

EXTRACT OF CHAPTERS 4 & 5

DARK SINGS
A
DISTANT HERALD

A Christmas Story on Holding Back the
British Twilight

C. Talmadge Mitchell

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A Christmas Story On Holding Back The British Twilight

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www.ctalmadgemitchell.com

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EXTRACT OF CHAPTERS 4 & 5

Dedicated

to

J.H.M.

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EXTRACT OF CHAPTERS 4 & 5

Chapter Four

The Great ‘Oundle Run

The visitor leaned back in his chair and took a sip from the mug, the still cold water chilling him for a moment as he looked out over the expectant faces of the children. Telling the ‘Oundle story as Elsa had reportedly related it would take a few minutes, so the old man wanted to ensure his throat was well lubricated.

During his brief pause, two young girls arrived, sliding into the room through a brief opening of the main door. From their familiar faces, the old man knew the two were the tardy Welsh children. He smiled and they lost their apprehensive expressions as they found seats near the right side of the room.

Across the room, the visitor could see that, as always, Evelyn had a question in her eye, but young Benjamin silenced her with a look. The visitor then continued, relating how Elsa had told the story of ‘Oundle and the Great Run of so many years before.

With several teachers in the room, the visitor felt he needed to add a small caveat, so he briefly spoke to the room outside the confines of the tale.

“All stories can change slightly in the telling as years progress, so what we say here this night may be a little different if you have heard it at home, in school or in your various places of worship. Most tellings have the same foundations, but each viewpoint may be a little different.”

The teachers in the room nodded, for each had tailored the story of the ‘Oundle Run to fit various lessons over the years. The most common comparison to history was to the Athenians abandoning their miracle city-state to invaders to save the Athenian people and therefore keep the early ideal of the rights of man alive.

“Right, then. Where were we?”

“Sir. The young Miss Elsa was walking with the boys and about to tell them the story of the ‘Oundle Run, as they were heading to the village. The same village,” young Benjamin piped up before Evelyn could reply.

“Excellent. Yes, let’s continue.”

As the troupe of cold, but not-yet-weary youths made their way across the wide fields and through scatterings of woodland towards the invisible steeples of old ‘Oundle, Elsa related the tale with a voice that seemed out of body. From her travels there with her father, she had heard the tale first hand from several different witnesses and, subsequently, had built her

own romantic version, but with an accuracy and assuredness that placed the listener squarely at the scene. John and the boys listened with little interruption as they moved towards the mysterious locale of Elsa's unfolding story.

Over the years, many have said that no one really knows what started it or if the Run had been well planned far in advance. But one thing was certain, and all who tell the story agree, that the 'Oundle Run was a complete surprise to the zone's then new overlords.

Mind you, there was some healthy suspicion that some authorities on both sides of the border had an unusually difficult time trying to track and tag those who seemed to have had a hand in instigating the run, but no border guard was ever reprimanded officially for lagging behind in the chase or failing to round up stray students.

Of all the villages stretching along the scythe shape of the early zone from the northwest to just beyond the north of Cambridge, 'Oundle had been the model of how a traditional English village could survive in peaceful coexistence with the newer paradigm, even if the town was one of the most staunchly opposed to the changes the zone's leadership had been slowly implementing over the years. Even with the subtle rise of the new order within the confines of the counties in the then new zone, many of the older institutions in more independent towns had managed to hang onto the traditional British way of life, thanks in large part to the help of old money.

Yet, on that oddly crisp spring-like summer day years ago, something was not quite right in old 'Oundle.

As the towns and counties of the zone had transformed, many villagers had literally packed up en masse and moved south, or, if a group had blood connections, to Wales or Scotland and even Northern Ireland. A few headed overseas. Residency rules within Britain's other regions had been swiftly amended once those regional governments had understood the direction taken by a large swath of central England and how confused regulations had unwittingly encouraged such change, nearly irrevocably altering what it meant to be British in the towns and villages of the zone. 'Oundle's city fathers, however, had chosen to remain a vital hub of education and local commerce, while they had continued to leverage strong links to London and the rest of England.

However, the city fathers of 'Oundle were older men and women and, as they began to pass on, some of the younger generation were more apt to lean towards the new leadership guidance within the zone and 'Oundle began to slowly change as well.

About a year before the run, around the time of the consolidated zone's formal inauguration, a small group of concerned members of the town's citizenry began meeting in secret in one of the older homes off of old Milton Road.

To this day, no one has ever revealed just who sat on that secret group, but they were all good men and women who knew that, in spite of 'Oundle's independent streak, the growing zone, which in reality if not formally, already had surrounded the town, would eventually pressure the town to adopt more and more of the zone's new laws and restrictions, changing the nature of the town forever. The schools the town had nurtured and sheltered for generations would no doubt fall as well.

Those looking from the outside could only surmise that some planning must have occurred prior to the actual run, but, having no details, Elsa expressed respect for the privacy of the town's former elders and moved to the events of that day.

In that in-between time of year in mid-July when the school sessions had almost ended and the summer break was still a week or so away, the young people in the village of 'Oundle were in that elated state of no studies, no tests, and very few obligations.

During what would have been the lazy days after exams, students from the several schools, townsfolk, and even those few outsiders who called 'Oundle a second home, seemed to be in a much more active state than in previous years. There was much moving about the town, many dinner parties were being held at odd times, and students were giving impromptu concerts all around town.

Many an afternoon saw the town square so filled with young people that traffic had to divert around the center of town. A coffee shop, popular with the students, anchored a corner in the main square and often held impromptu talent contests, which were the ostensive draw for the crowds. Such shows masked the mass gatherings that were used to pass updated planning information by word of mouth so there would be no paper or electronic trail.

Something the authorities should also have noticed and, in hindsight, might have used as an indicator later on, was that the grocers, butchers, and other shops had almost no sales over the few days prior to the run. In fact, most of the shops' stock had been allowed to be subtly depleted in that the shelves might have had products, even if spotty, but the back rooms and few warehouse buildings were nearly empty of back-up inventory.

The burst of social activity did puzzle the zone's watchers, a new police force made up of mostly outsiders appointed by the zone's overlords to keep watch on towns like 'Oundle. However, either due to the lack of history with the town or because the head of the area's police district had declared, just the week prior to the fateful run, that all was fine in his district, the town's watchers shrugged off the activity.

Consequently, on that sunny, cloudless day so many years ago, the watchers had been told there was nothing to watch, so did not detect and certainly did not interfere with the gradual gathering of small groups

throughout the town shortly after breakfast.

Had the watchers been able to peer into the homes of the town's residents, they would have seen the fullest breakfast tables the town had seen in years. Even the most independent of teenagers sat down to breakfast with their families and the students remaining in the great halls turned breakfast into a feast day morning.

"Breakfast would be quite nice right about now," Tom groaned in unfeigned hunger as he walked just beside Elsa, briefly interrupting the flow of the story.

"Please, we'll eat once we are safely in the village," Elsa replied and then continued with the tale.

After the grand breakfasts, an observer would have noticed a number of long, lingering hugs over thresholds and many silent nods between passing casual acquaintances as the morning moved into mid-day.

Small groups of four or five, mostly students, but also of the older townsfolk, began to gather all across town. The groups were small enough that there was no worry that the watchers behind the cameras would care, even if they had noticed.

"They had cameras in those days?" Henry asked, looking amazed for he had thought the Run had occurred in some dim, non-technological past.

"Yes, they did. Not as thorough as today, mind you, but they were there. Now, just listen."

Since these small gatherings were mostly students, and mostly teenagers of well to do and generally absent families, and since 'Oundle had a reputation for peaceful coexistence if not direct support of the new zone's leadership, the authorities gave little attention to the widespread gatherings.

As the afternoon had just begun to bleed over into evening's dusk across the open farmland outside the village, small groups of students and townsfolk began to drift towards the old chapel off Milton Road. All afternoon an unseen hand appeared to move the small crowds closer and closer to that aged symbol of what used to be. By early evening, the myriad of small groups had been slowly transformed into a single large mass surrounding the old chapel.

As the crowd grew to several thousands around the grounds of the chapel and spilled into the streets and lanes nearby, the watchers finally woke up and, after what was probably a frantic call back to district headquarters (to the chief who had declared that all was well throughout his district), a few police on motorbikes were sent out to observe the crowd and to try to discern its larger meaning.

As the police arrived, having parked some distance away, and while trying to wade towards the chapel's south gate, an eerie sound split the air, hushing the crowd and giving the police cause to go silent as well.

The fading light of dusk threatening imminent darkness added to the

chilling sound's mesmerizing impact on the crowd.

Some who were there called the sound a cross between a starving baby's cry for food and a tortured old man's plea for mercy.

The crowd remained silent and waited, as if everyone were holding their breath, refusing to draw in the crisp evening air. Most nearest the authorities ignored their presence, but a few carefully kept watch. The police themselves were thoroughly confused as to the origins of the sound, so they stood quietly, waiting with the crowd.

Suddenly, the eerie sound shrieked forth again, this time accompanied by a flash of yellowish light, which drew everyone's attention to the top of the chapel roof.

Yes, the roof.

Even though there were no level, flat surfaces on that old building's ornate high roof, somehow that eerie, skin crawling sound seemed to emanate from the top roof of the grand chapel.

To this day, no one knows (and no one has ever talked) how they got up there, but a small clutch of darkly dressed figures appeared with each flash of subdued light. Those closest to the building could only catch a glimpse as the shadowy figures leaned dangerously over the edge of a makeshift platform. Those further out, unfortunately a group that included the police at the south gate, saw the figures more clearly, albeit without much detail.

Another burst of eerie sound occurred and a lone, thin, black clad figure broke off from the dimly lighted mass and revealed his shadowy figure to the crowd.

As the crowd began to focus on the ghostly figure above them, several more figures came into fuzzy focus around the first. Lights must have been embedded on the floor of the makeshift platform, as all the figures were more shadowy outlines than recognizable people.

The crowd continued to stay hushed. Only a few evening birds broke the silence and a distant engine could be heard motoring away from the town.

The crowd and the few police then watched as the first thin figure, his then visible white hands and face, wraithlike, raised what initially appeared to be a short sword, and, waving the flashing sword defiantly in the air, screamed at the top of his aged lungs, amplified by some hidden sound system.

"Dieu et votre droit!"

As the crowd gasped at the slight turn on the old battle cry, the lone swordsman turned to the other figures and, on cue, the music started.

"Music?" Henry asked.

"Yes, music," Elsa replied.

"Shush!" Tom admonished his friend's overly eager questioning.

As soon as the little group of musicians began to play, most in the audience immediately understood who was up there on that small platform.

The initial lone figure was the American violin instructor, an old ‘Oundle fixture.

Before the transition, the old American had been tenured locally, but his classic American-driven disagreements with the new authorities had forced him to retire months before. Many had assumed he had returned to the States to avoid all the issues of the transition, but his presence there was proof that he had stayed, or had at least returned for one final concert.

“The violin was the scary sound?” Evelyn asked quietly.

“Yes, dear. But no ordinary violin,” the storyteller related. “You see, dear, the old American had introduced the electric violin to the community, to the initial shock and dismay of a number of parents of students who followed in his footsteps.”

The old man then continued Elsa’s tale.

For one glorious last concert, an electric violin, foot pedals and all, was just the sort of sound to get the crowd riled and ready for the night’s task.

As the small group began to play (some say the first music was Bach, others swear it was Mozart or Beethoven), the crowd joined in, swaying and humming along.

As the minutes passed, the music increased in tempo and the American moved on to play some of the old rock and roll standards (yes, he could make that violin sound like a guitar). The crowd became even more excited and sporadic dancing began in earnest.

By that time, the few police who had come on the motorbikes discovered that the bikes had stopped working (shocking), and that there was so much static on their radios and phones that they could not call back to the station. One of the officers bravely decided to walk back while the other two remained to observe. Bravely, because he was attempting to move against a good half mile of solid youthful, vigorous, pulsing flesh of mostly teenage hormones.

The music grew louder and louder as the evening progressed, drowning out even the evening bells from the various churches around town. When the bells in the old chapel were rung (no one can recall if it was a mechanical timer or if some students decided to ring them), the ensemble played counterpoint to the bells, stirring up the crowd even more.

Elsa smiled for a moment and paused in her narrative and added her own thoughts.

“When my father and his friends discussed the ‘Oundle Run, they could never quite fully agree on which songs were played. Several were agreed to, but mostly each witness had added in their own favorites over the years. A few mobile phone recordings were made and smuggled around the zone, but,

to this day, the exact songs and sequence are unknown. But we do know a few of them.”

As the little group of musicians played, students and some parents joined in on the ground with various instruments. Others sang along.

Hymns, rich with tradition and dripping with irony in light of the zone’s rise, caused many a tear to be shed that night.

Blues, rock and all manner of popular songs stirred the nostalgia in both the students and the older residents of the town.

Many remember vividly that a young boy who sang the words of the old Lennon-McCartney standard “In My Life” caused the crowd to share a collective cry.

As the evening wore on, the music would become wilder and would then return to a softer melody. It was a mix of heavy electric, which had been some of the first music to be restricted by the zone authorities, with the soothing classics.

The entire crowd eventually began to move with the music. First quietly, with a sense of peace and musical embrace. Later, the dancing turned frenetic and lusty, no doubt spawning a few new relationships post-run.

At some point in the evening, the lone policeman who had had to swim through the sea of teenagers and few older villagers, had managed to get back to the station and had directed the local power company to cut power to the church, and, consequently, a large section of the town.

When the authorities turned off the power to the church, there was an initial minute or two of silence, which caused the assembled group to roar in protest for more music.

Yet, just as a sadness of disappointment was descending on the crowd, the old man began to play solo. The others had picked up their acoustic instruments, but the overriding sound was from the old teacher’s electric violin through his aging pedal board.

“How did his electric work if the watchers turned off the power?” Tom asked.

“Batteries, child. Later, long after the event was over, many of the watchers’ vehicles were found to be missing their batteries,” Elsa answered, smiling.

Using batteries and clever rigging by some of the electrical engineering staff, the old American was able to play long into the night, driving the watchers nearly mad, as they could not figure out how to reach him on that roof. Yes, they could have shot him off, but that was the time of the truce and no arms were allowed to be fired unless to protect a life. Also, they could not send up a helicopter to scare him down as the Crown still had, at that time, full jurisdiction over the air.

As the clocks around town tolled ten, the old teacher continued to play, while, at some point during that later part of the performance, his

younger accompanists peeled off one by one. Each gave a bow to the roaring, dancing and increasingly wild crowd. Later, it was learned that they departed via a salvaged rubbish chute, like the ones you used to see when tall buildings were still being built in the zone.

The members of the chamber group were quickly absorbed into the crowd so that any watching police would have been unable to find them. To this day, no one really knows who played up there that night with the old man. We do know that the cellist was a girl and that the bass player, a boy or younger man, also had an electric base in addition to the acoustic bass the police found the next day. The other two, a second violin and a viola, were younger men as well. All were absorbed safely and anonymously by the writhing sea of young bodies.

The old teacher, however, remained.

Even though he could have easily escaped, the old American chose to remain to add both confusion to the authorities' energies and to ensure the youth of 'Oundle and the few older residents involved had the emotional backing of his music to spur them on their way when the time was right.

As the evening drew on, the old violinist added even more of the old rock standards, to include a number of his own from his days of touring as a solo artist and when backing some of the legends.

Sounds not heard for years in the zone, and many not heard in public since, rolled across the Midlands' night. Clapton, Townsend, Queen, the Beatles, Radiohead, Muse, U2, Sting, and more tore through the hearts of the older residents and incited the minds and bodies of the younger set. Old patriotic standards also echoed down the ages as well when the crowd joined in.

Finally, some say around eleven o'clock, others say near the stroke of midnight, the old American paused, seemingly tired and spent.

The crowd roared its encouragement and shouted for him to continue.

By that time, a few more authorities had arrived on the periphery and were trying to use a megaphone to drown out the American, vehicle spotlights to blind him, and the distant sound of a helicopter engine to worry the crowd. (Yes, as we have said, the transition zone, by mutual agreements, was no-fly, but that might not have stopped desperate authorities.)

The thin, obviously tired, black clad figure, more suitable to a rock and roll stage than the roof of an ancient church, leaned on one of the three mike stands and waved for the crowd to quiet down. Even the authorities finally stopped all their nonsense and waited for the man to finally speak more than a mumbled word or two.

The old man then bowed, one final, finite, sweeping bow as grand as any old grand stage great could have done, to the crowd below him. He then picked up a microphone for the only the second time that night and, in a

voice that was steady, but torn with emotion, spoke briefly.

“With apologies to the great John Lennon, thank you all, and I hope we passed the audition.”

The crowd roared with laughter and applauded wildly. Lennon, you see, had been one of the first artists on the zone’s restricted list and the group had played a number of his signature pieces and well as those of McCartney, Harrison, and even Starr.

“Now. You all know why you are here tonight.”

The American’s breath was coming hard. He was far from being a young man, so those in the crowd who had known him as a friend or had had him as a teacher or tutor, found their eyes tearing up at hearing his powerful voice in a near whisper, audible only through the magic of amplification.

“I...I still have a few more songs left in me. Your old people have paved the way. Many are probably already arrested, or worse.”

The crowd was suddenly quiet, almost reverent. Each person, from the few old ones who were remaining to act as a rear guard to the youngest who would be hidden for faster transport later, knew that an era was coming to an end with that old American’s words.

Oundle, forever to her credit and inner glory, had tried to maintain that stiff upper lip over the previous few years, but the pressure had been too great and the façade too fragile. Decisions, hard, permanent decisions had been made over the previous weeks and months.

So, in everyone’s mind, that night was the night of irrevocable action, for everyone in the crowd, other than the youngest children and the uninformed authorities, felt the night’s concert was the death knell for their wonderful town, even as its spirit would remain.

Quite a few tears began to flow as the old American reminded the crowd of their true purpose that night.

For those close enough to see, the violinist had the look of someone lost. Having been standing for hours, the old teacher seemed to waver again, but just for a moment. Then, he slowly straightened up, looked over the distant faces of his adopted town, blew the crowd a kiss, which had been his concert salute to his long passed mother, and, while tuning his electric violin, spoke once more into the mike, the words coming slowly.

Hairs from his overworked bow floated around his head as he spoke to the now quiet mob below him. Even the authorities continued to remain silent, waiting to hear.

“Now, you have one job to do. It may take you a few hours, a few days or weeks. It may also take you a lifetime. But, tonight is the beginning of your life and the buddy beside you. Never forget your chum, your mate. Never forget your town, your school, your friends, your teachers, your families, and, of course, your churches, temples, mosques, or what have you.”

The violinist emphasized the last bit by stamping on the deck above

the chapel and the crowd roared at the symbolism of the church beneath the American's feet.

"You can't carry this old pile of stones with you, but we'll be there when you drink that beer, light that candle, dance naked and wild in the moonlight, or tuck in those wee children after telling them tales of your exploits."

Tears were rolling off of every cheek in that town, to include some of the police.

"No, never forget and never let those you meet ever forget. I'd introduce the band, but they've departed and it's safer that I don't speak their names. You all know who they are and as they move among you, give them a smile, but don't call them out until you've finished your journey."

The crowd cheered again, then quieted as they watched the old man sway side to side in his signature stance of impatience. They watched with respect as he straightened up, took a deep breath, and addressed the mike again.

"My name is Alex. I play a little violin. I thank you for your time."

The crowd initially roared its approval of the old musician, but then suddenly fell deathly silent as all listened as the town's bells tolled the time.

Twelve bells.

Twelve o'clock.

Midnight.

The time had arrived.

Alex, the old American, after briefly tuning his violin for what would be the last time that night, shook his head at the mesmerized crowd, and picked up the mike.

Hitting his bow against the strings while tapping at the pedal board, the same eerie sound that had started the night flew out from his amp and hit the crowd like a dash of cold water in the mid-summer air.

Everyone seemed to shake themselves out of the trance of the moment, then looked around and began to mill as crowds do that have not yet remembered their individual purpose.

"Okay, now. Right, then."

The American played a few notes of harsh, biting rhythm and shouted in the mike.

"What are you waiting for?"

The electric violin screamed at the crowd like an angry raptor.

"Santa Claus?"

The violin then began a deep pounding and built to a crescendo into which the old American teacher shouted the question that brought everyone back to the present and the purpose of that dark and sad night.

The crowd roared back.

"No!"

“The Easter Train?”

“No!”

“What then?”

Into the silence that followed the old violinist’s last question, a single word floated up from the crowd, crisp and oddly clear in the still night.

“Run?”

A bold voice had spoken the single word in answer to the old man. A girl’s voice. The crowd turned and saw a girl with fiery red hair and a face like an angel standing on the wall near the south gate.

“Run?”

The single word again rippled from the red haired girl and traveled from her, all around the crowd, to the other side of the chapel and back in increasingly bold utterances.

“Run. Run. Run.”

As the crowd’s single focus grew in volume, the same girl suddenly began to sing.

At first, her words were hard to hear, but as those around her fell silent, her voice was heard across the grounds and rose up to the top of the chapel where the old American heard her words and, quietly, almost gently, added his violin accompaniment to her song.

As she sang, standing on the gate pillar below that old church, it was as if all the fathers and mothers before her were standing there with her.

As she sang, the old men in the crowd recalled far off wars and dead comrades who had died valiantly to ensure the freedoms that they enjoyed. The irony of those deaths was the hardest for some of the old men and women to take. For those very freedoms had allowed the changes that now drove them from their homes.

As the girl sang, others hummed the melody, no one wanting to intrude on the angelic voice that held the crowd for those final few minutes.

Many a witness will swear to the title of the girl’s song, but many other witnesses declare many different songs, almost as if each person heard a hymn or old standard that was inside of them, only brought out by the girl’s inspiring voice.

Some say she sang “I Vow to Thee, My Country.” Others swear she sang “Jerusalem.” A few even say she sang “Imagine.” Another few heard “Into the West.”

Whatever the actual song, its effect was nearly overwhelming for many that night, but then drove them to action.

As the last words of the girl’s heartfelt song drifted off into the ‘Oundle night, the crowd began the chant anew.

“Run.”

The violin then tore into the crowd like a scythe into a field of waving barley, yet aimed more at the authorities from the harshness of the

notes. Old man Alex's fingers blurred across the strings as his bow threw more and more complex sounds at the crowd, which was chanting the single word over and over.

"Run."

"Run."

"Run."

Yes, the crowd had finally come to terms with its collective mission and, roaring a final approval of the night's performance, began to immediately disassemble to its component parts.

In twos and threes and only four or more if small children were in tow, the students, the few parents, old town's people and most of the teachers ran. Had anyone been hovering over the town at that moment, they would have seen a wild spiral of bodies scattering around the landscape emanating from the old chapel grounds.

As the old American played into the night, continuing to drive the watchers mad with frustration, the good people of 'Oundle ran with the passion and focus that equaled that of the old martyrs.

As the crowd thinned, the police, in their own confusion, decided to retreat to the station house to await orders from the district chief. As the three or four who were at the south gate began to withdraw, one who seemed to be the leader caught sight of the singing girl and tried to move towards her against the rushing crowd.

The young lady of the song, with her red hair acting as a beacon for the crowds to find her gate, had remained on the wall near the south gate, staring up at her former teacher and childhood mentor. Her tears were streaming down her face as her friends called for her to climb down and depart with them. Neither she nor her friends saw the approaching uniforms.

Suddenly, the leader of the police group, a squat, dark man with an oddly drooping lip that seemed to ooze spittle as his wild eyes stared at the young girl, bolted towards her. Within an arm's length of his prey, his crooked mouth smiled something that was more sinister than simply a man doing his duty. Her beauty and innocence must have stirred something in the man and revealed itself in a look that bordered on obsession.

The girl, to her good fortune, did not see the face of the leader of the policemen as two of her student friends moved between her and the approaching uniforms. Both of the young teenagers stood fast, arms locked as if in a rugby scrum and blocked the final few feet of the police group's progress.

As the girl finally took her eyes off the old American and looked down from her perch, her gaze fell on one of the younger policeman, a thin, slight fellow who had been enraptured by the music and the spectacle of that night.

Upon seeing the girl's face and suddenly realizing what the look in his

boss's face probably meant, the younger man whipped out his radio and yelled at his boss.

"We've got to return to headquarters, sir. District's orders. Now sir. No arrests. No time."

The young policeman had grabbed the arm of his boss and, with strength that somehow broke through the grotesque mask of desire that was on his superior's face, turned the older man away from the girl, breaking the spell.

The older policeman initially tried to shake off the intruding arm, but, seeing his young officer's face, finally recognized what he had almost done and turned away, flowing with the crowd to the end of Milton. He and his team eventually returned to the station to await orders.

The old American, even in the weak light of post-midnight, saw the two young men protecting his former student. He saw them gently lift the red haired girl from her perch and lead her off into the crowd away from the police and to future safety. He then smiled and even, some say, danced a little jig for his former student as she was finally led away by her friends to a new world and a new life.

The students and the townsfolk ran for freedom, but, more importantly, they ran to make a statement, so that free people everywhere would never forget.

As the old American had told them, the students and the others would never allow anyone to forget.

The ever-shifting border of the zone at that time was a good two hours by foot, much less by bicycle, scooter or car. A number of lorry drivers, from various associations, happened to break down on all the roads leading south, east and west out of 'Oundle and its immediate surroundings that night and for several days, blocking the police pursuits. As one lorry was repaired or towed by frustrated authorities, another seemed to suddenly break down just a few hundred yards further down the road.

The Great Run lasted several days. To the dismay of the zone authorities, they were unable to plug the massive leak in the dike of conformity. Not only did the 'Oundle Run empty a section of the zone of a considerable amount of wealth and talent, the act itself, once fully understood, was replicated in a rippling effect around the edges of the expanding zone.

Some would say later that 'Oundle was the beginning of the end of the zone's aggressive expansion, for the sacrifice of the good people of 'Oundle had been recognized as a beacon of hope by many towns and villages that were on the verge of tipping over to the zone. Those towns then caught themselves and either did their own, smaller runs, if they were too far gone to try to fight the zone's encroachment, or, if they still retained a critical mass, shored up their various legal and other defensives and stopped the absorption

that had overtaken their neighbors.

Elsa's voice slowly trailed off and she turned her face away from the young men.

John sensed that his friend was remembering her father and her telling the tale that he no doubt had told on their trips to the town had probably given her a moment of grief.

"What happened," sniffed Henry, "to the violinist?"

Elsa softly cleared her throat and finally smiled as the little group approached the outer perimeter fence around old 'Oundle. The group had made good time, so they would probably be able to find a dry spot for lunch and possibly a home or old hotel to sleep in that night.

"Why, no one truly knows," Elsa answered. "Some say the police finally lowered men from a helicopter. Others say that he just disappeared off the roof before morning. Others say that he is still there, in eternal defiance of the new masters, playing his rock and roll to wake the dead."

Henry and Tom walked a little closer together after hearing that last bit.

"And, if you go there on the anniversary of the Great 'Oundle Run, there are those who say you can just hear him play his last few tunes after the people had begun their run. The authorities restrict access to the place for the two days around the anniversary, but electric music carries quite far."

John and Arman looked over at Elsa and grinned. She smiled back and winked, knowing that the two younger members would now not wander off while they transited the village or spent the night.

As the troupe walked on, they began to pass more abandoned farms and small homes that had once bristled with the good life that had enveloped 'Oundle and its surroundings for hundreds of years. Those abandoned homes seemed to urge the students on, perhaps out of vengeance or, conversely, from simply a desire to house a loving family again one day.

As the roofs and steeples of the town broke above the not too distant trees, each in the group reflected on what the 'Oundle Run had meant to the zone. Such an act of defiance had gone down as legend, and had added yet another chink in the armor of the zone authorities.

Elsa had to brush away a tear, brought on by the memories of her father and her visits to the town only a few short years before. He had said he had brought her back to her roots when they walked the sad and empty streets of the abandoned town.

On one trip, Elsa recalled fondly, she and her father had camped out right under the watchful noses of the authorities on the anniversary date of the run. She remembered hugging close to her father's wasting body for comfort, for she had known in her heart that she had heard the old violinist, who had made even her father shiver at the sound. Yet, the eeriest moment of that long ago night had been when Elsa had tried to leave their hiding

place near the reading man's park to get a better look at an unseen young girl singing what sounded like Ave Maria through the night's wind.

Had it been just the wind? Elsa would never know as her father had pulled her back and had comforted her with his soothing voice, lowered to ensure the watchers would not find them.

"There, there my little princess, the soul of a town takes a very long time to die. Yes, you may hear the old American and even the red headed girl's song. But, always be wary of the siren songs that those who would hurt you might play as well this night."

As the night had drawn on, with her father fully asleep, Elsa had peeked out and around the low wall obstructing their view of the old chapel and had seen no signs of the police, nor had she seen any ghosts.

However, Elsa had heard the winds carrying the idea of the Great 'Oundle Run to the four corners of Britain, even beyond, and, importantly, directly to her. For she would never forget her duty to the souls of such brave people who had not abandoned the long fight, but who had created a searing symbol that the authorities could never extinguish. 'Oundle stood as a lasting beacon of hope in the encroaching twilight descending on the English Midlands and beyond.

Chapter Five

Of Ghosts, Gangs, and Guards

Perched on a set of low hills like an old dowager waiting for her never to come sedan chair, the abandoned village of old 'Oundle reigned over a deathly quiet section of the River Nene valley. As the troupe neared, one could imagine the old regent glancing at them in momentary anticipation, but then returning disappointed to her slumber as the years moved along.

Since Elsa had only known one way at the top of the town to enter, she led the troupe beyond the town and then angled back to make their way across the remains of the bridge over the River Nene. Once they were through the two perimeter fences, which was simple work as Elsa easily recalled her exploits with her father slipping through the same breaks in the fences, the group finally came to the high town wall surrounding the village of the Great Run.

The original wall, which had semi-enclosed the village, had been added to by the authorities, so that the upgraded wall stood a good two-to-three feet higher than the normal six foot wall and now surrounded the main part of the old town. Elsa led the little troupe along the wall south a few dozen yards until she found the battered remains of an old stump.

At the stump, Elsa jumped up and, after blowing into a small hole to ensure no creatures were lurking, jammed her hand and foot into two spots where stones had either fallen or had been removed and, with a little whistle to the others, pushed herself up and out of sight over the wall.

The boys stood and stared, wondering if they had seen correctly and then jumped forward thinking that their friend must have hurt herself by falling the nine or so feet down the other side of the wall.

John was the first to follow, quietly calling Elsa's name. He was over in a flash.

Before Arman could send the boys over, soft laughter could be heard from beyond the light brown stonewall. Waving at the boys, Arman used the upper handhold for a foothold and hoisted himself to the top of the wall to peer over the edge. When he did so, he was staring into the eyes of John, who appeared to be standing on firm ground.

Arman jumped back down and motioned to the boys to climb over. He then followed, fumbling with his pack and pausing briefly, thinking he had heard something fall, but then ignored the sound and pitched himself over the wall.

Once they were all on the town side of the wall, the mystery was

explained. At that point on the town side and for several yards in both directions, an abrupt rise in the ground ran along the town side of wall no more than four or five feet below the top of the wall.

“Now, let’s all stay together and try to avoid too much noise.”

Elsa had assumed the role as guide while in the village, to which John nodded in agreement.

“Right, let’s have the boys up here with Elsa. Arman and I will follow.”

Walking down a lane that a weathered sign labeled North Street, the group saw a town that seemed to have been frozen in time. Solid, unspoiled houses, although with plantings overgrown, looked as if someone would be returning any minute to dust the front walk and trim and restore the gardens to proper order. The few businesses on the outskirts were locked up, dusty, but all tended to have signs telling prospective customers that the proprietors would be back soon.

As the group turned up what appeared to be the main market area and crossed the long silent street, John pointed out that some home gardens were less wild than others. Elsa picked up the train of thought.

“Yes, for a number of years after the run, a few of the older families remained and tried valiantly to maintain the town’s decorum. As those families either moved on, or passed on, those areas of town that they had nurtured also began to return to the wild.”

Henry pointed to the pharmacy on one side of the double carriageway.

“Interesting that even the pharmacy windows are unbroken.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Elsa replied. “Many of the businesses have back doors and windows that allow entry.”

“Right,” Henry answered. “And you speak from some experience...?”

Elsa flushed red and turned to her friend.

“Why, I never...”

Henry’s huge grin stopped her outburst and Elsa chuckled with the crowd.

“Besides, I’d hit the dress shops over there if I were to turn to a life of crime,” Elsa added playfully.

Again, as the group passed, the signs in the shops seemed to call to ghostly figures who would be returning to the street at any moment. Inventory, although sparse, still filled many of the windows, very few of which were damaged.

Arriving at an intersection that appeared to have been a major center of commerce in the town’s heyday, Elsa pointed to a stately old inn that she and her father had used years before. Elsa commented that the proprietors had no doubt moved on but that the students might find the rooms set up as

nicely as ever and maybe even find that last of the underground papers were placed on bedside tables.

“There. I think we can use this inn as a place for lunch and, if we like, maybe spend the night?”

“Bad timing that the coffee shop is closed,” Henry commented, pointing to the darkened corner bistro. “This place must have hosted countless students and teachers in that brief afternoon time between classes and evening dinner.”

Elsa smiled at the thought of the students of yesteryear hanging about the coffee shop. She then stopped in front of the old inn and pub that faced out into the small town square.

Old long before the zone, the stately building exuded English high tea and embracing comfort for wandering travelers over the centuries. Sadness seemed to hang over the place, capped by a small hand-lettered sign in one of the front windows.

“Rooms available.”

John stepped forward under the old carriageway and tried the massive oaken door, which opened easily and, oddly, with no creaking sound.

“Well, looks like we have a warm spot to rest for a bit,” John called from the entryway.

The rest of the troupe followed John into the old inn and, walking slowly through the lobby, marveled that the place looked as if it had been patiently waiting for guests.

“Dust.”

“What?”

“Dust,” Tom repeated. “Not much of it.”

“Odd. Snug doors and windows, I would imagine,” Arman offered.

“So, do we stay here, in full view of these windows, or do we venture into the haunted interior?” John quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

“Haunted?”

“What? You said the old church was haunted. Nothing about the houses or this place.”

Henry and Tom were trading concerned looks after mixing up their comments.

“Just a lark. Let’s just stay here for a bit,” John suggested as he slowly collapsed onto a large antique sofa and Elsa joined him on the opposite corner.

“Do we need a fire?” Arman ventured, staring at the cavernous fireplace.

“Not a good idea,” Elsa called from the sofa. “There might be rovers or others about. Even the authorities. I don’t think the cameras have worked in the streets for years, but one never knows. It’s warm enough just being inside.”

“Rovers?”

“That sounds a bit...”

“Ominous.”

Tom and Henry were mixing their speech again.

“I’ve never seen them, but my father warned me against wandering too far from him during our hikes. He said they were bandits and robbers who had eluded the authorities. He said that sometimes members of London gangs would come up here to cool off as he called it. Of course, it might have been a tale to scare a young girl into listening to her father.”

After Elsa’s explanation, Tom hopped up and threw the two large bolts on the main door, sending a booming sound bouncing off the dark wood of the inn’s inner walls. The group then all settled into cozy spots around the great room and simply dozed for a bit, each lost in their own thoughts about the last couple of days.

After what seemed like a short time for the students, but was actually nearly an hour, Henry patted his stomach and wondered aloud.

“Does anyone want to eat something?”

“Brilliant! I thought you’d never ask.”

Henry sat bolt upright, as did everyone else in the room, and turned to stare at the origin of the new voice.

Old.

Old was the first word that came to everyone’s mind.

Ancient.

Ancient was the second.

“Well, are you simply going to sit there being rude, or introduce your friends, Miss Elsa?”

There were two of them, hunched over like thin spirits in an old Dickens’s play, standing at the shadow of the hallway arch that Elsa knew led to the dining room. One a woman, tall, thin, dressed in grey wool with a soft pink shawl draped over razor thin shoulders. The other was a man who, had he been a woman, could have been the speaker’s twin. He may have been as tall, but was hunched over more than the woman, so his height was in question, but his sharp features, bony structure and, yes, grey tweed coat over similar slacks, a starched white shirt, and thin black tie presented a slightly askew mirror of the woman.

Elsa stared, squinted in the dim light, and then a smile broke out on her tired face as she jumped up from the sofa.

“Mrs. Thomas. It’s you! You’re...”

“Alive?”

At Elsa’s blush, the old woman continued with a wink.

“I should say we are.”

“No thanks to the government,” the old man at her side her mumbled.

“Mr. Nash, it’s you!” Elsa exclaimed as she slowly walked towards the two seeming apparitions.

Henry and Tom rushed over to Elsa and grabbed her hands, both whispering.

“Are you daft? Maybe they’re... You know... Spirits?”

Elsa stopped as if considering the idea for a brief moment and then shook off the boys’ hold. She then darted across the room and embraced the old woman.

“Lilacs and orange blossoms,” Elsa murmured.

“Well, Sally the storekeeper passed years ago, so I purchase my scents on account these days,” Mrs. Thomas chuckled to herself.

As introductions were made, John and the other boys learned that the two elder residents of the seemingly deserted town were brother and sister and had befriended Elsa and her father years earlier when the two had hiked the area. Now quite old and frail, the two seemed to support each other when walking and, as happens with souls who rarely have outsiders intrude, when talking.

Mrs. Thomas was the stronger of the two and the obvious leader, with her brother, Mr. Nash, the frailer and the more suspicious. The two of them had stayed behind after the Great Run and had slowly seen nearly all of the remaining residents pass on. A few still remained, but they all kept pretty much to themselves, leading very solitary lives.

Some on the outside believed that ‘Oundle was simply in a pause and that the city fathers, absent residents, and all the former students who were spread over the country would one day return and reclaim the town. The few remaining senior residents were the weak flames that kept that hope alive.

The two elder hosts insisted the students eat a late lunch, comprised of roasted duck, vegetables, bread, and wine, although the hosts were careful not to pour wine for the two youngest, who had to be content with water.

During the lunch, held in a converted room deep in the inn, the two hosts seemed to chatter on about nothing in particular. When asked about the outside world, they looked puzzled and disinterested, so the conversation centered on the town’s decay. After lunch, the two ushered the children back to the front of the inn to into the library just beyond the lobby where they had first met.

No one had mentioned staying the night and the two older siblings had not only not offered rooms, but had made it clear that they rather enjoyed the lack of company disturbing their routine.

“Stole the good man’s book, they did,” Mr. Nash abruptly volunteered to the room, which had grown quiet after the heavy lunch.

“Now Mr. Nash,” Mrs. Thomas began, but was cut short by her brother.

“Didn’t have the decency to steal the whole statue. Just the book.”

Mr. Nash then turned to silence and would not, at the beseeching of Henry and Tom, who had both grown to like the gruff older man, reveal his meaning.

John smiled at the cousins' efforts as he perused the titles on the shelves.

"Amazing. You have all the greats. Kipling, Conan Doyle, Lewis. The entire Rowling's collection, even the later works," John said as he wandered from one end of the long, curving wall of books to the other.

"I know we are still allowed to read these, but they are quite hard to find, either as hard copy or as tablet books," Elsa added as she joined John at the shelves.

"Well, we'd offer to allow you to take a few," Mrs. Thomas said in a low, less welcoming voice. "But, we're afraid you might be over burdened by their weight."

"Bradbury!" Henry exclaimed, a look of sheer pleasure crossing his face. "Even to read a few lines of Ray Bradbury in these troubled times is enough to keep a man going for weeks."

The other students chuckled a bit at Henry's dramatic turn of phrase.

Tom also wandered over to look at the books, considered a Tolkien volume, ran his fingers over Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables," Omar Khayyam's "Rubaiyat," and Thomas Macaulay's "Lays of Ancient Rome," but then returned to his comfortable chair empty-handed and began to doze.

Arman had followed Henry after the exclamation at finding the Bradbury works, and looked along the sea of shelves, his eyes landing on a small tome with gilt lettering.

"Devotions upon Emergent Occasions," John Donne," Arman said quietly. "My mother used to read this. She'd hide it from my father. She said this man's words gave her strength. I never really knew why she needed strength until these last few weeks, after little Nicky's..."

Arman caught himself and glanced over at John, who smiled at his friend, nodding that to discuss Nicky's death was okay.

"Well, son, that book hasn't been exposed to light in a long time," Mrs. Thomas called, her voice crackling at the strain of calling across the large room. "You go right ahead and take it with you if you feel the need to look into your own soul. Return the book when you can."

Arman nodded his thanks and returned to the chair opposite the dozing Tom and carefully began reading the Donne classic.

John and Elsa had already claimed titles to read for a bit as well.

John had chosen a collection of Conan Doyle short stories, outside of the Sherlock Holmes series. Elsa had found a book of collected poems to keep her company for a while.

Feeling somewhat safe in the comfort of the old English inn, the little troupe put the journey aside for a brief time while they read or dozed

under the watchful, kind eyes of their hosts, who seemed to be dozing themselves off to the side of the library.

After a time, John and Elsa, who were sitting the closest to the windows, looked up from their volumes and cocked their heads to listen to what sounded like distant voices in the town square. Turning to their hosts, both were surprised to see Mrs. Thomas up and at the library door. Mr. Nash was nowhere to be seen.

“Elsa. Dear, dear, Elsa,” Mrs. Thomas called from the door, her voice colder, more distant. “We must take our leave now. We mean you and your friends no ill. You remain here in the main rooms as long as you’d like, although I doubt you’ll want to overnight here.”

Elsa started to speak, but Mrs. Thomas waved her off.

“We’ve lived here on our terms for a long time now, dear, so please allow us to pursue our lives as we see proper. We do not interfere, at least not often, with the wanderers,” the old woman said as her look briefly changed to softness. “Once in a long while, we even enjoy their company. However, we can’t allow ourselves to be compromised, so we’ll take our leave. Safe travels.”

With the last word, Mrs. Thomas retreated down the hall and was gone. What struck the group the most was the silence that ensued after the old hostess departed. Even her footsteps down the wood floored hallways were not heard.

Before Elsa could call after her, John motioned for her and the others to be silent and walked over to one of the smoked glass windows of the library and tried, unsuccessfully, to see out into the town square.

Just as John turned back to the group, a tapping came at one of the windows further to the right. The glass was clearer and showed a scruffy face staring back at them. The face, due either to the age of the wavy glass, or the fellow’s own hideous features, held a menacing grin. Behind the face, several more vague images of faces hovered, as if ready to pounce on the little troupe.

Weapons.

The first thought in John’s head was what could he use for a weapon? The fire stokers were handy, so he picked up the two and handed one to Arman. Nothing else in the library or anywhere else they had been in the inn had revealed anything that could be used as such, so the next thought was securing their location and then figuring out next steps.

The wide-eye faces chose that moment to disappear from the window and, from the sound of hands on the massive doors, had moved to try to open the main door in the adjacent lobby.

John and the group ran to the lobby to try to hold the door, but, fortunately, Tom had dropped the heavy bolts earlier, locking the door from being opened from the outside. John and the little band stood in the lobby

listening to the outsiders and trying to think of next steps.

After a moment, a frustrated would-be assailant banged on the door and mumbled something to his gang, who sounded like they were arguing. Then scuffling sounds erupted in a flurry of activity beyond the door and then fell abruptly silent.

The silence lasted such a long time, that John finally went to windows and risked looking out to see what the gang might have been up to. His brow furrowed, he turned back to Elsa and the boys and commented on his puzzlement.

“Something or someone has silenced our little gallery of hoodlums.”

For what John has seen out the lobby window was a pile of what appeared to be inert bodies at the kerb of the square’s fountain, a few yards from the inn’s carriage entrance.

“What? How?” Elsa asked as she, too, peered out at the obvious pile.

“Maybe your elven folk?” Tom mused, his weak smile betraying his nervous humor.

Arman walked over to the door and motioned for silence.

“Voices. I hear faint voices. Sounds almost military.”

With that, all the students froze.

Military meant the authorities.

After a few moments, the band discussed options in hushed tones. If the authorities had already decided to pursue and find them, then there wasn’t much they could do. John, however, felt that he could reason with them and insisted that the others wait while he went out to bargain with the unseen force that had subdued the hoodlums.

In spite of arguments against his venturing out, John handed the poker to Henry, threw back the bolts and exited the massive doors. Elsa pulled away from Arman and the boys and flew after him.

“If you’re going to face the music, you’re not doing it alone.”

Arman and the boys then rushed after Elsa, with the intent of dragging her back into the inn while John faced the invisible authorities.

As the group stood on the street, with the early afternoon sun peeking out of the dreary, cloud-scattered sky, the shadows of the far side of the fountain suddenly revealed a lone figure.

Tall, dressed all in black with a tight black cap that covered most of the head, black gloves over thin hands, and supple black leather boots, the lone figure walked towards them, with the only exposed skin the white of the figure’s face.

Elsa was the first to see the figure and, after watching the tall silhouette almost float over to her group, she immediately realized that the authorities were not their rescuers.

Behind the tall figure, two other figures in black, both in obvious top shape and just as hard to see or hear, seemed to ooze out of the shadows of

the surrounding buildings.

The pile of bodies was now making snorting noises, indicating that they were not quite dead, but simply knocked out.

The tall figure stopped a few feet from John and Elsa. The two behind the lead figure paused as well.

“Do we thank you?” Elsa asked quietly of the tall figure.

“Or do we run?” mumbled Arman, trying to hide the poker and waving at Henry to conceal the one Henry carried.

The tall figure remained silent, but extended a slim hand holding a battered mobile phone.

“So, that’s how they knew we were here,” John commented, taking the phone and, turning slightly, tossing it to Arman.

“Remind me to remind ourselves to get rid of those.”

The tall figure then turned as if to walk away, but Elsa called out, stopping the figure.

“You’re the Welland...the River Welland Guard,” Elsa blurted, betraying her surprise and, in some way, hints of possible fear.

The tall figure paused and turned back, while the other two black-clad figures stepped to either side, as if preparing to attack.

The River Welland Guard.

The phrase hung in the air, as if no one in the group could quite comprehend.

Elsa and her comrades all simply stared and waited.

Not long after the ‘Oundle Run, several towns to the north around Rutland Water, the River Welland, and the River Nene had similarly succumbed to zone pressures. Fearing a similar fate and seeing no help from the ineffective politicians in London, a number of towns on the expanding zone’s borders began to enact their own safety nets to protect their towns.

Even though they were outside the formal zone boundaries, towns such as Stamford along the River Welland also enacted a series of local laws to protect the integrity of the town and its citizens. However, only after a series of speeches known infamously as the Stamford Tub Speeches were the city fathers sufficiently spurred to enact major changes and spend the funds necessary to stay the creeping influence of the zone and its allies.

Shortly after the ‘Oundle case, several of the medieval market town’s leading citizens, after a long night of pub rounds, checked into the old King’s Inn, taking the flashy honeymoon suite for the evening. After a few more rounds mixed with heated discussion on the issues, the group of middle-aged and elderly men, who were not in the best of shape, threw back the fading red satin drapes, flung up all the windows in the great bay window looking over All Saints Church, stripped nearly naked, and climbed into the grand bath tub that was one of the earmarks of the hotel. From that slippery pulpit, the men began to regale the town with soaring words of freedom, tradition, and the

symbolism of being naked to God and King, and bowing to no other.

While most who had gathered to listen little recalled the content of the speeches, the impact of respectable men essentially baring all for their town was not lost on the city fathers and hence the series of local laws were instituted soon after the Tub Speeches.

Stamford's approach was so successful that many towns around the fringes of the zone enacted similar protections, to include the consolidation of homes and land in the hands of trusts and other protective structures. As with Stamford, thousands of families in villages just outside the zone simply signed over their deeds to a trust in order to protect the homes and lands from further absorption. While the act itself was risky for the individual families, the deed transfers included provision of rent in perpetuity as long as a member of the family or close blood relative occupied the home. This single provision of leveraging the power of consolidated trusts did a great deal to help halt the unchecked geographic expansion of the zone at its expansive height.

While a bit anachronistic, a large number of these laws included the addition of walled city boundaries as in medieval days. Such walls did, over time, lead to eventual distrust of outsiders, either from the zone or, in some cases, even traditional England. Consequently, the towns created standing volunteer forces far larger than in pre-zone days. Several towns that were nearly surrounded by the zone, save on one or two sides, created special expeditionary squads to scout out the zone areas close by in order to augment other channels of information. For several of these towns, these small, elite forces of well-trained operators were known informally by the names of their hometowns or collectively as the River Welland Guard.

The volunteer Guard, not formally associated with any local government in order to protect the towns and the members, was formed initially by one of the long time educators at one of the historic local girls' high schools in an effort to demonstrate the extreme of the classic woman-as-equal argument and to literally thumb a collective nose at the zone's repressive attitude to women. Originally comprised of local high school girls who were part of the military training units at the schools, the Guard retained that flavor over the years and the ranks were refreshed with new members each year.

No one girl could be in the Guard longer than two years, with only three-to-four months total active zone time within those two years. The leaders had learned the hard way that more time in the zone irrevocably hardened the girls, so limiting their exposure to the harsher missions deep into the zone ensured they would merge back into society's routine with little trouble.

Bits of this history were swirling about the heads of Elsa, John and the cousins, who had grown up with tales of such expeditionary teams, but

had never known them to be real. Elsa did have a vague memory, but could not quite recall how she had recognized the Guard members. Only Arman, who had only rudimentary grasp of history as most of his energies focused on computers and other electronic toys, was completely in the dark.

Finally, the tall figure walked up close to Elsa and, when only a few inches away from Elsa's face, spoke so softly that the others simply heard the wind.

“What do you know of such things?”

The voice was of a young woman, maybe even a teen, old beyond her tender years. Her simple question, asked without challenge, but out of seeking, touched Elsa in some deep part of her own young soul.

“My father, the Colonel... Before he passed, he... He told me of your group.” Elsa replied, suddenly remembering where she had heard of the elite group.

It was then the young woman's turn to be surprised and she mouthed the name Elsa had just spoken. Even the two behind her murmured the name of Elsa's father.

Elsa was a little taken aback that the strangers seemed to know her father's name.

“Your father was the Colonel...”

It was not a question, but a slow statement.

Elsa stared for a moment and then, biting her lip, stepped even closer to the tall girl's face.

“How do you know...did you know my father?”

The tall girl looked back at her companions and, with the sweep of her hand, removed the black cap from her head and let her deep black hair fall to her shoulders and over her face. She then pointed at the carriageway of the inn that led to an expansive courtyard.

“Let's talk in there. Safer.”

Leading the way, the tall girl glided into the courtyard while Elsa and the others followed. The two black-clad companions followed behind.

The courtyard had been quite the cheerful setting in the days of 'Oundle's grandness. The plantings were spaced just right, even if a bit wild and overgrown at that time. The small pond, fronting a fountain that had not run in years, did contain dark, murky water, but no fish. The paving stones were, for the most part, still intact, as were the several planked benches scattered around for long ago guests to use.

The tall girl found one of the benches, sat and motioned to Elsa to sit, which she did.

“I was too young, but others have told the tale. After the 'Oundle run and after a number of the towns on the edges of the zones set up groups like ours, the government banned its military men from helping our groups train, or determine how to equip ourselves, or conduct exercises. It was a bad time.

Old soldiers, loyal, but frustrated by the restrictions, were resigning, emigrating, and, sadly, even taking their own lives in deep frustration after helping us anyway.”

The girl stared off beyond the arched entryway.

“Yes, a bad time. A dark time.”

The other two figures shifted nervously near the street entrance, causing the tall girl to hurry her words.

“Yes, it’s not safe here. We have to hurry. But, I will tell you that the Colonel, for no one calls him by his name, only the Colonel, did come one day. He was distraught. Over... Over his son dying at birth.”

Elsa’s shoulders involuntarily clenched at being reminded of the brother she had never known.

“From what I’ve heard, he wandered the edges of the zone for about a year or more, teaching many of the groups the basics. Some, where the city fathers had been old friends he trusted, he taught a little more. More...effective measures of defense. Including much of what our own charter is about. Later, years later, he returned briefly, to say good-bye, we’ve been told.”

Watching her comrades, the tall girl finally stood and looked down at Elsa.

“We truly have to leave this place. Before dark. Before, well, before any friends of those fellows come along.”

“Wait,” Elsa replied, finally finding her voice, “I need to know more.”

The tall girl was whispering to the two figures who then turned and disappeared into the street. Turning back to Elsa, she spoke softly, but with heart.

“I’ll finish later. When I see you again. Not today and probably not for a while, but I will tell you the story as I know it.”

Suddenly, sounds of several local birds filled the courtyard, giving the scene a sense of expectation. As the bird songs died down, several more black-clad figures appeared all around the group, from within the courtyard and the street beyond.

Henry and Tom were the first to notice and Henry found his voice first.

“My god, there are more of them. Are they all...girls?”

One of the smaller new figures stepped into the light and stared into Henry’s face.

“Right you are and don’t you forget it.”

Henry, still a little confused by the tall stranger’s short discussion with Elsa, was going to have none of the girl’s cheek, as he saw it.

“So, why dress up like boys, then?” Henry glared back at the girl.

“Boys? I...”

The tall girl interrupted her angry comrade.

“Caterina, no need to get upset, we’re departing.”

“Emma, how can you...”

The young girl Caterina let her voice trail off when she saw her leader’s face.

Elsa smiled and nodded at the girl who they now knew was Emma, the leader of the small band.

“No need to worry about us,” Elsa said. “We’re moving on now and will forget you as soon as we are over the next hill.”

“The next hill?” Emma repeated quietly. “Do you even know which is the next hill?”

John found his own voice and replied.

“No need to worry, we know our way.”

“Can you exit Oundle without stirring the authorities?”

John frowned. Something in the girl’s tone worried him, but he was loath to admit anything to them. Elsa did not share his concern.

“We made it into the town almost undetected,” Elsa glanced at Arman who shrugged. “Why should we not think we can make it out the same?”

“We’ll see you out of town. We were leaving ourselves, soon, but need to recon the southern route for future excursions. We can’t travel very far with you, but we can get you beyond the more well hidden cameras.”

John and Elsa glanced at each other and both nodded as one.

“Right, then.” Elsa replied. “We welcome the help. But tell us. Why?”

“Why?”

“Why help us?”

“I could say it’s because of your father, but that would not be fully true. We were already shadowing you...”

“What, you were following us? When?” John demanded.

“Let’s just say we bumped into you and decided you needed a little oversight.”

“Oversight?” John was growing a little frustrated with the mysterious rescuer.

“For example,” the tall girl Emma continued to look at Elsa while answering John, “some of the older residents, the ones who never left, tend to several common areas. The authorities leave them alone. Like your old couple.”

“Yes,” Emma said and allowed herself a smile at the surprise on their faces. “We’ve been watching you the entire time. Those two are tough characters as the old movies used to say. They and a few others think the town will come back someday. So, here, the area around the town square, a few of the churchyards, and one or two of the school greens, the smaller ones, are maintained to some level of dignity. Sad really. There were more of

them, but they are old and dying out.”

Suddenly, a deep silence fell over both groups, with each person thinking their own thoughts of the near-death of villages like ‘Oundle and, with the current encounter, of the contrast with those towns like Stamford that had reinforced themselves to withstand the pressures of being on the shifting borders of the zone.

“But why?” Elsa insisted. “Since you did not know the connection to my father earlier. Why help us?”

Emma was tucking her dark hair back into her cap when she replied.

“Because we know who you are.”

“Who we are?” Elsa said with frustration. “What does that mean? How?”

“Listen. Right. We need to be moving. I can only say that we happened to notice your group, figured out you were the runners and decided we had just enough time to see if you made it beyond ‘Oundle. Really, we have to go.”

The tall girl turned back to the one called Caterina and said something unintelligible to her whereupon Caterina turned to glare at Henry and motioned that Arman, Henry, and Tom follow her into the street.

“Runners?” John repeated. “Why runners?”

“It’s what the grapevine is calling your little troupe. Easy to remember, I suppose.”

“Runners,” Elsa commented. “It seems to imply we’ve done something to run away from.”

“Seekers,” Arman chimed in over his shoulder. “Like the old John Wayne movie. A more noble label.”

Henry clasped Arman on the shoulder and repeated the word.

“Seekers. Sounds like some sort of military missile.”

The girl called Caterina threw up her hands to silence the boys.

The tall girl then leaned in close to Elsa and John and whispered so that only they could hear.

“There is a quiet net looking for you. We give you odds of a day, maybe two. You need at least three to get close to where we think you’re headed, and then another day or so before the celebration, if you even guess the correct town. Now, let’s go.”

With the last order, for it was an order, the shadowy protectors of the medieval villages along the River Welland and the slightly more confused zone runners, left the courtyard to its birds, murky fountain pool, and former ghosts, and stepped out in the dimming winter afternoon light into the street fronting the main village square.

Across the street, near the pile of still sleeping rovers, Caterina was showing Arman and the boys a small kit that looked a lot like a diabetic’s insulin kit, but was a bit more sinister.

“They’ll be out for another couple of hours. Probably wake by the time their mates miss them.”

Upon seeing Emma, Caterina snapped shut her syringe kit, smiled suddenly at Henry, and then turned to Tom and seemed to want to say something to him, thought better of it and then headed up West Street, to act as a forward guard.

“How long have you been away?” John ventured as he eyed the semi-conscious rovers.

“About two weeks. We dare not be out too long. Even our own townfolk grow suspicious if we are in the zone too long.”

“Are these trips, uh, successful?”

John’s words hung over the two groups like a dull blade leaning against the flesh of the tall girl. He saw her face wince briefly, but then go back to its stark blankness.

“Successful?” the leader of the black-clad girls repeated.

Emma pulled at her black cap and continued.

“Yes, you could use that label. We do what we have to do to ensure the survival of our towns. No more. No less.”

Wishing to move off the subject of the Guards’ activities in the edges of the zone, Elsa brought the group back to the issue of exiting the town.

“How might we repay you? You know who we are, and you tell us that the authorities are actively looking for us, so you must know we might be arrested at any moment. We have little money and no real prospects after we complete our journey.”

“Money?”

The tall girl and several of her comrades still in the street openly laughed at the mention of the word.

“Money. Credits. Plastic. Any kind of payment and we have it.”

One of the smaller of the shadow Guards stepped into the center of the street and added ominously.

“Do you have any idea what people will offer when their time is nigh? Jewels that make your eyes hurt. Money enough to drown the old kings of France. No, child, we do not want anything from you, except for you to complete your trip.”

Another of the shadows joined the girl and then several piled into the center of street, standing next to their leader. The girl continued, her voice and build oddly similar to the girl known as Caterina.

“We heard about your travels from the underground, after only a couple of days. Don’t look surprised, there is one and it’s strong. Not invincible, and full of spies and weak ones, but still an underground. Even the weasels want to see you best the zone leadership.”

The girl then took a long stride and reached out for Elsa’s hands. Elsa complied and the girl, who, at such close proximity, revealed she was no

older than Elsa herself, spoke deeply and from the heart.

“We can’t go with you. We’d give anything to pursue your celebration with you, but our path takes us towards less pleasant pursuits. And we must be back in Stamford in time for the last of the holiday markets.”

At the look of surprise on the runners’ faces, the girl continued.

“Yes, we still have them on the outside. They are not as grand as the old days, but we still have them. If we could, we’d take you there!”

“Constantina!” the tall girl Emma called to the younger guard, obviously wanting to silence her more junior comrade.

“Oh, Emma, you know it’s true. All these years. All the separations. We could do it. We could smuggle them into Stamford.”

Tears seemed to be forming at the corners of the girl’s dark brown eyes. Tears that had not been shed for years, Elsa was thinking, bewildered at the girl’s feverish outburst.

“Constantina! You know that can’t happen. Don’t confuse these good people.”

Suddenly, the girl called Constantina stepped back, releasing Elsa’s hands. She backed into the arms of her comrades and turned away.

“I’m sorry,” Emma offered slowly. “We are not out here to rescue people, normally. The town has rules. As do many of the towns on the border with the zone. The agreements, truces, understandings, whatever they are called, are quite fragile and any disturbance could result in devastation for our towns. Please understand.”

John and Elsa both started to reply and then Elsa allowed John to finish for them.

“Emma. Miss. All of you. You need not worry about how your hands are tied. Your leaders are doing the only thing they can do. We may have broken some unknown law here in the zone and are fugitives. Both the constables and the zone authorities will probably end up catching us before we get to the celebration, but we have to try.”

“You girls have a job to do. No, not a pleasant job and not one that any of us could probably ever do, but we understand why. Your kindness here in helping us to safely move on will not be forgotten.”

Silence fell again over the two groups as the words sank in.

Not a pleasant job.

“Shall we be off?” Elsa’s practical mind broke up the individual reflections and brought both groups back to the present.

“Yes,” Emma replied, rubbing her arms against the evening’s gathering cold. “The others will watch for the watchers and remove any obstacles.”

Turning to her group, Emma gave a few quiet directions and all but the Caterina girl melted into the shadows as the runners and their guide headed east, passing the old Barque Inn. They crossed the road and headed

south just beyond the small hill with a still proud church, and headed towards the far town wall.

Emma's voice had lost its recent musing tone and was back to all business. The younger Caternia (for she was at least a couple of years younger than the leader) then moved to trail behind everyone keeping an eye out on the rear.

Eventually, the group reached the far southeast corner of the village's reinforced walls. Both Emma and Elsa knew the area and where to cross over, but both were being cagey about their knowledge. Emma furrowed her brow and pretended to look down several alleys as if not sure which to take. Elsa mumbled to herself about landmarks and turns. John finally broke the impasse.

"Ladies, we gents might not be the brightest fellows in the Midlands, but we know you and your father's history here, Elsa. And, Emma, if the Guard is as selective as the rumors say, then you probably know several ways out in this quarter of town."

John's words hung in the air for a moment and then Emma was the first to volunteer.

"Yes. My apologies. We're unaccustomed to helping people find a way out. We're more familiar with ways to mislead and misdirect."

"I'm being a perfect arse," Elsa offered, using a rare vulgar term, which showed how upset she was with her actions. "We can easily get through by way of the next road. Water runoff eroded the reinforced wall years ago."

Consequently, after cautioning all to ensure nothing fell out of pockets, the two groups made it through the wall and the two fences, which were in even worse repair than the northeast corner where they had entered the town, and found themselves on a farm road, with late afternoon threatening to turn to dusk.

"We'll leave you to it, then," Emma stated quietly, looking back suspiciously at the darkening village of 'Oundle.

"Yes," John replied. "We must be going. We have to find somewhere to overnight before too late."

As the uncomfortable farewells were made, one of the silent Guards appeared in front of them, as if she had been scouting the way ahead. As she approached Elsa, the group recognized her as the young Constantina, whom all had thought was behind them in the village.

Slowly, as if not wanting to part with the small bundle, Constantina handed Elsa a wrapped package no bigger than a ring box. The girl's voice was now sweet and musical, not the voice of a hardened enforcer combing the edges of the zone's night.

"For the trim, miss."

"Trim?"

“Yes, the trim, miss. Not for me, but for our aunt. Mine and Caterina’s.”

“Of course. Your aunt’s name?”

“No name, Miss. We don’t have relatives or family names when in the Guard. Even the ones you heard earlier were mistakes that we all have to forget before we return to town, Miss.”

The young girl then walked backwards into the brush beyond the second fence and was gone.

Looking around, John, Elsa and the other runners suddenly realized that all they were alone except for the girl called Emma. Even Caterina had faded away without a farewell, other than a softly spoken goodbye and good luck to young Tom, who stood staring at the young girl’s fading shadow somewhere beyond a large oak towering over the perimeter fences.

“We’re headed back home now. We’ll be thinking of you and praying for a safe journey,” Emma offered.

Whispering thanks, each of the runners shook hands with Emma in turn. She then pointed down the path and road heading south and gave them one last word of advice.

“After you pass those hills to the south and then turn east, be careful of the villages you encounter before you cross the walled road. A lot of the villages close to this side of the walled road have had their share of hardship under the zone, yet a number have also prospered. My guess is that you will not have many allies until you’re beyond the railroad at Huntingdon, if that’s where you are headed.”

John and Elsa exchanged surprised looks, but remained silent.

“Be wary as to whom you trust. You have to operate with the thought that someone out there will betray you, so be ready for it. Don’t get too comfortable.”

“Thank you, Emma, we will heed your advice,” John spoke for the group.

“Do. We have a saying that we borrowed from the Army. Complacency kills. Always be on your guard. Godspeed.”

Before the leader of the Guard squad turned away, Elsa reached out and, grasping Emma’s leather clad hands, spoke quietly so that only she would hear.

“The Colonel would be proud.”

The girl known as Emma only nodded and briefly returned the comforting press of Elsa’s hands as she stepped away.

With that simple parting, the tall Guard Emma rejoined her fellow shadows in the overgrown brush, fading away as quietly as wisps of smoke on the winter’s wind.

The little troupe was alone again as it turned into that same wind and headed south down a curving farm road, into the considerably less friendly

territory between 'Oundle of the Run, a village frozen in time, and the unknown dangers of the Great Walled Road.

About the Author

C. Talmadge Mitchell, a retired US military intelligence officer, and government and commercial national security consultant, has lived, worked, and traveled across the US and the globe for over thirty years. Originally from Sumter, South Carolina, he spent his early years in Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, and his remaining formative years in Columbia, South Carolina, then moving away to join the US Air Force. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in History, University of Maryland University College, and a Master of Science of Strategic Intelligence, US National Intelligence University, Washington, DC. Previously chiefly a writer of short stories, this first novel kicks off his Distant Herald series.