

Bone by Bone

Carol O'Connell

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Extract

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1

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ONE

A batty old man of the cloth had once described the Hobbs boy as a joke of God's: an archangel of the warrior cast and a beacon for women with carnal intentions.

An angel.

Would that he had wings.

Oren Hobbs, now a man full grown, opened his eyes in the dark and took deep breaths to quell the panic. Every time he dreamed, he died. Neither awake nor asleep, he was caught, for a second or two, between the nightmare of going home again and the solid world, where he had arrived – where a dog was barking in the yard.

He lay sprawled upon the old horsehair sofa. The upholstery smelled of tobacco and spilt whiskey, the best-loved vices of his father and the housekeeper.

These stale odors were cut with a slice of a cool, sweet air from the open porch window. He had forgotten to lower the sash after climbing inside, and now Oren recalled that the door to the house had been locked against him for the first time in memory. Still drowsing, his eyes were slow to pick out the surrounding shadows of furniture that took on familiar form but no detail.

What the hell?

One of the shadows scuttled across the carpet, agitated and flapping its wings like a gray moth – a moth that could skin its shin on the coffee table and whisper curse words.

Memory guided Oren's hand to a lamp, and he switched it on the better to see a woman wrapped in a purple robe with great floppy sleeves. 'Hannah?'

Nearing sixty, the housekeeper was a small, slight figure beneath that oversized garment – the same old bathrobe. She might be as tall as a ten year old, but only if she stood on her toes. The long braid of black hair had gone to iron gray, and her smile lines had deepened, but she seemed otherwise unaltered by the past twenty years. Her heart-shaped face had no sag to it.

Pixies aged so well.

'Oh, damn it.' Her wide-set hazel eyes blinked in the lamplight as she leaned down to rub her wounded shinbone.

He followed her lead of a whisper that would not

wake the old man, who was near death. ‘Hannah, it’s me – Oren. Sorry if I scared you.’ Rising from the couch, he stood barefoot in his sweatshirt and blue jeans. At thirty-seven years of age, he might be the one more changed by time. She looked him up and down, and shook her head, as if she could not reconcile him with the longhaired boy who had left this house when he was seventeen. His dark brown hair was shorter now, and a strand of it covered one blue eye.

He nodded toward the open window, the evidence of his housebreaking. ‘I got in late, and I didn’t want to—’

‘Hush.’ Hannah held a veined hand in the air, frozen there, and he fancied that her ears were attenuating, straining to hear something. Her attention was rewarded with the bark of a dog very close to the house – and then the sound of something dropped, an object clattering to the floorboards of the front porch.

The housekeeper jumped as if a cannon had sounded.

Oren walked toward the foyer, one hand outstretched to grab the doorknob.

‘Don’t go out there!’ Hannah switched off the lamp in the front room.

He had a feeling that she had played out this little drama before. ‘What’s going on?’

More barking came from the yard.

The front door would not open. In the dark of the foyer, he found a bolt by touch, but he could not undo

the lock. Oren returned to the predawn gloom of the parlor. He found his duffel bag and pulled out a gun. This was reflex, and he thought better of it. Best not to shoot somebody's pet on his first day back in town. He put the weapon away and closed up the bag. Zip – gone. 'It's OK, Hannah. Go back to bed. It's just a dog.'

'That's not *our* dog,' she whispered, creeping closer. 'Horatio died ages ago.'

As he moved toward the open porch window, Hannah reached out with both hands to catch him and snatch him back.

Too late.

Oren climbed outside. The sky was early-morning gray, and the tall trees had no colors yet. Smooth, worn boards were cool beneath his bare feet as he hunkered down before the gift that had been left at the edge of the porch – a lower jawbone, bare of flesh and laced with teeth.

Even without the evidence of a silver filling in one molar, he would have known that this bone belonged to the skeleton of a human being. He was well acquainted with human remains in every stage of decay.

TWO

As the sky brightened in the east, Oren could see that this was no innocent find of the barking dog. An animal would have left wet traces of saliva, but the jawbone was dry. It had been dropped on the porch by someone who walked on two legs.

He peered into the woods, looking for signs of trespass, trails in the air, left there by waving ferns and low branches. After delivering a present like this one, a pervert might linger awhile to watch the reaction – and the dog might betray its master with one more bark. Oren sat down on the porch steps to wait – and listen.

The smell of moist earth wafted up from a garden that ran the length of the porch. Nothing had blossomed yet, but it was certain that the old man had planted the bulbs of lilies, dahlias and gladiolas. Come a fine warm day in high summer, all of them would rise up in a riot of bright

yellow blooms. On this early June morning, the bulbs were still hiding and biding their time. Oren's mother had been partial to yellow flowers, or so he had been told. There were no memories of her – only of this enduring ritual of gardening, the only sign that his father was a fool for love.

How much time had passed, he could not say. Behind him, he heard the door unlatch, then the creak of a floorboard, and now he caught the aroma of coffee. He looked up to see his tall, lanky father standing over him, holding two steaming mugs.

Not dead yet, old man?

Far from it. The retired judge appeared to be enjoying robust good health, though he was no longer impervious to cool mornings. Henry Hobbs wore a flannel shirt over his faded jeans. His feet were shod in replicas of the old sandals with crepe soles that had allowed him to sneak up on boys who were up to no good. For this reason alone, Oren and his little brother, Josh, had often wished that the judge would wear shoes and socks like other fathers. A long ponytail had also been the old man's trademark. Now his head was bald. As compensation, he had allowed his beard to grow long. The wispy white ends of it moved with a gentle current of air.

Bowing, almost courtly, Judge Hobbs handed one of the coffee mugs down to Oren, and then joined his son on the steps. The two men sat, side by side, in com-

panionable silence, as if twenty years had been but an hour's separation – as if a human jawbone had not been left out in plain sight on the porch, resting there between them.

The sun was up, and the color of their surroundings had ripened into lush forest green. Yellow wildflowers peppered the meadow.

And the jawbone had a reddish cast.

A flock of crows rose up from a nearby tree, screeching. *Khaa! Khaa! Cowp-cowp-cowp!* His father watched their flight. 'Damn birds. I never did need an alarm clock.' With the same nonchalance, the old man said, 'So you've come home.'

'Well, yeah.' Oren sipped his coffee. 'I thought you were dying.'

'What?' The judge turned to face his son. 'Hannah told you that?'

'No, sir. She never spelled it out in her letters.' Yet she had left him with the impression that a funeral was pending – just a crazy inference drawn from her line about shopping for coffins.

The judge waved one hand, dismissing this notion. 'I'll outlive her. She drinks more than I do.' He flicked a ladybug off the rim of his coffee mug, proof that he was not blind – except to the skeletal remains of a human being only inches from his elbow.

The door opened, and Hannah rushed out onto the

porch in a racket of wooden clogs. Bending low, she covered her employer's shoulders with a woolen afghan.

'Stop fussing over me,' said the judge, though he snuggled into the wool, grateful for the warmth. When his housekeeper had gone back inside and the door had banged shut behind her, he turned to his son. 'Damn, she's in a state this morning.'

Oren lightly tapped the fleshless body part that perched between them on the edge of the porch – just a hint that this might be the cause of Hannah's distress.

'Well,' said the old man, oh so casually, 'it's not like she hasn't seen that kind of thing before.'

That much Oren had already surmised, but he would not take the bait and ask an obvious question. Lessons of boyhood had made him into a patient man. In a contest of sorts, he sipped the dregs of his coffee – *slowly* – then looked up to the sky and said, 'I heard the dog died.'

The judge nodded. 'Horatio was lame and half blind when he chased down his last squirrel.' He drained his coffee mug and set it down beside the jawbone. 'Never heard a car pull up. How'd you get here, boy?'

'Planes and taxicabs.' Even if he had waited another twenty years for this reunion, his name would still be *Boy*. 'I got out of the cab on the highway and walked for a while.' Last night, he had thought it best to sneak up on this place of profound pain and night terrors and the best times of his life. Oren smiled somewhat insincerely. 'It

was late. I thought the noise of a car might disturb a sick old man on his deathbed.'

Judge Hobbs laughed. Approaching his seventy-fifth birthday, he could pass for ten years younger. There was no sign of illness in his rosy flesh, nor had age slowed his brain. He announced every thought with the flicker of bright blue eyes, quick to note everything, missing nothing, not even what went on behind his back, for now he turned to catch Hannah watching from the window.

Reaching down to a lower step, Oren plucked a small clump of yellow hair from the splintered wood before the next breeze could take it. There was no need of a microscope, no doubt that this was fur recently shed by the barking dog.

'I thought you'd be wearing your uniform, boy.'

Oren stuffed the fur ball into the watch pocket of his jeans. 'I left the Army.'

Finding human bones on the porch seemed to be an everyday thing with the judge, but this news from his son was clearly unsettling. 'You quit? Not on *my* account.'

'No, sir. It was time for a change.' Years ago, he had ceased to define himself as a soldier. He was a man in search of a second act, and Hannah's most recent letters had pried him loose from the inertia of military life. The mail from his father had always been returned unopened, twenty years of letters, and yet the old man had

remained a constant correspondent all that time. The silent war of father and son was a one-sided thing.

Oren, formerly Warrant Officer Hobbs of the US Army's Criminal Investigations Division, picked up the jawbone and pondered the rust-colored stain. 'So . . . this happens a lot?'

The door opened wide, and Hannah stood there, hands on hips, wearing a shapeless denim dress. Her hair was massed on top of her head and magically held in place by two wooden sticks. The new day had officially begun, and the balance of power shifted to her side of the porch. 'Oren, I need you to carry that bag of yours upstairs. It's too heavy for me.'

In times past, the housekeeper had used this voice of authority only for special offenses, such as the grimy rings of a boy's life left on the porcelain sides of the bathtub. Smiling, he rose from the steps and followed her into the house. Closing the door behind him, he paused to stare at the dead bolts. Once, there had been a quaint keyhole lock – only one – and there had never been a key. Now there were three heavy-duty bolts, and each one required a key to unlock it from the *inside*.

The parlor of the old Victorian was flooded with sunlight, and Oren had his first look at what time had done to this room. It was disturbing. The shabbiness was not a symptom of apathy; it was worse – a conscientious thing. A broken vase of no value, sentimental or

otherwise, had been glued back together so that it could remain a fixture of the mantelpiece. The rug was faded and near bald in places, evidence of scrubbing spills or maybe the accidents of an old dog in its dotage. And though Henry Hobbs had bags of money, the old man had kept the same furniture. Rips in the massive red sofa had been carefully mended, as had the cracks in the old brown-leather club chairs and the recliner. This was no act of preservation, but more like hard-core denial that two decades had passed since the loss of Josh.

An Irish setter lay on the floor near the fireplace. The dog was posed in sleep, but nothing could be so still as death. ‘Horatio?’

‘Your father had him stuffed twelve years ago,’ said the housekeeper.

Not the brightest of animals, Horatio had never learned to do tricks or obey commands; he had only known how to slime his family with kisses and wet them down with drool. So happy was he to love and be loved, his tail had wagged in his sleep.

This stuffed – *thing* – was nothing like Horatio.

Hannah squinted, as if to see the lifeless carcass more clearly. ‘I suppose it *is* a bad joke on a dead dog.’ She gestured by hand signals that he should follow her upstairs, where they would not be overheard.

He picked up his duffel bag, his socks and cowboy boots, and then he climbed the steps behind her, noting

the rut worn into the center of the staircase carpet – the same old carpet. Up to the second-floor landing and down the hall they went. The housekeeper led the way, and Oren spoke to her back. ‘So, Hannah, you mentioned a coffin in your last letter.’

Surprised, she stopped mid-stride. ‘The judge didn’t tell you?’ She continued on her way down the hall, saying over one shoulder, ‘Your brother’s been coming home – bone by bone.’

THREE

Oren dropped his bag and boots. Grabbing the housekeeper by the shoulders, he turned the tiny woman around to face him. ‘The judge thinks that jawbone belongs to *Josh*?’

‘Well, yes. But that’s not the crazy part.’ She rolled her eyes and sighed. ‘It never ends.’ By her tone, she might be describing a long parade of ants in the kitchen instead of his younger brother’s strange homecoming, one bone at a time. Hannah turned solemn as she studied his face. She must have seen that he was stalled somehow. The wiry little woman scooped up his belongings from the floor, as if the heavy bag and boots weighed nothing, and she carried them to the bedroom at the end of the hall.

He was slow to follow her through that last door. Unlike the parlor downstairs, his old room showed no

signs of time passing. Oren stared at the familiar blue bedspread and its history of soap-resistant stains. It was unwrinkled, not quite the way he had left it when he was a teenager who struggled with the concept of tucked-in sheets and smoothed-out blankets. The same photographs hung on the walls. His old fountain pen lay on the writing desk alongside a book he had never finished reading. All that appeared to be missing was the knapsack taken with him on the day when the old man had sent him away.

Hannah settled his duffel bag on the bed and opened a bureau drawer. 'You travel light.'

'I shipped a trunk. It'll be along in a day or two.'

'Good. That sounds more permanent.' The housekeeper unzipped his bag and removed an old Colt .45 with two fingers and a look of surprise. 'How on earth did you find it?'

'That's not Granddad's gun. I bought that one from a collector.' He had seen it as a sweet reminder of early childhood, a day when the housekeeper had found him and Josh playing with an old revolver in the attic. They had just figured out how to load the bullets when Hannah had snatched it away from them. Then she had hidden the gun with only the clue that it was buried, and the two brothers had dug up large sections of the yard by flashlight and moonlight in a quest that had gone on for years.

Next, she pulled a heavy wad of T-shirts from the bag

and unwrapped them to find a bottle of Jack Daniel's Tennessee whiskey buried inside.

'A present,' he said.

She carried the bottle to the window and grinned at the label in this better light. 'You remembered my brand. You good boy.'

'We need to talk about the judge – and the bones.'

'I know.' Hannah set the bottle down on the desk and left the room. She returned a few moments later with two small paper cups from the bathroom dispenser. Three fingers of alcohol had been poured and drunk before she said, 'You know it's possible for a man to be crazy *and* functional. Take the judge for instance.'

'Right,' he said dryly, 'just hypothetically.'

The housekeeper crumpled her paper cup into a ball – the only sign that she was vexed – and set it on the bureau. She turned her back on him to fold the T-shirts and place them in a drawer. 'This business of stuffing the dog – turning the house into a damn museum.' More clothes were pulled from the duffel bag. 'It's like one little crazy spot in the middle of a real clear mind. That's called a fixation.'

'Fixation?' Pain had ebbed away with the medicine from the whiskey bottle, and Oren smiled as he parroted the housekeeper's old mantra: 'You've been reading books. You know that can't be good for you.' Countless times, she had said this to him when he was a child

spending too many daylight hours in the judge's library. It had been her mission then to save him from literacy and send him out of doors in search of a life.

He poured and downed another shot of whiskey as he leaned back against the only patch of wall not cluttered with photos in white mats and black wooden frames.

'I've got a present for you, too.' The housekeeper opened the top drawer of the desk. She pulled out a photograph framed in silver and handed it to him. 'You were such beautiful kids.'

He studied her gift, a portrait of two boys. Oren, pictured at the age of seventeen, stood half a head taller than his younger brother. He had never seen this shot, though he remembered when it was taken. No detail of that day could be forgotten. Josh had mounted his camera on a brand-new tripod and used a cable release to snap this picture from a distance. And so the two brothers were standing together – for the last time. The photograph was black-and-white, and Oren's blue eyes looked very dark. He seemed so subdued in that moment, and today he was not so changed after all, still brooding in his countenance, as if he had made a pact with Josh, for whom change was impossible.

He sank down on the bed beside Hannah.

She wrapped her arms around him in a hug. 'It's good to have you home.'

He had sorely missed this little woman, and she

released her hold on him too soon. He bowed his head to look down at the picture in his hands. ‘So . . . about that jawbone?’

‘Ah, the bones. They’re always left on the porch late at night. You’re the only one who knows – besides me and your father.’

No, there was one other person who knew – the trespasser who traveled by night with a yellow dog. ‘I’m guessing this has been going on for months.’ He dated that guess by the housekeeper’s letters and their cryptic allusions to something amiss. ‘If the old man doesn’t call the sheriff, I’ll have to do it myself.’

She placed one hand on his knee and squeezed it with the gentle warning, ‘He won’t like that, Oren.’

‘He was a judge. He knows the law.’

‘But you don’t know the half of it – not yet.’ Hannah stood up, a little unsteady for the liquor. Late in life, she had evidently become a pansy drinker.

He followed her down the hall to Josh’s old room, where the braided rug and the striped wallpaper were holding up well. But the bedspread had once been brilliant green, and now it was a muted shade. The closet was open, and Josh’s favorite denim shirt hung by a hook on the back of the door along with the Sunday-best blue jeans. His brother had been wearing knock-around jeans the last time he was seen alive.

Hannah seemed lost in reverie and a whiskey buzz,

perhaps forgetting why she had brought him in here. To refresh her memory, Oren slapped the top of the coffin that had pride of place in the center of Josh's bedroom. 'This is new,' he said.

Did that sound sarcastic? He hoped so.

The varnished rosewood was trimmed with shiny brass that spoke of a recent purchase. It was the wildly upscale model hawked by funeral directors whose souls were interchangeable with used-car salesmen. And this could only mean that one such undertaker must have seen enormous grief in the old man's eyes. And tears? Oh, yes. The expense of the coffin was proof. This obscene trick could only be worked on a fragile mourner deep in pain.

Hannah raised the lid and laid it back on its hinges. 'The judge didn't want anybody to know about this until he had all the bones – till Josh was finished coming home. He made me swear not to tell.'

The satin lining was green – Josh's favorite color – and the skeleton nestled there was the same red cast as the jawbone outside on the porch. The hands and feet were missing. Perhaps the judge's night visitor was an amateur at exhumation and had overlooked remains that might pass for sticks and stones. What destroyed Oren was the slight overlap of the skull's front teeth, the only physical imperfection of a fifteen-year-old boy.

Hello, Josh. Did you miss me?

Hannah stepped back from the coffin. ‘You wouldn’t expect bones to smell.’

By profession, Oren was accustomed to decomposition. He knew it was the confined space and the seal of the coffin that gave the bones the reek of an ossuary. And there was also an earthy smell. He leaned down, as if to kiss his brother’s lipless face. ‘Hannah. Did the judge clean the skull? Did he do anything to it before it went into the coffin?’

‘No, not a thing. The way Josh is now – that’s the way he came home.’

The bones of the body were dusted with soil, but the skull bore the circular marks of cloth-wiped dirt. No part of the skeleton showed signs of exposure to the elements, and there was no damage from the fangs of animal predators – only the stains of sheltering earth.

Raw burial could only be read as murder.

The torso and limbs were more lightly colored than the skull, a sign that they had been protected for a time by a layer of clothing. Oren took small comfort in the knowledge that his little brother had not been thrown naked into some hole.

Hannah tugged at his sleeve. ‘The judge won’t want to give Josh up to the sheriff, but he might be willing to part with one or two bones.’

Oren nodded, as if she had said something sensible. It had been easy enough for the judge to part with his

firstborn son. But it would be too hard on the old man to give up the other child, the dead one.

Hannah raised one finger to herald another thought. 'Maybe we could just hold off on reporting Josh's skeleton – at least until it's finished.' One hand went up to her mouth to stifle any more mad ideas. Her head tilted to one side, as if to shake out this contagion of an old man's insanity, and then she gripped Oren's arm. 'Before you call the sheriff, you have to prepare the judge.'

And how would he convince a crazy old man to surrender his dead son? Well, he would avoid any useless words like *closure*. Oren could not even bring himself to close the coffin. He wanted to crawl inside with the bones, to lie down with them and die.

Hannah stepped up to perform this small service for him. She was lowering the lid when he said, 'Wait!' and stayed her hands. 'They don't match up.'

'What?'

'Look at the thigh bones, Hannah.'

She leaned over the coffin to stare at one and then the other. She looked up at him, quizzical – worried. 'They're the same.'

'Look again. The left one's off by an inch. Now look at the arms.' He pointed to radials and femurs, not wanting to touch them. 'These bones belong to two different skeletons . . . at *least* two.'