

More Than Bones by Craig David Singer

Available on [Amazon](#), Barnes & Noble and many other fine stores on 1/8/19.

1

The house on Underwood Road looks much bigger in person than it appeared in the photo. I'd call it a mansion, actually. A four-story red-brick colonial with regal roman columns rising up the front porch and quaint gabled windows popping out from the roof. It's hard to believe this is going to be my new home.

The man who answers the door looks much bigger in person than he did in his picture too. His shoulders are almost too broad to fit through the doorway. His head is the size of a Halloween pumpkin. Multiple chins jut out from his neck like layers of wedding cake. He has the bulging midsection of a football lineman and limbs thick enough to support a tree house.

Yet from out of that massive body comes a delicate, effeminate voice.

"You must be Emily," he says.

I crane my neck up at him. "Yes, sir. That's me."

He thrusts out his arms and grins at me widely. "Welcome to fabulous Baltimore!"

"You're Mr. Wharton, right?"

"Norton Theodore Wharton, at your service."

He bows low as if to a queen. His generous buttocks rise up behind him like hilltops. Strands of his dark combed-over hair flop across his forehead. His shirt buttons threaten to explode off his chest.

I do my best to stifle a laugh. He catches on and straightens himself.

"What's so funny, missy?"

More Than Bones

I have to think fast. “It’s just so interesting that your first name is the same as my last name.”

He purses his rubbery lips and ponders it a moment. He has the patchy complexion of a kid with the flu, and an upturned nose like he smells something rotten.

“Yes, I guess that is interesting,” he says. “Anyway, don’t just stand there, hon. Come on inside before all the cold air escapes. You have no idea what a bitch it is to keep this house air-conditioned.”

I scurry across the threshold. He slams the door shut.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t realize it would be so hot here in June.”

“Well, it’s the last day of June, hon. Besides, Baltimore is *south* of the Mason-Dixon Line, in case you didn’t know.”

I did know. But that didn’t stop folks back home in South Carolina from teasing me about moving to Yankee country. Then again, some of the folks back home think North Carolina is Yankee country. But regardless of which side Baltimore occupies, right now it’s as muggy as a Dixieland swamp.

“It probably doesn’t help that I’m full of hot air,” Norton says.

He lets out a booming laugh from deep in his gullet. It’s the sort of laugh befitting a man of his girth. It makes his dainty speaking voice all the more absurd by comparison.

I take a long look around his home’s entrance hall. The ceiling is two stories high, adorned with frescoes that would do Michelangelo proud. A colossal crystal chandelier hangs down from the center. A mahogany staircase rises up at the rear, with flower motifs carved into the banister. A pair of king-size gilded chairs hold court off to the side.

“Wow, this is all so beautiful,” I say.

“Oh, hon, this is only the foyer. Come on. Let me show you around.”

Norton starts up the stairs, beckoning like an usher in a theater for me to follow him. As we ascend each level, I get glimpses of

more spectacular spaces. A study on the second floor overflows with statues and tapestries and antique furniture. A luxurious bathroom oozes marble and brass. Norton's master-bedroom suite on the third floor might be larger than the whole house I grew up in. I feel like Alice in Wonderland shrinking into the pages of *Architectural Digest*.

Things change abruptly when we reach the top floor. The stairwell gives way to a long plain room with a low, slanted ceiling.

"Voilà!" Norton proclaims, huffing and puffing from the climb. "Here we are at last, Emily, in your domain!"

It's the attic.

He stoops to avoid whacking his head on the ceiling beams. I have plenty of clearance.

"I picked out the peach-and-ivory color scheme all by myself," he says. "Don't you just love it?"

I do. And the country pine bed tucked under the alcove looks awfully cozy. The adjacent bathroom is small but sufficient.

"And aren't the accent windows just scrumptious?" he squeals.

I suppose they are, though *scrumptious* seems an odd word to describe panes of glass. They do resemble something out of a fairy tale, shaped like little half-moons that flank the larger gabled windows. For a moment I'm a wayward heroine in a gothic romance, taking refuge in a gentleman's castle.

"And what do you think of that?" Norton cries out, pointing toward the shadows in the far corner of the room.

That's where a full-size honest-to-goodness human skeleton hangs from a pole. What do I think of it? Well, it kind of creeps me out, to tell you the truth. Not that skeletons frighten me. I've seen plenty of real ones before. They had a whole platoon of them at medical school.

But this one is in my bedroom.

"I found him at a flea market," Norton says. "Isn't he splendid?"

More Than Bones

I suppose he is, except that he is a she. The wide opening in the pelvic bones gives her away. Not that I'm going to correct my new landlord about it. My cousin Andrew told me Norton is gay. And being a gay man, maybe Norton would be disappointed to find out he bargained for a female set of bones.

"He's my gift to you, Emily. A welcome present for the new doctor in her new home. Look, he even has a name."

Norton points to a tarnished metal plate at the top of the pole, where the faded letters *OLI* are inscribed. I've seen that abbreviation before. It stands for Orthopedic Learning Institute. That's a lousy name for anyone, even a skeleton.

"Ollie?" I dutifully pronounce it.

"Well, yes. But Oliver sounds much more dignified, don't you think?"

I suppose it does, except that it's still the wrong gender.

"So, do you like it?" asks Norton.

"Um, it's a very nice skeleton. Thank you."

"No, silly. I mean the room!"

"Oh, sorry! Yes, I like it a lot."

Norton claps his hands gleefully. "I just knew you would. Now, Emily, I want to make sure we have an understanding between us. This is your part of the house and your private space. I don't intend to be a busybody up here. Fair enough?"

I nod. I think I know what's coming next. The rest of the house will be off-limits to me, except for coming and going. And that is perfectly reasonable, considering the modest rent Norton requested in our email exchange.

But what Norton actually says is, "And the rest of the house is yours to enjoy as well. I want you to feel completely at home here. In fact, I want you to think of this as *our* home."

I can't believe this man's unconditional hospitality. Other than

Andrew's recommendation, I'm a total stranger to him. How does he know I won't roll around naked on his couches or spill blackberry jam on one of his rugs? I start to tell him what a generous gesture it is on his part, but my words get buried somewhere in the vicinity of his navel, along with my face, and the scent of cinnamon fills my nostrils. Norton is bear-hugging me. I do my best to hug him back, but with his body like a double-wide trailer, bless his heart, my arms don't reach all the way around.

We head back downstairs. Norton offers to help me move in my things. But once we get started, he mostly just follows behind me, yapping away like an excited puppy while I haul loads of my stuff up those three flights of stairs. First he goes on and on about his best friend, David, who he says I'm certain to bump into because David's a nurse at the hospital where I'll be doing my internship. Then he goes on and on about my cousin Andrew, who he says he must remember to thank for connecting us. Then he goes on and on about my fiancé, Pete, who he says is always welcome to spend the night whenever I want. He hasn't even met Pete yet! I can feel myself blushing.

After two more loads, Norton declares it's time for refreshments. I'm sweating like a pig in a hot-yoga studio, so I'm only too happy to take a short break. I follow Norton into the kitchen. Coppery granite counters sparkle in the late-afternoon sun. Shiny stainless-steel shelves groan with enough cooking gear to open a Williams Sonoma store.

"This is my favorite room," he confesses.

He grabs a pitcher of freshly made lemonade from the fridge and pours me a glass. I down a big gulp. It's wonderfully cold but tastes very different from the lemonade I'm used to back home. Norton's version is not quite as sweet and is slightly metallic.

"What's in this?" I ask.

More Than Bones

“Oh, just the usual,” he says. “Lots of lemons, some sugar, water, and ice.”

I take another gulp. “Is that all?”

“Well, I might have thrown in a few jiggers of vodka.”

I put down my nearly empty glass. That detail would have been more useful thirty seconds ago. Not that I mind an occasional cocktail, but it has been a really long day and the last thing I need is alcohol.

I gaze out the kitchen’s big bay window. The sprawling backyard is invitingly lush, with grass as smooth as a putting green, brilliant flower gardens, and majestic oak trees. A charming brook meanders along the rear of the property. The whole scene is like something out of a painting. Andrew told me I’d be happy living here, but at this point I’m close to tears.

“Your whole house is just so magnificent,” I say.

“Thanks, hon. It’s in pretty good shape considering it’s a hundred years old. I do love old houses. That’s one reason I couldn’t wait to move in. I’ve only lived here a few months myself, you know. I got this house for my thirty-ninth birthday.”

Where I come from, people buy houses as a lifelong investment, not a birthday present. Then again, where I come from, people don’t drive fancy foreign cars either, like the brand-new BMW that’s parked in the driveway next to my beat-up old Chevy. I wonder what occasion Norton purchased that for. Memorial Day? The summer solstice?

But shame on me. There’s nothing wrong with having nice things. Still, I can’t help but wonder if he’s overcompensating. Since he lives all by himself in this enormous house, I get the feeling that maybe he’s lonely.

Norton’s refreshment has left me a bit woozy, so it’s a good thing I’ve only got a few things left to fetch from my car. I excuse myself and head back outside, only to procrastinate a bit longer while I admire the other gorgeous homes on the block. The Baltimore I’ve seen

on TV looks nothing like this place. Norton said the neighborhood is called Guilford. Well, evidently the good people of Guilford poop nuggets of gold. Manicured shrubs guard spotless sidewalks. Leafy elm trees shade immaculate lawns. It's ridiculously pristine and picturesque here. Am I having an out-of-body experience? Or is that the lemonade?

Suddenly, a tall elderly man emerges from the house next door and starts walking directly toward me with stiff arthritic steps. His eyes lock onto mine. Strands of white hair droop from his forehead. His unkempt eyebrows stick out in all directions like threads of torn cloth. With his ashen complexion and lurching gait, he looks a bit like a geriatric Frankenstein monster.

"You must be Emily, the young doctor who's moving in with Norton," he says.

"Yes, sir. That's me."

He reaches out a bony hand to shake mine. "I'm Frank Connor, the old fart next door." Frank has a noticeable Baltimore accent, with elongated, nasally vowels. "I'm *sew* glad to meet *yew*," he says.

"I'm glad to meet you too, Mr. Connor."

"Yew may think I'm crazy," he says, "but I believe yew and I were destined to meet."

I have no reason to think he's crazy. But *destined* to meet? Bless his heart, but that does sound a bit nuts.

A sleek black cat with a tuft of white hair on its head wanders into our midst and brushes my leg. Frank's eyebrows quiver like insect antennae.

"Right on time," he says to the cat.

I squat down and let the cat sniff my hand. "Is it yours, Mr. Connor?"

He chuckles. "I don't think Helga belongs to anyone."

I can't help but notice the strange object that dangles from Helga's silver collar. It's a ring made of gold, somewhat thicker than a wedding

More Than Bones

band and with a diameter somewhat wider than a poker chip. Three spokes radiate out from the ring at equal angles like the points of a triangle. The ring also has an eye hook that is attached to the cat's collar.

Frank scoops Helga up, unhooks the object, and offers it to me. "This caught your eye, didn't it?" he asks. "Here, have a closer look."

I take it from him and hold it up to the orange-tinted sky. A delicate lattice of gold stretches across the ring's interior, holding seven shimmering gemstones in place like droplets of dew in a spider's web. The stones form a spiral, with the biggest and brightest one at the very center.

Whatever this thing is, it's like nothing I've ever seen before. I find myself staring at it as if I'm being hypnotized. Or maybe that's the lemonade too.

"Mesmerizing, isn't it?" Frank asks me.

I nod. "What is it?"

"It's called the Amulet of Saint Helena," he says. "Originally it was a gift for a man, but seventy-five years ago my mother found it in Paris around the neck of a shopkeeper's wife, and only women have worn it since. My mother wore it for a time before she died. My wife wore it too. Now it's your turn."

"I beg your pardon?"

He smiles mysteriously. "I want you to have it."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Connor. I don't understand. Why would you give something like this to a total stranger?"

"We're not strangers anymore, are we, Emily?"

"But it's been in your family for such a long time."

"For far too long. I have no need of it anymore. And it has no need of me either."

It has no need of him? What on earth is he talking about?

His old eyes gleam. "Please, Emily, do me the kindness of accepting it. We'll call it a token of our long-awaited

acquaintance.”

Our long-awaited...? What? I search his face, and I see that refusing would hurt his feelings. OK, first a creepy skeleton and now this weird thing. Who gives gifts like this? Maybe the good people of Guilford drink too much spiked lemonade.

“All right, Mr. Connor. If you insist.”

“Thank you, my dear. It means a great deal to me.”

“Well, don’t worry. I’ll keep it in a safe place.”

“Oh no, no. You must wear it. It won’t help you otherwise.”

Help me? Help me how? Like a lucky charm? I’m beginning to wonder if this old man really is crazy. No way am I wearing this thing. It’s too clunky and heavy to hang from my neck. I’m not sure how the heck the cat managed it. It might look all right dangling from a Christmas tree. Besides, I’m not that much into jewelry. Oh, I am wearing an engagement ring, of course. That I do love. It’s so simple and sweet.

“To be perfectly honest, Mr. Connor,” I say, “I don’t have anything to wear it with.”

Frank’s smile broadens as if things are proceeding exactly as planned. “It just so happens I do,” he says. “Come with me, my dear.”

He turns and starts walking slowly back toward his house. I know I should politely excuse myself. I probably shouldn’t trust a strange man. But my curiosity gets the best of me.

Frank’s house is the only one on the block that’s not in impeccable condition. The front lawn needs a mowing. The backyard is a jungle of overgrown shrubs. Vines have engulfed the neglected brick exterior. The shutters are in need of a paintjob.

He opens the front door and leads me down a hallway, past darkened spaces that have all their drapes drawn. We come to a cluttered room he calls the den. It smells musty. Boxes and bags are piled high on the rugs. Papers are stacked on the couches and chairs. The shelves are crammed full of books and knickknacks and old photographs.

More Than Bones

In a few of them, I recognize a much younger Frank. A tall man in a suit also looks vaguely familiar. I have no idea why.

“That was my grandfather, Teddy,” says Frank. “He was a giant in this town. You can see I mean it literally, but I also mean it figuratively. He was a pillar of the community, charitable to a fault, and admired by everyone.”

Frank picks up a photo of a tender-faced woman. “This was my mother. She died when I was just a child.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” I wasn’t expecting to have anything in common with this peculiar old man, but it turns out I do.

He points to a painting of another dark-haired young woman. “That was my wife,” he says.

“Wow, she was beautiful.”

“Yes, indeed.”

He walks over to her portrait, grips the frame with both hands, and lifts it away from the wall, revealing a built-in secret vault. He presses a lever, and the vault door swings open. It’s jammed full of stuff too.

“Wow!” I say. “What a great place to hide things!”

Frank smiles at me sadly. “Hiding things is easy, my dear. Finding them again is sometimes much harder.”

He reaches into the vault and pulls out a small velvet bag. Inside the bag is a gold herringbone necklace. It’s understated and elegant, just the sort of thing I can see myself wearing.

“I can only loan you the necklace,” he says. “It’s not mine to give away. But please, Emily. Indulge an old man. Wear it with the amulet. That’s how it once was. That’s how it should be.”

I stand in stupefied silence while he hooks the amulet onto the necklace and then latches the necklace around my neck as if he’s bestowing a royal heirloom to a princess. Why on earth am I going along with this nonsense? Is it because the vodka has softened my defenses? Or am I too tired to resist after a long day of driving? Or

is it because Frank seems a lot like my new landlord? Another lonely soul living all by himself in a humongous house.

“I don’t know what to say, Mr. Connor. Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, my dear.”

“But I still don’t understand why this is so important to you.”

He nods. “It’s a long story. I promise I’ll tell you some other day. But now it’s getting dark out. I’m sure you want to get settled in.”

Frank takes my arm gently and escorts me back down the hall. He opens the front door and steers me outside, suddenly seeming eager to be rid of me.

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again very soon,” he says. “Good night, Emily.”

“Good night, Mr. Connor.”

He closes the door, and I’m left alone on his steps to ponder what the heck just happened. Does he really expect me to wear this thing? But he is right about it getting dark out. Where’s Pete? He should have been here by now. I check my phone, but there’s no message from him. Maybe he’s stuck in traffic between DC and Baltimore. And maybe that’s not such a terrible thing. I’m cruddy from hauling all my stuff up those stairs. I could use a little time to get cleaned up before he arrives.

I grab the last things from my car and head up to the attic. I strip off my clothes and turn on the shower. It doesn’t run hot right away, so while I wait, I check myself in the mirror. I’ll never know why Pete finds me attractive. His other girlfriends were all a bit on the skinny side. I could never have that kind of supermodel figure. My hips are too wide. They’re what folks in South Carolina like to call birthing hips. Just like the hips on that skeleton.

Finally the water runs hot. I’m about to step in, but the amulet’s reflection captures my gaze. It’s such a strange object, with those three spokes pointing outward like rays of sunlight and those gemstones swirling like a constellation of stars...

More Than Bones

The mirror fogs up, and the spell is broken. I can't shower with this necklace on! I take off the jewelry and look around the attic for a place to stash it. The skeleton catches my eye. I walk over to her and stand there like we're old friends it's OK to be naked in front of. I drape the necklace over her skull and let it dangle so the amulet rests perfectly against her breastbone. Her sternum, I should say, seeing as how I'm a real doctor now.

I step back and admire my decorating touch. It feels a bit wicked, but I certainly don't mean to poke fun at old Frank Connor. It's just that this skeleton seems a more appropriate place for his amulet than around my neck. One bizarre gift adorning another.

My cell phone starts beeping. Finally, Pete! I grab the phone and read his text, but my heart sinks. An emergency patient just rolled into his operating room. No way can he drive up to see me tonight. He's really sorry but relieved to know I made it to Baltimore in one piece. Smiley face. He'll call me as soon as he can, and tomorrow he'll drive up for sure. Another smiley face.

It's OK, I text back. I understand. And I can't wait to see you whenever you get here!

What else can I say? The poor guy is working his butt off. Just like I will be soon. And we've already been apart almost every night for a year. So what's one more, right?

But no. I want Pete here with me, and I want him here now. Damn it, why did an emergency have to pop up at this very moment?

I glance at the skeleton. I could swear she's grinning at me. Like she's saying, *Don't worry, sister. It's just a bit of bad luck. But if things don't improve, you know right where to find that old man's lucky charm.*

I put down the phone and let out a sigh. The shower's still running. Waves of steam are billowing out of the bathroom like smoke from a fire. Now my new attic home is as hot as July.

[Keep reading...](#)