

# **Written in Bone Study Guide**

**Written in Bone by Simon Beckett**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Written in Bone Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-3.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 4-6.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7-9.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 10-12.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13-15.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 16-18.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19-21.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 22-24.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 25-27.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 28 and Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>



# Plot Summary

"Written in Bone" is a mystery novel by Simon Beckett, one in a series that features the forensic anthropologist David Hunter. An incinerated body has been found on the remote Scottish island of Runa, and Hunter is called in to examine it. As the investigation unfolds, two different murderers surface and the body count rises. After a series of unexpected twists, the criminal mastermind is revealed to be the retired cop Andrew Brody. Meanwhile, the beautiful Grace Strachan turns out to be a twisted serial killer in her own right.

After Brody 'finds' a burned body in an abandoned rural cottage, he joins Hunter and two local policemen in investigating its origins. Their first task is to determine whether the strange death was an accident or not. The island's few citizens are insular and resistant to any outsiders other than the rich and philanthropic Michael Strachan and his wife Grace, two South Africans who have rebuilt the infrastructure of the island. Hunter develops a friendship with the friendly innkeeper Ellen McLeod. After several sessions of advanced forensic analysis, Hunter is eventually

able to determine that the body belongs to a mainland prostitute named Janice Donaldson who was killed with a blow to the head before she was burned. After sharing certain secrets with the young cop Duncan, Brody gets nervous and decides to destroy all of the evidence, burning down several buildings and killing the young cop Duncan.

Aided by a crippling storm, Runa descends into chaos. Grace Strachan, herself a serial killer, resumes her insanity and murders the young reporter Maggie Cassidy. Using Maggie's dictaphone, the police determine that she was planning to meet Michael Strachan at the time of her death. The police confront Michael at his solitary retreat: the ancient burial Cairns. Michael first confesses, but then admits that he has lied to protect his wife. Furthermore, he reveals that his wife is actually his sister and that they have had an incestuous coupling since they were teenagers.

Meanwhile, following an accidental slip-up by Brody, Grace has found out about Michael's affair with the Innkeeper Ellen McLeod and has begun a murderous rampage. The police stop Grace from killing Ellen, but Michael kills himself and presumably his wife by blowing up the hotel. Hunter is about to leave when he realizes that Brody has been behind the first murders. Brody admits to his crimes, explaining that he wished to avenge his daughter's murder for which he blamed, wrongly, Michael Strahan. Brody then commits suicide. Back in London, Hunter is relaxing when he is unexpectedly attacked and possibly killed by the not-dead Grace Strachan. The book ends with Hunter possibly dying on his front step.



# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary

In the second book of Simon Beckett's thriller/detective series, London-based forensic anthropologist Dr. David Hunter travels to the remote island of Runa in the Scottish Hebrides. He investigates a suspiciously burned body that had been discovered in a rural hut by ex-cop Andrew Brody. The island's small, insular, and secretive population becomes embroiled in a murder investigation which unravels as a result of old feuds among the citizens, incompetent management by the local police, unrelenting stormy weather, and nefarious subterfuge by the murderous elements. Chaos envelops the island; the body count increases; and Hunter, caught in a vortex of spiraling violence and pyrotechnics, barely escapes Runa alive.

Dr. David Hunter, who is the book's narrator as well as its protagonist, begins "Written in Bone" by describing, in general terms, the incineration of the human body, noting that bones will retain their shape long after the flesh has been reduced to ash. Then an unnamed man, accompanied by his dog, discovers something terrible in a musty abandoned cottage. The man is nervous for undisclosed reasons even before his discovery. After smoking a trembling cigarette, he makes an unspecified phone call.

Hunter is in the Glasgow airport, about to fly home to London, having just finished a mutilation investigation in the Scottish Grampian Highlands, when he receives a call from Detective Superintendent Wallace. Wallace asks him to assist in a forensic investigation of a suspicious fire death on a small island in the Outer Hebrides. Though pining to return to his girlfriend Jenny and worried about the state of their relationship, Hunter, with a characteristic obsession with his craft, decides to take the job. He calls Jenny to alert her of his delayed return and the exchange is tense.

In chapter 2, Hunter introduces himself as a forensic anthropologist (an expert in the study and identification, for legal purposes, of highly decomposed, burned, or mutilated bodies) and presents some of his back story: his wife and daughter were killed in a car crash and he quit forensic anthropology for awhile, becoming a doctor of medicine, only to eventually return to his true 'calling'.

The action resumes as Hunter flies to the Outer Hebrides capital of Stornoway. He meets his investigation partners, both locals: the gruff sergeant Fraser and the young, friendly constable Duncan McKinney. They take a ferry to the island of Runa, encountering a bearded boat captain, Iain Kinross, and his teenage son as well as a sprite and energetic young woman named Maggie Cassidy. Enroute, Hunter learns from Fraser that the body had been discovered by a retired Detective Investigator (DI) named Andrew Brody who had become a loner after being left by his wife and daughter. Hunter then has a conversation on the deck with Maggie, who seems overly chatty and curious.



The ferry arrives at the rustic, craggy island. Hunter and the policemen are met at the dock by the ex-cop Brody. There is immediate tension, the beginning of a power struggle, between Brody and Fraser. They drive across the island to see the body. Brody and Hunter become acquainted on the way. Brody is miffed that Wallace, the superintendent (who is preoccupied with mainland train catastrophe), has not sent out a proper investigative (SOC) team. They reach the site of the body and enter the cottage. (We now know that the unnamed man from the first scene was Brody). The dead body has been thoroughly combusted, save for two unburned feet and one unburned hand. Strangely, the fire did not spread to any place beyond the body.

Chapter 3 begins with the young constable Duncan feeling queasy. The group then begins to investigate the burned corpse. Brody immediately begins to note clues that would suggest murder (and not an accidental death). Fraser, significantly irritated by the ex-cop's impositions, defers to Hunter, who does not yet arrive at a conclusion. It is agreed upon that the corpse was almost definitely a woman. The team is then interrupted by Maggie. She has followed them to the cottage and is revealed to be a snooping newspaper reporter. As night falls, Brody offers his camper as a crime-scene command post, in which Duncan spends the night.

## Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Spoiler alert! From the beginning of this first section, the murderer/murderers is/are revealed so that their actions and motives can be analyzed throughout. (This differs from the plot summary, where the revelations are presented as they appear in the plot.) If you wish for your first reading of this mystery novel to retain its proper suspense, please don't read on.

The literal and figurative realities of combustion and its byproducts are central to this book. Buildings are burned, people are burned, cigarettes are burned.. Hunter notes that human bones will retain their shape long after all the other flesh has been reduced to ash. Here Hunter is speaking literally about his profession and metaphorically about the problems facing a criminal's attempts to hide evidence. The message is: in every crime there will always be traces left behind, and a competent investigator will be able to uncover them.

The plot begins: the man (who we will soon learn is Brody) who discovers the body in the cabin, is also responsible (we will eventually learn) for the corpse's death. Though this is unexpected, and not obvious, many clues are left for the reader. Before he discovers the body, the man is described as nervous and fearful. Afterward, he smokes a cigarette while acting terrified. Later, to hide the evidence, he puts the cigarette butt in his pocket rather than on the ground. The careful reader will immediately become suspicious of Brody. After this first scene, however, there isn't much evidence that exposes him. Brody is clever and spends the rest of the story manipulating his police partners into framing Strachan. Unless the reader carefully considers this first scene, he or she will be completely blindsided by the ending.



The back story presented in chapter 2—Hunter's tragic past and his cloudy future with his present girlfriend Jenny—supplies Hunter with most of his nonprofessional motivation. He is preoccupied with the women in his life, living and dead, and these relationships color relationship with many other characters, especially the innkeeper Ellen and his daughter. Brody, who has also lost a wife and daughter, immediately bonds with Hunter based on this commonality. The primary tension in Hunter's life exists between his work and his personal life. He feels tremendous guilt upon leaving his girlfriend alone for several days after taking the case yet it does not prevent him from doing it.

Once Hunter arrives on the island of Runa, the novel establishes itself as a 'fish out of water' story. The locals view and sometimes confront Hunter as an outsider, with several important plot consequences. Other residents—transplants like Brody and the Strachans—also stick out as outsiders. Runa is tight-knit and full of secretive and uncomfortable realities that become exposed once outlanders begin investigating the first murder. The struggle of an air-tight community to remain unchanged in the face of outside intervention is a stock plot that repeats throughout western literature and film. Examples include "Gulliver's Travels" by Jonathan Swift, "A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court" by Mark Twain, and the movie "The Gods Must Be Crazy".

In chapter 3, as the police team begins to investigate the body, Brody's manipulations take fuller form. He desperately wants the forensic team (led by Hunter) to rule the death a murder so the framing of Strachan can become realized. Fraser, meanwhile, desperately wants the death to be ruled an accident. His laziness, small-mindedness, and drunkenness remain constant, always providing contrast to the measured competence of Hunter and shrewd deceit of Brody



# Chapters 4-6

## Chapters 4-6 Summary

Hunter calls Wallace, noting the possibility of a murder. Wallace's interest is piqued but he lacks the resources to send an SOC team. Hunter and Fraser arrive at their lodgings, the Runa Hotel, which doubles as the island's restaurant and watering hole. Hunter meets the friendly and striking hotel owner Ellen McLoed and her young daughter and is shown to his reasonably appointed room. Fraser, clearly a heavy drinker, proceeds directly to the bar. Hunter has another stilted phone conversation with his still-peevish girlfriend before reviewing his forensic photographs and having a strange, momentary vision of a person standing in the rain outside his window.

In Chapter 5, Hunter goes down to the bar for dinner and meets many of the locals. Kinross, the ferry captain, is sitting with the loudmouth ex-fisherman Sean Guthrie and the alcoholic shopkeeper Karen Tait. Hunter first sits with Brody and then is introduced to the charismatic, handsome, and extremely wealthy South African Michael Strachan, who is responsible for various recent structural improvements on the island. There is obvious tension between Brody and Strachan. Brody leaves. Soon after, Strachan is whisked away by his beautiful and generally beloved wife Grace. The Strachans are regarded by the others as island nobility. After eating, Hunter retires to bed, dreams of his deceased wife, and, upon waking, again has visions of an entity standing in the street below his room.

In chapter 6, Duncan is alone and nervous in the camper outside of the cottage. He is frightened by an interloper who is revealed to be the still-snooping Maggie. He ejects her but they both privately admit to liking the other

## Chapters 4-6 Analysis

The hotel is a meeting place for nearly every character. Given that the setting, with all the characters trapped within a small community on a tiny island, is already claustrophobic, the hotel provides an inner layer of entrapment as well as a venue in which all the characters rub shoulders. This seal is complete externally once the terrible weather prevents any possibility of escape or communication with the mainland. This construct adds danger and tension to the plot

Another aspect of the closed-off community that is consistent with the mystery genre is its narrow range of suspects which is limited to a handful of characters, all presented from the beginning. Once the case has been deemed a murder, the characters all know that the killer must be among them.

In Chapter 5, in which most of the town meets at the hotel for dinner, the tensions become more apparent even if their sources are still obscured. Strachan notes that Brody does not like him but he doesn't realize that Brody is attempting to frame him for



murder. Drunk Karen has the audacity to call Grace Strachan, a village hero, a bitch (after Grace has left) but no one realizes that Grace is a twisted murderer. Michael's womanizing and Grace's obsession with Michael's secret movements are both subtly presented during this chapter. Still little evidence is provided that would lead the reader to suspect either of them.

Maggie, the snooping reporter who scares the daylight out of Duncan in chapter 6, is a character whose investigations mirror those of the police team. She has her own reasons to uncover the truth (career advancement) as do several other characters. This simultaneous sleuthing is common to the mystery genre. The reader, in the midst of his or her own developing inquiry, must wade through the overlapping discoveries and points-of-view of several characters.





# Chapters 7-9

## Chapters 7-9 Summary

At breakfast, the hung-over Fraser lets it slip to Ellen that the burned body was a woman. Ellen agrees to keep the secret and also lends them her car. They drive to the cottage. With Hunter's approval and Fraser's disapproval, the ex-cop Brody continues to work on the case. Strachan suddenly arrives at the scene and is immediately shooed away by an angry Brody, who later muses on his dislike of the island benefactor. Hunter spends the rest of the day conducting a forensic investigation on the body. At first he surmises that the fire was an accident but then, upon examining the skull more closely, he finds evidence of a blow to the head that preceded the fire. Hunter thus concludes that the woman has been murdered.

Hunter begins chapter 8 eager to inform his superintendent, especially after realizing that the killer is probably still on the island. But the radio is down and he instead hurries back to the village to inform his colleagues. Before he gets there, however, he swerves to avoid a dog and crashes Ellen's VW into a ditch. With the car stuck, his only option is to set out on foot into the cold, dark and rainy night. He quickly loses sight of the road and falls into the gully, rolling down a hill and badly separating his left shoulder. He then wanders aimlessly, unable to find the road and becoming increasingly concerned, until he finds himself at the ancient burial cairns which had been mentioned by both Brody and Strachan. Hunter sees movement and fire light coming from a nearby hut. Entering it, he collapses while being confronted by a hooded figure.

Chapter 9 begins as Hunter wakes up at the Strachan mansion, having slept deep into the following afternoon. The hooded figure had been Michael Strachan enjoying a solitary camping outing. Michael had dragged the unconscious Hunter to his car. The schoolteacher and nurse Bruce Cameron had then reset Hunter's shoulder before administering a powerful sedative. Hunter spends the afternoon at the mansion getting to know Grace and Michael and hearing about their apparently perfect lives. Hunter is able to finally make contact with Wallace, but it will not be possible for a murder investigation team to arrive until the following day. Cameron enters: headstrong, arrogant, and full of obvious lust for Grace. Then Maggie arrives uninvited, again digging for leads. Hunter has Maggie give him a ride back to the village, during which they reach a certain conversational understanding.

## Chapters 7-9 Analysis

During Hunter's forensic investigation, he enters an ecstatic state in which he forgets completely about time and place, as well as his personal problems and his overwhelming sense of guilt. His obsession with the minutia of his craft allows him his primary emotional escape. Unfortunately, the facts of the case, and the idiosyncrasies of the locals, present aspects that are common with Hunter's tragic past, causing his



consciousness to regularly spiral backwards. Hunter is troubled by his dreams and also troubled by real happenings—the ghostly form of Mary Tait outside his window, for example—that resemble dreams. Most of the characters have some sort of trauma or mistake or unfortunate circumstance in their back-story which strongly colors their present actions.

In chapter 8 Hunter first visits the burial cairns. These huts provide a physical but less corporal manifestation for a central concept of the book: even in death, lifeless bodies (and their surroundings) can have a profound effect on the living. When Hunter, lost, injured, and in grave danger, stumbles upon this area, he is figuratively entering the land of the dead, much like the mythic Siddhartha crossing the river Styx on the way to the underworld, or the goddess Persephone, in the Greek myth, traveling to Hades. Hunter, like the two characters just mentioned, manages to escape back to the land of the living. The metaphorical lord of the underworld of the Cairns is Michael Strachan. His interest in these ancient death rituals foreshadows his involvement in the eventual (and past) murders, as well as the dramatic climax of the plot, which, as could be expected, returns the action to the burial cairns. Michael is presented both as a socially gregarious leader and as a socially isolated and death-obsessed loner. In mystery novels characters with such double personalities will always arouse suspicion.

Hunter, spending most of chapter 9 recovering at the Strachan mansion, seems not to suspect the Strachans in any way. But it is worth noting that Hunter is not a detective, even as he has been thrust into that role during the investigation. (Circumstances, mostly related to the weather and the swift timing of the action, prevented a proper detective from reaching the island in time.) He is clearly a very talented forensic anthropologist and performs that function masterfully throughout the story. But his ability to intuit the big picture is limited. Usually, his realizations occur just in time to not prevent a murder from happening. In this sense Hunter is an unusual and an interesting mystery novel sleuth.



# Chapters 10-12

## Chapters 10-12 Summary

Hunter, still extremely sore, returns to his hotel. He discusses the case with the grumpy Fraser and is then harassed in the bar by the hulking and inebriated ex-fisherman Guthrie. The tension is eased as other locals, including Maggie, enter. Throughout this sequence, Hunter's identity as an urban outsider, and its effect on this insular community, becomes more apparent as a complication to the investigation. Maggie reveals to Hunter that she had written a story exposing a drunken assault by Fraser on a female suspect. This explains the permanent rift between them.

As chapter 11 begins, an epic storm has reached the Hebrides which will delay for days the arrival of the SOC team and hinder later communication. Hunter and Jenny reconcile briefly over the phone but then the line goes dead. Then Hunter, yet again, sees a girl in a nightgown, but this time he is sure that it is not a product of his imagination. The next morning Wallace, unable to send in the SOC team to the island due to the weather, has decided to let Brody continue helping with the case (much to the disdain of Fraser). Hunter visits Brody's house to update him on the recent developments. The two men converse and bond over their common experiences with lost wives and lost daughters. Brody explains that the young woman wandering outside in a nightgown is Mary Tait, the mentally handicapped daughter of Karen the shopkeeper. The conversation is then interrupted by the following news from Fraser: the cottage containing the corpse has begun to collapse due to the storm's gale force winds. Forced to make an instant decision, Hunter and Brody take the unorthodox step of disturbing the crime scene and moving all the evidence out while they still can. When the cottage collapses, minutes later, Hunter is holding the dead woman's hand and most of the other important evidence has been evacuated and transferred to evidence bags.

In Chapter 12, the team, except for Duncan, who stays behind to guard the remains of the cottage, moves the evidence bags to the Island's clinic, but only after facing great resistance from the cantankerous nurse Cameron. Hunter and the police set up shop in the clinic. Hunter explains how the body of the woman, now thought to be overweight, had burned like a candle, with the body fat acting similar to the candle's wax.

## Chapters 10-12 Analysis

In Chapter 10 Hunter nearly gets assaulted by the ex-fisherman Guthrie in a continuation of the insider/outsider theme. A related dichotomy exists between old fashioned and new-fangled technology. The locals fish, hunt, and work on wooden boats. Their island has an ancient quality. Strachan has attempted to bring modernizations to the island, especially its feeble economy, but the progress has been awkward. Hunter spends much of his time working on his laptop, the device which, in

this chapter, first incites Guthie's ire. The plot later demonstrates the limits of modern technology once power and remote communication are lost.

In chapter 11 the cottage collapses. The key interactions occur between Hunter and Brody. First they have a serious conversation at Brody's house about their common tragedies and then they decide together to clear the corpse from the cottage before it collapses. A close reading reveals that Brody is in fine form. He gains Hunter's complete trust while revealing nothing about his sinister actions. Now that Brody has been officially added to the investigative team, he can continue to manipulate the investigation and take advantage of the void created by the lack of a homicide detective.

In chapter 12, while resisting the use of the medical clinic as a storage area for the displaced corpse, the nurse Cameron is established as a clear suspect, although no motive is ever established for this obfuscation. Cameron clearly has a crush on Grace Strachan, but it is unknown how that might figure into any criminal wrongdoing.



# Chapters 13-15

## Chapters 13-15 Summary

Hunter spends some time reassembling the corpse's teeth, manually placing them into the skull's jaw. He is now convinced, based on the rotted teeth and the skimpy clothes worn at death, that the dead woman was drug addict and likely a prostitute. With Brody guarding the clinic, Hunter goes back to the village to get some food and to buy a padlock for the unlocked community center (which houses the clinic). While buying the lock at the community center, Hunter receives a chilly reception from Karen Tait. Back at the hotel, Hunter overhears Ellen having a conversation with an unknown man in hushed tones. Ellen appears to have been crying when she encounters Hunter.

In Chapter 14, Hunter has dinner with an already tipsy Fraser. The two men get accosted by Kinross and Guthrie, who become angry upon learning that the community center has been locked. Hunter defuses the tension by noting that this idea has had the blessing of local hero Grace Strachan, but then Fraser makes the enormous blunder of letting it slip that a murder investigation has begun. Hunter returns to clinic and attempts to match the reconstructed jaw to images of missing women that he has downloaded onto his laptop. After some time he is able to find a match. The deceased is a former prostitute and drug addict from Stornoway named Janice Donaldson. Meanwhile Duncan is back in camper, alone and feeling nervous. The chapter ends with Duncan reacting to a knock and deciding to open the door.

Chapter 15 returns to Hunter, still working at the clinic and getting weary. He passes out and dreams of a skull emanating smoke. When he wakes up he realizes that the building is on fire. After stumbling perilously through the burning community center and barely unlocking the padlock in time, Hunter narrowly escapes. After some time collapsed on the wet ground, Hunter is surrounded by many of the island's citizens. Most of them are angry and blame Hunter for the fire. Michael Strachan talks down the crowd, noting that the building was a firetrap and promising to build a new one. Hunter returns to the hotel. He is unable to contact his supervisor or his girlfriend. He instead has a long conversation with Ellen.

## Chapters 13-15 Analysis

In chapter 13 Hunter returns to his strength: forensics. While meticulously reassembling the facial bone structure of the burnt corpse, he again loses himself in his craft, like a master artisan. During these moments of brief transcendence his connection to ordinary linear time loosens in the following ways. Firstly, he works for hours without noticing the passage of time. Secondly, he gets to experience the past via his reconstructions. In his mind the dead can be reanimated and the present and past can be bridged.



When Hunter overhears Ellen speaking to a man in hushed tones, and later crying, the reader is alerted to the existence of an important secret. Though the reader might guess that it this relates to the paternity of her child, correctly fingering Michael Strachan as the father would require a lucky guess. Nothing in the text, so far, would read the reader to this conclusion.

In Chapter 14 the tension between the locals and the police has reached a boil. Fraser, previously incompetent but not yet important to the plot, accidentally reveals to the entire village that a murder investigation has begun. The reader is left to imagine the ripples of chaos that ensue. The locals now know that a murderer is among them. At this stage, we will learn later, Brody has become spooked and has begun a campaign of rash action. Hunter does not suspect a thing and Brody's flawless performance gives him very little reason to suspect anything.

In chapter 15, when the community center burns and Hunter barely escapes, Brody is the first person there to help him. Brody had also started the fire, unbeknownst to the reader. His involvement in the scene is vastly overshadowed by the frantic accusations of the locals and the cool control exerted by Michael. Brody does reveal a bit of his intentions at the end of the scene when he asks Michael how he could have known about the fire if it was not visible from his house. The tension between the two men has increased further, but only upon a second reading does it become apparent that this is the central axis of conflict in the book.



# Chapters 16-18

## Chapters 16-18 Summary

At daybreak, the police team investigates the remains of the community center. Hunter has lost nearly all of his forensic tools, including his computer, and all that remains of the body is a charred hand. Hunter finds evidence of a fire accelerant, leading to the conclusion that the building has been burned intentionally and further complicating the investigation. Maggie enters uninvited. Hunter gets her to leave by promising a good story (for her newspaper) later. The team then begins to worry about the crime scene at the cottage and expects that the arsonist would want to destroy that evidence too. After a mad dash they find the cottage and Brody's camper burned. In the rubble is the body of the constable Duncan, much to the despair of his supervisor Fraser. Unable to contact Wallace on the mainland, the police team is alone on the island with a killer running amok.

In chapter 17 Hunter begins to investigate Duncan's body. He finds evidence of a blow to the head similar to that which likely killed Janice Donaldson. Hunter is able to conclude that the killer was left handed and that Duncan's murder occurred inside the camper (and before the fire). Michael Strachan shows up unexpectedly. Before he is shooed away, Hunter asks if they can borrow the communication equipment on Strachan's yacht. Strachan agrees.

After taping off the crime scene, the team spends chapter 18 trying to reestablish contact with the mainland. They stop by the Strachan mansion but no one is home. They go to the harbor boatyard, hoping to borrow the radio on Kinross's ferry. The men there are unfriendly and suspicious but Kinross does reluctantly agree to help. With the storm marooning the boat in the harbor, however, the radio is useless. Returning to Strachan's house, the police team finds Michael outside, madly searching for his missing wife. They finally find her in the yacht, tied up and covered with a sack. She has been recently attacked and the yacht's communication equipment, the police's last chance for communication, has been destroyed.

## Chapters 16-18 Analysis

During chapter 16, Hunter and Fraser discover that the community center, the cottage, and camper had all been intentionally burned, and that the young policeman Duncan had been murdered along the way. Brody, who is responsible for all of these crimes is as cool as a cucumber as he accompanies the policemen during their grim discoveries. It seems that the Simon Beckett, the author, wishes for the reader to be as surprised as possible at the end of the book. The devastating twist ending is common to the mystery thriller. Brody's virtuoso performance, especially in this chapter, makes his eventual guilt especially unexpected. Except for the first chapter, and the rare moment that Michael Strachan makes him lose his cool, there is virtually no foreshadowing.



During chapter 17 Michael Strachan, having arrived mysteriously at the burned-out cottage, emerges as a suspect. His reaction is visceral, and he appears to be falling apart. Still there is nothing clearly incriminating about his actions. Because the actual murderer, Brody, has kept such a successfully low profile, the reader is left to sift through crumbs of suspicion regarding the other questionable characters, namely: Cameron, Michael, and Guthrie. The sea captain and his son could also be considered possibilities. But at this juncture the reader has little way of ascertaining the truth and is beginning to wonder whether a totally unexpected killer will emerge.

In Chapter 18 isolation and the fickle nature of modern technology reemerge as central themes. Hunter and Fraser desperately need to contact the mainland but the storm has left them catastrophically isolated. This loneliness in the face of building terror can be compared to the plight of the two marooned astronauts in the film *2001: a Space Odyssey*. Beckett has created a setting that is completely enclosed, calculating that the novel's suspense will increase in tandem with the sense of suffocation.





# Chapters 19-21

## Chapters 19-21 Summary

Grace has not been seriously injured. Cameron volunteers to dress Grace's wounds, but Michael, wary of the nurse's crush on his wife, orders him to leave. Brody implies that Michael has possibly attacked his own wife, angering Michael. After Brody leaves Hunter has a drink with Michael, who explains that his wife had a breakdown years ago following a miscarriage and that they can not have children. They have come to Runa, Michael says, to have a fresh start. Their exchange is interrupted by Maggie knocking at the door, again nosy for a story lead. Hunter convinces her to give him a ride back to the hotel. During the ride he reveals to her that Duncan has been murdered, and asks her to stay quiet and give the investigation proper space. They pass Cameron on the road trying to fix a broken bike. He refuses a lift. Hunter notices that Cameron is left handed (and therefore possibly the murderer.)

Chapter 20 begins with Brody and Hunter discussing the case and speculating about Grace's attacker. Hunter considers Cameron or one of the boatmen to be suspects. Brody rejects all these possibilities and suggests that all the clues point to Michael Strachan. Hunter thinks privately that Brody's animosity for Strachan is clouding his judgment. Back at the hotel, most of the town has assembled, demanding to hear the facts of the case. Brody and Hunter overrule Fraser's disagreement and address the meeting, divulging most of the pertinent details. Hunter notes an interesting reaction from young Kevin Kinross. The evening done, Hunter carries Ellen's daughter to her bed and can't avoid remembering his own deceased daughter. After settling into bed, Maggie knocks on the door. She knows the first name of the dead prostitute, something that was not revealed at the meeting. Hunter presses her to identify her source. Maggie says that she will, but not until the following day.

At the beginning of chapter 21, Hunter wakes up. It is the middle of the night and he notices a distant growing light. Down at the harbor, in the boatyard, there is another fire. The citizens, and Hunter, gather around Guthrie's partially constructed fishing boat. It is ablaze, with a burning dead body visible in its center. At first Hunter is concerned that the body belongs to the missing Ellen, but then Ellen arrives. As the chapter ends, Hunter notices that Maggie's distinctive red coat is being worn, strangely, by young Mary Tait.

## Chapters 19-21 Analysis

By chapter 19, the plot has become more complicated. Michael Strachan has attacked his wife while destroying his yacht's radio capabilities because he is afraid that the police will discover that Grace, previously a murderer, has begun killing again. He could not possibly realize that the first two murders were conducted by Brody in an attempt



frame him. In any event, he and his wife are becoming unhinged and the island is falling deeper into chaos.

An interesting aspect of this chapter is Michael's personal confession to Hunter regarding his marriage which seems heartfelt but is not actually true. Hunter is deceived throughout the story by similar gestures. Some examples: Maggie pretending to be a freelance writer on the ferry boat, Ellen explaining the origin of her daughter, and Brody confiding about his struggles to find his daughter. Runa is full of talented liars.

In chapter 20, Brody seems to reveal his true intentions during a conversation with Hunter. Sensing Brody's mania to implicate Michael, Hunter begins to have doubts about his partner. As Brody's perfect cover-up begins to unravel, even after setting a series of fires and destroying nearly all the evidence, one is reminded of Hunter's initial prose statement. A fire will destroy nearly everything but certain clues, if viewed by an expert, will always remain.

The dramatic fire in chapter 21 incinerates the remains of the recently murdered Maggie. Beckett expertly suspends this realization by having Maggie's coat present as her cremation. Her red coat has been her signifying physical trait, so it comes as a great surprise when it is being worn by Mary Tait. Beckett seems fond of reinforcing minor characters with a continually repeated physical signifier. Some others include: Kevin's acne, Mary's nightgown, Guthrie's belly, and Cameron's pronounced Adam's apple. Strangely, Hunter's appearance is not mentioned once. All that can really be inferred, is that Hunter is of average size. (This conclusion can be drawn from the physical intimidation he feels in the presence of Guthrie.)



# Chapters 22-24

## Chapters 22-24 Summary

Speculation grows that the body belongs to Maggie, who remains missing. The Taites are questioned about the coat. Karen offers no information. Mary, who is mentally handicapped, is finally coaxed, for a little while, to speak. She claims to have gotten the coat 'from the man', 'when they ran off. After all the noise.' But she will or can not make a clearer statement. Brody and Hunter investigate the body. It fits the physical characteristics of Maggie. Multiple broken bones and evidence of a slit throat lead Hunter to surmise that the victim had first been knifed, then thrown off a cliff, and finally burned. Their chat is interrupted when Fraser catches Kevin Kinross snooping outside.

Chapter 23 begins with Kevin getting questioned. Upon getting pressed, he admits that he had known the name of the first dead woman, Janice Donaldson, because he observed his father visiting her at a brothel in Stornoway. Kevin had given this information to Maggie and he therefore believes that he is responsible to Maggie's recent death. Kevin also reveals that he has had an ongoing physical relationship with the mentally handicapped Mary Tait. Kevin leaves and Fraser jumps to the assumption that captain Kinross is the killer, an assertion questioned by Brody.

Hunter spends Chapter 24 trying to unravel the circumstances behind the most recent murder. He learns little from a visit to Maggie's grieving grandmother. Then he goes, along with Brody and Fraser, to the harbor cliffs. They are able to locate the spot on which the body landed after being thrown from the cliffs. After a perilous climb to the top of the cliffs, Brody and Hunter locate the location of Maggie's death. Blood is everywhere. Nearby they find Maggie's car and various other possessions. Her notebook has been destroyed by the rain but her tape recorder is still functional. They realize that they probably have a recording of the murder.

## Chapters 22-24 Analysis

Mary's entrance is dramatic. Her possible existence had been cleverly foreshadowed throughout the beginning of the book. Hunter has already gained confirmation that Mary is not just a vision, but they are not introduced until this late juncture. When she is finally coaxed to speak, her words feel revelatory. Her childlike buoyancy is juxtaposed in Chapter 23 with the disgusting admissions of her lover/molester Kevin Kinross. The clues offered by Kevin could also be considered red herrings in that they don't shed light on the murders themselves. Mary, however, was present at the Maggie's murder, and helps lead the police, however cryptically, to the high cliffs.

As Brody and Hunter climb the cliffs and discover the scene of Maggie's murder in chapter 24, the final climax seems at hand. Maggie's Dictaphone, previously regarded as a forgettable annoyance, holds key evidence that will hopefully identify the killer. And

Brody, not the murderer this time, is as curious as Hunter to find out who murdered Maggie.



# Chapters 25-27

## Chapters 25-27 Summary

The police team listens to Maggie's final recorded entry, in which she waits with trepidation on the remote cliff for a meeting. Then a car drives up and she is killed. Unfortunately, she does not divulge the identity of her killer during this message. The police team scours the other messages. In one message Maggie claims that the father of Ellen's child is actually Michael Strachan. In another she reveals that she was going to meet Michael on the occasion of her murder. Thinking they now know the identity of the murderer, the police team rushes to the Strachan mansion to apprehend Michael, but only Grace is there. While the police are searching the estate, Grace overhears Brody discussing Michael's affair with Ellen. Grace gets upset and yells for them to leave, which they do. Making an educated guess, they head for the burial cairns to find Michael. With the storm reaching its peak, and the rain freezing over, the mountainous slope up to the cairns is treacherous. Hunter is separated from Brody, and then finds himself alone among the cairns. He enters an ancient hut, thinking Michael might be there. At first he thinks he is alone, but then Michael emerges from the shadows to confront him.

In Chapter 26, Michael confesses to all three murders. His strange nonchalant affect confuses Hunter and his knife is unsettling but not really threatening. Still, Hunter is trapped in the hut. Then Brody rushes in and jumps Michael, pummeling him mercilessly. Hunter steps in and prevents Brody from killing Michael. After Brody handcuffs Michael, and they are beginning to walk down the mountain, Michael learns that Grace now knows about his affair with Ellen. Michael is shocked and divulges two extremely unexpected facts.

1. Grace is the real murderer. Michael has just been protecting him.
2. Grace is not Michael's wife. She is his sister.

In chapter 27, while the police team rushes with Michael around the island, trying to stop Grace from continuing her murderous rampage, Michael fills in details of his dreadful story. Grace and Michael had had an incestuous, codependent relationship since they were teenagers. Grace had always loved her brother with an insane, maniacal passion. Still in South Africa, Michael made Grace pregnant, and a botched back-alley abortion left her unable to have children. Michael attempted to end the relationship but his first new girlfriend was stabbed to death by Grace. A pattern emerged. Michael and Grace, using their vast wealth, would move to different places around the world. Michael would take a lover, often a prostitute. Grace would then find out and kill the lover. Then they would move again. Michael thought that they had found real peace on Runa, until Grace found out about his forays with Janice Donaldson. The murders then began again.



When Michael and the police arrive at the hotel, their worst fears have become manifest. Cameron has been brutally murdered and Grace is threatening, with knife held to throat, to kill Ellen's daughter. Meanwhile natural gas is freely running into the building. After a complex and unsuccessful negotiation, Grace attempts to kill Anna, but Michael rushes in and gets knifed instead. His stomach wound is probably fatal. Soon after he decides to blow up the building so he can die alongside Grace. With ample natural gas seeped into the air, all he needs to do is throw his sparked lighter. All the others run out of the building and several seconds later it explodes. Both Strachans, presumably, are dead.

## Chapters 25-27 Analysis

The chapters that follow feature an expansion of the twist ending that is common in mystery novels. This story's aim is to trick and to surprise and it successfully reorients itself several times during these final chapters. The disclosure that Michael and Ellen made a child together is the first shocker. Then we learn that Michael is likely the killer of Maggie. And then, in chapter 26, the greatest twin surprises of the book: Michael and Grace are siblings, and she has been the murderer. There is almost no way that the reader could have guessed this. If Grace is crazy, then she hasn't shown it. From these developments, chapter 27 proceeds in a logical fashion. Grace goes on a killing spree and Michael blows her up (or so we think). Most readers would now believe that the plot has been wrapped up.



# Chapter 28 and Epilogue

## Chapter 28 and Epilogue Summary

In Chapter 28, with the weather finally clear, the mainland police have descended on Runa. The mess is being cleaned up and Hunter can finally leave. After saying goodbye to the (surviving) islanders, Hunter is waiting, along with Brody, for the police helicopter that will take him home. They are chatting, one last time, about the case. Then it dawns on Hunter, after a few verbal slip-ups by Brody, that Brody had been lying to him the whole time. Brody immediately admits to his crimes. After tracking his estranged daughter around the world, he had become convinced that Michael Strachan had murdered her after paying for her services. So he followed Strachan to Runa, moving near him while plotting against him. Brody learned about Strachan's relationship with Janice Donaldson. He found Donaldson, hoping to extract information, but they instead got into an argument and he hit her, accidentally killing her. Not knowing what to do with the body, he decided to burn it while framing Strachan.

When a month passed and no one reported the body, Brody decided to report it himself. During the botched investigation that followed he burned the cottage, his camper and the community center to destroy evidence and killed Duncan after worrying that he knew too much, all while pushing the police to finger Michael Strachan as the murderer. The whole time Brody had picked the wrong Strachan. It was Grace who had killed his daughter. Having heard these sudden revelations, Hunter is amazed, saddened, and nervous that Brody will kill him to save himself. He instead says goodbye and casually walks off the nearby cliff. Brody's body is fished out of the sea a week later, during the epilogue. In the months that follow, the survivors move on. Ellen and her daughter move to Edinburgh and start over. Hunter is back in London. The tension between his work and his personal life continues. Jenny would prefer that he gives up forensics, with its danger and its constant travel.

One day, while Jenny and Hunter are preparing a summer barbeque, a woman calls, claiming to be Rebecca Brody. She asks to drop by Hunter's flat so they can talk. When she arrives, Hunter opens the door and is confronted with the not-actually-dead Grace Strachan, who immediately stabs him before running away. As the book ends, Hunter lies bleeding and possibly dying on his doorstep. The reader has no way of knowing whether he will survive the attack.

## Chapter 28 and Epilogue Analysis

Chapter 28 presents a greatly unexpected twist. Brody has not acted in a suspicious fashion since the very first scene, before we even knew his name was Brody. Still, Hunter is able to finally piece together the evidence and correctly accuse him. The entire book has been a preparation for this final twist. The author, Simon Beckett, intentionally planted its clues only in the first section so that only the most perceptive



reader would not be surprised. Once it is established that Brody was the murderer of Janice and Duncan, and acted with the single goal of destroying Michael Strachan, the book can be read in a completely different fashion. His animosity for Michael makes much more sense, as does his constant dismissals of any non-Strachan suspects. But with so much of this plot depending on unspoken back story, the reader will inevitably be shocked by this outcome.

The epilogue of "Written in Bone" offers still another twist while reinforcing Hunter's notion that he will never be safe as long as he continues this line of work. The work is his love however, so he will likely continue, even though it portends further peril. While the book doesn't guarantee Hunter's survival, we can assume it based on one piece of extra-textual evidence: Beckett has written two more books in the series, both starring David Hunter.





# Characters

## David Hunter

David Hunter is the main character, narrator, and protagonist. Nearly every scene includes him and every scene is described by him. We therefore get a thorough understanding of his psychological condition. He is always mindful of his deceased wife and daughter and troubled by the tension between his obsessive work habits and his often lonely girlfriend Jenny who lives with him in London. Hunter's professional specialty is forensic anthropology. During the novel he conducts several investigations of burned bodies and determines the circumstances of their deaths with great skill. The lack of a police detective pushes Hunter into that role too. He is less comfortable and less effective as a detective. On three occasions Hunter is nearly killed and spends most of the novel enduring a badly separated shoulder. In the penultimate scene, he suddenly realizes that Brody has been responsible for the first murders.

## Andrew Brody

Brody is the middle-aged retired cop who discovers the first body. Only at the very end of the novel does the reader learn his whole story. Formerly a resident of the Scottish mainland, Brody had been tracking his estranged daughter around the world and had become convinced that she had been murdered by Michael Strachan. When Strachan moved to Runa, Brody moved there too, hoping to eventually implicate him. Brody accidentally killed a prostitute, Janice, Donaldson, that he discovered was having a relationship with Strachan. Brody then burned Donaldson's body, hoping to frame Strachan. During the ensuing police investigation, Brody, though not still an active policeman, manages to include himself in the police team. He deceives Hunter and Fraser throughout while trying to make them finger Strachan as the murderer.

## Michael Strachan

A South African with significant inherited wealth, Michael Strachan is the unofficial mayor of Runa although he has just lived there for five years. He has used his money to make significant structural improvements to the island and he and his wife are revered for it. Michael is about 40, handsome and active. Unfortunately, he and his wife have a dark secret that drives the plot of the novel. They are actually brother and sister, and Michael's attempts to exit their incestuous coupling have driven his wife to murder. Before arriving on Runa, the Strachans lived in many places around the world, always leaving to escape a new Grace murder. On Runa, the Strachans thought that they had moved on. They live in a lovely mansion on its own harbor and enjoy traveling around in their personal yacht. Michael is fond of camping alone in the ancient burial cairns. Hunter discovers that Michael is preoccupied with death. Eventually, after a few attempts, Michael claims his own life.



## Grace Strachan

Grace is stunningly beautiful and a competent artist. As mentioned above, she is also a serial killer. She was previously pregnant with Michael's child. He forced her to have an abortion, which was botched, leaving her unable to have children. On Runa, while devoting her life to leisure and various philanthropic activities, she thought that she and her husband had found peace. But Grace's fear of losing her husband/brother drives her to murder Maggie. And when she learns of Michael's affair and child with Ellen, she goes completely berserk. She stabs and kills Cameron and then attempts to kill Ellen and her daughter. After presumed deceased in the hotel explosion, Grace returns in the final scene to stab Hunter.

## Ellen Mcleod

Ellen, a kind and attractive woman with red hair, own and runs the hotel and lives with her young daughter. She is an excellent host to Hunter and the two become friends while commiserating over their difficult family situations. The real father of her child is Michael Strachan. Ellen nearly is murdered after Grace finds out.

## Maggie Cassidy

Maggie is a young lady who reports for a mainland newspaper. She is on the island to visit her grandmother and knows most of the locals. Once she gets wind of the murder investigation, she conducts various poorly-hatched schemes, always hoping to uncover a front-page story. She is annoying to the police but still manages to become friends with Hunter. She also discovers certain important secrets before the police do. Eventually she is murdered by Grace Strachan in a moment of insane jealous rage. Afterward, Maggie's dictaphone allows the police to unravel the mystery.

## Sergeant Fraser

Fraser is the local cop who is supposedly in charge of the investigation. Unfortunately, he is an incompetent, foul-tempered alcoholic who accidentally leaks sensitive information on several occasions and tends to jump to incorrect conclusions. Fraser is sometimes helpful to Hunter and Brody but mostly he just gets in their way.

## Duncan McKinney

Duncan is a young constable who is Fraser's assistant. He is bright, good-natured, ambitious, and a bit naive. He spends most of the plot guarding the first corpse at the cottage. Then Brody, worried that Duncan possesses too much information, murders him.



## **Iain Kinross**

Kinross is the captain of the ferry boat to Runa. He generally aids the police in their investigation. Previously he had visited the same prostitute, Janice Donaldson, that Michael had visited. This complicated the efforts of Brody to blackmail Michael.

## **Kevin Kinross**

Iain's son, Kevin is a sullen teenager with terrible acne. He has a romantic relationship with Mary Tait.

## **Mary Tait**

Mary is 16 and mentally handicapped. She regularly wanders around the island in a nightgown. Hunter sees her outside his hotel window and is disturbed. Mary is present at Maggie's murder.

## **Karen Tait**

Mary's mother, Karen is an ill-tempered alcoholic and the town's shopkeeper. She is especially unfriendly to Hunter.

## **Sean Guthrie**

Guthrie is an unemployed ex-fisherman. He is large man, a brawler, and bitter about his situation. He intimidates Hunter on several occasions.

## **Bruce Cameron**

Bruce is the school teacher and the nurse for the village. He is hard-headed and stubborn. He also has an obvious crush on Grace, or eventually murders him.

## **Graham Wallace**

Wallace is the police superintendent, stationed on the mainland in Inverness. He does not send the proper police force to handle the case and then, once the terrible storm is raging, spends the majority of the story unable to help.

## Jenny

Jenny is Hunter's girlfriend. She is lonely and unhappy that Hunter has taken this assignment. While Hunter is on Runa, he is usually unable to contact Jenny.



# Objects/Places

## Runa

Runa is a small fictitious island in the Scottish Hebrides on which nearly the entire story takes place.

## Stornoway

Stornoway is the largest city in the Hebrides, on the island of Lewis. Hunter flies there from Glasgow and then takes the ferry to Runa. The murdered prostitute, Janice Donaldson, lived in Stronoway.

## Runa Hotel

The Runa Hotel, run by Ellen Mcleod, is the social center of the island. Hunter and Fraser stay there during the investigation and the hotel bar is the primary meeting place for the residents.

## An Abandoned Cottage

The first body is found in an old abandoned cottage.

## Brody's Camper

Brody's camper is parked outside the cottage until Brody burns it down.

## The Runa Harbor

The Runa Harbor, which shelters nearly all of the island's boats, is flanked by cliffs on three sides.

## The boathouse

The Boathouse is a harbor side meeting area and work space for the sea captains and the fishermen.



## **Maggie's Mini**

Maggie drives around her grandma's Mini. After Maggie is murdered near her car, Brody and Hunter search the automobile for clues.

## **The Burial Cairns**

The Burial Cairns are located on the side of an inland mountain. Michael Stachan finds peace while camping there alone. During the novel's climax, the police confront Michael there.

## **Iain Kinross' Ferry**

Iain's ferry boat is the main transportation to the island of Runa.

## **Community Center**

The Runa Community Center also houses the village clinic. Hunter nearly dies when the building is burned down by Brody.

## **Hunter's Forensic Equipment**

All of Hunter's forensic equipment is destroyed in the community center fire.

## **The School**

The island school is managed by Cameron with assistance by Grace Strachan.

## **Maggie's grandmother's house**

Maggie stays at her Grandmother's House while on the Island.

## **Burned Corpses**

Hunter's specialty is the analysis of Burned Corpses.



# Themes

## Loss

Nearly all of the characters are motivated, in one way or another, by loss. Each character be viewed in terms of their reactions to their circumstances. Hunter and Brody have lost their wives and daughter, although the circumstances are significantly different. Grace has lost the ability to have children. Ellen lacks a relationship with the father of her child. Fraser loses his partner, Duncan, when he is murdered during the plot. Michael's relationship nightmare has deprived him of the desire to live. The shopkeeper, Karen Tait, has lost her youth to alcoholism. The ex-fisherman Sean Guthrie has lost his fishing boat to the bank after never making enough money. Maggie's grandmother loses her granddaughter after Maggie is murdered. The small village loses its collective innocence after a series of brutal murders and nauseating disclosures. These myriad examples demonstrate the multifaceted nature of Loss. For most of these characters, the past is thick in the air, and all of their decisions must answer to it. Hunter considers his loss every time he meets a young girl. It makes his relationship with Ellen's daughter particularly emotionally significant. Brody has sacrificed everything remaining in his life in attempt to avenge the loss of his daughter. Once his efforts go terribly awry, he loses the desire to keep living, and ends his life,

## Vengeance

For several of the characters, response to loss is to seek revenge. This desire drives all of the murders in the novel and is a common motivation in mystery thrillers. People usually have a good reason to murder other people, even if the act is fundamentally insane. For example, Brody murders Janice Donaldson while seeking revenge against Michael Strachan, who he believes has murdered his daughter Rebecca. For years, Brody's life has been guided by a slowly charted course of revenge. He wishes to destroy Michael any that can and gives up his whole career in the process. He eventually learns that he has been wrong about the circumstances of his daughters death.

Grace Strachan, meanwhile, has sought to revenge for every woman who has slept with his husband/brother. She has also sought revenge for Michael's insistence that she get an abortion (which has rendered her unable to have children). Hunter could have easily solved the case had he been able to intuit this machinery of vengeance sooner than he did. Grace's final act of revenge is committed at Hunter's expense. She stabs Hunter because she believes that Hunter is responsible for her husband's death. But he violent act cannot bring her beloved husband back. A lesson to be taken from this novel is that revenge can do nothing to alter the past.



## The Inevitability of Discovery

Hunter's job as a forensic anthropologist involves primarily the investigation of human remains that are burned or decimated beyond analysis. Time and time again, he successfully finds clues in the rubble and ash that allow him to reconstruct the past. Beyond this material reality, the Inevitability of Discovery is a central theme to this book and to mystery novels in general. Criminals always attempt to mastermind crimes that leave no traces. But this task is impossible. A smart enough detective can always find wisps of evidence. The title *Written in Bone* refers to the messages that exist even after a fire has supposedly destroyed any traces of the past. Brody labors to cover up all traces of his effort to frame Michael Strachan. He burns Janice Donaldson's corpse in a special way. He leaves no trace of his cigarette butts. He buys a new car because he fears the old one will harbor DNA evidence. He even steals items from the Strachan mansion and places them at the scene. But he still makes mistakes and is powerless to control all of the strange circumstances. Just in a nick of time, Hunter pieces together a matrix of clues and determines that Brody is a murderer. Though clever, and aptly trained as a policeman, Brody can not control all of the ramifications resulting from his crime and therefore he gets discovered. The novel's subtext suggests that every criminal is stuck in the same predicament.





# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written as a first-person narrative. The protagonist Hunter tells the entire story. We only get the point of view of the other characters through their quotes, assuming, as we probably should, that Hunter is a reliable reporter of the story. He appears in nearly every scene, although some of the scenes that he describes are based on the accounts of others. The author gives the reader a window into Hunter's thoughts by denoting them with italics. These are Hunter's thoughts that are contemporaneous to the story and are in contrast to the summarized thoughts and analyses that Hunter shares as narrator. In this sense we are treated to two different Hunter's. Besides describing the story's events, Hunter also describes several dreams in addition to his thoughts.

After appearing stable for the majority of the novel, the narrative point of view becomes intriguingly unstable at the end. Grace stabs Hunter and the book ends with him possibly dying. The reader is left to wonder: has this story been told from the perspective of the grave? When a story is told from the perspective of a narrator who is also part of the action, the reader naturally assumes that the narrator has survived. The author has used this final plot device to turn this expectation on its head.

## Setting

Nearly the entire story takes place on the small, mountainous island of Runa. It is an island in the Scottish Hebrides with tall cliffs, ancient ruins, and a small and extremely insular population. Historically bad weather and rough water plague Runa during the novel. Communication with the mainland is lost, adding to the horror and fear of the citizens and making the police's job considerably more difficult. The island has one main road. The majority of the population lives together in a small village that flanks the main harbor. The wealthy Strachans are set apart in a large mansion with its own harbor. The abandoned cottage, the resting place of the first dead body, is isolated from the rest of the island, as are the burial cairns in the mountains that Michael Strachan likes to visit alone so he can 'think'.

Previously, when Hunter is called onto the case, he is in the large Scottish city of Glasgow. Instead of flying home to London, he flies to the largest city in the Hebrides, Stornoway. From Stornoway he takes a ferry to Runa. Hunter's first conversation with Maggie occurs on the high seas. Then the mystery unfolds on Runa. After its resolution, Hunter returns to London and resumes his life with his girlfriend Jenny. He is relaxing in his London apartment when he is attacked by Grace.



## Language and Meaning

"Written in Bone" is a mystery thriller, written in a matter-of-fact tone. The language is straightforward, and there is little use of metaphor or hidden meanings. The words themselves are generally extremely familiar, with the possible exception of those words specific to rural Scotland, and those words specific to forensic anthropology. The author has likely chosen this voice because of all of the hidden material in the plot itself. The reader is busy trying to unravel an extremely complex mystery, so the direct narrative delivery is useful. As the American author John Barth would put it: this is an example of the 'windex' approach to language as opposed to the 'stained-glass approach', meaning that the words exist to portray the characters and the story in the clearest light possible. The Gaelic language comes up from time to time, especially in the names of places and structures and in moments that emphasize the tradition, such as toasts. Were we to hear the dialogue we would be presented with extremely thick Scottish Highland accents. Hunter's London accent, though not immediately accessible to the reader, surely contributes to the mixed reception that he receives from the locals.

## Structure

The novel is divided into 28 short chapters and an epilogue. Since the book is a mystery, many of the chapters end with some revelation and/or some cliffhanger. From the beginning of Chapter 2, Hunter is in Runa trying to solve the mystery. Until chapter 15, the investigation proceeds slowly. There are several scenes that take place in the hotel bar that develop the setting and the atmosphere more than the plot. The night scenes have a rhythm of their own, with an emphasis on Hunter's ruminations, dreams, and visions-both real and imagined. Each day seems to begin with a hearty breakfast at the hotel next to the hungover sergeant Fraser and some pleasant words with Ellen

Then, around chapter 15, after Brody burns down the community center and kills Duncan, the pace increases. Once Maggie is murdered and incinerated in chapter 21, the plot features nearly constant action. Every chapter, it seems, a new character emerges from the woodwork and reveals a terrible secret. During the final two chapters and the epilogue, three enormous twists are unveiled, one after the other. Only then can the reader piece together the plot that has already transpired. The ending is a cliffhanger. Hunter is stabbed and left to die. The reader must wait for the next book in the series to find out if Hunter has survived. Similarly, the reader must read the preceding book in the series to understand Hunter's motivations as they are immensely affected by past events.



## Quotes

"Given the right temperature, everything burns. Wood. Clothing. People." Chapter 1, Page 1.

"And even when the carbon has burned from it, leaving it as dead and as lifeless as pumice, bone will still retain its shape." Chapter 1 page 1

"Because even after human biology has broken down, when what was once a life id reduced to corruption, decay and old, dry bones, the dead can still bear witness. They can still tell a story, if only you know how to interpret it. That's what I do. Coax the dead to tell their story." Chapter 2, page 8

"Well, Dr. Hunter? Still think there's nothing suspicious about it?" Chapter 2, page 21

"You'll find it hard to keep anything a secret on Runa" Chapter 5, page 47

"Our lives, and sometimes deaths, are stories written in bone." Chapter 7, page 67

"I stared, too numb and exhausted to move, as a hooded figure slowly emerged from inside. It stepped into the firelight, eyes reflecting the flames as they stared at me from beneath the hood." Chapter 8, page 79

"I felt a stab a guilt at the secret knowledge of the chaos I'd called down on this remote island. Runa didn't know it yet, but its peaceful existence was about to be shattered." Chapter 9, page 94

"For a forensic anthropologist, teeth are a repository of information . . . As well as revealing race and age, they form a record of an individual's life. Our diet, habits, class, even our self-esteem, can all be gleaned from these chunks of calcium and enamel." Chapter 13, page 129.

"Then, drawing confidence with the torch's weight, he went to open the door." Chapter 14, page 149

"Grace? Oh, god, Grace!" Chapter 18, page 195

"What the hell's going on? This is Runa, for God's sake, things like that don't happen here!" Chapter 19, page 210



"The light I'd seen was coming from the harbor, a sickly yellow glow that reflected from the wet rooftops of the houses, growing brighter every second. Something was on fire."  
Chapter 21, page 228

"I've been trying hard enough for an interview, and if Michael Strachan wants to keep it private, I'm not going to argue." Chapter 25, page 272

"Grace isn't my wife. She's my sister." Chapter 26, page 289

"You start off on the side of the angels, and suddenly you find out you've become what you hate. How does that happen?" Chapter 28, page 318

"He killed himself but he let me go!" Epilogue, page 325



# Topics for Discussion

Compare the motives of the two murderers.

Discuss the parallels between the plot developments and the external physical conditions

In which ways does does Brody reveal to Hunter that he is the killer?

How is the desire for revenge manifested?

What are the aspects of a good mystery novel?

Why does Hunter take on this case?

Compare the investigative strengths and weaknesses of Hunter and Maggie.

How does Maggie gain Hunter's trust?

Explore the role of outsiders in the story.

Explain Beckett's use of italics in Hunter's narrative. How do these formatting decisions affect the reader's experience?