

# One

## **Wylie Westerhouse Branson, Missouri**

*"They're alive, Holly."*

The words echoed off of the stone walls and faded into silence. I crossed the floor and took Holly McFadden's hand. She swayed a little and her eyes crossed as she realized what had happened over the last few minutes. There was evidence that her parents, presumed lost at sea for over six months, did not die in a boating mishap after all. The ghost of Seth Larrimore, Holly's uncle, delivered the message that Oliver and Gwendoline McFadden were not on the "other side".

In other words, Holly's parents were not dead.

Quentin Lynchburg and I made eye contact. Quentin also goes by the nickname "Q".

Holly dropped my hand and stepped behind the computer monitor to read the words for herself.

Her eyes still on the screen, she whispered,  
"I have to go, Mr. Lynchburg."

"Of course, Holly," Q said. "And maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Holly said.

"Well," Q said. He glanced at me and I saw him struggle for the right words. "What we need is the right kind of help and more boots on the ground."

Q sat at his desk and began striking keys. "I'll make the travel arrangements, and we'll be off."

"Who is 'we'?" Holly said.

"The three of us," Q said. "You, me, and Wylie. I'll call Brian McAllen and find out if he's familiar with any mercenary types."

"Mercenaries?" Holly said. "Are we to be starting a *war*?"

Q rubbed his chin.

"That's the wrong word I guess," he said. "For now. I guess I meant... private *detectives*. Investigators."

"Investigators? What for?" Holly asked. "There are loads of policemen in Scotland, Mr. Lynchburg. And what do we do about the castle in the meantime? Just key the locks and leave it?"

Quentin hadn't thought about this yet.

"She's right, Q," I said. "We have sold-out tours for the next six weeks."

Q squeezed his eyes shut.

"That's right," he said. "We're in no position to infuriate the City or the Chamber of Commerce at this point. This could turn out to be a black eye for Branson—the castle is being advertised nation-wide. It will be *weeks* before the proposal for our building variance is even drawn up—and even longer to take a vote on it."

"Maybe Elvis Rushmore could—," I said.

"There's no time to teach anyone to run a proper Castle tour," Holly shook her head. "It would be better to shut it down than to do a half-baked job of it. The people won't stand for it, believe me."

"I could stay," I said.

Holly and Quentin looked at me.

"I couldn't ask you to—" Quentin said.

"No, you didn't *ask* me, Q," I said. "I mean, sure, I *want* to go, but it's not like I would be much help. I *am* capable of running the tours, and I can start training some more people at the same time. I also have Toby to think about, and Duncan—who now has a girlfriend, and now the ghosts have become more *solid*—and we have no idea *why*. My God, the more I talk, the crazier I sound."

Quentin stared into space, and then he sighed.

"I believe that's the best that we can do right now, Wylie," he said. "I'll talk to Elvis and we'll get some people over here as soon as possible. Call me just as soon as you feel comfortable with turning the operation over to Elvis, and then you can join us."

"How long do you plan to be gone, Mr. Lynchburg?" Holly asked.

"At this point we have no idea of the number of resources that local law enforcement will apply," Q said, "Your parents have been presumed dead for months, and the police have no reason to suspect foul play."

"Foul *play*?" Holly said. "Who said anything about *foul play*?"

Quentin exhaled.

"Don't get all worked up now, Holly. I'm just speculating—trying to consider all possibilities—"

"You're talking like a politician now, Mr. Lynchburg," Holly said. "What makes you think there's been foul play?"

"It's possible that your parents were kidnapped, Holly," Q said.

"*Kidnapped*?" Holly squealed. "Why would—how could you even *think* that? They didn't have any money! They don't even *know* anybody who has money! They had no other family. They owned an old used boat and an old run-down castle!"

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard of," Holly said, shaking her head.

"That's *not* what happens when someone is kidnapped! That's the kind of thing done by degenerate criminal types, and they make demands for money straight away! We've heard no such thing."

"You're right about that, Holly," Q said. "But there's something that you aren't thinking about."

"What are you talking about, now?" Holly said. Her shoulders slumped and she rubbed her forehead.

"Their daughter sees dead people," Q said.

Duncan and I crept up on Nate and Tooie as they were waking up. Or coming to—whatever it is you do after you faint. Duncan moved around behind me, which was a good idea. At least, no one screamed or fainted again. Nate and Tooie were plenty freaked-out, though. They shivered and pressed into each other and up against the wall.

"Guys," I said, "You are not in any danger. Yes, there are...several ghosts

here, but they've *always* been there. We just couldn't see them. They can't hurt you. Most of them are actually pretty nice."

"Nice?" Tooie screeched through chattering teeth. "Nice? Ghosts are not nice, Wylie! Are you *crazy*?"

"That is so unfair, Ma'am," Duncan said. He stepped out from behind me.

"You can call me shallow, or vacant—or say that I'm transparent or void, or lacking in opacity, but I am most certainly not... *un-nice*."

"That's far too many negatives, Mr. Straight A's," I said.

"Look at me, Wyles," Duncan shrugged. "I *am* a negative."

Nate laughed. Tooie elbowed Nate in his side.

"I'm sorry, Honey," Nate said, "Duncan always cracked me up. That was funny, right there."

Tooie pushed away from Nate and got to her feet. She stood with her feet spread apart and her arms crossed.

"You need to *explain* yourself, Wylie," she said, "I thought Nate was your best friend in the *world*. Have you been keeping this a secret from him for *all these years*?"

"Hey, I had nothing to *do* with this," I said. "*Holly* is the one that can see them."

"Holly's not...here," Nate said. He looked around the room.

"Duncan? Where did Duncan go? What's happening, Wylie?" Nate asked.

I stepped toward Nate and raised my hand to touch his arm or shoulder, but he backed away from me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It works by physical contact. The more I'm around Holly, and the more physical contact, the longer it lasts."

"Holly isn't even *in* here," Tooie said.

"I've been around her a lot," I said. "Especially since she found Duncan at my house. She said he was some kind of 'sign'. I guess he was because now we can actually touch them."

"Touch them?" Tooie squealed.

She grabbed Nate by the arm and tried to pull him away from me.

"Get away from him, Nate, before he infects us!" Tooie said.

“He’s not *infected*,” Nate chuckled, but he looked at me like he wasn’t so sure.

“Then what would you call it?” Tooie asked. “*Holly* sees ghosts, and now *Wylie* sees them too. That is *text-book infection*! Get me out of here *right now*, or I’m walking out. I mean it!”

“Look,” I said. “The only reason this ghost-sight is stuck to me is my contact with Holly. It works like a rechargeable battery. Holly said that was how it worked with her uncle. After the first time that I saw Duncan, I lost sight of him after Holly had been gone for a few hours.”

Nate took a step toward me. Tooie grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to hold him back.

“*What...? Nate! What are you doing?*” Tooie screamed. “Are you as *insane* as he is?”

I held out my hand. Nate raised his. Tooie let go of Nate’s arm and backed against the wall.

“I mean it, Nate. I am *not okay* with this!” Tooie said.

“Listen to me, Too—Aimee,” Nate said.

Tooie blinked hard. I’m guessing she’s not used to Nate using her real name.

“Wylie and Duncan Westerhouse were my best friends in the whole world,” Nate said. “We built forts, we shared crazy plans, and we were the only kids our age whose parents let them stay out after dark. We shared *dreams*, Babe. We talked for hours about starting a rock band, even before any of us had an instrument. But then Duncan got sick. We watched him get worse—and then we watched him die.”

Nate was tearing up a little. So was I.

“I don’t understand what’s going on any more than you do, Tooie,” Nate said. “But there has to be a reason that Duncan is here. I love you, Aimee Lee Reznik, but I am *not* turning my back on my friends.”

Nate raised his arm. We grasped each other’s forearms, Viking-style, and began our handshake ritual. Nate looked over my left shoulder.

I turned and saw a teary-eyed Duncan lift his hand. Nate and Duncan grasped forearms. They went through the handshake sequence while they

fought back tears.

The handshake ended in an embrace that was beautiful, and yet too painful to watch. I looked away.

Tooie was gone.

I sat next to Holly in the back seat of the limousine on the way to the airport. Quentin rode up front with the driver to give us more privacy.

I have only known Holly for a few months. She shared her secret with me when she discovered that my dead brother Duncan was camping out on my sofa. I've since met several other ghosts; most notably, the ones who "accidentally" accompanied the Castle McIntyre on its voyage from Scotland to Branson, Missouri.

I have loved Holly McFadden since the day I first saw her at the Branson airport. She didn't feel the same about me—not at first, anyway. Not even *close*. But something has changed in our relationship over the past weeks. During that time, a group of local ghosts threatened the continued existence of the Castle McIntyre in Branson. Holly and I are now much closer.

My ten-year-dead brother has been reunited with a sixteenth-century Scottish girl. This same girl visited him when he was dying.

After the threat to the castle was resolved, the McIntyre ladies pushed Holly McFadden across the room. They knocked Holly and me to the floor. That was followed by a very, very, long and wonderful kiss.

A kiss that was not repeated.

Until last night.

Holly and I were to be separated indefinitely. This fact made both of us nervous for multiple reasons, but it could not be helped. I wanted to be with her. I also wanted to continue being able to see my brother.

Holly and I spent last night together. C'mon. Not like *that*. We *did* kiss some, I'm not gonna lie. But if I even thought of it going any further, it was soon obvious that our relationship was never going to be normal.

When Holly McFadden started to cry there was still an intimacy, but not in a romantic sense. For a second or two, it was hard not to take that personally.

I had my feelings hurt for about a half-second before it all made sense to me.

Holly McFadden doesn't remember having a normal life. She has been able to see and hear and talk to ghosts since she was six years old. This terrified her parents, especially her mother. There was an accident in a lake when Holly was six—when she fell out of a boat. Her parents jumped in to save her and were instantly able to see dozens of horrifying spirits beneath the water. Holly's father was able to deal with the experience. Holly's mother was not.

Holly's mother never touched her again.

Holly's parents disappeared six months ago, thought to have drowned in a boating accident. But just two days ago, their boat was recovered in London. It had not been destroyed at sea, as the authorities first believed. It was stolen from the facility where Oliver McFadden had it stored.

Holly's uncle, Seth Larrimore, had been Holly's teacher, friend, and lifelong companion. He died in Holly's arms just a few months ago.

Now, if you feel guilty about what you thought I meant by Holly and me spending the night together—I'll let that slide. My life used to be a little closer to normal than it is now.

My life will never be normal again.

Holly and I sat close to each other in the limo with our arms entangled. We each wore shorts and short-sleeve shirts. We were both a little sweaty, but—oh, well. One of the hazards of the "ghost-gift".

When we arrived at the airport, I went to help with the luggage, but Quentin wouldn't have it. He told us to go ahead to the boarding gate. Holly and I walked inside with our arms around each other. I used to shake my head at people who showed too much affection in public. Ever since that day, I look at those people and wonder if they might actually be passing the ability to see the dead.

When boarding started, Holly and I kissed, and then we hugged.

I hugged Quentin and then we shook hands. He looked around.

"Wow," he whispered. "There are a bunch of them in here."

"Yeah," I said. "Why do you think that is?"

He laughed and pointed toward the boarding gate. Several transparent

ghost-passengers floated past the gate without even slowing down.

“I guess everyone likes to travel,” Q said. “And I bet they ignore the ‘water-landing’ instructions just like everybody else.”



# Two

## Sebastian Wellmore Wellmore Village, Scotland

Maggie Wellmore shook her head at the sign that read “Do NOT enter the Dungeon!” She opened the door to the basement carrying a floor lamp under one arm. She took one step before she threw the lamp and screamed. She waved her arms violently at the bloody skeleton that had dropped directly in front of her. Her backward fall was slowed by the tiny wire that entangled her arms.

*“Sebastian!”* she screamed.

Sebastian Wellmore strolled nonchalantly around the corner. He stopped and looked down at his mother.

“Mother, while I do understand that many of our guests may not be able to read or comprehend, I *DO* expect a little better from you. I see you’ve met Nigel.”

“Nigel,” Maggie said. “You’ve given your juvenile, fake skeleton friend a name. How quaint. *Get this monstrosity off of me this instant!*”

“Very well, Mother,” Sebastian said. “You ignore my sign and damage my prop, yet somehow this is *my* fault. When was the last time *you* did anything to increase the appeal of this dreary place?”

“Do you mean things like replacing lamps that no longer work, or having the entrance landscaped to properly welcome our guests?” Maggie asked. “We had a long history of tourism before you and your fancy suits and your shiny shoes and parlor tricks, young man! Just because I don’t dress up like you do—like I’m expecting the Queen.”

“Success is a subject to be studied, Mother Dear,” Sebastian said. “One must not dress as one *is*. One should dress for where they *want to be*. The tourist money has dwindled and people do not visit in the numbers that they once did. We are in no position to rest on past success. People were at one time willing to

pay to stroll through an ancient structure like this one—but today one must provide an all-around experience; tantalize and excite! Generate the buzz that sends people out in the world to tell all they know of the *terrors* within the Castle Wellmore! We must adapt, or be swept aside to die.”

“Always the melodramatic one, Sebastian,” Maggie said. “Doom and gloom! We must change everything, or perish! You so remind me of your father, God rest his soul.”

“So you think that Father’s warnings were in vain, Mother? Father knew that the day would come when we would have to change with the times or suffer the consequences.”

Maggie Wellmore dismissed her son with the wave of a hand.

“Bah! If you had attempted to learn a thing or two from the McFadden girl while she was here, *then* we might have something to hang our hats on, foolish boy. She studied your father’s notes like she was on a mission, child. If only—”

“And your Auntie Mona would be your Uncle if she had a pair of—”

“Mind your tongue, Sebastian!” Maggie wagged her finger at her son.

“The girl was here for all of six weeks, Mother,” Sebastian said. “A hired hand, nonetheless? Six bloody weeks.”

“Six weeks during which our numbers increased most *every day* if you care to look it up, Mister,” Maggie said. “That girl is something special, mind you. And she didn’t need any of your bloody flyin’ skeletons to make that happen. She made the history come *alive*, she did. That’s what the people want—not your silly tricks.”

“Well, unless you have another McFadden girl in your pocket, Mother, the tricks are what we have left,” Sebastian said.

Maggie’s shoulders drooped.

“It would have been a gift from heaven, had she been able to stay,” she said.

“Heaven has better things to do than look after than a dirty old castle, that’s what Father said for the longest, Mother,” Sebastian said. “Heaven helps those —”

“That help themselves,” Maggie said. “Don’t quote your father to me, Sebastian. I didn’t like it when it came from him, and I don’t like it coming from you. What kind of heaven wants us to prosper by tricking the people with fake ghosts and goblins and spooks?”

"*Puhlease*, Mother!" Sebastian said, letting his head loll backward. "There is an entire *industry* devoted to people who *beg* to be frightened out of their wits! Books! Movies! Haunted houses! Halloween has become more popular than Christmas! Are you willing to ignore this to defend the precious *history* of this place? This is a fallen-down mass of *stone*, Mother! Half of our family's wealth has been squandered on this wreck, and now Father is gone. We should raze this abomination to the ground and be *done* with it!"

"Bite your tongue, you insolent fool!" Maggie screamed into her only child's face. "The Wellmore family name does not exist to cater to your every spoiled desire! If your Father could hear—"

"Well, he can't hear *anything*, Mother," Sebastian screamed back at her. "What *good* does it do to speak of him? Father's last needs have been attended to—with another portion of our meager substance."

Maggie slapped Sebastian before she even realized it. She began to quake and to cry.

"Sebastian," she whispered. "I'm sorry, darling. You are all that I have left."

"You are *almost* correct, Mother," Sebastian said. He wiped his mouth. His nostrils flared at the sight of his blood on the back of his hand. "You have me, and you have our hemorrhaging family bank account along with an eight-hundred-year-old crumbling bit of stone that no one gives a bloody damn about."

"We'll just have to look for someone like Miss McFadden—"

"Have you listened to a word I've said?" Sebastian growled. "There are not enough local people to support a tour based on the history of this place, real or made-up. The only thing that can save this castle is to clothe it with the reputation that it is *hopelessly haunted*—the more horrifying and bloodier, the better."

"I cannot do anything to help with that, Sebastian," Maggie said. "I would not be able to show my face in town if it was known that I perpetrated such a hoax."

"Then just what would you have us do?" Sebastian said. "When the money is gone, I will have to get a *job*—perhaps become a gentleman's valet—while *you* will be taking in washing. Is *this* what you wish us to settle for?"

"What if we *did* have to take on jobs?" Maggie said. "That is not the end of

the world, son. Your father and I were once—”

“Do you hear what you’re *saying*?” Sebastian said. “The living descendants of the Baron *Wellmore*; forced into servitude—”

“No one said anything about becoming a servant, Sebastian—”

“What would Father say if he could see us now?” Sebastian said.

Maggie collapsed into a chair.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“I’m not asking you to do anything,” Sebastian said, “But stay out of my way.”

“You don’t have to live in this dreary place, Darling,” Maggie said. “Andrea and Benjamin have plenty of room.”

“If you choose to stay with your sister, with her sad eyes and her pity—that’s your business,” Sebastian said, “But my place is here.”

“This place has not been fit for living in for years; the drafty old doors and windows—you’ll catch your death,” Maggie said. “It wouldn’t hurt you to spend some time with your aunt and uncle—”

“I don’t need room, and I don’t need charity,” Sebastian said. “My place is right here, as long as this cow is our sole source of independence.”

“I don’t think that this old place is good for you,” Maggie said.

“You’re partially correct,” Sebastian said. “You don’t think.”

“Well, I’ll put this lamp away, and I’ll be going,” Maggie said.

“Leave it. I’ll see to it,” Sebastian said quickly, blocking the entrance to the basement.

“I’m not completely useless, Son,” Maggie said. “I’ll see to it.”

“Suit yourself,” Sebastian said.

Sebastian followed his mother down the basement stairs. He held a flashlight, even though there was a light fixture hanging from the ceiling. When Maggie passed the passageway that broke off to the left, Sebastian spoke.

“There is plenty of room in the little storage room, there,” he said. “You certainly do not want to go anywhere *near* the dungeon level. There are rats down there the size of housecats.”

“Your father took care of the rats long ago,” Maggie said.

“Apparently they have learned that Father is gone because the rats are back with a vengeance,” Sebastian said.

Maggie eyed Sebastian warily.

Sebastian smirked as he offered his mother the flashlight.

“If you insist on visiting them, tell them I said ‘hello’.”

“What might you have down there?” Maggie asked suspiciously, “That the rats stand guard over?”

“Have a look for yourself,” Sebastian yawned. “But be quick about it. I haven’t all night.”

Maggie turned toward the first level storage room.

“Andrea is preparing her beef stew,” Maggie said. “She and Benjamin would be so happy if you would join us.”

“Thank them for me,” Sebastian said. “I have more props to prepare and I’m not hungry.”

“Suit yourself,” Maggie said. “I love you, Son.”

“Good night,” Sebastian said, closing the door behind his mother.

Maggie Wellmore wiped the dust from her hands onto her blouse. She walked to her car and moved it but a few hundred feet. She stopped and waited for ten minutes. She stepped from the car and circled around to the rear of the castle. She paused behind a large tree and eyed the two shallow window wells that had been boarded over for decades. There were now small gaps in the boards for the first time in years—gaps that she recently created.

Maggie held her breath when she saw a beam of light pass in front of the window. At first, she thought it was her imagination running wild, but then the beam passed the other window. She sneaked back to her car and moved it far enough away that she could just see Sebastian’s car.

That night was the third night that she had watched for her son to leave the castle after she had gone. The first two times had been for naught. Maggie did not wish to arouse her sister’s suspicion by returning to Andrea’s house too late. Andrea Murdoch was already concerned with her older sister’s behavior. Andrea could think of no reason for her sister to be keeping such late hours. For the past several nights, Andrea stayed awake until she heard Maggie come in. Andrea did not like the Castle Wellmore at all, and she did not trust Sebastian.

Maggie was about to give up on that night's mission when she saw the lights come on inside of Sebastian's car. A few seconds later the headlights came on and the car pulled away. Maggie waited three minutes and left her car. She carried a small flashlight and her keyring. She opened the boot and picked up the heavy lug wrench. She didn't know whether to believe her son about the rats, but she was taking no chances.

Maggie opened the basement door and stepped back to wait for the skeleton to drop down. She pushed her way around it, turned on the flashlight, and crept down the stairs. She paused when a stench hit her nose—the smell of a defective sewer. Eight steps below her, the stairs ended. The hallway turned to the right. Maggie held her breath and stepped down. She took a few kibbles of cat food from her pocket and threw them against the wall at the bottom of the stairs. She waited. Three small mice scampered to the feast. Maggie let out a breath.

She had only been to the ancient dungeon level one time—at her husband's insistence. The couple had just become engaged to be married. Alistair Wellmore insisted that she would always have an irrational fear of the dungeon unless she saw it herself. He was right. But that visit was years ago, and she still had the occasional nightmare. This subterranean level had remained practically unchanged for the last eight hundred years. The signs of unspoken horrors remained.

As Maggie watched the mice eating, her thoughts went back to her first trip into the dungeon.

Alistair Wellmore did his best to prepare his young fiancé for the descent into his family's dark past. He installed electric lighting where there had been nothing but torches for centuries. He hid away some of the more brutal and offensive structures. Alistair held both of Maggie's hands at the top of the stairs while he told her what to expect. Maggie had been frightened, but she was also excited.

There were shackles everywhere—most were attached to sections of the wall. In one place, four shackles hung from both sides of a wooden structure. These were positioned so that two people suspended across from each other would be almost touching.

Almost close enough—for biting. There was a tapered trough underneath with a drain in the middle. Maggie could not make herself look away from this scene. She shuddered and trembled until Alistair moved her away.

Ancient wooden tables and crude stone constructions stood around the perimeter of the room. Maggie asked Alistair about these but he shook his head. He explained that many secrets were best left in the ancient past.

Maggie shook her head to clear away these memories and bring her senses back to the present. She reached back into her pocket and threw a handful of cat food against the far wall to occupy the mice.

The entrance to the old dungeon stood at the end of the hall, flanked by two unlit torches. Maggie crept up to the door and reached out to touch it. She noticed another smell beneath the aroma of an open sewer. An industrial aroma. An...*oil*.

She ran a finger along the top door hinge. She rubbed her finger together with her thumb.

*Would Alistair have gone to the trouble to oil these hinges? Why would he?*

She remembered the door from her previous visit to the dungeon. Alistair made Maggie open the door herself, all those years ago. Alistair wanted her to know of the door's weight, its strength, and its *power*. It was heavy enough that it took every bit of Maggie's strength to move it—a few centimeters at a time. The door was made of heavy timber and iron. Alistair refused to help her, saying that he would not always be around to help her. How prophetic *that* had been.

Maggie did not remember there being a “peephole” cut into the door. The small door, which was well above her eye-level, had the same type of iron bar latch as the main door. Maggie ran up the stairs to the storage room, picked up a wooden chair, and returned to the dungeon door. She climbed onto the rickety chair. She lifted the small iron latch. She opened the little door and clicked on the flashlight with her trembling hand.

The light reached only a short distance into the room. Maggie moved it to the right, and to the left. She moved it right again—and thought she saw something move. When she moved the light in the opposite direction, she stared

into the face of a bearded and spectacled man.

Maggie screamed and dropped the flashlight—inside of the door.

A moment later that flashlight shined through the door at her.

“Who are you?” a man’s voice asked.

“I’m M-Maggie,” she said.

“I’m going to give you back your light, Maggie,” the man said. “We’ve little use for it in here.”

Maggie took the light through the peephole with quivering hands. She almost dropped it twice before turning it around to shine into the dungeon. When she did, she saw the man now had a woman standing at his side.

“Who...who *are* you?” Maggie whispered.

“We are Oliver and Gwendoline McFadden, Miss...”

“*Oh, my God!*” Maggie exclaimed, nearly falling from her perch on the worn-out chair.

“You’re Holly’s *parents!* But you were...everyone thought that you were lost at s—”

“I see that you’ve found my rats, Mother,” the voice behind Maggie Wellmore said.



