

SEVEN DAYS. FOUR DEATHS.
ONE CHANCE TO CATCH A KILLER

FROM THE SHADOWS



G. R. HALLIDAY

A D.I. MONICA KENNEDY NOVEL

VINTAGE

G. R. HALLIDAY

FROM THE SHADOWS



Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

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About the Author

G.R. Halliday was born in Edinburgh and grew up near Stirling in Scotland. He spent his childhood obsessing over the unexplained mysteries his father investigated, which has proved excellent inspiration for *From the Shadows*. He now lives in the rural Highlands outside of Inverness, where he is able to pursue his favourite pastimes of mountain climbing and swimming in the sea, before returning home to his band of semi-feral cats.

For Sarah

Friday

Chapter 1

The first autumn stars had appeared in the black sky above the Wester Ross mountains, but Robert didn't notice them. He didn't look up once as he wheeled his bike into the dark garage, swung the door closed and ran shivering towards the light at the front of the house. But the other person, the one who was watching from the shadows among the trees, did notice those stars. And knew immediately that they were a sign.

Robert hesitated on the doorstep then reached to his pocket for the mobile phone again. He knew he should wait, but the need to read back over the messages was desperate.

Were the messages really from his mum? It didn't make sense. And the phone. Taped to the handlebars of his mountain bike that morning when he'd left for school. That didn't make sense either. But then nothing seemed to make sense since she'd gone. It was like everything had tilted off by a degree. Robert touched the dark denim material of his pocket. Compulsively checking that the phone was still safe. He pulled his hand away, resisting the urge to read the messages again. He knew his dad would be listening out and he'd only try to interfere. Besides, it was Dad's fault she'd left anyway, wasn't it? He must have upset her somehow. He must have done something bad to make her leave.

Robert pushed at the front door. Unlocked, as it had been for weeks. Dad was still hoping she'd come back. *He still thinks she might want him.* There was a sound from inside, a soft shift of body against old sofa. He could picture his father craning his neck, hoping.

'It's me,' Robert shouted, one hand on the bannister.

'I thought you were coming straight home from school?' Even Dad's voice sounded weak now. Weak and pathetic. 'You're only sixteen. I told you to call so I know you're safe.'

'Yeah, well I didn't. Get over it.' *Of course he's weak. Why else would Mum have left if he wasn't?* Even as Robert thought this, he was swallowed

up by horror as the alternative explanation came swimming up from his stomach: *She left because of you.*

No.

He squeezed the phone in his pocket. This was proof. She had asked to meet him. Why would she do that if she'd left because of him? But his mother never called him Robert. Always Robbie, or Rob. So why would she change that now? He ran a hand over his short dark hair. He should speak to his dad, let him read what she had sent. *Maybe she's had ...* Robert searched around for the right words. A breakdown, depression.

He seized on the idea, a trace of light in the dark. That would explain it all. Why she left, the strange messages. She was probably ashamed, worried what they would think of her. Robert pictured himself gently putting his hand on her face. *It's OK, Mum, we're here for you.* He turned towards the living room, then stopped as he caught the stifled sound coming from the room. A strange new fear joined the constant ache in his stomach as he realised it was the sound of his father crying. He turned back and went quietly up the stairs.

Robert opened the door to his bedroom at the top of the stairs. A confusion of feelings churned in his stomach. Like he was old and worn down, young and powerless, all at the same time.

As he stepped into the room he caught the faint edge of a smell. Was it a perfume? From his mum? Robert shook his head at the idea – that was called wishful thinking. He turned as their dog came padding along the corridor. Ellie was an ageing Scottish deerhound with shaggy grey hair that hung down over her eyes. She nuzzled at Robert's leg then pushed past into the room. He ran a hand through her soft fur and watched as she lunged awkwardly onto his bed. Slowly rotating her long spiny body in a circle before collapsing on the bedspread.

Robert nudged the door until it caught on the carpet, then dropped his bag on the floor. There was homework to do. Exam preparation. He looked at the neglected study timetable pinned on the wall at the far end of the room. Before she'd gone he'd craved knowledge. He'd soaked up all the information he could use to get the hell out of Wester Ross. Tourists came to the north-west Highlands of Scotland and especially this area to go walking in the mountains. To visit the beaches. Robert had even heard of people coming to watch the stars and planets in the dark skies, far from any street lights. But just try living in a lonely glen in the middle of nowhere. He shook his head again, still looking at the study timetable. Now his mind was so filled with his mum there wasn't any room left to care for much else.

At his desk, his fingers moved to his pocket again. He stopped when he noticed a mug sitting by his darkened lamp. It was Dad's favourite mug, the white one with an old DIG FOR PLENTY logo on it.

He leaned over and clicked on the lamp, the phone momentarily forgotten. The mug was still warm. Hot chocolate. His favourite. Guilt bubbled in his stomach. This was Dad's way of showing that he understood, that he felt the same way. Robert took a mouthful of the thick, sweet liquid. And another. It hugged all his senses as he curled up on the bed beside Ellie. Her fur was calming against the bare flesh of his arm. He heard the low sound of the television from downstairs. It was comforting somehow, despite everything.

Ellie whined and tilted her head. Robert followed the dog's gaze towards the shadows at the end of the room, the window. The darkness almost seemed to stare back at him. He shivered at the idea and pulled the strange phone out from his pocket. He hesitated, then started typing before he could stop himself: 'I'd like to see you. When can we meet?' Send.

He dropped the phone onto the bed and ran his hand over Ellie's head. Over the fine fluff on her ears. He took in that distinctive smell she had, like warmth and security distilled. He stared at the fur above her eyes, blinked. Each strand of fur seemed to stand out, bright. He blinked for a second time. This time the dog almost seemed to blur in front of him.

She whined again. Suddenly she uncurled her body, jumped off the bed and moved stiffly to the window. She turned and caught his gaze, the whites of her eyes bigger than usual. She started to paw at the pile of his washing heaped beneath the windowsill.

'What is it, Ellie?'

Robert heard the slur in his own voice, felt saliva run down his chin. He reached a hand up to wipe his mouth, but his arm wouldn't respond. A tide of panic washed over him. He tried to sit up on the bed, but he couldn't move.

He screamed.

But the sound that came from his mouth was a whisper. He tried to stand up again. He experienced a moment of pure horror when he found that he couldn't even turn his neck or raise a finger.

'Dad. Please, help me,' he tried to shout. But the words lay dead in his throat.

Dad. Please.

All the hurtful things he'd said to his father.

The noise from the television died. Robert heard a click. His father was switching off the lights in the living room, in the downstairs hall.

Ellie barked. The lips around her yellowing canine teeth were trembling. Robert caught the faint edge of that smell again. He tried to swallow and felt the saliva run down his throat. A thick sweet taste, but with something else underneath it. A hint of bitterness. He tried to swallow again. Nothing. Could he breathe? His lungs felt tight, and panic set in.

Dad. Please! Help me.

Then there was the sound of his father's footsteps on the stairs. The familiar creak from the floorboard as he paused at the top, just outside Robert's bedroom. The door opened.

Daddy.

That old comfort against all the fears. The dark, the monsters.

'Rob.' It was his dad's voice coming from the doorway. 'I'm sorry – about everything, with Mum. You know you can speak to me ...'

Please help me, Dad. But the words were locked in Robert's throat and his back was facing the door so his father couldn't see his face.

'We can speak tomorrow.' His father sounded too broken and sad to seek a response from his son. 'Come, Ellie, down to bed.'

The dog whined, barked again. She wouldn't move.

Look at me, Dad. Please, look at me!

Robert heard his father take a step closer. 'Ellie. Come on.' His voice was louder, commanding. Reluctantly the dog turned from the window, obedient to her master. She paused at the foot of Robert's bed, whining, then passed from his sight.

Robert screamed and screamed.

But the noises never made it out of his mouth. He heard the door click shut, his father's footsteps fading down the corridor.

He stared into the dark at the end of the room. The taste of bitter hot chocolate burning in the saliva pooling around his tongue. That faint smell of perfume, lingering. He stared, unable to move as his eyes slowly adjusted to the low light.

There was a long moment of silence in the house. Then suddenly the phone buzzed on the bed beside him. But Robert couldn't move to read it. With his head locked into place, he forced his eyes as far left as they would go and saw one word appear on the screen: 'Now.'

The message was followed by a sound from the corner of the room by the window, where the curtain hung down to the floor. It was the sound of someone breathing heavily – sucking in deep lungfuls of air.

Then the soft shift of fabric sliding across carpet as the curtain began to move.

Robert stared into the dark. And a pale white face smiled back at him.

Saturday

Chapter 2

The naked body was placed in a particular position, its torso folded forward so the face was pressed into the boggy ground. Detective Inspector Monica Kennedy looked at the back of its head. Short dark hair; lower down on the back there were deep red cuts on skin that was horribly white and vulnerable. The smell of rotting meat. The smell her first boss, down in Glasgow, had said you never forget. How right he was.

She glanced around the rough croft land. It was close to the Minch, the sea that separates the west coast of the Scottish Highlands from the Outer Hebrides. Far across the water through the afternoon haze Monica could just see the sharp Cuillin mountains on Skye. Like a monster curled on the horizon.

The closest house was a quarter of a mile away. Far enough for someone to dump the body without being seen. They could come at night. Take their time. It's what she'd do. After eighteen years working serious crimes she knew she could get away with murder. It wasn't a fact she'd necessarily share with others – a topic of conversation over a pint of stout – but it was a comforting thought, really, when her job after all was to catch whoever had left the victim in this beautiful wilderness.

Monica looked down at the body again. Cuts, bruises and blood, but no obvious cause of death. A big part of her wanted to reach down, the motherly part of her needing to try to comfort – as if you can comfort the dead. She should know better. Instead she crouched down, the forensics suit stretched and then rustling as she leaned carefully in and smoothed away the strands of grass close to the victim's legs. The skin was bruised purple by the gathered blood. It meant the body had been placed here before the blood settled, or placed in this particular position at least.

Monica's eyes ran down the white of its back. It was a boy's back, she was certain, but she wouldn't voice this until they had confirmation. You could never say what you thought without upsetting someone or other. Not until about eight people had discussed and confirmed it. She shifted onto her knees, feeling the cold damp ground through the plasticky Tyvek suit. Then

her eyes landed on something and the breath caught in her throat. She leaned in closer.

‘For Christ’s sake,’ she muttered.

She stood up then. Stared down at the body for a second longer before walking towards the crowd of rubberneckers who had gathered by the road for this unexpected Saturday afternoon entertainment. An unfamiliar police officer turned towards her. He must be new, Monica thought. She’d been working back in the Highlands for over four years and made a point of trying to remember the uniformed officers’ names and faces. She often failed, but the intention was well meant.

He did that familiar double take when he realised how tall she was. An unwelcome reminder that in the white suit she probably looked like some weird Halloween scarecrow set up in the field to frighten children, with her pale skin and her long arms and legs sticking out of the sleeves of the suit, which was really a size too small for her. Large felt bad enough. But shifting up to XL or 2XL ...

Jesus. Monica shook her head and forced that sense of embarrassment at her size back under its rock where it belonged. This was a crime scene, probably a murder investigation, she was responsible for. And who didn’t look terrible in one of those hideous suits anyway?

She took a deep breath and squirmed out of the thing like a snake shedding its skin. She folded it up, then dropped the bootees into the paper sack beside it ready for the forensics team to check. She thought of the microscopic fibres of evidence that she might have picked up from beside the body. Little particles of death desperately clinging to her forensic second skin.

The officer kept staring, his mouth open like maybe her strangeness was connected to the dead thing folded up over there. As if he’d slipped into a new, terrifying world.

‘What is it?’ she said, staring back hard at him with her brow folded. Part of her almost wanted him to make some comment about how stupid she looked.

He shook his head, eyes wide, face pale. He tried to say something but the words weren’t coming out. She realised that maybe it was the first body he’d seen. Maybe he was in shock, and she felt half a moment of guilt. Well, he was lucky it was her and not her new colleague he was speaking to. Lucky that DC Crawford hadn’t arrived from whatever it was he did at the weekend. From whoever’s bed he’d found himself in. They were yet to even work on a case together since his promotion to the Major Investigation Team, but from the meetings they’d attended she’d seen how he went after weakness. Like he

saw any hint of uncertainty in others as an opportunity to prove himself as a detective.

The officer tried to speak again but the words still wouldn't come. This time Monica took the weight off for him.

'Who found the body?'

'I was the first officer at the scene ... responding to an emergency call. They were out walking.' He motioned to a man and woman standing beside the flashing lights of a police car. The blue in the growing dark of the autumn afternoon was cold on their faces, making the day colder still.

Monica took the young couple in. Matching orange Gore-Tex jackets that would have cost three hundred pounds each, built for mountains they'd never visit. The dog at their feet was a black spaniel, sitting quietly, well trained. Shock was written clear across their faces. They were young professionals probably, doctors or lawyers. Monica dismissed them as suspects, another thought she'd have to keep to herself for now.

'Their dog, it came over and ... They saw the body.' The officer's shaking hand went to his forehead. 'I removed the suspects—' He took a breath, tried again. 'I removed the witnesses from the scene and detained them for questioning, then I cordoned off the area until ...'

Monica nodded. She should say something to reassure him, since he was obviously anxious he'd messed up somehow. But she decided not to. Maybe he had messed up and it would come out later.

She turned at the sound of a car pulling up at the edge of the field near the crowd. A silver Audi. Monica watched as Detective Constable Connor Crawford climbed out of the vehicle. He was a small and wiry man with dark red hair combed up into a thick quiff. There were female whispers in the office about him being 'fit' or 'hot'. But to Monica he looked preened, pampered even. Somehow like a strutting fox, appealing but not someone you should trust. He looked around, taking everything in as if he were sniffing for trouble.

Monica noticed that he was wearing the same brown suit as when he had left the office the previous afternoon. Except now it was crumpled from the pubs, nightclubs or whatever it was he got up to after work. Monica felt something like professional satisfaction that her profile of him seemed to be correct. *Well, you don't have to look for trouble, Crawford,* she thought. *It's found you, and it's lying right over there waiting.*

She turned away, let him come to her and watched as the forensics team worked to set their tent up. Watched as the white nylon snaked and rippled in the wind, almost alive against the darkening sky.

‘We need to put out an alert for all young missing persons. Do you know of anyone who’s gone missing locally?’ Monica said to the young officer, who was still standing beside her.

He shook his head, eyes dancing up, back over Monica’s shoulder towards the body. ‘Who, who would do that?’

She sighed. Who indeed? And that voice at the back of her head piped up, *Who wouldn’t? This whole world has gone to hell.*

Chapter 3

The rain hammered the roof of the Land Rover. Water leaked round the door edges and trickled into the vehicle. Michael Bach took a draw from his cigarette and flicked it out of the gap in the window. The smoke stuck to the damp interior, mixing with the heat of the engine.

His watch said it was 3 p.m., but the wide sky over the west coast of the Scottish Highlands said it was later, a lot later. The dark storm clouds covered the sun. Beinn Dearg, the mountain at the head of Loch Broom, was fading to purple, grey and black.

Time to go home. Instead, he lit another cigarette and once again went over the short phone conversation from the week before.

Can you meet me this morning?

We've got an appointment next week.

Please, it's really important.

Nichol Morgan was seventeen. The kid had his problems, no doubt about that, but he was one of the good ones. One of the ones Michael thought he had a better relationship with, as good as it can be when you're someone's social worker.

OK, Michael had replied eventually. *I'll meet you in an hour.*

Except he didn't. And now seven days had passed.

Sitting by the black sea loch, below the mountains, Michael watched the clouds breaking over the town of Ullapool. It was remote – a place for fishermen, hillwalkers, drinkers and misfits. But never for the faint-hearted. He thought of Nichol again and felt that pressure growing in his stomach. Shame. He remembered turning up outside Inverness train station two hours late, looking around for the kid. Calling his phone, texting him, waiting for the reply that never came.

He took another deep draw from the cigarette, the smoke burning his lungs.

The reply that didn't come until the next morning. He opened his phone and read the strange message again: 'The future is in the stars.'