

Bound by Blood and Bone

By Andrew Wordsworth

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Carol passed by the neatly manicured lawns of Bishop's Parade, her heart no longer so heavy. The sky rolled forth in layers of richest crimson, delicately laced with shades of pink. How glorious! What a lovely evening! Breathing in, her nose delighted at the delicious scent of hyacinth and honeysuckle. Breathing out, she smiled. This would go well. She knew it. Turning into Laurel Gardens she came to an abrupt stop. The stench hit her first - flaring the nostrils, curling the lip. Covering nose and mouth she swallowed hard and surveyed the scene before her. Rubbish in various states of decay littered the whole street. Carol picked her way through a morass of discarded meals, food wrappers, beer cans, spirits bottles. As she advanced, every garden appeared neglected. Lawns overgrown. Filled with weeds, more rubbish, dog mess. Here, someone had discarded a washing machine, its peeling white paint giving way to rust. Over there a couple of threadbare armchairs, fabric frayed, in places so worn that Carol was convinced she saw tiny red eyes stare beadlike from the hidden depths. She shuddered and hurried on. Somehow, springtime had evaded Laurel Gardens, each plot more forlorn than the last. The sun broke through again as she reached the bright green gate of number 39. The gate opened smoothly onto a neatly manicured lawn, fragrant with chamomile and marjoram. Low hedges of delicate purple flowered lavender laid their heavy scent. Red and blue salvias, stood to attention, a guard of honour along the gravel path. Sweet roses arched crimson over the front door in welcome. From somewhere, the scent of honeysuckle wafted by. Carol stifled a yawn as she ambled along the path. I am Dorothy in the poppy field. Next thing it will be flying monkeys.

A miaow brought her back to the present. She was at the front door, green and glossy, its brass knocker gleaming in the sunlight. A second miaow followed by

scratching at the door. Carol looked down to find her gaze returned by the pink eyes of an unblemished white cat. Too pink to be natural. Albino maybe? She reached for the knocker. It took the form of a cross, as if of woven reeds, the centre squared, the

arms tied at the ends. It sat upon on a circular plate, delicately engraved with wildflowers. Snowdrops? No, forget-me-nots.

The door's sudden opening halted further speculation. With another miaow, the cat jumped into the milk-white arms of the green-clad goddess blocking the entrance.

Tall and powerful. Hair like burnished copper tied back in bands green as jade.

"Ah Pyewhackett, where've you been roving?"

Miaow.

"I see. And here he comes, so he does."

With much noisy flapping, a great crow landed on the gate, greeting them with a loud caw.

"Quiet now, Elemanzer! No need to startle our guest! In you go now."

With another caw the crow made straight for the doorway. Carol covered her head and ducked smartly. Once inside the house, the bird disappeared from view.

Calming her breathing, Carol smoothed her hair, picked up her patchwork tote bag and turned to face the other woman. The red-headed woman, still stroking the cat, stared straight back, face impassive, eyes hard as emerald. Is it me or is it getting colder? She began to shiver, her tongue tracing a delicate line along her upper lip. She tingled where she had no right to tingle. Was this the right address? Could this really be...?

One ginger eyebrow raised itself and the woman cracked a half-smile. "To be sure, Carol, I'm Bridget Morrigan. I've been expecting you. Will you step into my humble home?"

Carol briefly stopped breathing. How did she know? I didn't tell anybody I'd be visiting Michael's wife!

"Ah now! Don't you be worrying. Let's just say a little bird told me."

Pyewhackett purred. The woman turned her head to smile again at Carol. Face soft, eyes hard and cold. Then with a commanding, "Come in!" she made her way back into the house.

Breathing rapidly, Carol's hammering heart shrieked at her to run. Now! Before it's too late. But with her gaze fixed on that sturdy back, her body refused to obey, drawn instead through the green door and into the room beyond. Bridget turned again, indicating a tall, black leather armchair.

"Won't you sit down? Good. Now, I am told you've been seeing my husband."

The soft black leather of the armchair felt cool and surprisingly yielding against Carol's skin. Womb-like, enveloping. Her hands stroked the varnished smoothness of the exposed wood. The smell of leather, lacquer and something else reminded her of Sunday Mass as a child. Delicately her fingers traced some indecipherable carved design on the ends of the arms. She longed to stand up, turn around and take a close looker. But that would be rude.

"Will you be taking some tea now?"

In for a penny, in for a pound.

"Yes, please"

Once Bridget left the room, Carol asked herself how she could have let her life get so complicated. It was so straightforward before Michael. Go to work, come home, walk

Hugo, catch up with friends from time to time. But now...

Carol remembered a cold cloudless night in late January, the moon full, blood red. The blackthorn bloomed early this year and the first lambs will soon begin their brief existence. For weeks she had needed to pull her coat tighter when walking Hugo past this spot. He always whimpered, straining at the leash to get past this place. Tonight her hot breath clouded in the amber glow of that flickering streetlight. She shivered despite her thick blue coat, hat and gloves. Someone had taped a laminated photo to the lamppost. Head and shoulders shot of a copper haired man with green eyes and a grin. It was then that she'd noticed that someone had replaced the lilies at the foot of the tree. Twelve, just like every year. Long green stems woven together in a wreath. This time however, the broken corpse of a rook lay upon the floral tribute, head bent at an awkward angle, crimson blood spattered on the white lilies.

Michael Finnegan read the sign Aged 26. Eternally remembered.

"Tis a sad tale, to be sure."

Carol had not seen Bridget return, but sure enough there stood a silver tray on the occasional table before her, a curious willow pattern tea pot sat pride of place, flanked by two matching cups and saucers and a plate of biscuits.

Silken voice, steel edge. Play it cool.

Pyewhackett rubbed against her leg. It felt wrong. Repulsive

“Shall I be mother?” Bridget’s forearm was like cream and smelt faintly of lavender.
“It’s a special blend. I know you will like it.”

She accepted the cup, raising it cautiously to her lips. Herbal. She detected mint, lavender and something else. Camomile perhaps? Parsley? And honey. Delicious.

“So. How did you meet him? My husband. And I know the truth, so don’t try to lie to me.”

Carol took a sip of her tea and smiled. So fragrant. It made her tongue tingle.

She would never forget the night she met Michael. The unnatural coldness close to that flickering streetlight, the curious epitaph, the bloodstained lilies. Next morning over coffee, Sally advises involving some friends with an interest in these things. “But hands off Ragnor! He’s mine!” She pictures her new bunch of friends. Ragnor, the man-mountain and technical whizz; Gill, bored housewife with more money than sense, dependable Sally with her ample waist and cheeks that dimpled when she smiled. So they inspect the site in daylight.

Gill checks the environmental temperature.

“Still registering a five degree drop here, Ragnor”

“Yes. It’s cold alright.” The man mountain replaces his black Thinsulate gloves with yellow latex as he sifts through the debris at the foot of the tree. “It’s as I thought. Look here Carol. This rook’s had its neck broken - the head’s almost hanging off. Here pass me that trowel Gill.” Gill trots off, soon returning from the van with a garden trowel. Her tongue is virtually hanging out.

“Thanks Gill. Now let Carol see this.” He digs down. “Aye, there’s more decayed flowers down here. Someone has been laying these for years.” Then comes the crunch of metal on gravel. “What have we here? Aye, it’s as I thought. Human remains. Cremated.” He stands up and turns to look at his friends. “This is grim. Ladies, I reckon we have a McKenzie 4c.”

Blank expressions.

“Anyone? Look I’d expect it of Carol. She’s a novice. “Haven’t any of you read Alexander McKenzie’s ‘Systematic Classification of Hauntings and Apparitions’?” Heads shaking. Ragnor rolls his eyes.

“Give me strength! McKenzie describes Type 4c as “Bound by blood and bone”.

Human remains on unconsecrated ground. Multiple and consecutive floral tributes - that's consistent with 4a - "Bound by unrequited grief". Animal sacrifice - that suggests a 4b - "Bound by vengeance". We have both. That is a 4c. It's pretty uncommon. Love triangle, maybe?"

Miaow! The white cat jumped onto Carol's lap, digging in her claws, making her wince.

"And now, you're back in the room!"

The claws retracted.

"Ms. Morigan, I am so sorry. I had no idea that you did not know..."

"That he is dead? Of course I know Carol! Michael died in a car crash, three sheets to the wind in the early hours of New Years Day. A hit and run. The driver got seven years. He should be released in the autumn. Now tell me!"

Carol took another sip. Dorothy in the poppy field. Nice. The newspaper article stated that the driver had shown no remorse about the killing. The little muscles to the side of the mouth and the sides of the eyes began to soften. Her neck and shoulders gradually lost their tension. Must be the camomile.

"And don't worry. I know that you were not carrying on with him whilst he was alive. Although he was carrying on with someone. And you are going to tell me who."

The white cat felt warm on Carol's lap, purring contentedly. The snowy fur felt soft as she fussed it. She paused to take another sip of her tea before returning to stroking duties. Was that a flying monkey?

"I don't know why Michael chose me, but I do know that he's desperately haunted by his condition. He's weary - terribly weary. Lonely, frightened and desperate for release. Bound to the same spot for seven long years - no-one to help him get through the most heartbreaking situation he has ever faced. He lost his life, his wife, his family. But worse than that he's lost his faith. You know that was everything to him. He kept the faith and then when he died, God didn't keep his part of the bargain. No removal to a final judgement and eternal rest."

"You need to ease off on the tea a little, Carol."

But it's so very good...

"Here, try a biscuit. They're home made."

Carol put down her tea cup on the table and took a biscuit. It was roughly round,

baked yellow-brown and speckled with tiny black flecks.

“Are those caraway seeds? I haven’t had caraway seed biscuits since I was a girl!
Used to love them!”

“Try one”. Bridget’s voice was ice.

Carol took a nibble. The bite was crisp, causing her to breathe in - the aniseed aroma of caraway. She chewed - the buttery oatmeal crumb rough on her tongue, sticking between her teeth. But quite delicious. She put down the biscuit and returned to her tea.

“So you know that his spirit has never found rest?”

A cackle. The flapping of wings. Fly, my pretties, fly!

“Know it? I’ve made certain of it! He deserves everything he gets, that philandering bastard!”

So she knew about Katie. Poor Katie had never let go of her grief. Until I made her understand what she was doing to him. She must believe that... But no.

“So she’s called Katie? Where do I find this tart? We have something special planned for her, don’t we, Elemanzer?”

Carol sipped her tea. A little spilled from the cup which felt clumsy in her tingling fingers. With a flap, the great crow landed on the back of the leather armchair. She could still, with some effort, move her head to face him. He stood there, cocking his head from side to side, surveying her with bright black eyes. She turned to look at Bridget.

“I do believe that you are beginning to appreciate the the quality of my tea, Carol.”

Carol put down her tea cup. It felt so heavy now and her tingling arms just wanted to rest on the soft leather. Her tongue felt too large for her mouth

Yes. She wanted to say. But no words would come out. What have you done to me?

“A little hemlock. Not too much. Just enough to get your attention and help you to listen better.”

I can’t move a muscle! The witch has poisoned me!

The crow hopped onto her shoulder. She turned to look at him. All beak and feathers.

She tried to turn away but found that now she could not.

Too close! Too close!

“You don’t like crows, do you Carol?” Bridget took a sip of her own tea, then placed the cup neatly on the saucer. “Not to worry, he is under my absolute control. I know

what you mean though. All crows are creepy. They're dark as the night itself and soulless as automatons. Down they flap – wings like thunder. They land on their sturdy black legs – huge claws. Hop and flap until those beady black eyes spot something – interesting. They tilt their big black heads from side to side, to find just the right spot, then, “crack!” That massive black beak comes down like an ice pick and a skull is opened, an eyeball impaled. Imagine what Elemanzer would do to you, if I let him have his way. What would he go for first? Nose? Ears? Fingers? No, that's more Pyewhackett's territory. More likely the eyes I should think. Although he may peck at your skull a little. So what do you think Carol? Cavorting with the dead, is it? With my husband? What am I to do with you, my pretty?”

Don't shoot the messenger?

“What was that, Carol? I can barely understand you?”

With supreme effort she formed the words. “Katie... his... sister...”

Bridget snorted, folding her arms.

“Michael had no sister... Ah, to be sure, you'll tell me the tale soon enough. We just have to wait.”

Bridget helped herself to another cup of tea and a caraway seed biscuit.

Miaow! Pyewhackett jumped from Carol's lap and wandered over to her mistress.

Bridget smiled. Breaking off some of the biscuit, she fed a little to the cat. With a disappointed caw, the great crow flapped across the room, landing by the tea tray, eyeing up the rest of the biscuits.

“No, Elemanzer! Come here!”

He hopped over and took the offered crumbs before returning to his place on Carol's shoulder. She felt the muscles of her face and neck beginning to loosen a little.

Nevertheless she was surprised when the strained words whispered from her wooden vocal cords.

“His mother was only fifteen when she had Katie. So she was given up for adoption at birth. They only found each other a couple of years before he died.”

Another miaow.

“What is it, Pyewhackett? Bridget picked up the cat with both hands and held her to her ear. Miaow! Miaow!

“Yes. Maybe you're right.”

She snuggled the cat onto her lap and started to fuss once more.

“Pyewhackett thinks I'm not being fair. Well, maybe I was wrong, but seven years of

anger is hard to let go of. Oh, I don't hold you to blame Carol. Michael should have told me the truth! Well, he was a good, devout Catholic and this is his Purgatory! He'll be released when he has paid in full."

But it is not God that is holding him there is it, Ms. Morrigan? His remains are just scattered there on unconsecrated ground. You offer a sacrifice every year to bind him to the spot by blood and by bone.

"You know, Carol, I can think of better things to do than freezing my butt off on some dreary roadside, sacrificing birds. Michael's done his penance. I reckon the time has come to let him move on. So I'm going to help you. Here is what you need to do..."

They met by the streetlight as the full moon rose bright above the horizon. High above, the rooks flapped to roost in the trees. Carol returned to the task of clearing away the debris until she reached the layer of gravel and ash.

"Is that really all that is left of him?", said Katie.

No. There is so much more.

"Ragnor, please would you do this? I don't think I can face it."

Wordlessly, Ragnor took the trowel from Carol. With the greatest care he removed the remains separately to a small mahogany casket which he then presented to Katie. She accepted it quietly, reading the epitaph on the brass plaque through tearfilled

eyes:

Michael Patrick Finnegan.

14.4.1974 - 1.1.2010

Rest in peace

As midnight approached, the temperature dropped. The amber glow of the streetlight began to flicker. With a burst of static the spectral detection grid came to life. The air shimmered slightly at the coldest spot a little way ahead. No thermal imaging needed tonight. Carole swallowed hard and opened her bag, checking the contents. The potion bottle was there - its cold, faceted surface unmistakable. She recalled Bridget's instructions, given as the hemlock began to wear off and the life return to limbs.

"Wait until the priest begins his mumbo-jumbo then drink it down. You'll need to see things as they really are."

And there was the blade. Its jewelled hilt fitting her palm perfectly, the grooved blade sharp and curved. Like the new moon.

“You will know what to do with the athamé.”

Ragnor gave a quick thumbs up to the priest and flicked a switch. The ghost cam’s power indicator glowed a reassuring green.

“OK Father McEvoy, your on.”

Placing the purple stole about his neck, the priest crossed himself.

“We gather here to commend our brother Michael to God and to commit his body to the earth. With faith in the resurrection, let us pray for Michael.”

Above them, another flight of rooks glided to roost. The priest mumbled a reading from the funeral rite and sprinkled holy water over the casket, the ground and the witnesses. A loud chorus of raucous rook calls provided Carol the opportunity she needed. Retrieving the potion she removed the stopper. Remembering her experience with hemlock tea, she sniffed the bottle. A pleasing aroma of mint and mugwort with hints of heather. Quite different. Downing the contents, she replaced the bottle into her bag.

“O God, in your mercy bless this grave. Send your holy angel to watch over it. As we bury here the body of Michael, deliver him from every bond of sin, that he may rejoice with your saints for ever. We ask this through Christ our Lord.”

To Carol alone, the night exploded with colour. Light streamed down from moon herself - a silver pathway leading all the way down to this place. Only her eyes perceived Michael’s tenuous form gaining colour and solidity. A willowy man dressed in jeans and a brown jacket, his Nikes hovering about a foot above the earth. He turned to her and smiled, a willowy man, his blue jeans, brown corduroy jacket and sneakers still ethereal as he floated above the earth.

The priest turned to Ragnor who, taking the casket laid it gently in the grave, covering it with soft new earth.

“Forgive Lord, whatever sins Michael committed through human weakness as we commend his body to the ground. Grant him everlasting peace we pray.” Graciously grant that we shall enjoy his friendship in the kingdom of our Lord.”

Flights of rooks arrived from north, south east and west, loud enough to wake the dead. Wind whistled in the branches.

Katie moved to the front to lay a final wreath of twelve white lilies.

“Goodbye, dear brother. Be free!”

Carol watched as Michael whispered “Goodbye” to his sister. Then his gaze turned towards the light and he began floating towards its brightness. It seemed to Carol that lilies lined the silvery pathway heavenward. Suddenly, Michael looked back. Eyes wide. Mouth gaping. Clawing at his ankle. The wind wailed and moaned. Rooks began to mob him. Ethereal arms flailed, seeking in vain to beat them off. “Saints of God, come to his aid! Hasten to meet him, angels of the Lord!”

Carol stood motionless, brandishing the athamé. With a loud miaow! An unblemished white cat streaked past her and up the tree, its pink eyes gleaming. With a loud caw a huge carrion crow joined in the fray, breaking up one sortie, then another. A shimmering silver chain, quite visible to her now, tethered Michael’s ankle to the earth. Now she knew what to do. Rushing forward Carol raised the athamé, bringing it down hard on the silver chain, its ethereal links giving way in the faint green glow of the blade.

“Be free, Michael!”

He turned towards her, smiling, radiant. “Thank you!” whispered the wind. Then in a flash he disappeared along the lily-lined path and into the radiance.

Later, Carol would tell them that she had seen the heavens torn asunder. She had seen lilies and angels and glory in the highest! But best of all she had seen the vision of sheer joy on Michael’s face, had held Katie as the tears rolled unashamedly and had known that, in a very real sense, Michael lived on.