

Rowena Summers

WILLOW HARVEST

A compelling and powerful
West Country romance



SPHERE

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SPHERE BOOKS

A GYPSY OMEN

Rosie tentatively entered the tent and saw an old crone with a kerchief tied around her head, wisps of untidy grey hair escaping from it like rats' tails. She wore a dark shawl and tawdry jewellery that clanked about her as she motioned Rosie to sit down. The old crone put both hands around the crystal ball in front of her, and Rosie felt her eyes drawn to it as if she was mesmerised by its presence.

'There's a troubled heart in you, missie.' The old crone's droning voice made Rosie jump. 'There's a dark man who means you harm, and another who'll be the savin' of 'ee. There's a long road for 'ee to travel before you find what's right under your nose, and your own nature will lead 'ee into perilous waters. Beware the dawn, pretty maid.' She paused for her words to sink in. 'You're a wilful one, for all your pretty ways and soft white flesh and red mouth.'

Rosie leapt to her feet. 'I don't want to hear any more,' she said jerkily.

The old woman gave a sudden cackle. 'Ah well. If 'tis happy endings you're wanting to know about, I can't give 'ee none of they, missie! They be in your own hands, so use them well – and you mind what I said. A dark-haired man who means you harm!'

Prologue

A single newcomer in the isolated village of Moule would have been a curiosity. A whole family of them drew suspicion and speculation, especially to a community that hadn't seen the strangers at church in the three weeks since their arrival among them.

The people of Moule were mostly God-fearing folk. Partly as a result of their stentorian vicar's powerful personality; and partly as their heritage in living in that part of the Somerset Levels that had once known bloody carnage in the Duking Days of Monmouth's Rebellion. The slaughter of those far-off days had been brought to its climax in the wild and lonely area where Moule had seemed to spring up like a fully-fledged moth from a chrysalis. *I feel*

Its inhabitants were an odd mixture of the fey, who swore that on dull and misty nights they could still hear the anguished cries of the dying, the breaking of heads, the stealthy rustle of an unseen enemy . . . and the brash and lawless, who seemed to epitomise the brooding enmity of those days of two centuries before, and whom Vicar Washbourne tried vainly to bring back to the Christian fold. *tsuz*

There were those who had already glimpsed the three people come recently to live at Briar Cottage alongside the rhine. The strangers might have felt disturbed to know how often they had been discussed in the smoke-filled taproom of the Moule Inn.

There, the old men pondered darkly on folk who moved about the country like gypsies, for to those who rarely strayed from their rustic environment, all others were likened to the broom squires.

'There's two men, I'm told,' one would say, trying to appear knowledgeable over his foaming jug of sweet-smelling cider. 'And a pretty maid.'

‘Ave ’ee seen her, Tom?’ another would add, the thought of the girl coarsening and broadening his dialect. ‘A fine looking wench she be, a real fiery one by the looks on ’er, all plimmed out and ripe for plucking, I’d say. There’s a fine bit o’ bed-sport for a lusty young feller-medlad to wed.’

‘A pity you ain’t fit for the job then, Isaac,’ the raucous laughter filled the fetid atmosphere of the Inn. ‘I reckon ’tis a few years since they creaking bones ’ave climbed aboard a pretty maid!’

‘I can still mind it well enough,’ the old man snorted. ‘And I’d still give young Rosie Nash a minute or two’s gamin’, if not a whole night . . .’

What he said from then on didn’t matter. He knew he’d set the cat among the pigeons by mentioning the pretty maid’s name. And none on ’em knew it afore he did, he thought gleefully. That was clear from the way the rest of them sat suddenly straighter on the benches, their beetroot faces paying more attention to old Isaac Hale than they normally did.

‘Nash, you say, you old gorm? Her name’s Rosie Nash?’

Isaac preened himself. ‘Ain’t you going to ask how I know it? ’Twas Vicar himself that told me, see. He went over to Briar Cottage to see ’em today and came away sore miffed. I seen ’im and paid my respects, an’ he told me.’

‘Suckin’ up to ’im, more like.’

But nobody was really listening. It dawned on Isaac’s slow-witted brain that his brief moment of glory was over. The rest of them were glancing at each other and then away again, as if each had thoughts of his own he didn’t care to transmit.

‘’Tis not a good omen,’ Tom Kitch said at last.

‘That it ain’t. Vicar won’t know what to make on it.’

‘One thing’s for certain sure. We’ll get a longer sermon than usual next Sunday,’ came the gloomy comment. ‘He’ll want to make sure the Lord’s on his side.’

Isaac’s rheumy old eyes shifted from one to another of his drinking companions. When he belched loudly, wiping the froth from his mouth with the back of one mittened hand,

they glared at him, as if this new turn of events that so far had him mystified was all his fault. And if he'd unknowingly stirred up a nest of emmets, he reckoned he had a right to know about it.

'Are you buggers goin' to tell me what you'm on about?' he demanded.

Tom Kitch took on the role of spokesman for the group, since the rest seemed reluctant to open their mouths.

'You'd find it in the church if you took as much interest in its innards as young wenches, you old has-been. How long since you cast your eyes on the board of martyrs of this parish? The name of Nash can't have escaped your notice, nor the crumbling gallows at Beech Cross you pass every day. I know you can't read much, but even your dummy brain must listen when Vicar reads out the names and points to 'em for the benefit of thick-noddles like yourself once a year!'

Tom spoke with all the lofty superiority of church caretaker, and was well able to read more than the simple items within the hallowed walls, if these half-wits weren't. He overlooked the fact that he often did so in order to relieve the boredom of his task.

Isaac felt a slow crawling down his spine as the other's voice grew stern, and memory of ancient tales stirred inside him.

'Tis all past history now, Tom.'

'Aye, so 'tis. But the fact remains that a Henry Nash of this parish – mebbe livin' on the very spot where Briar Cottage now stands – was put to death by the hanging judge not more'n half a mile from where we sit. You know what they did to 'em in them days, don't 'ee, Isaac? They hung 'em in front of their family and friends, then they quartered 'em, and after they'd soaked 'em in cauldrons of boiling pitch they hung 'em out to dry in the streets as a dire warning. They say you could hear their bones clattering in the wind for months afterwards . . .'

Isaac heard no more. The bile rose in his mouth in a great acid gob, and he clamped his hand across it, his scrawny cheeks bulging with the effort not to spew up his guts at the

graphic description. Tom always did have a vivid turn of the tongue. He heard the rest of his companions chuckle uneasily as he fought down the urge to vomit and finally mastered it.

The night was chill and vaporous in the flat shallow saucer of the Levels, and he had no fancy for lurching out into it alone after hearing such a tale. It was all too easy to miss a footing and go headlong into the dank waters of the rhine, or wander in a muzz until the blessed daylight had mercy on a man.

It happened to Isaac more than once after a night's drinking, when he'd stepped out with false bravado, only to be mist-weirded and near crazed by morning. The fear of lunacy was sharpened even more by seeming to float on a sea of shapeless, writhing spume, without even the landmark of the distant, mystical Tor of Glastonbury for guidance.

It was easy then, in that soundless hell with only his own harsh breathing for company, to imagine himself back in the Duking Days, when the Levels had run with blood. And the sudden fearful hot gushing of his own urine only added to the illusion.

There was a snap of fingers beneath his nose, and Isaac breathed a little more easily. This was no ill-wished moor, but the cloying, familiar atmosphere of the Moule Inn taproom, and he was among friends. If he waited long enough his grandson Cyrus would come looking for him from his own cider-sipping corner of the Inn, and the crowd of them would stumble out together into the cold night air. The ghosts of the past were well and truly laid . . . only it seemed that Tom wasn't inclined to let them rest.

'What did Vicar tell 'ee about these strangers then, Isaac? Seein' as how he chose to confide in such a nonse as you. Or is it all in your head as usual?'

'I ain't a'fairyin'!' Isaac said indignantly. 'Vicar was all put about, and only said summat about 'em bein' basket-makers, which is a respectable enough jobbin', and much sought after in the towns, Vicar said, as if I didn't know that already. An' that he hoped little Rosie Nash 'ould come to

church on Sunday and persuade her father and brother to do likewise, that's all.'

His companions looked at him thoughtfully.

'Little Rosie Nash,' Perce Guppey ruminated, pinching his thin nostrils together the way he always did when there was something to puzzle over. 'There don't sound nothin' sinister about a pretty maid wi' a pretty name, I daresay. And if her menfolk are basket-makers, I reckon they'm here to do a buying-for-work with the withy growers. That'll be it, Tom.'

'It still don't explain how they come here out of nowhere, do it?' Tom's grey eyes were remote, as they were when he gave the impression of seeing things other folk didn't, whatever the truth of it. 'Folk won't like it. 'Tis too much of a chancing. The name and the place and the timing of it all. The midsummer month of the slaughter, and a family called Nash have come back among us. 'Tis a bad omen, and I'm thinkin' the sooner Vicar gets 'em to church or the devil chases 'em out, the better 'twill be for all on us.'

Chapter 1

1850

For the first time since Rosie and her menfolk had come to live at Moule, she felt able to leave Briar Cottage with an easy mind. Now that the worst of her father's severe bout of influenza was over he was at his most irritable, and her brother Edwin urged her to take a walk on such a warm and golden afternoon.

Scorning doctors with all the bitter memories of the futile attempts to save his wife from the throes of childbed fever some three years ago, Dunstan Nash had been a difficult patient for his children to nurse. An irate one too, when the vicar of their new parish had voiced his hopes in less than pious tones that the family would soon make their appearance in church and become part of the greater family of God.

Rosie's soft mouth twisted wryly as she stepped out of the cosy cottage with its snug stone walls and roof of thatch. She had fallen in love with the cottage at first sight, but Vicar Washbourne had chosen a bad time to come calling. Her father was at his most frustrated from enforced inactivity, and from the weakness still keeping him indoors when he too would like to explore this flat countryside that was now home, before applying himself eagerly to the craft that was his life and his joy.

Poor Vicar, Rosie thought fleetingly. To be told in no uncertain terms that God hadn't done overmuch for the Nash family in recent years, and that they could manage very well without Him now, was almost blasphemous. Rosie recalled the vicar's pale gaunt features turning puce as he promised curtly to say special prayers for God's lost children on Sunday.

Her brief sympathy towards the vicar vanished. What did he know about lost children, except in vague general terms?

He knew nothing about the loss of a beloved wife and mother, and the rearing of the weak premature child for two years afterwards, until their sweet Dorcas had toddled towards the edge of the cliffs, unknown to the rest of them, to be found cold and lifeless on the rocks below a whole day and night later . . . no, he couldn't know the pain of it . . .

Rosie swallowed back the lump in her throat that came with remembering. The past was behind them, and they must begin a new life. Edwin had been insistent on the sense of it, after their father seemed to be half-demented by this new tragedy. And now that the strain of the past three weeks was over, Rosie felt the first stirrings of interest in her new surroundings.

She was too young, at seventeen, to mourn for ever. Her innate optimism and indomitable spirit had done much to keep her father going, and now, with the July sunshine warm on her face, and lifting the long silky strands of her dark hair to a blue-black sheen from her shoulders, she had to admit she found the new village a welcoming sight. The charm of the square-towered church and the winding street, even the criss-cross of rhines over the moor, some of them carpeted with a deceptive growth of mossy weed hiding the dank water beneath, all added to the lushness of the area around Moule.

Rosie hesitated. She should be seeking out the school-room, where she intended offering herself to the head teacher as a teacher of letters and drawing and needlework, if required. It wasn't what she would have chosen to do, but she thrust to the back of her mind the wild episode in the spring, when the gypsies had encamped on the moor near their Minehead home, and she had become bewitched by a young gypsy boy with night-black hair and flashing eyes, and a way of taming horses that was uncanny. It was her brother Edwin then who had talked to her long into the night about the way the Nash family was taking the road to destruction.

'Do you think Mother would have liked to see this wanton look in your eyes, Rosie?' He'd been blunt with her. 'Did she insist on us having a proper education so that you could run wild with the gypsies?'

'If Pa doesn't mind, why should you?' she had said angrily,

the truth of his words stinging her to round on him, despite the fact that he was three years older and a foot taller than herself. She tilted her face to look up at him, her firm young breasts heaving, a pulse beating in her throat, and a fine red flush on her cheeks, and Edwin sighed, knowing just what the gypsy boy found in her to quicken his blood.

'It's Pa I'm thinking about,' Edwin slowed down his speech deliberately. 'Haven't you seen the way he looks so vague at times lately? I'm afraid for him, Rosie. This whole place holds too many memories for him now, and the bad ones outweigh the good. We should get him away from here before he does himself a mischief or just gives up on the will to go on living.'

Her heart had leaped in her chest as his words sank in. In a trice she reverted to the child on the brink of womanhood, with all the trust in her brother showing in her appealing sea-green eyes that could melt a man's heart.

'What can we do, Edwin?' She whispered. 'We both love him, and I couldn't bear it if anything happened to Pa . . . ' She caught her breath, remembering the bad times with a sharpness that took her unawares. Her soft expressive eyes blurred, and she dashed the tears away with her long slim fingers.

'The best way is to remove ourselves from this place to a new environment,' Edwin said ruthlessly. 'We must get him away from the sight of the sea that Mother loved so well, and from the moorland cliffs where we lost Dorcas. It's all too much of a reminder, Rosie. His eyes stray there too often, and sometimes he cocks his head as if listening for Mother's footsteps. Haven't you noticed?'

To her shame, Rosie knew she hadn't. She had been too busy discovering the delights of being seventeen and the object of a young man's admiration, and one who was ardent in his embraces. In her heart she knew it was an association that had no future, but the taste of it was sweet, because it was her first young love, and the gypsy was a new and exciting experience . . .

'I don't know,' she stammered now. 'Where would we go, Edwin? Pa has his work . . . '

'I've thought it all out. Will you back me up when I suggest it to him, Rosie? I've even made some enquiries, and there's a place we can look at. Do you agree?'

She trusted him, her tall, strong brother, and nodded. And the next evening over supper, Edwin put the proposal to their father.

'Father, it's time we left Minehead.' Edwin was never reticent when it came to voicing his thoughts, and Rosie knew the truth of his words to her when she saw the vague look in her father's eyes. It was as if only half his mind was with them.

'Left Minehead? Who's leaving, boy? Not you and Rosie?'

'All of us, Pa,' Edwin went on urgently. 'I'm thinking we could do a lot better with the business than we do here. The fashion for basket furniture has grown apace recently as you know, and we're not getting the best of the trade.'

A flicker of interest was kindled by Edwin's enthusiasm. At twenty, Edwin was a mirror-image of how Dunstan himself had looked at that age, tall and broad, and darkly handsome. In those far-off days he had wooed and won his lovely Marjorie with the ease of butter melting in the sun. He strove to give his son all his attention.

'How could we do better? We do well enough with our baskets and stools and have a steady business.'

'But we have to pay such a price for the withies to be transported all this way, Pa. It's the middling man who makes the biggest profit.'

'Edwin's right, Pa.' Rosie added weight to the discussion, her nimble mind appreciating all that her brother said.

Dunstan looked at her, his darling, his slender girl-child, who was so subtly emerging into womanhood that he had hardly noticed the changes in her lately. He registered them now, the wide eyes and generous full-lipped mouth with the mutinous little chin when she wanted her own way, and the dark gleaming hair like satin that would be a delight for some lucky young man to entwine himself in, as his Marjorie's had been for him. Dunstan was aware of a fleeting envy for the unknown suitor, and dragged his thoughts back to Edwin.

It had been all too easy for him to drift away lately, into

melancholy, to a place where Marjorie and then Dorcas had gone, to which he could not follow. But for these two, whom he loved so dearly, he might have been tempted to hasten the day, to hurry the eventual meeting in paradise.

That he could even contemplate such a meeting was some reassurance in his saner moments that he had come a little way back from the torment he'd suffered, even to renouncing his God and all who professed to be His servants. Just a little way . . .

'Are you listening, Pa?' Edwin said sharply. 'I've had thoughts on this for weeks now. We could sell up here and find a place nearer the withy fields on the Levels. We could do a buying-for-work with one of the farmers. Once he's harvested the withies we can take them straight away and do our own stripping and boiling of the rods. That way we can be sure of getting the colour variations we want for the work, without relying on what's brought to us by the middling man. We can set up an exclusive brand of basketware. We might even become famous. Perhaps even the Queen would buy from Nash and Son!'

Edwin's voice grew reckless as he saw he'd caught his father's full attention. Dunstan was shrewd enough to know the idea was a sound one. And Edwin still had one last card to play.

'Mother would approve, Pa. She'd like to know her legacy to us was a cottage business in the country. And if it prospered, mebbe we could buy a shop in a nearby town. Bridgwater's a fine place for selling, they say, and our Rosie can set herself up as a teacher. Mother would have liked that.'

This time she glared at her brother. It was what Marjorie had wanted, but it seemed too rigid an occupation for Rosie's own free spirit. But she bit her lip as Edwin nudged her, seeing that their father was letting the suggestions sink into his mind.

'I'll need time to consider it,' was all he would say at that time. But a few weeks later he'd instructed Edwin to make fuller enquiries as to a cottage with workshop alongside, in easy reach of a farmer willing to supply them with the

willow rods they needed for the basket work in which they were both employed. The withies were transformed by their expert hands into items of beauty and usefulness, and supple as the wood they worked so

Edwin's enquiries was that the Nash family, early one Saturday evening, with all their belongings in two carts, resting for the night at a small inn, and reaching Briar Cottage on the outskirts of the village in the middle of Sunday morning, when all the good inhabitants of the village were singing their hearts out in Vicar Washbourne's church.

Rosie stumbled a little in her stroll across the marshes, breathing in the heady scents of grasses and wild blossoms, a little reminiscent of home without the tang of the sea . . . *this* was home now, she reminded herself. A lingering pang for the richly carpeted moorland above the town of Minehead salted her eyes for a moment, but her chin lifted resolutely. Tears were for children, and she and Edwin had formed an undaunting pact to put the sparkle back into their father's life once more. That he had been stricken down with the grim bout of influenza from the day they arrived here had taxed them to the utmost, but it was over now, and things could only get better. Rosie's natural optimism asserted itself.

Besides - her soft mouth curved into an upward tilt - there hadn't been time yet to begin the new business, and no question of her finding the village school and taking up a post as teacher . . . but inevitably, Edwin had become anxious about the farmer with whom he'd done a deal for the withies, and a week ago he'd voiced his worries.

'I'm afraid Farmer Merrick will think we're fly ones if we don't let him know what's happened, Pa,' he said to Dunstan. 'I think I should go there and explain that it's taken more time than we expected to get settled, or else he'll be selling the withies elsewhere.'

'Can't I go?' Rosie said at once. 'I feel stifled in here, and I promise I won't be any longer than I can help. If the

farmer's feeling out of sorts at your non-appearance, he might take more kindly to a pretty face!' she added teasingly. 'And I can take the cart and get some eggs and cheese at the same time. Oh, do say I can go, Pa.'

'You don't know the place, Rosie, and you're a stranger here.'

'I know the name. It's Merrick Farm, and I've heard it out when we came here,' she persisted. 'It's a straight line from the village, and I can't miss it, though it's two miles away. What's that, anyway? I've walked twice as far for eggs before now. And what can happen in the country? It's so sleepy it's almost dead. Without even the sound of the sea to liven things up . . .'

'All right, you can go,' Edwin said at once, his mouth tightening at her tactless reference to the sea. 'She'll be all right, Pa, and she can take the dog with her for protection. Not that I think she'll need it. One look from those glowing eyes of hers when she wants to quell anybody, and there's no one who'd dare to argue with our Rosie!'

He was exaggerating to put her father's mind at rest, Rosie thought. At least, she hoped so. She wasn't as dogmatic as Edwin suggested, was she . . . ? Remembering the gypsy boy on the moors, she knew that she had inherited all her mother's melting femininity with Dunsstan's strength, and the result was an intriguing blend of softness and haughtiness . . . but the gypsy, Cory, had seen right through her to the budding flower that she was.

His aggressive weight had crushed her into the soft bed of the moorland that last evening before the gypsy caravans were to move on. It was wrong, and Rosie knew it was, but the new sensations he awoke in her were too exquisite to be denied. His rough, calloused hands had sought the softness of her breasts in her unlaced bodice, moulding them and touching their peaks with his lips in a way that sent wave after wave of a pulsing fire through her limbs. He kindled a matching flame deep inside her that as yet she was too innocent to know how to handle. Despite her yearning, she had struggled against any more familiar embraces, and Cory had reluctantly let her go, his black

eyes hot with desire as he gazed at her captive little body beneath him.

'If there was only time, I would break you with all the delight of breaking in a new mare.' His words, coarse and whispered, his mouth against her skin, had sent a new thrill coursing through her veins. It was the first time she had been wanted – and loved – outside the family, and however mismatched, she knew she would never forget him, and this night. Velvet dark the sky, diamond-studded with stars, and Cory's arms holding her close . . . but he had reluctantly let her go as the sounds of his own family's impending departure made it necessary for him to go.

'Will I ever see you again?' Rosie had asked, her voice catching a little. His hand had taken a thick strand of her hair and twisted it around his wrist, where it gleamed like ebony in the moonlight.

'As sure as we breathe, my sweet Rosie,' and then he had let her hair go, and he was gone, swallowed up in the night.

The pain of parting had lessened over the months, and Rosie had set out on her journey to Merrick Farm with the dog they simply called Boy. It wasn't a joy-ride and she had an object to her mission, but it was good to get away from the sick-room where her father still lay, immune to the acid odours of staleness that made her wrinkle her nose each time she entered it.

It was an easy ride to Merrick Farm, and Rosie paused as she reached the great beds of withies, growing tall and straight, their olive green leaves whispering in the breeze. Nurtured by the waters of the muddy river Parrett and the rhines in the Levels, they were an ancient crop, but Edwin had informed her that it was only since early this century, with the Enclosure Act of parliament, that there had been laying-down of cultivated beds. Before then it had been a haphazard growth. Now, the beds were fine and square and certainly flourishing, and Rosie turned the horse and cart onto the Merrick land.

The next hour had been one of pleasure. Farmer Merrick and his wife were full of concern for her father's welfare, and insisted on sending more than the eggs and cheese she

had come to buy, piling the cart with fresh vegetables grown on the farm, and a bunch of sweet-smelling roses for herself.

‘Tis your name, I believe, my dear?’ Mrs Merrick’s round apple-cheeks broke into a smile. ‘Your brother told us all about you, and a fine and pretty maid you be. You’ll be having the young men knocking at your door afore long wi’ such a winnin’ smile, won’t she, Faither?’

‘That she will,’ Farmer Merrick said comfortably. ‘Unless she’s already spoken for, which ’ouldn’t surprise me for certain sure!’

‘Nor me neither,’ Mrs Merrick agreed. ‘A comely young maid can always put the sparkle in a young man’s eyes. I bet our Rosie’s courtin’ . . .’

They had a way of talking about her as if she wasn’t there, but with a quaint rustic charm that brought a smile to Rosie’s face as she sat in the warm farmhouse kitchen and watched Mrs Merrick pound the bread dough with competent hands, twisting it deftly into a huge thick plait to be left to prove before baking.

‘No, I’m not’ she began.

‘Then there’s hope for our Will yet, Missus,’ Farmer Merrick said cheerfully. He bade Rosie good-day for the present, banged out the clay pipe against the large black range and clumped across the stone-flagged floor to be about his business. When he’d gone Mrs Merrick offered Rosie a second drink of raspberry cordial, for the afternoon was hot. Rosie spoke with studied casualness.

‘Is Will your son, Mrs Merrick? Would that be the boy I glimpsed at the withy fields? I thought it was Farmer Merrick with him.’

The amply-proportioned farmer’s wife chuckled, every bit of her seeming to shake like ripples on a pond. She was a very stout, good-hearted woman, and Rosie had taken to her at once.

‘Aye, that’ll be our Will, me dear. Tall as his father, but half as wide, which is what catches the eye of a maid these days, I’m told. Takes more’n a regular shape to find a good partner, though. I was never anywhere near your size, with