

FAMILIAR & BELOVED

Return To Death Island

Part I: The Boys

Familiar and Beloved is a whole new collection of stories set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, and while we will honor our promise not to harm or kill our furry friends, listener discretion is still advised.

[“Familiar and Beloved” by Landon Blood]

Walk with me my little friend

Through these hills until we reach the end

The magic of fire, the whisper of wind

The depths of the earth

Reaches in

Soft little paws step lively now

A howl in the night

Forest comes alive

Ooh the moon starts to rise

Cat's on the prowl

Dog's on the trail

A lonesome call, familiar song

Oh brings us home

Bring us home

Baker's Gap, TN

1929

In the autumn of 1929, a shadow passed over the hearts of Baker's Gap, Tennessee. The greatest fear of every mother and father in that deep green valley was realized over and over in diverse and tragic ways. The stories we must share to set the stage for what is to come are difficult to hear, Family, and we understand if some of you must turn back now. There's no better way to tell you than to come right out and say it: children were dying in Baker's Gap.

There was no great sickness. No fever or crushing cough had come to silence the young voices of that corner of east Tennessee, yet there were more child-sized coffins lowered into the churchyard behind Rising Creek Baptist and in family graveyards across the county than anyone could have ever imagined. If there'd been an outbreak of influenza, they could treat it. If there'd been some black-hearted stranger snatching young'uns out of their beds at night, they could find him and put him to the rope. But it wasn't like that. Not at all.

It started with the Shelton girl out by the reservoir. It had been rumored that the little church her family operated out in the back of Fell's Holler was a snake handling affair. It was a small congregation of blood-related believers, so nobody outside that community could ever confirm that, but it was whispered she might have been looking for snakes out by the rocks on the west side of the lake when she fell into a whole nest of them. The horror wrought by the bite of a young copperhead with no control over how much poison it passes into the bloodstream is the stuff of campfire stories and cautionary tales passed down from every mamaw and granddaddy in Appalachia. Everybody knows you gotta watch where you plant your feet out by the water, and yet Marley Shelton did not. Her daddy found her, body all puffed up purple and hazy green, a fleshly garden of misery and bloated death. The size of the bite marks on the child's body chilled the blood of the folks down at the funeral home. Mark Carter said he'd never seen anything like them in his 35 years of funeral directing. He swore these couldn't be copperhead bites. Copperheads just didn't get that big around here, did they?

Less than a week after little Marley was in the ground, Joe-Mac Hoskins' youngest boy Jeffery turned up drowned in one of the drainage pools on the other side of the dam. What the good hell he was doing down there nobody knew, but his brothers found him. Ray and Ben Hoskins were born a year apart, but folks who didn't know the family would swear they were twins. Mean as hell and three times as tough, they'd snuck down to the pines on the far side of the reservoir with a jar of 'shine to meet up with the Cook boys from out the Gap. Roger Cook was joining the army and they wanted to give him a proper send off, but none of them made it out to that little almost-island with its thick stand of trees.

Ray-Ray and Ben were cutting across the dam when they spotted somebody floating face-down in the largest of the drainage pools and ran over to see what old drunk had fallen in. The cry that tore from Ben Hoskins' throat when he recognized his little brother's good coat surprised even

him. The Cook boys turned up in their truck shortly thereafter and helped the pair fish their little brother's body from the water. They drove out to the Hoskins' place near Flat Top Ridge with all three brothers in the back of the pickup, Ben's inconsolable wailing ringing through the night air like a siren.

Ten days later, Jimmy Powers and his big sister Tina were walking home from Wednesday night services at Rising Creek Baptist. Bobby Ann Murray said that Tina waved to her before the two turned off the road to take their usual shortcut across the high rocks that backed the far edge of the reservoir. That was the last anybody ever saw of them alive. The next morning, a sheriff's deputy found their bodies broken and still at the foot of the ravine, one atop the other as if Jimmy had slipped and Tina reached out to help him.

In response to public outcry over the safety of said reservoir, the town council voted to restrict all public access to the man-made lake that supplied water to the town of Baker's Gap and the surrounding area. For a brief while, things seemed to return to normal in Johnson County. But while the community mourned its dead, it remained deaf and blind to the other victims of that cursed place, dying inch by inch because of the horrors they had witnessed there.

Shane Shepherd was falling. He fell every night through a great, bottomless pit, the wind whipping tears from his eyes and the breath from his lungs as he watched a never-ending montage of death and despair play out before him. His friend and boon companion Cowboy Absher faced down a hulking, man-shaped shadow on the pine-carpeted shores of Death Island as the rest of them cowered. He stared helplessly as the shadow slammed Floyd's adopted little brother into the trunk of a massive tree with a single blow. The snap of the boy's spine cut through the woods like a gunshot as monsters roared and ancient hound dogs bayed and the world fell to storm-soaked chaos.

Shane was screaming. His mamaw, Edith Marie, rushed to his bedside through the darkened room and lit the bedside lamp.

"Shane, baby," she soothed, patting his shoulder gently. "Honey? Honey, it's all right."

Shane thrashed and panted, his eyes clenched tight, knowing if he opened them for too long he'd see Cowboy's limp body, and the wolf of Death Island looming over them, screaming its blind rage as Dallas' old beagle, Sam, howled his own fury in a marrow-curdling harmony.

"No, no, no, no..." Shane chanted. "Get up, Cowboy, get—"

"Shane!" Glenn Duncan's commanding baritone cut through his grandson's half-conscious babbling.

Shane opened his eyes to find his mamaw and papaw gazing down at him the same way they always did when he woke screaming in the night, the gentle concern on their faces mixed with a healthy dose of fear.

"Come on now, boy, it's all right. You're safe," Shane's papaw said, softer now. He crouched down, one hand on his wife's shoulder as she sat on the edge of the bed, the other firmly gripping Shane's. Edith Marie pulled Shane to her in a tight hug, and Shane let her, but only for a minute. He was fourteen, after all, far too big to be held by his mamaw everytime he had a bad dream. Jesus, he was soaked in sweat. Did he pee the bed again? He surreptitiously felt around under the covers. No. Just sweat. He was spared that final humiliation at least.

"Was it bad this time, sugar?" Edith Marie asked. Her hair was in curlers and she wore her old pink housecoat. Shane could tell she hadn't been asleep; she still had her teeth in. She must've guessed he had a bad dream coming. It had been a hard day yesterday.

"I'm all right. Same thing as ever. It's just a bad dream, Mamaw. You go back to bed. I'll be alright."

Edith touched her husband's hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Glenn Duncan made eye contact with his grandson and nodded.

Shane nodded back. "Thanks for checking on me, sir."

“Get some rest now, boy. Love you,” the older man said as he headed out of the room and back to bed.

Shane turned to his mamaw, the #closest thing to a mama he’d ever known, and hugged her tight one more time. “You go back to bed too, Maw. I’ll be alright.”

Edith Marie Duncan looked at her only grandchild, and he could see she didn’t believe him, but she kissed him on the forehead, said good night, and made her way back down the hall to join her husband.

Shane loved his mamaw and papaw more than just about anything. Shane’s daddy had been hurt real bad in an electrical accident when he was a baby, and his grandparents took him to raise while his mama took care of her still relatively new husband. Jasper Shepherd never did recover. He passed on from health issues related to his injuries after fighting a hard two years. Shane’s mama, Janice, was never the same after losing the man she worked so hard to save. Something in her just gave up, Shane had overheard his Mamaw say. From what he understood, Janice lived in a special hospital out by Lexington where doctors took care of people like her, people who were too sad to be out in the world. Shane remembered visiting her a few times when he was little, but that had been a long time ago. Mamaw and Papaw gave him a good home, and he didn’t want for anything. Shane knew he wasn’t the hunting and fishing type of grandson that Glenn Duncan would prefer, but his papaw loved him all the same, and his mamaw spoiled him rotten whenever she could.

Shane knew he wasn’t the only boy in Baker’s Gap being raised by somebody other than his real mommy and daddy, and he’d always been all right with that. It’s one reason he’d always liked Cowboy. It was nice not being the only one in the group who’d lost his people. After Cowboy died, and then came back out there on the island, he didn’t feel like that no more. Cowboy was still Cowboy — sorta — but seeing one of your best friends die in front of you, even if it wasn’t permanent? That did something to you. What the boys had witnessed and lived through that night on Death Island had changed their circle of friends forever.

Curtis Kilgore told his mama everything that happened that stormy night, as well as what had taken place on their farm after his daddy died — how the thing that pretended to be his daddy made Curt do all manner of horrible things. Curt's mama didn't believe him til he took her to the woods and showed her the items that the thing that was not his daddy made him bury. Charlotte Kilgore promptly sold the house and the land, and moved her whole family out to Newport to live near her brother.

The Kilgore's abrupt relocation had been hard on Curt's best friend Archie Stallard. Archie's dad had found out the boys went to see Cowboy off at the Walker House and had grounded Archie for months for "going out to that whorehouse in the Gap." Shane suspected he'd smacked Archie around and *then* grounded him when Archie asked him how he knew it had ever been a whorehouse. Either way, Archie was quieter after Curtis moved away. At school, he didn't ask Miss Belle any snarky questions to lead her off track — well, not as many anyway. He still sat with Shane, Dallas and Floyd at lunchtime, and they still walked to and from school together, but Archie hadn't organized any grand expeditions or adventures like he used to. Archie's daddy kept him busy working on their land even more these days, so they hardly ever saw him outside school.

Dallas was all right, as far as Shane could tell. They still saw each other pretty much every day of the week except Sundays. Mamaw and Papaw didn't go to church, and church was the bulk of Dallas Shepherd's life three nights a week and most weekends. Still, Dallas was the closest thing to a brother Shane had. Dallas also brought Sam, his blind old Beagle mix, whenever he came over, and Sam made Shane feel safe. Some nights Dallas told Sam to stay when he went home, and Sam would sleep at the foot of Shane's bed. Shane never had nightmares when Sam was there.

Floyd — who by all rights should have been the one most shaken by Cowboy's death, resurrection and departure — was doing more than fine. He was downright thriving. He had shot up a solid three inches in the last year and was getting his daddy's broad blacksmith shoulders. Growing into a man seemed to settle onto Floyd Absher like molten iron being gently poured into a mold and honed into a fine tool.

Shane had fared less well when puberty, with its myriad confusing changes, hit. He felt like a fresh caught fish, all slimy and awkwardly flopping around, gasping for air, completely out of his element. While Floyd and Dallas had grown up and filled out, Shane got a little bit bigger, but in all the wrong directions. He felt clumsy, like his feet were too big for his body and his elbows were in the wrong places. He was a scrawny scarecrow of a thing with thick, greasy black hair that didn't stay clean, and he'd never sweat so much in all his life. He didn't want to go outside. He didn't want to camp or adventure or even see anyone, except for Dallas and Sam. Especially Sam. He was always glad to see that good boy. Somehow when Sam was there, and he was petting his old blind head, the burden of sadness and fear that hung like a weight on his heart seemed to lighten just a little. The rest of the time, things were just hard. Too hard.

Shane felt like the past two years had frayed the seams on the fabric of the world he thought he knew. Even though most of the people he loved were still right there, he felt awfully alone much of the time. He'd been part of a pack of boys, and together they were invincible and untouchable, until one day they weren't.

He rolled over in his bed to stare out the window into the shadows of the humid East Tennessee night that hovered over Bear Creek Reservoir like a wet washcloth stretched across a basin of hot water. He did not go back to sleep.

Across the reservoir, a tiny stone struck Archie Stallard's windowpane with just enough force to produce a solid *pink*, but not hard enough to break the glass. A moment later a second rock hit a little harder, rattling the pane in its frame. A third struck the frame with a solid *thunk*, and the sash flew up.

"Damn it, Dallas, what are you playing at?" Archie Stallard hissed into the yard outside his bedroom window. "If my daddy catches you out there, he'll tan my hide. Then he'll call *your* daddy, and we'll both be in it. I done told y'all! I can't sneak out like I used to."

"We gotta talk, Chuck. You can either meet me down at the road, or I can start throwing rocks at your daddy's window and ask him if you can come out and play."

“What’s got into you, Churchboy? We used to have to convince *you* to do the sneaking around,” Archie called down, trying to ignore the note of gravity in Dallas’ taunt.

“It’s about Shane. Meet me down by the mailboxes in twenty minutes. Floyd’s already on his way.” Without waiting for a response, Dallas Shepherd vanished into the night.

Mailboxes were a common landmark for the children of Baker’s Gap, and they knew them well. As many rural homesteads were set back from primary roads, the U.S. Postal Service — as it expanded to serve the more remote parts of Appalachia — had instructed many residents of a holler, branch or otherwise remote stretch of land to place mailboxes for each individual household on a shared post at the end of whatever narrow lane connected their homes to the main thoroughfare. This often resulted in there being not a single house visible to passing motorists during the months the trees held their leaves, their presence betrayed only by clusters of up to 6-7 mailboxes at the edge of one weed-choked trail or another.

The particular mailboxes in question here were a block of black metal receptacles that once served Mason Road and the three households situated at the end of it. Curt’s family had been the only one to get mail there for years. The other houses belonged to folks who’d either passed on or left the area. Now that the Kilgores had moved on, nobody would be getting mail here. It was a convenient landmark on Archie and Curt’s end of town as well as a handy place to meet up in secret, as the mailboxes had been erected at a dip in the road that wasn’t visible from the upper windows of Archie Stallard’s house, nor the front porch of the Kilgore house. Many adventures had been hatched in the shadow of the mailboxes.

Archie cursed Dallas under his breath. What in the world could he be thinking? Archie’s daddy was not a man with a short memory. He’d rooted out every secret means of egress from his house and sealed them shut. Attic window? Nailed shut. Loose boards that let even an abnormally tall young’un slip beneath the porch and out to the woods? Fixed. Bedroom window with the busted latch that opened and closed ever so quietly? Repaired. Or so Grover Stallard believed. As a character building exercise, he’d made his son do all of these repairs himself. Grover would inspect the work and have Archie do it over if the work wasn’t up to his standard. He’d never bothered to climb over Archie’s captain’s bed to check the latch on his window though.

Something about climbing over the sheets of a newly teenaged boy did not appeal to a man like Grover.

Archie had indeed fixed the latch — fixed it so it opened even more smoothly and quietly than before. However, he had resisted temptation and had not utilized this improved escape route until now. If Churchboy Shepherd was willing to risk having big Walter Ray bust his hide for sneaking out, the stakes must be high. Twenty minutes later, Archie Stallard's 6'1" form crouched down in the weeds by the mailboxes, waiting for his friends. Soon enough, the sound of footsteps on gravel announced the arrival of Dallas Shepherd, and Dallas was not alone. The tall, handsome form of Floyd Absher appeared next to him at the mouth of Mason Road. Floyd grinned as Archie rose up from the shadows by the mailboxes.

"Wow Dallas, you did get him out of the house. What'd you do? Use dynamite?"

Dallas shrugged, trying not to smile. "Worse. I threatened to wake up his daddy."

Floyd nodded seriously. "That'll do it. Hey, Arch."

Archie rolled his eyes. "How'd you get out, Absher? You get a note from your mama?"

Floyd shook his head, not taking the bait. "Pa's been pulling doubles on some big thing Locke Rail has going on down past Ernie. You couldn't wake him *with* dynamite. Mama's gone to see her sister over in Rogersville for a few days, so it's just me and the old man around the house this week. Would have been the perfect time for an expedition, Arch." Archie could hear the grin in his friend's voice.

"I told y'all—"

Dallas cut him off. "We know, we know. Your daddy'll beat you half to death and disown you if he catches you sneaking around at night since he knows now he can't trust you to not go places that might besmirch the Stallard family name. We get it, Arch. This is important, though. This is about Shane. He ain't been right since... well, since everything with Cowboy out on the island."

The levity faded from Floyd's voice. "He is awful quiet these days, and he ain't looking too healthy neither."

Archie looked down at his feet. "He ain't told none of his stupid stories in a long time, now that you mention it. Much as that kid gets on my nerves, I kinda miss the stories."

Dallas nodded once. "He don't sleep for nothing unless I leave Sam with him. The one time I left him home with Mama when I slept over there, Shane woke up screaming. His mamaw came running in, and... well, I got the feeling it happens a lot."

Floyd nodded in understanding. He knew well what it was like to have a little brother who wasn't well in ways nobody could figure out. "What are you thinking we should do, Dal? You know him better'n any of us."

Dallas thought about it for a minute.

"It's his birthday next week. His mamaw asked me if we had anything planned. Last year we just ate cake at his house and he sat and read a book and me and Great Uncle Glenn did the jigsaw puzzle they gave him as a present. But that wasn't too long after Cowboy left. She thought maybe he'd get back to normal by now. It's been awhile, but he ain't. I told her I'd talk to y'all. I think we should take him out camping. Maybe go out to Whistler's Knob and look for deer-sign, or maybe go out to Buckeye Falls?"

Archie started to protest, but Dallas held up his hands.

"It don't have to be no secret. We ask our folks. Get permission, keep it all above board. I know that's the only way you're gonna go, Arch, and we need all of us there that can be there. Please, y'all. If one of y'all was hurting or sick we'd do the same. I know things are different now, but we can't just let him stay like this. We ain't little no more and besides..." Dallas turned his gaze on Archie Stallard. "What was the number one rule of every expedition, Commander Woodchuck?"

Archie Stallard looked up like he'd been slapped. "Oh, come on."

Floyd grinned. "Say it, Archie. You made the rule."

Archie Stallard sighed and muttered, "We never leave a man behind."

Floyd cupped a hand to his ear. "Sorry. What was that?"

Archie rolled his eyes. "We never leave a man behind!"

Floyd clapped him on the shoulder. "That's the spirit! We'll talk to Shane and see where he'd rather go, but let's not give him the option to stay home. He has to pick the place, and we'll do it. Agreed?"

The boys all nodded their assent, and then spit and shook on it to make it official. Then one by one, they drifted from the mailboxes back to their respective corners of Baker's Gap to sleep away what was left of the night.

The following Sunday, Edith Marie knocked gently on her grandson's bedroom door, waiting for his answer before opening it a crack to tell him, "Shane, honey, you've got company."

Shane furrowed his brow. He figured Dallas had church tonight, as it was the third Sunday of the month. Shane wasn't really in the mood for company. He'd had the dreams the night before and hadn't slept much. He'd tell Dallas he wasn't feeling well, and they could spend time together after school one day this week.

But when he walked into the sitting room of his mamaw and papaw's house, Dallas was not alone. Archie Stallard and Floyd Absher perched next to him on the edge of Mamaw's good sofa. Through the back screen door, Shane could see Sam waiting patiently on the back porch, his blind eyes unfocused, nose bobbing gently, scenting the gentle rain that blessed the fields that cool September evening. Shane went over and opened the screen door, calling the ancient dog inside. He knelt down and hugged Sam close, the warm, musky scent of his soft hide and

panting breath a comfort. Shane closed his eyes for a second, counted to three, and then stood to face his friends as Sam settled by his feet.

“Hey, boys. What are y’all doing here?” Shane looked around at each of them, trying to divine from their body language what this unusual visit portended. “Is everything ok?”

For a moment, nobody said anything. Noticing Edith Marie hovering just outside the doorway, Shane called nervously to her, “Mamaw? What’s going on?”

Dallas spoke first. “Bud, we gotta get you out of this house. You stay holed up in your room doing nothing but reading and sleeping, and well, frankly it’s starting to smell back there.”

Archie nodded seriously. “I’m surprised y’all ain’t got a citation from the county about having such a stink this close to the town water supply. Gonna have to hose you down or something, kid.”

Floyd elbowed Archie hard in the ribs. “Lay off, Chuck,” he hissed at him, half grinning. He turned sincere eyes on Shane, ignoring Archie as the lanky boy play-acted serious injury from the elbow strike. “It’s your birthday next weekend, man. We wanna do something nice for you. I know it ain’t the same without Curtis or Cowboy, but we wanna take you out camping. Get away from town for a minute, and I just... I don’t know, just be us again. Get some adventuring in before it gets too cold.”

Dallas tagged back in before Shane could refuse. “We already talked to Great Uncle Glenn and Aunt Edith about it, and they said it’s ok.”

Shane glanced back to his mamaw, and saw his papa had slipped in from his workshop on the side of the house to join her. “It’s all right with us,” Glenn Duncan said, nodding. “You boys could use some fresh air. You’re mamaw’s talked with the other boys’ folks, and we’re all ok with it. As long as y’all stay clear of the reservoir.”

“I figured we could go over to Buckeye Falls, or maybe go up to the Devil’s Mile. Even out to the Knob. We can do whatever you want to do. Whadda you say, man?” Dallas asked gently.

Shane was about to say absolutely the hell not, but then he saw hope in his mamaw and papaw's eyes as they gazed on silently from the kitchen. He knew he'd put them through a lot in the past couple of years. Hell, they'd probably enjoy a night of guaranteed sleep without him screaming in the middle of it. He took a deep breath, ran a hand through the back of his lank, shaggy hair, and said, "Well, I don't know where half my gear is right now, but... boys, I'll think about it. We can talk about it at school later this week, ok? Just let me think on it some."

Dallas beamed. "Yeah, man. That sounds real good. Don't it, boys?"

Archie and Floyd nodded their agreement. Then Edith Marie called them into the kitchen, where she served each boy a thick slice of her famous chocolate cake left over from Sunday dinner with a tall glass of milk to balance out the sugar. When they'd cleaned their plates, she sent them on their way with a leftover chicken leg for Sam to be enjoyed on the road. It made it about as far as the end of the drive before disappearing in what might have been a new Baker's Gap record for the devourment of poultry.

The next week of school seemed to crawl by. Miss Belle's lectures were as interesting as lessons ever got in the first few weeks of school, but the boys only had room for one thing in their collective headspace. Where would Shane want to go? *Would* he go? Or would he beg off at the last minute, retreating to his room and fracturing the bonds of their friendship even more?

They needn't have worried. On Wednesday after school, as the four of them walked to the point in the road where they always split up to find their respective ways home, Shane called them to a stop. Throwing both hands into the air like a preacher receiving a message from on high, he declared, "I have decided!" A little of his old showmanship sparkled in his smile, as all eyes turned on him.

"I was gonna tell y'all I couldn't go, but — wait a minute, Dal, let me finish," Shane admonished as he saw Dallas open his mouth to protest. "I was gonna tell y'all I couldn't go because I couldn't find my pack. See it's got my knife, my good rope, and six different lucky charms y'all

wouldn't even understand, along with my favorite copy of *Tales of the Strange* that Uncle Georgie got for me over in Tipton. I can't go camping without my pack, boys. But luckily I remembered where it is. We just have to get it."

"Where the hell is it, pipsqueak?" Archie grouched, irritated but also relieved to hear his friend sounding a little bit more like himself. Shane was clearly milking this for all it was worth.

"Well, that is an interesting question, young Archibald. I thought it was under my bed. 'Twas not. I thought maybe Mamaw had found it and put it in Papaw's workshop because it smelled bad. She had not. And then I remembered. Ah yes, Shane old boy, you left it with the swords."

Floyd wrinkled his brow for a moment, not following. "The swords?"

"Oh yes!" It surprised Shane how easy he found sliding back into the role of storyteller and clown. He still felt the weight of whatever haunted him, but there was a light breaking through the shadows that dogged his heart.

"My treasures lie beneath the weight and protection of 'Scalibur and his brethren Gallyhad, Lancelot, G'wayne, Percival, and even the short sword of Sir Cowboy. I hid my pack in the armory we built to stand against the enemy!" Shane cried, a bit of manic energy inspiring him to throw out a single finger pointing west.

Archie's face tightened with grim understanding. "You can't be serious, kid. You left it *there*?"

The realization hit Floyd at the same instant. "Wait, the swords? The swords we made out of poplar branches when we played King Arthur?"

Shane nodded solemnly. "The very same, boys. The very same."

Dallas shook his head, disbelieving. "Shane, that means your pack—"

"Is on the island. So if you want me out of the house for my birthday..." Shane took a deep breath. "We have to go back to Death Island."

[“Familiar and Beloved” by Landon Blood]

Thus concludes part one of Familiar & Beloved, “Return to Death Island.” Today’s story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins. Our theme song is by Landon Blood. Join us for part two exclusively on Patreon.

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