Putting her ear to the chest of the small wooden doll she could hear the soft, shallow sound of breathing. Willow needed no further proof. Happy that she had done what was necessary to safeguard her home, she would use the talisman as a doll's house to hold and protect her secrets, in full view of the one that she knew would one day come seeking to possess them.

# Chapter One

## The Demise of Willow Pendragon

Thursday, 31st October 2002

Dorcas Sharpe inhaled deeply as he picked up the receiver of the ringing telephone, knowing this was the call he had been waiting for. Fighting to retain his composure, he said quietly, “we’ll come right away. Thank you for letting me know.”

Slowly replacing the receiver into its cradle, he turned to his wife and father standing beside him. His father, Ambrose, had a look of sadness behind his blank, flat gaze. A crushing inevitability coupled with a deep, long-suffering regret. In contrast, Anna had a sparkle in her eyes that Dorcas hadn’t seen since the very earliest days of their relationship. She, too, had been waiting for this day since their wedding four years ago.

“The hospital,” he confirmed softly, “we need to get there now.”

In silence and without any sense of urgency the trio prepared to leave the house. They gathered coats and scarves, turned off lights and checked doors were locked. Soon they were together in the large entrance hall, wrapping up against the chill of the cold Halloween afternoon.

They stepped out into the biting air and Ambrose stood watching his own breath, realising he was breathing just a little faster than usual and aware of his heart thumping rapidly within his ribcage. Dorcas locked the large, solid oak door and together they descended the steps down onto the gravel of the driveway, Ambrose using the iron handrail to steady himself.

Dorcas squeezed his heavy frame behind the steering wheel and connected his seatbelt. Ambrose sat beside him while Anna struggled with a twisted seatbelt behind her father-in-law. Without waiting for them to buckle up Dorcas started the engine and turned the car around before beginning the half mile journey along the pretty winding drive

down to the road. Anna glanced up at the stately dimensions of the house before it disappeared from view. Dorcas had first brought her to Amberley Heights some five years earlier to meet his aging aunt and she had fallen in love with it on sight. She had known, even then, that the visit was not really to seek the approval of his elderly benefactor, but rather to ensure a positive response when he asked for her hand in marriage a couple of months later.

After twenty minutes the car pulled into the hospital car park. The cold north-easterly wind had blown in black rain clouds and the fine drizzle that had begun a few minutes ago had given way to a downpour. With the windscreen wipers set at double speed they struggled to cope and Dorcas could barely see as he attempted to reverse into a space.

“Dorcas, just drive straight in to it, will you? We might not have much time. Worry about getting out later when there’s no hurry,” snapped his father.

Dorcas did as he was bid. This was neither the time nor the place for an argument, so he let the comment go. He despised his father above all, but he could wait just a little longer. Before the night was out the tables would turn and for the first time Dorcas would have the upper hand.

Without speaking the family hurried out of the rain into the main entrance of the hospital. It was alive with people and noise, the bright fluorescent lighting harsh against the fading light outside. There were children in Halloween costumes in the waiting area; clearly one of their chums has suffered an injury during their ‘trick or treat’ revelry. Closely dodging a three foot pumpkin and a slightly taller Gandalf, Ambrose leant against the wall as they waited for the lift. Its arrival was heralded by a loud bell and a smooth female voice announced that the lift had arrived at the ground floor.

They travelled up to the fourth level and along the corridor to Ward 4E and waited outside the small side ward where Willow Pendragon lay dying. They were still wiping the antibacterial foam around their

hands when the nurse who had been attending the patient opened the door to leave.

“How is she?” ventured Anna. The nurse tried to smile in welcome, but it wouldn’t come. “It won’t be long now. I’m sorry,” she said softly. She added “Did Miss Pendragon have a faith at all? I can arrange a priest, vicar, rabbi...”

Dorcas considered this for a moment, and shot a look towards his father, whose eyes were saying no. Always one who wanted to be seen doing the right thing, in his heart Dorcas wanted a priest to come and absolve the old woman of her earthly sins. What harm could it do to have the Last Rites recited by a priest with a protective prayer to see her on her way? But he knew it would be the last thing Willow would have wanted. How ironic that his final act towards her would be one of thoughtful accord.

“No, thank you” he whispered, “Aunt Willow had...” he quickly corrected himself, “sorry, *has* very non-traditional beliefs and I don’t think she would want the presence of a priest.”

“Of course,” replied the nurse, “I will leave you to say your goodbyes. Let me know if you need me.”

“It’s her birthday today, did you know?” said Ambrose softly.

“No, I didn’t realise, though it will be on her records, of course. I’m so sorry.” What else could the nurse say?

“She’s in good company, you know. William Shakespeare and the artist Raphael, they both died on their birthdays, too.” Ambrose took out a handkerchief and blew his nose.

“Just ring the bell if you need anything. It’s the red switch at the head of the bed. I’m just down the hall,” the nurse said reassuringly, turning and walking silent towards her office.

Willow Pendragon was eighty years old and ready to die. She was frail and wrinkled, and bore little resemblance to the striking, if unconventional, beauty she had been for most of her life. Wisps of white hair had escaped from the long plait draped over her left shoulder. She wore a pale grey nightgown which matched almost exactly the colour of her complexion and on her right hand was the large amber ring that she was never seen without.

Ambrose saw Anna eyeing the ring and he sighed. She and Dorcas weren't here to say farewell to a beloved relative, they were only here for what they could get. He wasn't surprised. His son had been like that since the day he was born forty-five years ago, and he had truly married his other half. A decade younger, Anna was even more greedy and selfish than her husband.

Ambrose looked at Willow's face and took her hand. She was breathing quickly and he feared she wasn't just sleeping but had slipped into an unconsciousness from which she wouldn't awake. He willed her to open her eyes; once bright, vibrant green eyes that sparkled with life, but now faded and dull. Ambrose spoke her name but she didn't stir.

"They say the last sense to go is someone's hearing. You could try talking to her Ambrose, she might hear you," suggested Anna. Ambrose nodded, but struggled to think what to say. Anna could see he was finding it difficult and remembered Dorcas once telling her that his mother, Ambrose and Willow had all been great friends and had been inseparable for many years.

"Talk to her about your younger days. About Hazel," she prompted. The mention of his beloved wife was too much for Ambrose and his eyes glistened with tears, lips trembling.

"Willow?" he started, "I've been thinking a lot about you... about you, me and Hazel. You know, way back when, larking about in the boathouse and out on the lake. They really were the good old days, eh? When nothing else mattered, except a couple of bottles of something bubbly and a deck of cards..."

"That's it, Dad," cut in Dorcas, "make sure she's truly lost the will to live." He laughed cruelly at his own joke. Anna shot him a glance which said he's gone too far.

The nurse popped back a short time later to check that all was ok. She took Willow's pulse and dimmed the lights a little. It seemed to signify the beginning of the end. Her last minutes dragged slowly on, her breathing seemed to quicken, then falter, then start again a few times as though she were practising stopping altogether. When the end came, an hour or so after the family had arrived, it was quite

sudden and no-one seemed to notice that she had actually slipped away until a few seconds afterwards.

Ambrose called her name and looked at Dorcas. "I think she's gone, boy," he said, with a degree of panic in his voice.

"I'll get the nurse," Dorcas responded, rushing from the room.

Anna looked at Willow. She'd never watched anybody die before and she was trying to work out if Willow's spirit had now left her body to ascend to a better place. She concluded that Willow looked no different in death to how she had looked an hour ago. And that, Anna pondered, was rather something of an anti-climax.