

One

Wylie Westerhouse Branson, Missouri

The band and I waited at the side of the stage on another hot, August night in an overcrowded club. The sweaty but smiling club owner made his way through the crowd for his opportunity to slobber on *my* microphone while thanking the audience for buying his liquor and sending his kids to college.

I ran a towel across my face and through my hair. I shook my head like the dog that I am and looked over at my friend Nate, who was doing the same thing. He grinned as only Nate Barlow can, and gave me a thumbs-up—and then he had to go back to his sweat-mopping because that’s what drummers do. They hit things with sticks and they sweat.

Me?

- 1 tsp. Honey
- shot of lemon juice
- warm water
- shake
- gargle
- swallow

I am the singer.

“Good evening, Branson, Missouri and thanks for coming out tonight. Now, let’s put your hands together and give us your biggest and your proudest, your absolutely loudest, your out-of-town or my town, Majestic Mizzou Bar and Grill cheer for...The Wylie Westerhouse Band!”

It’s been a little over a year now, but I always get goosebumps when I hear

the noise ramp up before the encore. I bounced up the one low step and waved to the audience as I shook the owner's hand. I wondered if I might actually get through this whole night's set without any problems from the audience. No such luck.

"Yeah! Sing it, CHEATER!"

Sometimes, these heckler incidents pass unnoticed. That night, it didn't happen that way. The drugstore cowboy punctuated his remark by throwing his arms out to the side—and into a speeding waitress who was carrying two trays of beer bottles.

So much for our encore momentum.

We waited while the tired staff cleaned up the beer and the glass. A couple of bouncers stepped in to break up a shoving match and calm down some tempers. Just before everything got back normal, I felt a tap on my shoulder. The club owner pointed to my microphone again.

"Sure. Go ahead," I said. "Why not?"

He put his lips right up against my microphone *again* and announced—"It's that time again, folks! Last call for alcohol!"

Perfect.

I glanced back at Nate. Nate was glaring at the heckler—who seemed convinced that he had done nothing wrong. He was even laughing and high-fiving some of his buddies. Nate looked at me and nodded.

I've known Nate Barlow since his family moved into our neighborhood when we were both in the third grade.

Nate works his butt off, but he also gets to sit on it for most of the night. He's a good drummer. He could be even better but he sets up his kit to allow himself expanded views of the audience, which sometimes leads to missing a cymbal or clunking a stick against a rim instead of a drum head. I'm pretty sure that no one notices, other than me, or maybe another drummer in the audience. But Nate is more concerned with watching people than in being the world's best drummer. And by "people", I mean girls.

Nate and I never discuss these hecklers, but he knows how they affect me. Sometimes I hear them but don't see their face. Nate helps me with that. Other

times, he may just confirm what I already know—like he just did.

Nate has helped me out on two occasions where I bit off more than I could chew—when I might have lost my life or some body parts that I’m fond of. We never discuss those times, either.

Maybe you’ve heard of our band. Actually, you might have specifically heard of *me*. A season ago, I was a contestant on “America’s Brand New Voice”, which is one of the most successful and longest running of the amateur talent shows. I lobbied to have my whole band come with me, but they only agreed to include Nate. No, they weren’t wowed by his drumming skills. That decision was entirely a *visual* thing. You want me to say it? Fine. Nate is a good-looking guy.

Of course, if you *have* heard of me, then you probably know that I was disqualified.

On two occasions during the competition, I finished a song and stared down into the cold, blue eyes of the infamous Trevor Burkendale. That man *owned* the judge’s panel, and struck fear into the hearts of aspiring talents around the globe. I looked him in the eye, and I survived.

But then *scandal* reared its head.

Oh, yes. A *huge* scandal. No one from the show or the network would even *talk* to me about it. No one answered my calls. The entire show staff and the network went into complete lock-down mode.

I went to the studio, and not only couldn’t I get in, but they had armed guards escort me to my car. I only found out that I had been disqualified from a reporter. They wouldn’t explain what had happened.

I trusted people who *stabbed me in the back*. That’s what happened.

But on that August night in Branson, Missouri, most of the crowd was on vacation. The tourist season has *just* crested the top of summer’s hill before it races down the other side to the back-to-school sales. The crowd of one hundred and ninety-seven strong that were closing down the Majestic Mizzou Bar and Grill sounded more like five hundred. They were more interested in the

performance of—

“That boy from America’s Brand New Voice who sings the Hank Williams song that we all watched on the TV before he got himself kicked off of the show.”

I smiled and enjoyed the applause for a few seconds after the final song. I bowed and waved to the crowd before I stepped behind the stage and out of the back door. I slipped my hand through the wrist strap of my police flashlight as I made my way toward the vantage point. I watched the crowd make its way across the parking lot.

There he was—still trying to impress his date and another couple with a steady supply of arrogant remarks. His off-the-shelf cowboy uniform included a black cowboy hat over a western snap shirt. The starched creases were sharp enough to cut a tomato in half.

In other words, it was the look that I’ve seen ten-thousand times. I’ve been accused of wearing it myself during the last three years.

All hat and no cattle.

Mr. Big Mouth was blabbering to his audience while he looked back over his shoulder. I stepped directly into his path.

“Hey, what the—?” he said as he stumbled.

“Sorry, let me help,” I said, and then I pushed him onto his butt into a freshly landscaped flower bed.

Mr. Big Mouth hit the ground, and then looked at his muddy hands in horror.

“Hey! You’re the singer guy! What’s your *problem*, man?”

“My *problem* would be idiots like you. Does it make you feel like a *big man*, trying to ruin the show? You gonna sit there making mud pies or you gonna stand up and fight?” I said.

Big Mouth’s friend took one step toward me until I made a few twirling, ninja-style moves with the flashlight. I practice these all the time and someone other than my dog should get to see them.

“If you want to make this your fight, too, I feel no obligation to play clean,” I said.

The guy raised both hands and stepped back.

"I didn't do nothing," he said.

Witnesses to my skill with the flashlight might imagine my having studied under a martial arts master, and they would be correct. I was tutored on many a weekday afternoon by none other than Donatello— the soft-spoken, purple bandanna wearing, bo-staff wielding intellectual leader of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Big Mouth slipped his way back to his feet. I spotted Nate nearby and tossed the flashlight to him. Big Mouth started running his mouth before he even made it to his feet.

"You should have gone to jail with your manager, instead of getting to pl—" My right fist connected with his left jaw before he could finish.

Encore Number Two. Level Complete.

I walked over to where Nate was standing. A young lady in a little black dress stood at his side and held my flashlight.

"Hey, Tooie. I didn't know you were here tonight," I said, holding out my hand.

Tooie Reznik handed me the flashlight like it was something nasty.

"When are you going to grow up and give up this stupid hobby of yours, Wylie? You're going to get yourself killed."

"I would be happy to. But the Haters just keep hating."

Tooie shook her head and gave Nate "The Look". That's the look that says that he's not earning any points for having me as a friend.

Man, I hate "The Look".

Tooie's real name is Aimee. Since the second time I heard her introduce herself as "Aimee with two e's", I started calling her Tooie. Nate picked it up right away and the name has stuck like super-glue. This hasn't earned me any points with her, either.

"So, Wyles, are you up for closing-time waffles? I'm buying," Nate said. This wasn't unusual for Nate. He came with me to Branson from Boston and landed a really good day job in his first three days here.

"Maybe next time," I shook my head. "I need to get home and let Toby out."

Tooie rolled her eyes, which is not unusual, at least around me.

“Okay, Bud. A awesome show tonight. I’m telling you, man, our days in these little joints are numbered,” Nate said as he clapped me on the shoulder.

“Thanks. Good waffles to you, my friends,” I said.

As I was leaving, I heard Tooie comparing me to a certain male body part.

I lowered the volume of the car stereo and switched off the subwoofer before I turned into my subdivision. The average bedtime in the neighborhood is probably about nine o’clock. Most of my neighbors have grandchildren around my age who make infrequent visits. I try to fit in here because living in an apartment is not an option.

I rent a house with a small yard so that I can keep Toby—and I am by-God gonna keep Toby. I saved my money for a year, and Mom and Dad helped me pay for him. He was my present to Duncan on Duncan’s last birthday.

Toby is staying with me if I have to rob banks to make that happen.

Toby is a West Highland Terrier, also known as a Westie. I didn’t know anything about them, but after I met the girl who was selling Toby and his two brothers and three sisters— I knew that it was destiny. The girl was really sweet and she started to cry when Dad and I put Toby in the car. I got her email address and I’ve sent her dozens of pictures of Toby over the last nine years, including some of him with Duncan during the next few months.

On Duncan’s good days.

A thunderstorm chased me home right up until I pulled into my driveway. The wind that had been trying to shove my little car off of the road for the last twenty miles finally gave up and died.

I unlocked the door that led from the garage into the kitchen and poked my head inside.

“Toby, Toby, Toby! Where’s my big boy?” I said, waiting for him to slide around the corner on the kitchen tiles before he jumped up for me to catch him. But he didn’t come.

Uh-oh.

That was irregular. Toby is ten years old now but he still acts like a puppy,

even though he's pretty lazy.

I closed the door behind me, turned on the light, and walked to the living room. The sound of Toby's whimpering brought a little comfort.

Toby was curled up on one end of the sofa and acting nervous. I took his head in my hands.

"What is it, Boy? It's okay now," I said, scratching his head. He relaxed and hopped down to follow me into the back yard.

I opened the sliding door into the back yard and Toby vaulted through it.

Before I passed through the door, I looked up at the framed photo of me with my big brother. This was my favorite picture in the whole wide world. As I did every time I passed through this door, I said,

"I love you, Chunky Dunky."

I'll check Toby over in the morning. He probably has a grass burr buried where he can't reach it.

In the morning. That's a depressing thought since it was technically morning already. It was my responsibility to have Branson Music open for business by nine o'clock.

Yeah; if you were under the impression that "Superstar" Wylie Westerhouse is able to sustain his "rock-star" lifestyle with just his music career, this is where I disappoint you. That's only fair, since I'm already disappointed.

I was born and raised in Boston. I stayed with Mom after she and Dad separated. I proceeded to act in stereotypical fashion at that point—lashing out in the way that many broken-home children do. I let my hair grow to where it hung down and covered my face most of the time. I started sneaking cigarettes and progressed from punk to Goth to metal-head.

I rolled my eyes so many times over two years that I should have sustained nerve damage. Many of these "rolls" were performed in the counselor's office, where I wasted a lot of hours. It didn't take me long to figure out that "child of divorce after the death of sibling" is a "get out of jail free" card for anything. I played my card a lot.

I thought my dad handled the situation as well as you could expect. He was

quiet but he did what he had to. He got up every morning and went to work because he didn't have any choice. Eventually, the nice, sweet, weepy ladies stopped coming over with casseroles dishes. You may not know this, but the mortgage company and electric company won't accept casseroles for payment.

Mom went a little bit nuts. No—nuts probably isn't the right word. She sort of got "tunnel-vision". Not the crazy "Bellevue" strait-jacket kind—more like the hyper-religious kind. It was like she was convinced that the three of us were just not "holy" enough to hold back the grim reaper. We couldn't score enough touchdowns or baskets on God's Playing Field to avoid a tragedy.

Mom didn't blame Dad, but the loss wore them down until the space between them was cold and empty. Life hit us harder than we could handle and my parents didn't know how to help each other.

Every single day, Mom was either reading the Bible or watching a preacher on TV. The one worldly connection that she refused to give up was her lifelong love of one particular country singer. Hank Williams.

Hank Williams.

I put his name there by itself in case you want to highlight it.

Strangely, Hank Williams would make an important contribution to my life.

That contribution may have occurred by osmosis from the sheer number of times that I heard Mom's records over the years. Not to say that Hank wasn't great, because, of course, he was. It's just that, remember, I was punk/Goth/metal kid. I wasn't really a fan of most country music. And in Boston, in my neighborhood, at least, it wasn't exactly considered "cool".

My voice had changed over the last six months—the embarrassing adolescent warble finally started to smooth out.

I had not sung out loud since I was twelve years old—not since the short time that Duncan, Nate, and I formed a band and practiced in my parents' garage. For a precious few weeks we believed that we were on our way to achieving our dreams. Soon after that—I found nothing to sing about.

But my singing voice seemed to have a mind of its own. I began to sing out loud when I was alone—almost as if I had no choice in the matter. I actually

took some comfort in the fact that my free will wasn't being put to the test during every waking hour. My voice was a close friend, yet a friend that I didn't know at all. This voice formed a bond with my mother's favorite song—"I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry".

I walked into our den one night. I was in my black leather garb, and I think I was even wearing black eyeliner. Mom was sitting in her rocker underneath a blanket and staring out the window at the snow. Her eyes were red and wet. I stood beside her. She looked up at me and smiled. We looked out the window together.

I began to sing "I'm So Lonesome".

After a few lines, Mom started crying. She squeezed my hand. And then we were both crying. She looked at me, oddly— like I had a chicken leg growing out of my forehead.

Mom jumped up and called my Aunt Jessica. She showed up in fifteen minutes. They sat next to each other on the sofa, holding hands, and had me sing "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" twice. Jessie brought a tape recorder in from her car and they had me sing it again. I was so proud—it was the first time I remember making anybody so happy.

My Aunt Jessie writes a syndicated advice column. Lots of people believe that she is a "psychic", and knows things about the future. That may have had something to do with the brain mass that her doctors found. They said that the mass had likely been growing for most of her life, but this isn't the time for that discussion. But I'll tell you *one* thing. Aunt Jessie knows a bunch of people. *Lots and lots* of people.

'Wylie Westerhouse sings Hank Williams' made its way into the hands of one of the scouts for America's Brand New Voice. When the next season began, I had an audition.

I need to catch you up on one other thing.
My brother Duncan.
Chunky Dunky.

I was thirteen. Duncan was almost fifteen. Duncan had always been kind of

small. I was a little taller than he was. Duncan was going through puberty really late. Puberty came late for me too, but I thought he was going to skip it altogether. It hit him hard. I made fun of him a lot while he gained weight. His face broke out and he added a brand new chin and a little jelly roll around his middle. “Chunky Dunky” I started calling him. And he always laughed. Always.

Duncan had just started to become infatuated with the idea of being a grown-up. When Dad wasn't watching, Duncan liked to pick up Dad's pipe and pretend to smoke it. He used it to point at things just like Dad did. Duncan adopted one of Dad's favorite phrases and he wore it out for a couple of years. After making a point he would say, “Am I right, or am I right, Little Brother?” And he *loved* Dancing Monkey Day.

Stay with me, now.

As long as I remember, my Dad referred to “report card” day as “Dancing Monkey Day”.

“So, have you boys made your grades, or are you planning to grow up to be Dancing Monkeys?”

Man, Duncan *loved* that line. Of course, he would. Duncan never got anything on a report card other than an ‘A’. I wasn't so lucky.

Years later, I ran across Duncan's last report card in my Dad's desk. It was hidden underneath the pistol safe.

Duncan had never seen this report card.

It was all ‘A’s of course.

Except for one.

During Duncan's last days at school, one hopelessly clueless or thoughtless teacher dared to defile his Dancing Monkey Day card with a ‘B’.

After about a year-and-a-half, Duncan began losing weight—but then he just kept losing it. As the second chin disappeared so did some of the light from behind his eyes. Duncan lost weight. Then we lost Duncan. My parents lost their marriage. And the three of us lost...well, we just got lost.

Mom and Dad's divorce became final without much fanfare. Two years later, Dad married Tina—a pleasant enough woman six years older than he was.

Tina had six children spaced exactly one year apart.

Tina's first husband disappeared one night. He checked in with his family ten months later from New York City. He was living at the YMCA and working at a soup kitchen—having discovered that he was a “Free Spirit”, which I guess is another way of saying that you want a “do-over”.

I wish Dad well but it seems like he's still living on autopilot. It was like he felt so desperate to help *someone* that he was drawn to this lady who needed a lot of help.

I didn't see much of Dad. He has his hands full with his new family. His wife can never remember my name, and she tries to hide it. I don't say anything because the poor woman always looked like she was searching for either a bridge or a tall building to jump off of. She blinks constantly and her eyes jitter back and forth. She has frizzy hair that always looks like it's trying to escape from her head.

My mother has followed a rather unusual pathway toward success. She went to work writing for a Christian greeting card company, and soon she made a name for herself and started her own company. She even had a spot on the Today Show. She got a lot of publicity a couple of years ago when some country music stars wore one of her t-shirts to a televised awards show. It reads,

Sean Connery is James Bond

Michael Keaton is Batman

Jesus Is Lord

Get Over It

Two

Holly McFadden McIntyre Village, Scotland

Holly McFadden took a long look at the drawing that she had worked on for two weeks. She laid down her colored pencil and proclaimed—
“*Ta-da!*”

Charlotte and Nora McIntyre clapped their hands and cheered.

“Mother! Father!” they shouted. “You must come and see!”

Baron Dallas McIntyre and his wife, Elizabeth, floated into the room.

“This is *beautiful*, Holly!” Elizabeth said. “Your best yet!”

“Indeed!” Dallas McIntyre said. “What a *magnificent* gift you have, child!”

They all looked toward the wall, where Holly’s drawings of the McIntyre family were displayed. She had completed at least one such drawing every year since her family bought the Castle McIntyre. Holly was then six years old. She was now nineteen.

One month ago, Holly moved four of her favorite drawings from her bedroom wall to a wall in the downstairs great room. This included her very first drawing, which she completed at age seven. The McIntyre’s reaction to Holly’s first drawing had made her feel so proud—and loved—that the picture held a special place in her heart.

The McIntyre family continued lavish Holly with praise of her artistic abilities. Her drawings became more refined with each passing year.

In the first drawing, Nora McIntyre was a girl of seventeen. She wore a high-collared, long dress with billowing sleeves. Charlotte McIntyre was a girl of eight, and wore a similar long dress, but with short sleeves.

The odd thing was, in every drawing, the girls wore the same dresses, and they did not age at all. Dallas and Elizabeth McIntyre also wore the same

clothes in each picture.

The six members of the McIntyre family who inhabited the Castle McIntyre — were ghosts.

“Why have I *once again* been pictured to look as if I have just swallowed *an insect?*” asked Princess Arabella McIntyre, who had just entered the room along with her brother, Prince David.

David and Arabella McIntyre were the great-great aunt and uncle of Dallas McIntyre. They had been murdered inside of this very castle in the same instant, one hundred years before Dallas and his family lost their lives.

Prince David died at the age of twenty-two. Arabella was twenty.

Holly’s drawing did indeed picture David and Arabella at its very edges, wearing sour expressions.

“Perhaps if you did not forever wear the expression of someone who has just bitten into an *unripe apricot*, Holly would have something better to work with,” Charlotte said.

“What has happened in the past six hundred years that we might be *happy* about?” Prince David asked.

Charlotte had no reply, and neither did her sister, or her mother or father.

The massive front door of the castle swung open, followed by a string of curses.

Seth Larrimore stomped into the entryway. A stream of mud flowed through the doorway behind him.

“What a bleedin’ mess!” Seth growled. “I’ve never seen such rains in all my life!”

Holly rushed to help her Uncle Seth close the door. She pressed her shoulder against it, as did Charlotte. The rest of the McIntyres stood by helplessly as the door finally latched.

“How are the roads, Uncle?” Holly asked.

“Ruined,” Seth said shaking his head. “I saw two trucks buried up to their axles. My four-wheeler was having a hard time of it. Old Man Blackwood from up the road says he’s worried about the bridge.”

"That little bridge isn't good for much, anyway," Holly said.

Seth Larrimore said nothing, but the look on his face frightened Holly.

"I'm talking about the main bridge, Holly," he said.

"I'm going with you," Holly said. "I'll get my coat."

"Look at Holly's new drawing, Seth," Charlotte said.

"Aye," Seth said. "She's a real *talent*, that girl is."

"She makes us look so... so *real*," Nora said.

"You *are* real, Nora," Seth said. "This will all make *sense*, one day, sweet girl. Holly is able to see all of you for a *bloody good reason*. You mind my words."

"Holy Mother of—" Holly muttered as she took in the sight in front of her. Her left foot slipped out from under her on the slick moss that covered a cropping of rock.

"Easy lass, easy you go there," Seth Larrimore said. He grabbed her by the arm.

"It's gone. The entire bloody bridge... gone," Holly said as she let herself slide to a seated position.

"Aye, that it is," Seth said, sitting down beside her. The raging roar of millions of liters of upstream rains tore away at the river's banks.

"It's been there...it's been *right there*...forever. It can't be, lassie. I just can't believe it," Seth continued to point his finger toward the spot where the ancient structure had stood, as if he was trying to hold time still. His voice fell to a whisper.

The river surged with an intensity unknown for a thousand years. It tossed aside pieces of the eight-hundred-year-old bridge as if it was made of paper.

"It's twenty-five kilometers farther for the tour buses to take the south road to the castle, Uncle. Will they...do you think...?" Holly asked.

Seth closed his eyes and shook his head. He exhaled heavily.

"Holly," he said, "I've been kicking back money to the tour company managers for the last three years as it is. I don't... I don't know how we survive this."

"Might we at good, long *last* have peace and contentment in our own home?" Princess Arabella exclaimed, snapping open her fan with a fresh dose of

attitude.

“Indeed, My Lady,” Prince David proclaimed with a jutted jaw. “My dear sister, I have stood perched on the very *precipice* of declaring the family castle off limits to these heathens for the final time—”

“Blow it out your backside, Davey,” Holly said, brushing the moss from the seat of her pants.

“Young lady, I have spoken to you time and again concerning the proper respect due to the Royal Family of this Grand—”

“Blow it out yer backside, *Your Highness!* Royal pains in the nether regions, is what you are,” Holly said. She walked straight through the Prince on her way to Seth’s four-wheeler.

Seth loosed one quick bark of laughter before the reality of their future regained his attention.

“Aye, are ye not aware of what will become of the castle without the wee bit of income from the tour buses, Prince?” Seth asked.

“Without that money, we’ll not be able to care for the castle or the grounds, and she’s nigh on eight hundred years old,” Seth said.

He stepped in front of Princess Arabella.

“And we know for certain that the Royal lot of you is not willing or able to swing either a hammer or a broom, now *are* you?” Seth pointed his finger toward Arabella, but thought better of it and dropped his hand.

“Brother, what dreadful nonsense is this commoner spewing? And how long must we remain out here in this awful weather? Just look at my hair!” Princess Arabella said.

“What do you imply, sir? Make yourself clear,” David said to Seth.

“What I am saying, Prince is that we cannot afford to keep up the castle without the income from the tourist buses. I’ve been kicking money back to them to keep us on their schedule as it is! And, as you can see,” Seth said, pointing toward the river, “It is most unlikely that they will be visiting in the near future.”

“Yes,” Prince David said. “A most welcome respite from those incredibly annoying people, I must say.”

“You’re not catching me drift, yer Highness. No tourists means no *castle*,”

Seth said.

“Nonsense,” David said. “We are the nobility of this land, the heirs of—”

Holly stepped in front of Seth, and directly in front of David and Arabella.

“Get this through yer thick skulls, ye Highnesses. Yer noble backsides don’t mean diddly anymore. Without the money from the bloody tourists, we lose the castle. Who in their right mind will buy it, especially *now*? Stay if you will, but you know what? The castle will be filthy within one month’s time. The walls will crumble. The varmints will move in and take over the place. Arabella, do you remember the night you ran around screaming yer fool head off because of the bat in your room? Well, the whole bloody bat family is moving in—along with the raccoons, the skunks, and the rats.”

“Rats? Rats? David, tell me the child did not say r—” Arabella stammered.

“I said bloody rats, Arabella! Every son of a motherless rat for a hundred kilometers will be crawlin’ around yer dainty little feet,” Holly said.

“This is *unacceptable*, David! I am Princess of the Shire of—”

“What you are, Arabella,” Holly said, “is *dead*.”

“Young lady! You will hold your tongue when ye—” David began.

“*Dead!*” Holly said. “All *six* of you. Six hundred years dead. You might still be here, but squeezin’ out a dusty Royal fart isn’t paying the light bill, *Sweetcakes*.”

Arabella intensified the speed of her fan and wobbled, swooning as if she might faint.

“How many have *died* in this village in the last six hundred years, Arabella?” Holly asked in a lowered voice. “Has it ever *occurred* to you that you might remain here for a *greater purpose* than forcing the rest of us to listen to your *constant complaining*?”

“David,” Arabella leaned toward her brother and whispered, “Do you *stand* there and allow this—? I do not care for her tone *whatsoever*.”

“Will we really have to live with the rats, Holly?”

Charlotte McIntyre stood trembling, chewing on her finger.

Holly ran to the little girl, firing a brief angry look toward David and Arabella on the way. She dropped to one knee, trying to take the little girl’s

quivering, dirty hands into her own.

“Of course not, Charlotte. You know your auntie and uncle and I bark at each other like this all the time, don’t you now?” Holly smiled at the girl, trying in vain to put her hand to the little girl’s cheek. “You know, there are a couple of bulls wandering around without their heads. Those two are wearing them on their own shoulders.”

Charlotte smiled.

“What about the bridge, Holly? Will we not have visitors anymore? I do enjoy them so—especially the children.”

Charlotte looked toward the raging river—her large, faded blue eyes overflowing with sadness.

“I mean, they don’t see us, or hear us, but I believe they wish that they could...”

Holly would have loved nothing more than to be able to hug her sad little friend—she had known this sweet, little eight-year-old girl for twelve years.

“Let’s not give up, yet, Charlotte. Uncle Seth knows a lot of good people,” Holly said as she stood. She wished that she saw something other than defeat on her dear uncle’s weary, bearded face.

Dallas, Elizabeth, and Nora McIntyre stood silently behind Charlotte. Elizabeth McIntyre clutched the arm of her husband. Dallas had a hand on Nora’s shoulder. The Baron pointed his chin into the stiff wind. Once again, he felt the burden of responsibility for his little family, as he had last done in life.

For five hundred years, the ghost of Dallas McIntyre had replayed in his mind the events of his family’s last day.

The riders came at dusk, bringing warning of the battalions of British just behind them. The mass of soldiers was too many to number. Dallas knew that a Scottish warship had set sail that day at noon after taking aboard provisions. Without hesitation, Dallas ran to the home of his sister and his brother-in-law, the sheriff of the Shire.

With few possessions, Dallas, his sister, and both of their families pushed away from shore in a small boat. They rowed in pairs and to exhaustion in the cold darkness—toward their only hope of survival...

Catching and boarding the warship.

Dallas McIntyre blinked hard and the memory receded—as it had every day for five hundred years.