

Written in Bone

Extract

Once we had left the harbour village, there was hardly any sign of life. The only sign of habitation we'd passed was an imposing old house, set well back from the road. Other than that there had been only the occasional ruins of cottages and sheep. In the gathering twilight, Runa looked beautiful, but desolate. It would be a lonely place to die.

There was a jolt as Brody turned off the road and bumped down an overgrown track.

Ahead of us, the car's headlights picked out a crumbling old cottage. Wallace had said the body had been found at a croft, but there was little left here to show this must once have been a working farm. Brody pulled up outside and turned off the engine.

"Stay Bess," he ordered the border collie.

We climbed out of the car as the Range Rover drew up behind us on the track. The cottage was a squat, single story building that was slowly being reclaimed by nature. Looming up behind it was the peak I'd seen earlier, now only a black shape in the encroaching darkness.

"That's Stynr Fell." Brody told me. "Not much of a mountain, but they say if you climb to the top on a clear day you can see all the way to Scotland."

"Can you?"

"Never met anyone stupid enough to find out."

He took a Maglight from his glove compartment, and we waited outside the car until Fraser and Duncan pulled up as well. I collected my own torch from the flight case in the police Range Rover, then we made our way towards the cottage, torch-beams bouncing and criss-crossing in the darkness. The cottage was little more than a stone shack, its walls furred with moss and lichen. The doorway was so low I had to stoop to go inside.

I paused and shone my torch around. The place was obviously long abandoned, a derelict remnant of forgotten lives. Water dripped from a hole in the roof, and the room we were in was cramped, a low ceiling added to the claustrophobic feel.

Like a tomb.

I dismissed the thought, annoyed with myself, and took stock of my surroundings. I was in what had once been a kitchen. There was an old range, a dusty cast-iron pan still standing on one of its cold plates. A rickety wooden table stood in the middle of the stoneflagged floor. A few cans and bottles were scattered on the floor, evidence the place hadn't been entirely untenanted. It had the musty smell of age and damp, but nothing else.

For a fire death there seemed remarkably little signs of any fire.

“Through there,” Brody said, shining his torch on another doorway. As I approached it I caught the first faint, sooty whiff of combustion. But it was nothing like as strong as I would have expected. The door was broken, its rusted hinges protesting as it was pushed open. Watching my step, I went though into the other room. It was even more depressing than the kitchen. The stink of fire was unmistakable now. The torchlight showed ancient, crumbling plaster on the bare walls, in one of which was the gaping mouth of a fireplace. But the smell didn’t come from that. Its source was in the centre of the room, and as I shone my torch on it my breath caught in my throat.

There was precious little left of what had once been a living person. No wonder Brody had looked as he did when I’d asked if it was badly burned. It was that, all right. Even the white heat of a crematorium isn’t enough to reduce a human body to ash, yet this fire had somehow done just that.

An untidy pile of greasy ash and cinders lay on the floor. The fire had consumed bone as readily as it had skin and tissue. Only the larger bones remained, emerging from the ash like dead braches from a snowdrift. Even these had been calcined, the carbon burned from them until they were grey and brittle. Presiding over them all like a ruined eggshell was a broken skull, lying with its jawbone canted off to one side. And yet, apart from the body, nothing else in the room had been damaged. The fire that had all but incinerated a human being, reduced its bones to the consistency of pumice, had somehow done so without burning anything else nearby. The stone flags below the remains were blackened, but a few feet away a tattered and filthy mattress lay untouched. Old leaves and twigs littered the ground, yet the flames had rejected even these.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. What had shocked me to silence was the sight of two unburned feet and a single hand protruding from the ashes. The bones jutting from them were scorched to black sticks, yet these were completely unmarked. Brody came and stood beside me.

“Now do you see what I mean?”