

## Behind the Old Market

It was nearly midnight. The Moon Lady was watchful. Though the roads were full of snow and the houses had shivered themselves into their night gowns, icy gloves splattered with finger pricked specks of crimson, chilly whiskers worn through with cold, Hunter was aflame. A warrior with ruthless hands, he'd been called home for a killing, for the baby in the crib next to his wife, was not his child.

Hunter would be quiet and quick. While the child slept soundly in the barracks, he crept up into the bedroom, lifted Srita onto his shoulder and carried her gently down onto the railway tracks. Here he would leave her to the fate of the midnight chugger, a freight train that pulled by every twelve o'clock. There lay Srita, tied to the tracks, awaiting the wheels that would cut her to pieces. Just following orders, that's what he whispered; though the orders were his own and though she'd pleaded with him to stop. There's not a thing will turn a warrior's mind once honour has been threatened. A warrior carries out their orders like a routed train, once the points have been set. The bones remember, and care little for morals or justice. This is a body of passion. No petty human doubt or apology might overcome this.

So off Srita went, carried by Hunter out the window, moments before the last train of that freezing night had passed, sawing her in two. The power of jealousy, to cut a person in half. Hunter took the pieces of her body and threw them into the salt bushes at the edge of town, where scavengers picked them down to the bone. Then he returned to his post in the desert. He killed and maimed his enemies, parleyed with warlords, protecting the oil fields and the mines he was paid to defend. He stayed out there in the sand dunes polishing his gun, sleeping little, rarely eating, praying every so often to keep his thoughts from returning to that night.

Srita's disappearance came as a shock to the village, though whispers of a lover had emerged. Bakaam. A sweet man, a farmer, quiet, reserved, hardworking. The villagers' tongues wagged, and busy, gossiping fingers pointed among them. Hunter, convincingly broken and grief-stricken, joined the mob in their frenzied hunt for justice, and after a brief trial, Bakaam was locked up for 22 lifetimes. The baby was given away.

Years past. It was a grapevine, an olive grove, an avocado stone's throw since the year August's own lover had died and left her, though she still tended the farm, brewing the apples that had made their lives comfortable. A mysterious patron had gifted her land when she was old enough to inherit the work, and together with her wife Karima, she'd made a profitable enterprise. Now though, the work was slow and arduous. The apples were dropping too early, small and undeveloped, not round and juicy as they had been, and should be, for the best kind of brew. August would peel and press them nonetheless, but her yield was dwindling. Something was missing. Her loneliness and tiredness and emptiness of heart sucked the strength from her, and she was snappy and bristly and brittle towards the farmhands who tended the orchards of her pear and plum and apple trees. They grew weary of her downcast spirit and not before long these pickers up and left in search of a farmer who would pay them properly, where they might find wilder woods and fatter berries to crush for their own mid-week punch.

It was a Thursday. The hay was stacked but the horses still stood in the yard, waiting patiently to be lead in. Dark was pressed itself over August's hands, still busy locking up the barns, the end of dusk and beginning of nighttime curling between her fingers. When the wood of an old door begins to split, though the pumping heat of the hearth warms the inside of a house, cold rushes in round the edges. Sucked in through those cracks, the icy wind tunnels down the hall, dragging its

long cloak across flagstones, whistling delightedly around the exposed skin of the woman huddled by the fire, left to tread the grapes of her life alone, wondering if she will ever find another pair of hands to help cut the wood to fill the hearth with warmth, to hold back the claws of winter. Now she sleeps in a freezing gale, dreaming she's on fire.

Enough was enough. August was awake, snow shoes on, her hat pulled down over her ears. She stepped out into the night, in search of an orchard to grow love anew. Down left, and left again, and up past the station where the bridge crosses the old railway line. The orchards here were empty. The moon was blue and August picked her way through a maze of stumps; trees cut down by soldiers with axes made of teeth. Harangued by a ghostly gale that would not leave her be, she pulled her coat tighter around her shoulders and ploughed on through the snow, searching for a patch of earth or a strip of green where she could plant that tree for love to grow once more.

Karima's sweet face drifted into her mind, and a hole somewhere in the back of her heart, right in her very centre opened. A pain she'd not felt before, sharp and dull in equal measures brought her to the ground. The wind rustled through the fingertips of the poplar trees, high above her head. *Ssh, ssh, shh*, it whispered lightly. And all of a sudden, there came another sound. So soft, it might have been a song.

*Whacha gun do - when ya hearts turned blue - when you got no home - an ya all alone?*

*And ya soul cries out - gimme sweetness gimme gold - rub some honey on my dry old bones!*

She peered through the snowflakes falling fat and fast, but she could not see through the fog. Her path had met a track up behind the market. Here, her foot hit something hard. She stumbled and looked down. And there she saw the strangest thing. An ivory coloured curve, half covered in

snow was pushing its way out of the earth. She frowned, knelt down, gave it a tug, and pulled out a long and flesh-stripped bone. Thinking this to be a treat for a hound or husky, August scraped off the mud with a stick. What was it, goat? Sheep? Too small for a cattle bone. She opened her jacket and tucked it under her arm. But as she turned back towards the orchard, there came that sound again on the wind. This time, the wail that caught her ear pierced right her. She turned and gasped. The top of a skull appeared, its crown emerging, as if the earth itself was birthing human remains.

The dig was quick, the bones were scattered about and cracked to pieces, but they were all there. Now, you may think this strange: a woman, out walking by a railway one night, realises quite suddenly the animal bones she has found are in fact human. You may think it odd: this woman, rather than fretting or shivering or shouting loud at the top of her lungs with the horror of this grisly find, does not call the authorities, or the detectives, or chiefs of the town, but instead simply hitches up her skirt, pulls up her sleeves, extracts a trowel from her bag and begins to dig. And you may think it outrageous that this woman, rather than stepping back to take in the enormity of the significance of these bones, to imagine the crime this person may have fallen victim to, before their remains were packed into this mound of soil by this railway, instead simply picks them up one by one and places them into her satchel. But that's just what August did. She took the skeleton home, and hung it on the washing line to dry.

Back on the farm, under three blankets, August lay awake, listening to the horses whinnying and stamping as the wind howled outside. Dawn broke, she padded downstairs and opened the back door to the garden. She was not mistaken. The storm had quietened now, the snow settled, the sun was creeping over the glistening, empty, corn fields, lighting the tops of the bare birch trees with yellow ochre. There was the skeleton hanging from the washing line, swinging softly from side to side in the breeze. A crow watching the scene from a gatepost, cawed...

August pulled on a jacket, stuffed her feet in a pair of gumboots, and trudged out, pulling the door behind her. With her switch blade, she cut down each bone from the line, carrying them inside. Laying them out carefully on her kitchen table, she began to examine the strange indentations and lines that tattooed the skeleton. She picked up the skull, and looking closer still, saw the sharp crack in its jaw. It's shape reminded her of an olive tree, and she thought of how she'd been shown to cut the branches from young saplings to spread out under the base of the tree, so that through its own rotting leaves, the tree could feed itself and grow. While she worked, scrubbing and cleaning these bones, all of a sudden they began to shake. August dropped the skull, aghast, but the bones on her kitchen table clinked and rattled again...

*Whacha gun do - when ya hearts turned blue - when you got no home - an ya all alone?*

*Ya soul cries out - gimme sweetness gimme gold - oh rub some honey on my dry old bones!*

August ran to the cupboard and brought out a huge jar. She smothered the bones all over with honey and licked the spoon and closed her eyes and when she opened them, who do you think was sat at her kitchen table, but Karima. Older, greyer, wrinkled by the earth, but very much alive. Just how the bones of a murdered mother became the flesh and blood of a lost lover, this ignorant storyteller would not dare to surmise. Whispers became mutterings became cries of disbelief and outrage, as slowly a dark truth emerged about a wife who'd been sawn in two by a freight train on the disused train tracks behind the Old Market. Javi Senti was fetched back from the desert and placed in the cell Bakaam was released from, and Karima and August lived together for many happy years in the little house the farmer had left for his daughter. All the while, at the far edge of town, on the porch of a hut hidden by giant hollyhock overlooking her rows and rows of beehives, a tiny wise woman, strong as a horse with piercing eyes and golden skin, rocks backwards and forwards in her rocking chair, humming. You might know her as Old Honey Bones, the mender.