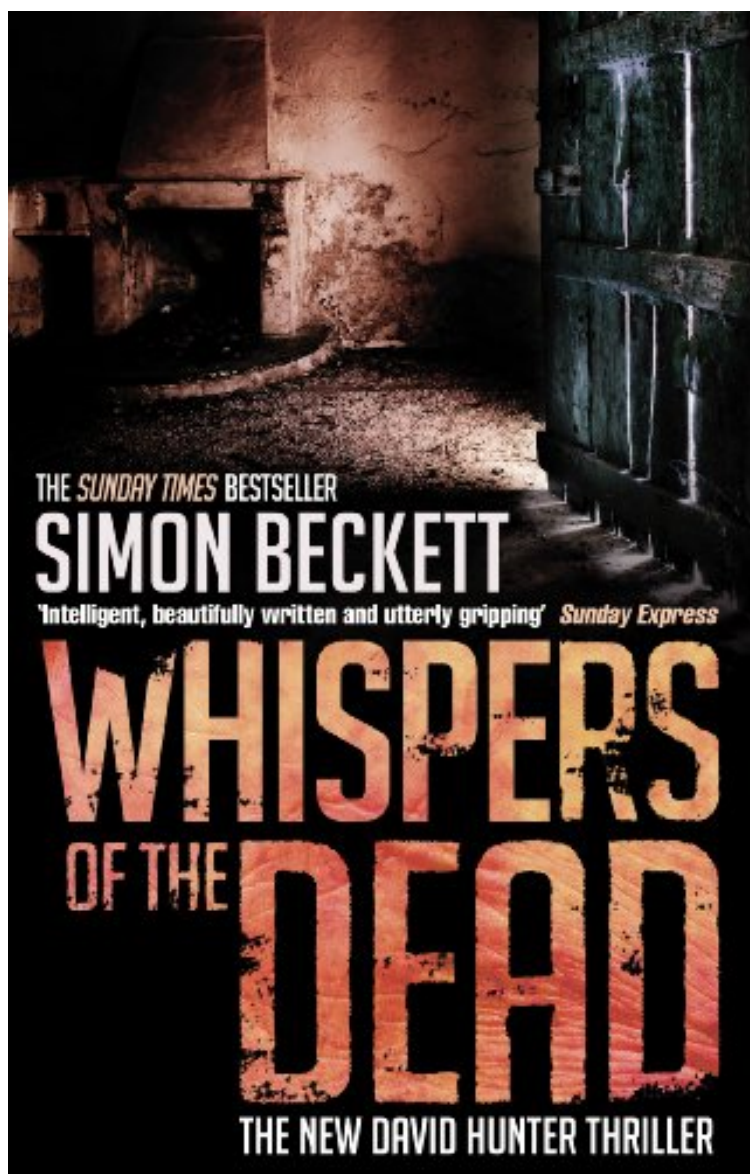


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## Whispers of the Dead: (David Hunter 3)



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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe victim has been bound and tortured, the body decomposed beyond recognition...A second body is found. A nightmare is about to begin...A serial killer is at work and the death toll is rising...A brutal abduction - a helpless victim is taken...And for forensics expert David Hunter, it's become a terrifying race against time.ExtraitChapter One Skin.The largest human organ, it is also the most overlooked. Accounting for an eighth of the entire body mass, on an average adult it covers an area of approximately two square metres. Structurally skin is a work of art, a nest of capillaries, glands and nerves that both regulates and protects. It is our sensory interface with the outside world, the barrier at which our individualityour selfends.And even in death, something of that individuality remains.When the body dies, the enzymes that

life has held in check run amok. They devour cell walls, causing the liquid contents to escape. The fluid rises to the surface, gathering below the dermal layers and causing them to loosen. Skin and body, until now two integral parts of the whole, begin to separate. Blisters form. Whole swathes begin to slip, sloughing off the body like an unwanted coat on a summer's day. But, even dead and discarded, skin retains traces of its former self. Even now it can still have a story to tell, and secrets to keep. Provided you know how to look. \* \* \* Earl

Bateman lay on his back, face turned to the sun. Overhead, birds wheeled in the blue Tennessee sky, cloudless but for the slowly dispersing vapour trail of a jet. Earl had always enjoyed the sun. Enjoyed the sting of it on his skin after a long day's fishing, enjoyed the way its brightness lent a new look to whatever it touched. There was no shortage of sun in Tennessee, but Earl came originally from Chicago, and the cold winters there had left a permanent chill in his bones. When he'd moved to Memphis back in the seventies, he'd found the swampy humidity far more to his liking than the windy streets of his home city. Of course, as a dentist in a small practice, with a young wife and two small children to keep, he didn't spend as much time out in it as he might have liked. But it was there, all the same. He even liked the sweltering heat of

Tennessean summers, when the breeze would feel like a hot flannel, and the evenings were spent in the airless swelter of the cramped apartment he and Kate shared with the boys. Things had changed, since then. The dental practice had flourished, and the apartment had long since given way to bigger and better things. Two years before, he and Kate had moved into a new five-bedroomed house in a good neighbourhood, with a wide, rich green lawn where the growing brood of grandchildren could safely play, and the early morning sunshine would shatter into miniature rainbows in the fine spray from the water-sprinkler. It had been on the lawn, sweating and cursing as he'd struggled to saw off a dead branch from the big old laburnum, that he'd had the heart attack. He'd left the saw still trapped in the tree limb and managed to take a few faltering steps towards the house before the pain had felled him. In the ambulance, with an oxygen mask strapped over his face, he had held tightly on to Kate's hand and tried to smile to reassure her. At the hospital there had been the usual urgent ballet of medical staff, the frantic unsheathing of needles and beeping of machines. It had been a relief when they'd eventually fallen silent. A short time later, after the necessary forms had been signed, the inevitable bureaucracy that accompanies each of us from birth, Earl had been released. Now he was stretched out in the spring sun. He was naked, lying on a low wooden frame that was raised off the carpet of meadow grass and leaves. He'd been here for over a week, long enough for the flesh to have melted away, exposing bone and cartilage under the mummified skin. Wisps of hair still clung to the back of his skull, from which empty eye sockets gazed at the cerulean blue sky. I finished taking measurements and stepped out of the wire mesh cage that protected the dentist's body from birds and rodents. I wiped the sweat from my forehead. It was late afternoon and hot, despite the early season. Spring was taking its time this year, the buds swollen and heavy. In a week or two's time the display would be spectacular, but for now the birch and maples of the Tennessee woodland still hugged their new growth to them, as though reluctant to

let go. The hillside I was on was unremarkable enough. Scenic almost, though less dramatic than the imposing ridges of the Smoky Mountains that rose up in the distance. But it was an altogether different aspect of nature that struck everyone who visited here. Human bodies, in various stages of decay, lay all around. In the undergrowth, out in the full sun and lying in the shade; the more recent still bloated with decompositional gases, the older ones desiccated to leather. Some were hidden from view, buried underground or in car boots. Others, like the one I'd been weighing, were covered by mesh or chain-link screens, laid out like exhibits in some grisly art installation. Except that the purpose of this place was far more serious. And far less public. I put my equipment and notepad back into my bag, flexing my hand to work the stiffness from it. A thin white line ran across my palm where the flesh had been laid open to the bone, cleanly bisecting the lifeline. Appropriately enough, given how the knife that had almost ended my life the previous year had also changed it. I lifted the bag on to my shoulder and straightened. There was only the faintest of twinges from my stomach as I took the weight. The scar underneath my ribs was fully healed, and in another few weeks I'd be able to stop taking the antibiotics I'd been on constantly for the past nine months. I'd remain prone to infection for the rest of my life, but I counted myself lucky only to have lost a section of

intestine along with my spleen. It was what else I'd lost that I was finding harder to come to terms with. Leaving the dentist to his slow decay, I skirted a body that lay partially hidden by shrubs, this one darkened and swollen, and followed the narrow dirt trail that meandered down through the trees. A young black woman in grey surgical smock and trousers was crouching by a half-hidden cadaver that was resting in the shade of a fallen tree trunk. She was using tweezers to pick squirming larvae from it, dropping each one into a separate screw-top jar. 'Hi, Alana,' I said. She looked up and gave me a smile, tweezers poised. 'Hey,

David. "Is Tom around?" "Last I saw him he was down by the pads. And watch where you step," she called after me. "There's a district attorney in the grass down there." I raised my hand in acknowledgement as I carried on down the trail. It ran parallel to a high, chain-link fence that surrounded the two acres of woodland. The chain-link was topped with razor wire and screened by a second fence, this one made from timber. A large gate was the only way in or out, on which was hung a painted sign. In plain black letters were the words Anthropology Research Facility, but it was better known by another, less formal name. Most people just called it the Body Farm. The week before, I'd stood in the tiled hallway of my London flat, packed bags at my feet. A sweet chorus of birdsong sounded from the pale spring dawn outside. I ran through my mental list of things I needed to check, knowing I'd done everything already. Windows locked, post put on hold, boiler switched off. I felt edgy and ill at ease. I was no stranger to travelling, but this was different. This trip there wouldn't be anyone waiting for me when I came back. The taxi was late, but I had plenty of time to catch my flight. Still I found myself restlessly checking my watch. A few feet from where I stood, the black and white Victorian floor tiles caught my eye. I looked away, but not before the Harlequin pattern prompted the usual connection in my memory. The blood had long since been washed off the area next to the front door, just as it had from the wall above it. The entire hallway had been painted while I'd still been in hospital. There was no physical reminder of what had taken place here the previous year. But all at once I felt claustrophobic. I carried my bags outside, careful not to put too much strain on my stomach. The taxi pulled up as I closed the front door. It shut behind me with a solid thunk that had a sound of finality about it. I turned away without a backward glance and walked to where the taxi was chugging out its fug of diesel fumes. I took the cab only as far as the nearest tube station and caught the Piccadilly line to Heathrow. It was too early for the morning rush, but there were still people in the carriage, avoiding looking at each other with the instinctive indifference of the Londoner. I'd be glad to leave, I thought, fervently. This was the second time in my life I'd felt the need to get away from London. Unlike the first, when I'd fled with my life in tatters after the death of my wife and daughter, I knew I'd be coming back. But I needed to escape for a while, to put some distance between myself and recent events. Besides which, I'd not worked in months. I hoped this trip would be a way of easing me back into things again. And of finding out if I was still up to the job. There was no better place to find out. Until recently, the facility in Tennessee had been unique, the only outdoor field laboratory in the world where forensic anthropologists used real human cadavers to study decomposition, recording the essential clues that might point to when and how death had occurred. A similar facility had now been set up in North Carolina, and also in Texas, once local concerns about vultures had been overcome. I'd even heard talk about one in India. But it didn't matter how many there might be: in most people's minds the research facility in Tennessee was still the Body Farm. It was in Knoxville, part of the University of Tennessee's Forensic Anthropology Center, and I'd been lucky enough to train there early in my career. But it had been years since my last visit. Too long, as Tom Lieberman, its director and my old teacher, had to... *Revue de presse* Beckett ratchets up the suspense ... and keeps the tension taut to the end with a late twist. *Whispers of the Dead* reinforces the authors place in the front rank of forensic crime novelists. *Publishers Weekly*