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The Dragon Whistler

The Secrets of the Soul Treasures

Kimberly J. Smith

CHAPTER 1

THE MUSIC WAS everything and everything was the music. The lilting, hypnotic tune consumed Willow, freezing the world as if someone had pushed the pause button on reality. Notes poured out of the tiny whistle, hovering in the air around her like magical bubbles that floated up into the cornflower blue Colorado sky only to be popped by sharp rays of morning sunlight. She'd never felt a peace like this before, so serene and clear and focused—

And then the dragon blasted through the mountainside and everything became chaos.

Broadmoor Crest Park was a good five miles across the valley from Cheyenne Mountain, but the view from its plateau was spectacular, so Willow had a clear view of the massive explosion of rock and rubble as the enormous silver dragon escaped the mountain. It was all she could do to tear away her gaze to share shock with her cousin Ben. Both he and the unfamiliar teenage girl seemed just as stunned by the dragon's appearance as Willow, if the way their mouths hung open was any indication. Willow studied the girl's face, but she'd never seen her before. Her clothing was odd, like a costume, and her appearance was just as mysterious as the dragon's, even if not quite as dramatic. She had yelled at them as she ran up, though. Now that Willow thought about it, the girl had been yelling at Willow. Yelling at her to stop.

Stop what? She'd only been playing that whistle she and Ben had found in the old hotel near summer camp. What was so bad about that?

The dragon's bellow drove everything else from Willow's mind, the roar bending the air from foothills to park where the three of them stood in the dewy grass transfixed with horror, terror and, if Willow was honest about it, kind of a thrill, actually.

Two months short of her thirteenth birthday, Willow was too old to believe dragons existed outside of storybooks, movies or video games. But there was no doubt that a real, live, honest-to-goodness dragon flew over the valley below them, turning in graceful, terrifying circles.

Her brain zapped and sparked like a live wire, trying to reject what her eyes took in. One bellowing roar later and she surrendered to the truth.

It was there. It was real.

A DRAGON!

Willow wasn't sure if she actually screamed the words because, seriously, she couldn't even breathe and oxygen in your lungs was

essential to screaming. Unfortunately, her lungs felt packed with some kind of thick icy substance, like maybe that oozing stuff inside those blue ice pack things. It sure didn't feel like summer anymore, although the morning was a warm one for Colorado.

The dragon moved its wings forward, then back toward its long, spiky tail, propelling itself through the air like a missile. That's really not how I expected a dragon to fly, Willow thought. The movements reminded her of swimming more than flying. Except, of course, that the thing was flying. Except, of course, that the thing wasn't supposed to exist in the first place.

The air vibrated with another bellow. Willow clutched the thin, bone-white whistle hanging from the silk cord around her neck. "Noooooo! This can't be happening, it just can't!" the stranger moaned. She looked like she was probably in high school, maybe a little older. The girl buried her fingers in her long, dark hair like she might yank handfuls from her scalp, totally freaking out. She whirled on Willow. "This is your fault!"

Willow's stomach turned to water. "Me? Wh— what'd I do?"

The girl's expression shifted to grim determination. Her light brown skin flushed with angry red splotches. She glared at Willow with dark brown eyes, nothing but pupils. Instead of answering Willow's question, she grabbed her arm and shook her. "You did this. And you have to fix it."

"Get your hands off me!" Willow squawked, but the girl grabbed the whistle out of her hands. Something was going on with the black markings on its underside — glyphs Ben had called them. Whatever they were called, they now glowed a harsh, volcanic red. "Where did you get this?" the girl demanded.

"Leave Willow alone!" Ben spat, pulling at the girl's other arm. Willow had to admit, she was impressed. In the short time she'd spent with her cousin, she'd never heard him raise his voice before. Not like this, at least.

The girl turned her piercing gaze on Ben and he shrank back. So much for his protective side. "You have no idea what you're talking about." Her gaze returned to the whistle in Willow's hand, eyes closing in defeat like those glowing red glyphs confirmed her worst fears.

Then her eyes snapped open, flashing with anger. She spun Willow around, pointing her at the dragon soaring over the valley. "That dragon is awake because you woke her. Which means Willow here is the only one who can put her back to sleep." Heaving a deep sigh, the girl backpedaled, dialing it down from fury to plain old seething anger. With a hint of regret, she said, "Congratulations, Willow. You're a Dragon Whistler."

CHAPTER 2

ONE WEEK BEFORE a real, live dragon exploded out of Cheyenne Mountain and forever changed her life, not to mention the world, Willow pushed her back against the brick wall of the Shop N' Sell a few blocks from her house, hiding from the shop's owner, Mr. Botana.

She peeked around the corner of the building as Mr. Botana tossed a tattered cardboard box into the enormous metal dumpster. The old guy did this a few times a week: tossed unsold items from his pawnshop to make space for new items that had a better chance of selling. Willow grinned, hearing the box thump to the bottom of the dumpster. She'd arrived at exactly the right time to rescue the treasures from the landfill.

Willow had discovered a few gems among his trash in the past, like the leather-bound book of Grimm's fairy tales, and that set of vinyl albums by some old rock group named Led Zeppelin—not that she had a turntable to play them on, but her cousin Marcus told her vinyl was making a comeback, so she'd kept them. And what about that beat up, blue California license plate from 1974? How could Botana have tossed that one? It was practically an antique! Leftovers from other people's lives fascinated Willow. Who knew what amazing journeys had led those items to Mr. Botana's place? Willow loved imagining their stories.

Willow's mom didn't understand. She called it “poking through the trash” but in Willow's opinion the woman had no vision. No taste for adventure, either. The only spontaneous thing Amanda McLain had ever done in her life was marrying Willow's dad after dating him for under a month. Look where that got her: a quick trip to life as a single mom.

At least when Willow's dad left them he only moved across town. Not like the father of her bestie and treasure-hunting partner Emma. Her dad had moved to California. And now Emma was spending the summer away from her friends. At least Willow didn't have to do that.

She pulled open the side door of the dumpster but the box was too low for her to reach, so she was going to have to climb in. Not her favorite part, but sometimes necessary. She grabbed onto the dumpster's top edge, careful of where she put her fingers, avoiding any sharp, rusted metal. She swung herself through the opening and landed in a puddle of sludge, catching herself before she slipped and fell. How annoying. What was this slimy, nasty stuff, anyway? It stunk. Great, and now it was smeared all over the sides of her new black Chucks.

Mom would not be happy.

Willow pulled the box toward her, disappointed to find only a few sets of ripped-up sheets and some old tattered blankets.

“Great. Just ... great,” she muttered.

Her cell phone rang in her back pocket, her mom’s ring. Ever since she’d had an allergic reaction to a bee sting when she was seven, Willow’s mom wouldn’t let her out of the house without a cell phone and an EpiPen. The phone, so her mom could track her down if she was kidnapped or got lost, the EpiPen to save herself in case of anaphylactic shock.

Bees were most definitely not on Willow’s list of happy things. And unfortunately, they tended to hang around dumpsters. Just one more reason Mom hated her treasure hunting. But it was an occupational risk Willow was willing to take.

She adjusted the sports bag strapped across her back and tried to use her fingertips to remove her cell phone from the back pocket of her jeans. As careful as she was, she still ended up smearing a dark and oily patch on the hem of her red jersey. Dang it! The Bulls shirt was one of her favorites—a classic Michael Jordan, #23. Hopefully that nasty goop would come out in the wash. She flipped her long, strawberry-blonde ponytail to her opposite shoulder, and delicately held the phone to her ear with a grimace. “Hi, Mom,” she said like she had no idea why her mother would be calling.

“Why are you not home?” The chiding voice on the other end of the line demanded. “It’s nearly 12:20! Your father will be here to pick you and Ben up for camp in forty minutes and you haven’t even eaten lunch. And when are you planning to get your practicing done?”

Willow closed her eyes and sighed. “Sorry, Mom. Lost track of time.”

“I have told you a million times, that excuse is not going to fly anymore, young lady. Five minutes. If you’re not washed up and at the table in five minutes ...” She dangled the threat.

“On my way.” Willow crammed the phone back into her pocket, smearing even more goop. Climbing up on the box of sheets, she was able to reach the opening in the dumpster. Her mom was serious this time, she could tell. She’d find some “consequence” for Willow if she didn’t make it home in the allotted five minutes, no doubt.

Willow dropped to the ground, and sprinted out of the alley. She jogged down the cracked, uneven sidewalk, veering around the tall prickly weeds sprouting up through the concrete. Willow had made the ten-block run in two minutes before, but it was right before lunch and Willow’s energy tank was low. Running in sludgy Chucks was brewing a nasty blister, too, which wasn’t helping.

She should have been more careful about the time, especially after last night’s meltdown. Even after they’d made up, Mom had still tucked her

with the “I spent the last twelve years of my life putting up with attitude from your father and I refuse to put up with it from you” speech. Yes, Willow had inherited her smart mouth from her dad but why was a little attitude such a big deal? It sure wasn’t a reason to blow up the whole family. Seemed like when you said “for better or for worse” that meant you realized you were going to have to put up with a few things about the other person that might drive you nuts. Nobody was perfect, right?

If she went too far one day would Mom kick her out, too?

Music Camp was the first thing her mom and dad had agreed on in years. Dad was so proud she’d made first chair in Honor Orchestra and thought music was her “calling,” just like making movies was for him. Willow wasn’t so sure. Music Camp seemed like a waste of time since she was going to quit violin anyway. At least, she was going to as soon as she worked up the courage to tell her parents.

And then there was the whole Ben thing. Making him going to camp too just made the whole thing worse.

Willow’s Chucks pounded the sidewalk. She ran faster, her knees feeling every jolt.

Willow still hadn’t told her mom how she really felt about her uncle and cousins moving in with them. She barely knew them! And as if having two unfamiliar boys and their dad in the house wasn’t awful enough, now she had to spend a whole week at camp with one of them. It didn’t even seem like Ben wanted to go, but it was hard to tell because he was so darn quiet. Mom thought that since he played the drums he should go to Music Camp, too. He played the kettledrums. Who played the kettledrums in the sixth grade? He didn’t even seem that into the drums anyway. All he ever did was read his stupid fantasy books. Elves and warlocks and dragons. Ugh.

Such ugly thoughts made Willow feel horrible, but she couldn’t help it. Especially considering why her mom’s brother and his kids had to move in with them. But Willow didn’t want to end up babysitting her cousin, someone she barely knew, all week long. At home, she could avoid him pretty well, but she had a feeling it wouldn’t be that easy at camp.

Poor Ben. She really did feel sorry for him, what with Aunt Sarah dying and all. Hard to believe that was only a month ago. Getting over something like that would take, what? Forever? As much as her mom drove her mad, Willow couldn’t imagine life without her.

Uncle Josh was willing to rent the rooms and they could use the money right now. Plus, Uncle Josh could help out with Great Aunt Matilda, so the nurse only had to come half days. Willow knew home nurses cost a lot, but there was no way her mom could watch after Great Aunt Matilda and keep up with her job without some help.

Willow raced through the neighborhood, picking up speed the last block despite the painful blister on her right heel. When she reached the front steps of her house, she collapsed onto the grass, sucking air as she stared up at the blue sky.

Her house was so suburbia, but she loved it. Flanked by four tall pines, it felt cozy and warm. Sure it was smallish, but it had a second floor and a big front porch tucked beneath the roofline. A carpet of lush grass covered the front slope of lawn and a series of barberry bushes grew at the far edges of the porch. Her family had lived in Denver for a bit when she was a baby, but this house in Colorado Springs was the only home Willow had truly ever known.

Willow counted to three, steeling herself before bursting through the front door. "I'm home!" she called, making a beeline for the stairs. She'd beat the clock, now she just had to get cleaned up before her mother saw her messy clothes. Willow was almost to the top step when her mother appeared at the bottom. "Freeze!" she hollered. Willow froze and turned. Her mom held a fistful of paint swatches. About the size of bookmarks, the strips of paper showed a variety of shades of paint colors. Willow's mother freelanced for a bunch of companies, one of them a paint company. Naming paint colors was her latest assignment.

Jaw clenched, her mom's lips disappeared into a straight line. "What. Happened." It was a question, yet a statement. Willow was 100% certain it wouldn't matter one bit how she answered.

She was so busted.

"I ... fell?" Not her best attempt.

"Into the sewer?" Her mom's words sizzled the air.

"Not exactly ..."

Her mom waited for Willow to go on. "Your haircut looks great," Willow said, beaming a toothy smile. Her mom had had an appointment that morning, and it really did look good: bobbed at her chin with long bangs that flowed back from her forehead in luxurious blonde wisps. She'd begged Willow to go with her, but Willow refused to cut her hair until it got so long that she was sitting on it. "Okay, all right? I climbed into the dumpster behind Mr. Botana's place."

"Willow! You promised me you wouldn't go crawling into that germ-infested slime hole again!"

"I know, I know, but I missed Thursday because of all the camp shopping and packing and—" Willow's mouth snapped shut. Arguing was pointless. Her mother folded her tanned arms across her chest, a sure sign she was ticked off.

"No." The glare grew more intense, which hardly seemed possible. "No. No! NO! No more Mr. Botana's dumpster. No more Mrs. Eldberg's trash can. Or the Winstead's trash can. Or the entire neighborhood's trash

can!” Mom was headed for a full on freak out, and Willow knew only one thing would stop the madness—the thing that always worked, every single time, without fail.

Cue the waterworks.

Willow considered it a talent, her ability to cry on demand. Complete with real tears. Her nose even got all red and snotty, the key to making the performance truly convincing. Given how mad her mom was today, Willow threw in a few hitching sobs for good measure.

In seconds her mom was apologizing. “I’m sorry, sweetie. Sometimes I forget how much like your father you are.” Willow slunk down the steps into her outstretched arms, trying not to smile. With a squeeze, her mom released her, whipping the dishtowel from her shoulder to dab at Willow’s face. “Look ... the tears helped clean you up,” she cooed.

Willow allowed a timid smile, just enough to smooth things over. “They did?”

“Yes, see? Everything is fine. I’m sorry for yelling.”

“I forgive you. And don’t worry. Dad will understand.”

Her mom’s eyes turned cold and Willow felt the sinking rush of an epic fail.

Crimson crept up her mother’s neck and across her cheeks like in one of those old cartoons on Boomerang.

Stellar, Willow. A+ job.

“Shower, young lady. NOW.”

Young lady. That was never good.

“I didn’t mean I was going to tell him,” Willow protested.

“Oh no, of course not.” Her sarcasm popped like ice water on a hot frying pan. “Get moving. Ben is already packed and ready to go. Your dad will be here in thirty-five minutes. You haven’t practiced and you still have to eat. What kind of mother sends her daughter off to camp without food in her belly?”

Willow couldn’t let the opportunity pass. “A great one?” she said, summoning a hopeful smile to her face.

“No sucking up allowed,” her mother shot back, but Willow could tell she was fighting back a smile. “And make sure you packed your EpiPens.”

“Yes ma’am.” Willow pounded up the stairs. She didn’t understand why she had to practice today. She was going to Music Camp—she’d be practicing there all the time!

The room Ben shared with Marcus was at the top of the staircase, making it impossible to avoid him. He sprawled across his bed reading that ratty old book just like he did every day since he’d moved in. Willow could tell by the expression on his pale, freckled face that he’d overheard their entire conversation. The look in his eyes said he thought Willow was

a horrible person who didn't deserve to have a nice mother who cared about her whereabouts—a mom she didn't appreciate, when his mom was gone for good.

Guilt squeezed Willow's heart; a lump clogging up her throat, and the sick feeling in her gut had nothing to do with being late for lunch.

Her mom must have taken Ben with her to the salon because he had new hair. The cut was super short on the sides but long on top, flopping a bit over his hazel eyes. Sadly, it made him look even younger than his baby face already did. It was amazing the two of them were the same age. Ben had turned thirteen already and Willow would finally be an official teenager next month, but Ben looked two years younger than her. She towered over him by about a good inch and a half, and that had to drive him nuts.

"You're ready?" she asked, kneeling to untie the laces on her Chucks. They stunk something awful. A trip through the wash would most definitely be required before they'd be wearable again. Good thing she had a few back-up pairs. She pulled off the offending sneakers and tossed them into the hallway laundry chute. They clunked against the metal sides all the way to the basement. Willow imagined them landing squarely in the laundry basket but the plastic clatter that echoed up the chute told her they'd bounced out and tipped the basket over in the process. Another fail. She was on a roll this morning.

"Willow!" her mom yelled. "I told you not to do that!"

"Sorry, Mom!" she hollered down the stairs before turning back to Ben.

He stuck a finger in his book to mark his place. "Have any luck this morning?"

Guilt stabbed her in the gut again. She didn't ask Ben to go along because, well, she didn't think he could keep up and besides, it didn't seem like something he'd want to do anyway.

"Um, not really." Willow looked down at the mess on her shorts and jersey. "It looks more productive than it was."

Uncomfortable pause.

"Yeah, well ... guess I better go get cleaned up." Willow forced a smile.

"Right," Ben nodded, eyeing the black smear on her hip.

"Okay then," Willow said, turning away.

"Okay," said Ben, returning to his book.

Lunch suddenly sounded awful. She slipped into the bathroom and shut the door. As she waited for the shower to heat up, she tried to convince herself it was a good thing that Ben was going to camp with her.

She tried ... and failed.

Miserably.

CHAPTER 3

BEN COSGROVE KNEW his cousin Willow wished he wasn't going to camp with her. He wasn't exactly thrilled about it, either. He wasn't thrilled about anything life had served up lately. Losing his mom, moving to Colorado Springs from Texas, all of it made his head pound and his stomach ache. And now he was supposed to go away to camp for a week with someone who didn't really like him. What was Dad thinking?

After the funeral, he had sat Ben down and told him that, in time things would get better. Ben kept waiting for the getting better part to start, because it sure seemed like things had only gotten worse. He knew it wasn't easy on Willow either, what with the three of them moving in with them. But Ben had really tried to be friendly, even though he didn't feel like it. While she was almost always polite, Willow obviously wasn't happy about the whole thing. Those arguments with her mom happened all the time.

Things would be much easier if Willow and Ben hadn't been complete strangers to each other before now.

Dad wanted him to be patient; said he was sure to make tons of friends at camp and then at school come fall, but to be honest Ben didn't really want to make friends. Making friends meant talking to people, and he didn't feel much like doing that just yet. They would ask about his mom. What was he supposed to say, that some drunk idiot decided to drive the wrong way on the highway and ran straight into his mother's car? That would be a fun conversation. Then maybe they could talk about how he'd figured out that no amount of crying would bring his mom back. And that he missed her so much it was like acid burning a hole in his stomach every second of his life? He couldn't tell anyone all that. They'd think he was a crybaby. He'd probably get beat up or shoved into a few lockers to encourage him to man-up. Ben knew how these things went; he'd seen it happen millions of times to kids at his old school. If you showed weakness, the mean kids attacked. And right now, Ben was weak. Becoming invisible was his only hope of survival.

His dad, his brother Marcus, his books—those were the only things Ben had in his life that meant anything to him now. Reading helped him forget, if only for a little while. Especially *Widershins and the Angel*. The book was about an elf who falls in love with a fledgling angel fallen from Heaven. Accidentally fallen, of course. Actually, Ben had a little crush on the angel. She could change her appearance to look like anyone in the

world. It would be so cool to be able to do that, just change your skin or your hair or your eyes or your nose whenever you wanted. Sure would be handy if you were a spy or in the witness protection program.

When the bathroom shower turned off, Ben slid off the bed and kicked Marcus' disgusting gym socks across the room toward the closet. Marcus was even more of a slob than usual, now that he'd gotten a job at the local Game Stop. He spent hours in the basement rec room, where his dad slept on a rollaway bed, "researching" the games he sold. Back in Texas, Ben would call that room a "family room" but here in Colorado—where Cokes were called pop and people looked at you funny for saying "ya'll" instead of "you guys"—it was called a rec room. It was cozy, though, with wood-paneled walls and a rectangle of thick carpet covering the cement floor. There was a worn couch and a wooden coffee table across from the old TV and Marcus' Xbox.

Ben heard Willow close her bedroom door as he tucked *Widershins* into the outer pocket of his duffle. Then he slung the strap over his shoulder and made his way downstairs.

Willow's lunch—chicken noodle soup and peanut butter toast—waited for her on the kitchen table. The soup had to be cold by now and the peanut butter was long past warm and melty. What a waste.

Great Aunt Matilda sat in her Lazy-Boy recliner in the den watching TV. She wore her standard nightgown and housecoat, but no slippers today. Ben quickly looked away from her wrinkled feet. Feet kind of grossed him out, and hers were horrible. Ben hadn't ever spent time around anyone as old as his great aunt. Her wrinkled skin hung from her bones and with her long, thin nose, she almost looked like a starving elephant. Her pure white hair was long and although Aunt Amanda usually kept it braided today it hung loose and messy. It made her look older and frailer than usual. Ben swallowed. Matilda made him sad. So he always tried to be really nice to her.

She rarely seemed to remember who he was, heck, most the time, she didn't even remember who she was. One day she'd be totally quiet and calm, the next she'd rant on about this or that, how she couldn't find something, or complain that Aunt Amanda was keeping her prisoner.

Alzheimer's was a pretty horrible disease. If nothing else, Great Aunt Matilda had taught him that.

Aunt Amanda walked into the kitchen, frowning at Willow's empty chair. Stupid Willow with all her back talk and running around that made Aunt Amanda worry. Sometimes Ben considered telling Willow she should appreciate her mom more, but she'd just think he was an even bigger nerd than she already did.

Willow bounced into the room, her hair slicked into a wet ponytail. A car horn honked out front and she groaned. "He's early!"

“Actually,” her mother raised an eyebrow at her, “you’re late. Throw that soup in a thermos and take it with you.”

“Dad won’t let me eat in the car!” Willow complained, but pulled a thermos from the pantry anyway. She cut her eyes at Ben before murmuring, “Oh well. Rules were made to be broken, I guess.”

THE MILES SPED by quickly as Uncle Grant drove the black Audi at a speed that made Ben more than a little nervous. This was only the second time he’d been around his uncle, but Ben was again amazed by how different he was than his own dad, and not just because Uncle Grant was taller, tanner, and more handsome. He also looked younger, even though he was actually a couple of years older. He sure acted younger.

Uncle Grant had sandy blond hair that looked almost red sometimes, and friendly blue eyes, like Willow’s. With his wide, white-toothed smile, slim jeans, and cowboy boots, he looked like he should be starring in movies instead of working behind the scenes.

“How’s your dad, Ben?” Uncle Grant called over his shoulder as he turned down the radio.

“Hey!” Willow complained. “I was singing!”

“I know,” her dad grinned.

Willow may be an accomplished violinist, but her singing was not so good and was making it hard for Ben to concentrate on his book. “He’s okay, I guess. I mean, you know.”

“Sure. I know.” But he didn’t know, did he? Of course not, how could he? Uncle Grant hadn’t lost his wife. He’d left her. He chose to lose her, which wasn’t the same thing at all. Ben felt a bubble of anger well up in his throat.

Thankfully, Uncle Grant turned his attention to Willow so Ben didn’t have to say anything else. “And Great Aunt Matilda? How’s she doing?”

Willow slumped against the window. “Same as ever. Impossible.”

“Willow, be nice. The woman is sick. It’s not easy being in your nineties, much less living with a disease like that for as long as she has,” said Uncle Grant. “Most folks don’t live to her age, even without Alzheimer’s. It’s quite the accomplishment.”

Ben had overheard his dad and Aunt Amanda talking about just that the other night. The doctors didn’t understand how Great Aunt Matilda survived all these years since her diagnosis. Her husband has passed away twenty years ago, but he must have left her some money, because they talked about it finally running out. That was part of the reason Aunt Amanda had taken Matilda in and hired a part-time nurse to help out.

Apparently it was cheaper than the place Matilda used to live. From what Ben could figure from what they said, Matilda's arrival was the final straw for Willow's dad. He left right after she got there.

Ben met Uncle Grant's eyes in the mirror, anger continuing to percolate in his heart. It really ticked him off when people ran away just because things got tough. Oblivious to Ben's scowl, Uncle Grant gave him a wink. "So, I'm scouting some locations for a new film and I need to ask Matilda if she remembers the old Canton Hotel. It was quite the place back in the late 1940s when she was a young lady."

Ben's scowl deepened. Was he joking? Ben looked at Willow, who frowned, too.

"Seriously, Dad?" Willow said. "If she *remembers*?" She shook her head and then looked out the window at the tall pines whizzing by. "And you get on my case about being nice."

Uncle Grant wasn't smiling any more. "Oh. Well, yeah. Right." He sounded embarrassed. He should be, but Ben couldn't believe he wasn't mad at Willow for talking to him like that. Ben would have been grounded for a month for such a smart mouth response.

"Why do you think she might have known about that hotel?" Ben asked after a moment of awkward silence.

"It was quite famous back in the day," said Uncle Grant, steering the car off the highway and down an exit ramp. "It was the place to stay around here a century ago. I'd love to get a first-hand account of what it was like back then. It's been shuttered up for over fifty years."

Silence fell over the car again as they pulled up to an intersection. "How close are we to camp?" Willow asked her dad.

"Pretty close," he said, glancing at the dashboard. "Actually, we're kind of early. Not supposed to get you there until 3:00 ... heh, heh. Guess I drove a little fast. We have half an hour to kill." The car idled at the stop sign. "You know, we could go see it ..." He hung the offer in the air like a treat to a hungry dog.

Willow glanced at her father, then at Ben. "We could go see the old hotel, you mean?"

"Yep. It's not far from here. In fact, the land backs right up to your camp."

"Really?" Ben had no doubt exploring an old abandoned hotel was right up Willow's alley. Ben closed *Widershins* and tucked it into the seat pocket in front of him. He had to admit, it did sound kind of interesting.

"Could we go check it out?" he asked and was pleased to see Willow shine a huge smile his way. That was a first.

Uncle Grant grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that."

The road leading to the Canton Hotel was more like two dusty tracks snaking through low-lying brush than an actual road. The Audi crunched along slowly, kicking up dust and debris. Uncle Grant grimaced as gravel dinged the side of his precious car. "I should have brought the production truck," he moaned.

As they inched along, Willow and Ben unbuckled their seat belts and rolled down the windows, eager to catch a glimpse of the hotel through the trees. Each turn revealed nothing but more trail. After a few twists and turns, Willow sighed heavily. "Where is it?"

"Should be right around the next bend," Uncle Grant said, and he was right. The next left turn revealed the most run-down, bedraggled, wreck of a building Ben had ever seen.

"What a dump." Ben said, panic lurching through him as he realized he'd spoken aloud. "Oh, I'm sorry, Uncle Grant."

"No apologies necessary, Ben. It is a dump. The place was condemned years ago," Uncle Grant said, a trace of awe in his voice like he admired the hotel's ability to defy time. "Yet, here it stands."

"I love it!" breathed Willow, opening the car door even before the Audi ground to a halt.

"Hey! Slow down!" Uncle Grant warned as Willow raced up the weathered front steps.

Ben emerged from the car more slowly, staring up at the ancient façade. The hotel looked more like a large mansion than a hotel. Scraggly weeds and overgrown shrubbery choked out any grass that might have once grown along the foot of its chipped stucco walls. Dozens of broken windows on upper floors sneered with jagged teeth. The deep red Spanish roof was pocked with shattered tiles.

The double front doors were made of dark wood, and Willow cupped her hands around her eyes, peering through one of the skinny panes of glass. "It looks like they left all the stuff in there when they closed it up. Everything's covered with sheets!" She knocked on the wooden door. The hollow thump echoed against the surrounding trees.

Ben felt a nervous flutter in his stomach. Being here felt wrong somehow. Sort of sneaky ... like they were doing something they shouldn't.

Willow obviously didn't share his apprehension, as she gave the doors an experimental push. They swung open as if they'd been waiting for her to arrive.

