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Written in Bone

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Extract

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Given the right temperature, everything burns. Wood. Clothing.

People.

At 250° Celsius, flesh will ignite. Skin blackens and splits. The subcutaneous fat starts to liquefy, like grease in a hot pan. Fuelled by it, the body starts to burn. Arms and legs catch first, acting as kindling to the greater mass of the torso. Tendons and muscle fibres contract, causing the burning limbs to move in an obscene parody of life. Last to go are the organs. Cocooned in moistness, they often remain even after the rest of the soft tissue has been consumed.

But bone is, quite literally, a different matter. Bone stubbornly resists all but the hottest fires. And even when the carbon has burned from it, leaving it as dead and lifeless as pumice, bone will

still retain its shape. Now, though, it is an insubstantial ghost of its former self that will easily crumble; the final bastion of life transformed to ash. It's a process that, with few variations, follows the same inexorable pattern.

Yet not always.

The peace of the old cottage is broken by a footfall. The rotting door is pushed open, its rusted hinges protesting the disturbance. Daylight falls into the room, then is blocked out as a shadow fills the doorway. The man ducks his head to see into the darkened interior. The old dog with him hesitates, its senses already alerting it to what's within. Now the man, too, pauses, as though reluctant to cross the threshold. When the dog begins to venture inside he recalls it with a word.

'Here.'

Obediently, the dog returns, glancing nervously at the man with eyes grown opaque with cataracts. As well as the scent from inside the cottage, the animal can sense its owner's nervousness.

'Stay.'

The dog watches, anxiously, as the man advances further into the derelict cottage. The odour of damp envelops him. And now another smell is making itself known. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the man crosses to a low door set in the back wall. It has swung shut. He puts out his hand to push it open, then pauses again. Behind him, the

dog gives a low whine. He doesn't hear it. Gently, he eases open the door, as though fearful of what he's going to see.

But at first he sees nothing. The room is dim, the only light coming from a small window whose glass is cracked and cobwebbed with decades of dirt. In the mean light that bleeds through, the room retains its secrets for a few moments longer. Then, as the man's eyes adjust, details begin to emerge.

And he sees what's lying in the room.

He sucks in a breath as though punched, taking an involuntary step backwards.

'Oh, Jesus Christ.'

The words are soft, but seem unnaturally loud in the still confines of the cottage. The man's face has paled. He looks around, as if fearful he'll find someone there with him. But he's alone.

He backs out of the doorway, as if reluctant to turn away from the object on the floor. Only when the warped door has creaked shut again, cutting off his view of the other room, does he turn his back.

His gait is unsteady as he goes outside. The old dog greets him, but is ignored as the man reaches inside his coat and fumbles out a pack of cigarettes. His hands are trembling, and it takes three attempts for him to ignite the lighter. He draws the smoke deep into his lungs, a nub of glowing ash

chasing the paper back towards the filter. By the time the cigarette is finished his trembling has steadied.

He drops the stub on to the grass and treads it out before bending down to retrieve it. Then, slipping it into his coat pocket, he takes a deep breath and goes to make the phone call.

I was on my way to Glasgow airport when the call came. It was a foul February morning, brooding grey skies and a depressing mizzle driven by cold winds. The east coast was being lashed by storms, and although they hadn't worked their way this far inland yet, it didn't look promising.

I only hoped the worst would hold off long enough for me to catch my flight. I was on my way back to London, having spent the previous week first recovering then examining a body from a moorland grave out on the Grampian highlands. It had been a thankless task. The crystalline frost had turned the moors and peaks to iron, as breath-takingly cold as it was beautiful. The mutilated victim had been a young woman, who still hadn't been identified. It was the second such body I'd been asked to recover from the Grampians in recent months. As yet it had been kept out of the press, but no one on the investigating team was in any doubt that the same killer was responsible for both. One who would kill again if he wasn't caught,

and at the moment that wasn't looking likely. What made it worse was that, although the state of decomposition made it hard to be sure, I was convinced that the mutilations weren't post-mortem.

So all in all, it had been a gruelling trip, and I was looking forward to going home. For the past eighteen months I'd been living in London, based at the forensic science department of a university. It was a temporary contract that gave me access to lab facilities until I found something more permanent, but in recent weeks I'd spent far more time working out in the field than I had in my office. I'd promised Jenny, my girlfriend, that we'd be able to spend some time together after this. It wasn't the first time I'd made that promise, but this time I was determined to keep it.

When my phone rang I thought it would be her, calling to make sure I was on my way home. But the number on the caller display wasn't one I recognized. When I answered, the voice at the other end was gruff and no-nonsense.

'Sorry to disturb you, Dr Hunter. I'm Detective Superintendent Graham Wallace, at Northern Force Headquarters in Inverness. Can you spare me a few minutes?'

He had the tone of someone used to getting his own way, and a harsh accent that spoke of Glasgow tenements rather than the softer cadences of Inverness.

'Just a few. I'm on my way to catch a flight.'

'I know. I've just spoken to DCI Allan Campbell at Grampian Police, and he told me you'd finished up here. I'm glad I've caught you.'

Campbell was the Senior Investigating Officer I'd been working with on the body recovery. A decent man and a good officer, he found it difficult to separate himself from his work. That was something I could appreciate.

I glanced at the taxi driver, conscious of being overheard. 'What can I do for you?'

'I'm looking for a favour.' Wallace clipped the words out, as though each one was costing more than he liked to pay. 'You'll have seen about the train crash this morning?'

I had. At my hotel before I'd left I'd watched the news reports of a West Coast commuter express that had derailed after hitting a van left on the line. From the TV footage it looked bad, the train carriages lying mangled and twisted by the track. No one knew yet how many people had been killed.

'We've got everyone we can up there now, but it's chaos at the moment,' Wallace continued. 'There's a chance the derailment was deliberate, so we're having to treat the whole area as a crime scene. We're calling in help from other forces, but right now we're running at full stretch.'

I thought then I could guess what was coming. According to the news reports, some of the

carriages had caught fire, which would make victim identification both a priority and a forensic nightmare. But before that could even begin, the bodies would have to be recovered, and from what I'd seen that was still some way off.

'I'm not sure how much help I'd be at the moment,' I told him.

'It isn't the crash I'm calling about,' he said, impatiently. 'We've got a report of a fire death out in the Western Isles. Small island called Runa, in the Outer Hebrides.'

I hadn't heard of it, but that was hardly surprising. All I knew about the Outer Hebrides was that the islands were some of the most remote outposts of the UK, miles from anywhere off the northwest coast of Scotland.

'Suspicious?' I asked.

'Doesn't sound like it. Might be suicide, but more likely to be a drunk or a vagrant who fell asleep too close to a campfire. Dog walker found it at an abandoned croft and called it in. He's a retired DI, lives out there now. I've worked with him. Used to be a good man.'

I wondered if the *used to be* was significant. 'So what else did he say about it?'

There was a beat before he replied. 'Just that it's badly burned. But I don't want to pull resources away from a major incident unless I have to. A couple of the local boys from Stornoway are going

out by ferry later today, and I'd like you to go with them and take a look. See if you think it's low priority, or if I need to send a SOC team. I'd like an expert assessment before I press the panic button, and Allan Campbell says you're bloody good.'

The attempt at flattery sat awkwardly with his bluff manner. I'd noticed the hesitation when I'd asked about the body, too, and wondered if there was something he wasn't telling me. But if Wallace thought there was anything suspicious about the death, he'd be sending a Scene of Crime team, train crash or not.

The taxi was almost at the airport. I had every reason to say no. I'd only just finished working on one major investigation, and this sounded fairly mundane; the sort of everyday tragedy that never makes it into the newspapers. I thought about having to tell Jenny that I wouldn't be back today after all. Given the amount of time I'd spent away recently, I knew that wouldn't go down well.

Wallace must have sensed my reluctance. 'Should only take a couple of days, including getting out there. The thing is, it sounds as if there might be something . . . odd about it.'

'I thought you said it wasn't suspicious?'

'It isn't. At least, nothing I've heard makes me think it is. Look, I don't want to say too much, but that's why I'd like an expert such as yourself to take a look.'

I hate being manipulated. Even so, I couldn't deny my curiosity had been aroused.

'I wouldn't ask if we weren't hard pressed right now,' Wallace added, turning the screw another notch.

Outside the rain-smeared taxi window I saw a road sign saying the airport was approaching. 'I'll have to get back to you,' I said. 'Give me five minutes.'

He didn't like that, but he could hardly object. I rang off, biting my lip for a moment before dialling a number I knew off by heart.

Jenny's voice came on the line. I smiled at the sound of it, even though I wasn't looking forward to the conversation we were about to have.

'David! I was just on my way to work. Where are you?'

'On my way to the airport.'

I heard her laugh. 'Thank God for that. I thought you were phoning to say you weren't coming back today after all.'

I felt my stomach sink. 'Actually that's what I'm calling about,' I said. 'The thing is, I've just been asked to go on another job.'

'Oh.'

'It's just for a day or two. In the Outer Hebrides. But there's no one else to do it right now.' I stopped myself from explaining about the train crash, knowing it would sound as though I was making excuses.

There was a pause. I hated the way the laughter had gone from Jenny's voice. 'So what did you say?'

'That I'd let them know. I wanted to talk to you first.'

'Why? We both know you've already made up your mind.'

I didn't want this to develop into an argument. I glanced at the cab driver again.

'Look, Jenny . . .'

'You mean you haven't?'

I hesitated.

'That's what I thought,' she said.

'Jenny . . .'

'I've got to go. I'll be late for work.'

There was a click as she hung up. I sighed. The day wasn't getting off to a good start. *So call her back and say you'll turn it down*. My finger poised over the phone.

'Don't worry, pal. My wife's always giving me a hard time too,' the taxi driver said over his shoulder. 'She'll get over it, eh?'

I made a non-committal comment. In the distance I could see a plane taking off from the airport. The driver indicated for the turn as I keyed in the number. It was answered on the first ring.

'How do I get there?' I asked Wallace.