

## FAMILIAR AND BELOVED

Kith and Kin

Part II

*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. This story takes place in the years following the events of Black Mouthed Dog, so if you haven't finished that tale yet, we recommend you do that before coming on this journey with us. Go on if you need to. We'll wait right here for you, family.*

Waylon Boggs stood atop a barren ridge overlooking what should have been the Pound River, the furious little tributary of the mighty Clinch that brought both abundance and disaster to the residents of Boggs Holler. What he saw instead was an abomination. The swift and muddy flow of the Pound was gone, its burbling song choked into a sludgy gurgle. The waters that were the source of fertile soil and fresh fish had been replaced with a vile, brownish-black sap in whose grasp writhed a legion of desiccated corpses, thrashing against its sticky grip to no avail.

Waylon saw all those he had ever known and loved amongst that throng of struggling dead. He saw them like this most nights. His sons were in that trench, his youngest, Dale, wrapped in a final embrace with his big brother Vernard. Their small bodies were torn apart and crushed inward at the same time as the tainted muck pulsed and wrenched at them. Glory Ann was there too, her figure bent over them in a pose that might have suggested protection, had her eye sockets not been empty, her mouth not transformed into ravening maw filled with huge, blunt teeth. Her body quivered under the strain of the ichor, her monstrous husk breaking apart before she could reach her terrified children. Waylon saw his Daddy, Uncle Batch, Verna, his mama, all swallowed up by this blasphemy of a river, all dead and yet still clearly suffering, their mouths agape, wailing in agony beneath that suffocating membrane, though not one voice escaped. The cracking of their bones, however, was a different matter. It echoed like gunshots, and Waylon flinched at the sound. Limbs and fingers snapped like dead branches to the bite of a hatchet, the bodies crumbling to cinders as the throat of the river ground them down, the rattling of their remains fading into silence as he began to scream.

Waylon sat bolt upright in the back of his family's cart, soaked in sweat. Where was he? What time was it? Judging by the position of the sun, it was late afternoon heading into evening.

Where was his mama? How long had he been asleep?

WAYLON: Mama? Miss Emmaline?

The last thing he remembered was his mama telling him to wait with the cart while she went over to speak with that strange little feller who'd been tending his garden. What if something had happened to her? What if she'd been wrong about the man? Where was Miss Emmaline? Surely she would protect her mistress, but who knew what people on this side of the mountain were capable of. His daddy hadn't wanted them to come. Waylon had heard them arguing the night before they left. Though it hadn't been clear from their conversation what, specifically, Lewis Boggs' objection had been, it had been obvious he'd been concerned for his wife. What if Daddy had been right?

Waylon climbed down from the cart and began walking toward the house, carefully picking his way around the dog-leg curve. The sun was dipping toward the treeline. It was that peaceful time on the edge of twilight when the birds have begun to settle in for the night and the crickets have yet to begin their nightly serenade. Not even a breeze stirred the leaves overhead. All was quiet save the padding of Waylon's footsteps. His mind raced with a host of horrific possibilities as the chimney smoke he'd spotted from the rode came into view. It was all he could do to refrain from breaking into a run. His blood thundered in his ears. What if he was too late? What if he'd lost his mama and her old cat? He scanned the treeline for a path that would lead up to the house with the steep yard and the tidy little garden. He'd stopped to get his bearings and catch his breath when a voice broke through the early evening air.

DIGGER: Hey there, young feller.

Waylon almost jumped out of his skin at the sudden disruption in the stillness all around him. He turned to find the small man from the garden walking towards him, hands in his pockets, careless as you please. He was still dressed for choring, but he'd washed his hands and his flannel shirt sleeves had been unrolled and buttoned up. He wore simple overalls and thin, gold rimmed spectacles that made him look like an underfed owl. He was mostly bald, and the wisps of hair left on his head were pale as dandelion fluff around his ears.

Mama had been right about one thing — the man was just skin and bones. Waylon thought he could have knocked him over with a well thrown feather pillow. As he drew closer though, Waylon could see that he might be made of sterner stuff. His hide was tanned from a life of working outside, his forehead a plowed field of worry lines and wrinkles. His hands had that same look of his late Uncle Batch's, all scarred knuckles and corded muscle wrapped around bones like knotted hickory. The beast in Waylon's blood took note of these things as it watched and waited inside the boy.

WAYLON: Oh! Hey there... sir.

DIGGER: Your mama's getting supper together. Says she don't trust my cookin' after all these years. Can you imagine? I been feeding myself and plenty of other folks out here for thirty years and she turns her nose up at my pickled pigs' feet and cabbage rolls? The very nerve of that woman! You have no idea who I am, do you son?

WAYLON: I'm afraid I don't, sir. Mama didn't tell me who we were coming to see, just that you were somebody she thought could help me.

DIGGER: Well, I guess I can't blame her. When you kill as many people as I did, you tend to be somebody people want to forget. C'mon up to the house and we'll have us a bite to eat.

At the mention of killing, Waylon's eyes narrowed and his hands half clenched. The dog inside him was pacing the fence of his body now, sniffing, growling, trying to goad Waylon into action. Was this man trying to scare him? Was he trying to intimidate him in some sly, old man way that you don't understand until they're already laughing at you? Was the old man already laughing? The dog's chain pulled taught as it strained and growled low in Waylon Boggs' soul.

The man turned and headed back up the road, stopping at the entrance to his yard, which Waylon had somehow missed, and Waylon watched his exposed back, calculating. If he struck now, he could find out whatever had been done with his mama and be done with it. He might have a little more fight in him than Waylon initially assumed, but he was still old. As if sensing Waylon's thoughts, the skinny man glanced back over his shoulder, his brow furrowing when he saw that Waylon wasn't following.

DIGGER: Oh, you don't wanna follow an old stranger back to his house out here in the middle of nowhere and nothing? Is that it? That's probably a good rule to live by, now that I think about it.

The old man pointed a thumb to his chest as he went on.

DIGGER: Elphius is what my Mama and Daddy named me, but everybody just calls me Digger. I'm your mama's younger brother. That makes me your uncle. Though from the look on your face, I guess I'm correct in assuming she's never mentioned me?

WAYLON: You are, sir. Mama never mentioned any brothers besides Uncle Asa, so you'll understand if I'm a mite skeptical, and if I'm starting to wonder where my mama is, given that I've not seen her since she went into your house and you're out here talking about killing folks.

DIGGER: 'Netta! Could you stick your head out here and show your boy that I'm not some murdering hermit that lured you into my house with pig's feet and cabbage rolls?

Oanetta Boggs banged the screen door open and bustled out onto the porch, her hands and the borrowed apron she wore covered in flour. She bore the look of a woman who has been called away from the kitchen to deal with the foolishness of menfolk, and both Digger and Waylon winced in sheer reflex.

OANETTA: What!? Digger, what are you doing? I was gonna introduce you and explain, but of course neither one of y'all can sit still and keep your mouth shut for half a minute. Let me get this flour off my hands and I'll come down.

WAYLON: Mama! You all right? He ain't hurt you or nothing, has he? He says he's my uncle.

OANETTA: Waylon, I told you I wasn't in no danger! Give me just a minute and I'll be right—

DIGGER: No, you stay put. We'll come to you. I have a feeling my nephew and I got a lot to talk about.

Before Digger or Waylon could take another step, a lithe gray shadow leaped onto the road. She settled herself onto her haunches, and sat gazing up at them with eyes far older than the Commonwealth of Virginia. Waylon startled at the sudden appearance of his family's ancient guardian, the beast in his blood growling. Waylon's blood rose as he looked from the man who called himself Digger to his Mama's familiar.

WAYLON: Hey girl! Everything all right? Has this man been nice to you and Mama?

Emmaline gazed back at him placidly and began to groom one paw.

Waylon's voice was shaky, like fingers clutching the handle of a sheathed knife, spoiling for a reason to draw steel.

WAYLON: Anything I should know? Anything I should do to make sure we're all safe? Just say the word, Old Lady, and I'll get all of us out of here.

Emmaline Underfoot, Gray Ghost of Black Mountain, blinked up at Waylon with the long-suffering expression of a matriarch who has been called away from her business to deal with an unruly child. Waylon's eyes widened as he caught the flicker of silver fire racing through the lighter parts of her coat, something he'd only seen when there was danger afoot. His muscles coiled, priming to lunge at the old man, when Emmaline got to her feet. As that halo of cold flames danced about her tabby markings, she began to purr, twining around Digger McCoy's legs. She gazed back at Waylon with a pointed stare, and the realization dawned on him that the old cat's warning had been directed not at the old man, but at him. Emmaline stopped to accept long, snoot-to-tail pets from this long lost relative, and glanced back at Waylon with another slow blink. Her message was clear: the only danger here was whatever fool thing Waylon might be thinking of doing. If he knew what was good for him, those calm green eyes said, he'd stand down.

DIGGER: Miss Emmaline and I go way back, don't we, girl? It's been a long time, but kin is kin, ain't that right, old Ghost?

Digger scratched the shimmering beast under her chin, and Waylon took a deep, centering breath. Emmaline began walking up the hill toward the house, stopping ten feet ahead to glance back at them imperiously.

Digger snorted.

DIGGER: I think we're being summoned. Come up to the house. Your mama'll skin us both if she has to come out here in the middle of making supper again.

Waylon chuckled sheepishly.

WAYLON: I guess you *do* know Mama.

The two men hiked up the little path that snaked up the hill to Digger's house. As soon as Waylon set foot on the porch, he was met with the tantalizing and familiar aroma of his mother's cooking — fried chicken, his favorite. His stomach growled enthusiastically, and Waylon realized it had been hours since he'd eaten, or even felt especially hungry. They'd made do with bread and cheese and a bit of dried meat on the road, which he'd barely picked at. It was little surprise he was getting a bit testy.

Oanetta Boggs was indeed making fried chicken, the crowning touch on a feast fresh from Digger's little garden: fried okra, juicy slabs of fresh tomatoes and cucumbers, and spicy fried taters. There was golden cornbread with just a hint of sweetness and creamy, fresh butter to slather on it. The cornmeal, Digger explained as they tucked into their meal, was from his neighbor's mill about a mile downriver, and he'd churned the butter himself. Brother and sister chatted amiably over supper, Oanetta filling Digger in on the news from Boggs' Holler — who'd got married and who'd passed, who'd had babies and who'd got caught fooling around with somebody else's spouse — the usual gossip that occupied a small community.

When their plates were cleared and their bellies full, Digger stepped out onto the porch to light his pipe while Oanetta warmed up a few slices of pie and made coffee. Waylon cleared the table, and made to begin the washing up, but his mama shooed him out the door after her brother. The

dishes could wait, and he was only getting underfoot in the small space. When the coffee was ready and the pie was hot, she loaded up a tray with three cups, cream and sugar, and three slices of pie, and joined the men outside.

It was a balmy evening, perfect for porch sitting, and she found Digger holding forth in the half endearing, half insufferable tone he used when explaining something he knew a great deal about — in this case, how the McCoys came to Boggs Holler.

DIGGER: We'd just come down to Pound Gap from West Virginia. There was a whole mess of families homesteading on that side of the mountain and down in the hollers by the river. The Adamases, the Boggses, the Fraziers, the Bateses, the Webbs, the Bentleys... other folks I'm sure you'd recognize. For a few years, everybody and their brother was looking to push into that part of the country, and us McCoys were right there with them.

OANETTA: Most folks who had money built up in the hills — it was good land, safe from flooding, but hard work to clear. Almost nobody tried it who couldn't afford to pay for extra labor. Folks like us settled down by the river. Real fertile soil there. A good patch as long as you were smart enough not to build right on the water.

DIGGER: Us and the Teasleys and the Boggses all pitched to make a home in that wild little patch of green. Didn't take us too long to get settled, but like 'Netta said, the folks up the mountain had more work to do, and they needed help if they wanted a roof over their heads before winter. So they come to us offering jobs. They needed barns raised and land cleared and wells dug. That's where I come in.

OANETTA: That's why folks started calling him Digger. Best diviner this side of the Gap, and he was only fourteen years old when Daddy realized he had the gift. If there was water under the ground, he could find it. You said you could hear it singing to you, like a song — didn't you, Dig?

DIGGER: That's why *you* call me Digger, Netta. I found a lot of water, helped dig some good wells in my day. And yeah, it comes to me kinda like a little song in my head. That's true enough.

But one day, that song... the song came, and it was different. That's when everything went to hell.

[ "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*

Shelton Bond rode down to Boggs Holler from his family's claim up the mountain to ask Elphius McCoy for the loan of his youngest the summer the boy in question — Elphius Jr. — was seventeen. Junior, whom his sister had nicknamed Digger, had earned quite the reputation over the past few years as one of Esau County's most reliable dowsers. The Bonds were looking to break ground on a nice piece of property, but thus far had been unsuccessful in narrowing down a location suitably close to a water source.

"Well now," Elphius McCoy said, glancing up from sanding a long, cylindrical piece of cherrywood that would one day form one of the four posts of a beautiful bed frame gifted to his daughter Oanetta on her wedding day. Shelton Bond had hitched his fine chestnut mare to the post at the corner of Elphius' workshed and now stood over him, looking for all the world like he'd bit into a sour apple. "Word I heard is you don't hold with dowsers, Mr. Bond. Sonny Kerr down at the mercantile says he suggested you have somebody out to find water for ye back in



April, and you told him it was ‘superstitious hokum.’ So you understand how I’m a mite surprised to see you here.”

Just inside the open door of the shed, out of sight of their visitor, Oanetta McCoy elbowed her younger brother, and Digger grinned back at her. Everyone in town was familiar with Shelton Bond’s opinion of dowsing — as well as casting lots, reading signs, healing, bibliomancy, and any number of other useful practices — because he never shut up about it. Digger could tell his daddy was tickled to find the man on his doorstep now, in need of just the sort of assistance he so loudly and publicly decried. Mr. Bond was due for a bit of ribbing before Elphius agreed to allow his son to help him — which of course he would. Eventually.

“Now Elphius, I-I know what I said,” Shelton Bond stammered, flexing his fingers on the wide brim of the straw hat he held in his hands. “And I... I stand by it! But you see, my wife... well, she don’t quite agree, and Amelia is... mighty *anxious* about the state of our household at the moment, as I’m sure you can imagine—”

“Oh, for certain,” Elphis nodded placidly, his eyes back on the cherrywood post again.

“And... there is her mama to consider,” Bond muttered. “Mother Sturgill has... questioned the suitability of our current accommodations as a home for her future grandchild.”

Oanetta covered her mouth to suppress a snicker. Mr. Bond’s mother-in-law, Purvis Sturgill, was a hectoring, ill-tempered meddler on her best day, and most folks thought she and Shelton deserved each other. His wife Amelia, on the other hand, had inherited her daddy’s sweet disposition, though that poor man hadn’t lived to see his daughter wed, thus saddling the couple with his widow for the foreseeable future.

“Oh, aye? Well... we certainly can’t leave the ladies out in the cold come winter, now can we?” Elphius mused, glancing toward the open woodshed door. Digger could see the twinkle of amusement in his eye. Then he brushed off his hands and got to his feet, reaching out to shake Bond’s hand. “Junior!” he called over his shoulder. “Come out here for a minute! Mr. Bond wants a word.”

Shelton Bond didn't really have anything to say to young Digger McCoy — he'd come to haggle with his father, as was customary at the time — but Elphius wanted to make a point. He wouldn't force his boy to dowse for anyone. Elphius would handle the negotiation of terms to ensure his son wasn't cheated, but the choice was always his to make. So Digger stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine, greeted Mr. Bond politely, and shook his hand. He didn't get any sort of bad feeling from the man, so he asked, "What can I do for you, sir?" as if he hadn't been listening all along. And when Bond had explained his situation, Digger nodded and said, "Well, I'll do what I can to help you," and then he left the rest to his daddy.

It was agreed that Digger and three other young men from the holler whom Bond had hired would ride up to the ridge, find water, and dig the well. He was up before sunrise the following morning and found his mama already in the kitchen, breakfast laid on the table, packing sandwiches and apples into a poke for him to carry for lunch. He polished off a plate of biscuits and gravy and a cup of coffee, kissed his mama on the cheek, and set off on foot to meet up with the rest of the digging crew.

Bond had hired Jeremiah Adams, Hank Webb, and Ansel Bentley to dig the well, all boys around Digger's age, or a few years older. Digger, Hank, and Ansel walked out to meet Jeremiah on the edge of his family's yard, Jeremiah's daddy having agreed to loan them the use of his tools and wagon and the family's biddable old mule, LuLu, to pull it. At Mr. Bond's expense, of course, Uriel Adams being no fool. Jeremiah was already up on the wagon's bench seat, ready to roll out, when the others arrived.

"Hop in, boys," he called. "Time's a'wasting!"

Ansel joined Jeremiah on the bench seat, while Hank and Digger climbed into the back of the cart. "Remind me why we're leaving before the sun's even up?" Hank groaned as he settled back against the side of the wagon, tipping his hat over his eyes, clearly hoping to catch just a bit more shut-eye before their work began.

"Because digging wells takes time," Digger answered. "Plus it's way out there."

"Yeah?" Hank replied curiously.

“Aye,” Ansel nodded, studying the crude map that Shelton Bond had given Jeremiah the previous day. “Looks like his parcel of land is out past the Abbots’ place, you know that ridge up at the top of the mountain?”

“Huh,” Hank mused thoughtfully. “Why the hell they want to build all the way out there? Be lucky if they can get to church come wintertime. Or hell, even down to Sonny Kerr’s for supplies.”

Jeremiah shrugged. “Shelton Bond’s from up north. He don’t know no better. But Daddy said ain’t nobody could talk him out of it.”

As it turned out, the Bond claim wasn’t particularly hard to find. Shelton Bond had marked its boundaries with painted stakes that were easy to spot in the bright morning sunshine by the time the young men of Boggs Holler made their way up the mountain. Jeremiah hitched the wagon to a tree near the edge of the property line so that LuLu would have plenty of shade, and Hank and Ansel pulled the shovels and an auger from the back of the wagon.

“All right, what do we do now?” Hank asked, having never accompanied the young dowser on a dig before.

Digger waved him back toward the wagon. “Y’all just wait here for a minute. I’ll let you know when I find something.”

Leaving the others to relax in the shade, Digger began walking into the trees, following the path of the ridge. He lowered his lashes, allowing his eyes to unfocus — not quite closing them, as that would be a damn fool thing to do while walking through the woods — but preventing what he saw from distracting him. Instead he listened, his ears cleaving to the sounds of the world around him, picking out the distinct calls of different species of birds — a chickadee here, a grackle over there, off in the distance the eerie cry of a loon — and the scuttling of chipmunks and squirrels and other diurnal creatures through the brush. The wind blew through the trees with a soft susurration. Twigs snapped and leaves crunched under his feet as he walked. There

was the gentle buzzing of insects — mosquitoes and honeybees and june bugs. And then, faintly, underneath all that, he heard something else.

It began as a low hum, a vibration he felt more in his bones than his ears at first that gradually grew in volume, becoming a hypnotic drone. And then — there it was — the voice of the water, a clear, crystal song that sang through the bones of his feet, swept up through his legs, back and neck, finally dancing into his ears, racing along the surface of his skin like goose pimples. There was no chance of losing it now — once he found the song, it was difficult *not* to hear it — and so he called for the others to follow him. He was close, but not *quite* there just yet. It was strong, though. Couldn't be much farther.

Digger strode on ahead, not waiting for the others, carried deeper into the trees by the water's song. A frown creased his brow as he kept walking, further and further. It seemed he kept getting closer, and yet... not, the tune rising and falling, fading and then growing stronger, almost as if the water was... teasing him. Like dangling a piece of yarn for his mama's cat Emmaline, letting her claws get *this close* to snagging it, then snatching it away at the last second.

“Hey, Elphius,” Jeremiah called from behind him. “I thought you said you found it?”

Digger stopped, holding up one hand to hush his friend. “Shhh! It's close, just... let me concentrate for a minute.”

Now Digger *did* close his eyes, listening intently to the song that filled his ears. When he stopped walking, it seemed to change, its tempo rising, growing more insistent. Ah! *There* it was — that way! Digger's eyes flew open and he darted forward, arrowing to the left and shoving his way through a stand of tangled brush that rose higher than his head. On the other side, he found himself standing in a wide clearing within the thick stand of trees and brush, the hard-packed dirt beneath his feet forming a circle that seemed almost impossibly clear this deep in the woods. It was a huge space — more than big enough for the house Shelton Bond wanted to build — and almost unnaturally flat. The ring of trees cast shade at their roots, but the center of the clearing was awash in sunlight, the sky a perfect blue circle overhead.

Jeremiah, Hank, and Ansel finally caught up to him, using the hafts of their shovels to bat aside the thick brush. Digger glanced down with a startled blink, realizing his face and forearms and hands were covered in scratches, and he'd torn his shirt on the brambles. Had he just walked through the damn hedge without thinking? His mama would tan his hide.

Hank let out a low whistle. "Would you look at this!"

The boys gazed around in wonder as they walked over to join Digger in the middle of the clearing. Digger grinned. "It's perfect, right? And it's here — right here," he gestured to the ground at his feet, winced as the song grew louder, almost in answer. In fact, he noticed, it had continued to increase in volume the longer he stood there, its near-frantic beat like a pounding heart. He had never heard a song quite like it.

"Mr. Bond ought to pay you a bonus for finding this spot," Jeremiah remarked as he began preparing the dig site.

Digger smiled and stepped back to let the others work, his head swimming. He needed a little rest, he thought, before he turned his own hand to a shovel. He stepped into the shade and leaned against one of the trees. As Jeremiah positioned the auger against the soil, his ears picked up a change in the water's song — a harsh, discordant note. Digger stood up straight, frowning. What was—

The water began to shriek, a banshee wail that filled his head like the ringing of a thousand bells, and Digger cried out, his hands instinctively flying up to cover his ears, his knees giving way.

"Elphias, what—?" he heard Ansel begin to ask, turning toward him. But his friend's question was cut short as Ansel choked, his hands rising to his neck as he coughed and struggled for breath.

Someone else screamed. Digger wasn't sure who, but the sound died almost before it began. As Digger watched in horror, Hank and Jeremiah also began to claw at their throats, gasping and choking as they dropped to their knees. And then they began to cry. At least that's what Digger

thought at first. But as the droning grew ever louder and the water wailed in what he recognized with a bone-deep terror as fury, water continued to pour from the boys' eyes, far more than could be explained by mere tears. Liquid began to trickle from their ears and their noses, burbling up from their lungs and spilling from their mouths in a shower tinted pink with blood. One by one, they fell to the ground, their bodies convulsing as the water had its way with them, until their choking finally fell silent and it began to recede, sinking back into the packed earth beneath them. But inside Digger's head, the wailing continued, ringing on and on and on.

[ "Familiar and Beloved" by Landon Blood ]

Thus concludes part two of volume two of *Familiar & Beloved*, "Kith and Kin." Our theme song is by Brother Landon Blood. Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins. The voice of Waylon Boggs was Brandon Bentley. The voice of Digger McCoy was John Patrick MacAfee. The voice of Oanetta Boggs was Betsy Puckett. The voice of the water was Saro Lynch-Tomason. Join us for the next installment of *Familiar & Beloved* exclusively on Patreon.

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