

G. R. HALLIDAY

FROM THE SHADOWS



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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.'

A line from a book Nichol had been studying at school? Something from a sci-fi comic? Michael had texted back: 'Where are you? Is everything OK? Sorry I missed you yesterday.'

But there was nothing after that. No reply. No answer to any of the calls or the messages Michael had left.

Sometimes clients went missing. It was a fact of the job. Those were the ones who wanted out, who headed for Glasgow or London. Nichol was different though. Or seemed different anyway. But he went too – *or someone took him*.

Michael forced a laugh, to make the thought seem ridiculous. Who would have taken him?

'He's probably fine.' The words sounded dull and unconvincing in the empty vehicle, with the smoke sticking to the condensation on the glass, and the rain hitting the roof.

He made to start his engine as a red Volkswagen entered the car park. The glow of its body was eerie against the mist. Slowly the car pulled in front of Michael's space, blocking him in. Its lights like eyes in the gloom until they flashed, once, twice.

Michael zipped his jacket closed – his dad's jacket, he reminded himself – a Mountain Equipment down jacket from

the 1970s. Faded red and blue, slightly too tight for his wide shoulders. He climbed out of his Land Rover and jogged towards the car, the rain pummelling at his hair and skin. As he drew closer he realised he knew the driver.

The man's name was Ben Fisher, DC Ben Fisher, a police detective. Youngest brother of one of Michael's old classmates. The last he had heard, his ex-classmate was working over in America. Strange how two people who'd grown up together could be experiencing such different lives at the same time.

DC Fisher wound his window down. His black hair neatly groomed in a side parting, even as his face scrunched behind his glasses against the rain. He was wearing a suit jacket – city clothes – betraying his unfamiliarity with the brutal west coast weather.

'Mr Bach?' Fisher said, not recognising Michael or resorting to proper procedure.

'That's right.' Michael held up a hand to shield his face from the rain.

'You filed a missing persons report on a young man named Nichol Morgan?'

Chapter 4

Michael followed the signs that led to the morgue. It was hidden away at the back of the building at the end of a maze of corridors and handleless doors – Raigmore Hospital’s little secret: a murdered boy and God knew what else. He tried to ignore the thought and went to push the final doors open but then hesitated. Through the glass panel Michael could see the flight of stairs that led down to the morgue, down into the underworld.

A layer of sweat hugged his back – his thick jacket was too warm for indoors; the smell of floor cleaner, the smell of the hospital cutting through. Some memory trying to surface in his mind.

Michael shifted as a noise echoed down the corridor behind him. Footsteps squeaking off the linoleum floor. He realised that his hand was shaking, and a sudden childish impulse took hold: an urge to drop his head and run away. Instead he pushed his hand into his pocket and turned.

Michael was a large man, used to staring down at people, but the woman walking towards him had dark unblinking eyes that sat level with his own. *She must be six foot two*, he thought, and for a moment he forgot why he was standing outside the doors to a morgue. She walked with slightly stooped broad shoulders and wore a dark wool coat that fell to just above her knees. It flared out behind her as she moved, giving the strange sense that she was floating.

He blinked, looked again. She was around forty with black shoulder-length hair, a round face and pale skin. Very much at home here, close to the dead. He cleared his throat, forced a smile to cover up his discomfort.

‘Michael Bach?’ she said it like *back*, with a hint of an Inverness accent. She must have seen something on his face because she tilted her head as if he had sparked her interest. ‘Thanks for coming, it’s not ... an easy thing to do.’ She let the words hang. ‘It was a traumatic death. He’s been outside overnight.’ She paused again. Studied him, his response.

‘You mean he’s not going to look the way he did?’ Michael said, wiping a hand across his face as the horror of what he’d just asked sank in.

She gave an almost imperceptible nod and waited as if to see whether he had anything else to say. When he didn’t she leaned awkwardly past him, pushed the door open and led him down the stairs.

The body was lying on a metal table, covered by a sheet. A man dressed in surgical scrubs was standing behind it. Michael found himself staring down at the anonymous shape. There was a thing under there, an object that was once a boy. He gripped the lighter in his pocket tighter. No one spoke and after a few seconds the man folded the sheet back.

It wasn’t Nichol.

Michael knew instantly because of the shape of the face. It was older and there was a little stubble. Nichol was still baby-skinned. This boy’s face was swollen, strange, his soul replaced with something, with nothing: the worst-kept secret, the worst-kept surprise.

‘It’s not him.’

‘You’re certain?’

Michael looked again. He saw the marks of violence this time. What looked like a love bite on the boy's neck, burst blood vessels in his right eye. Someone did that to him, hurt him, chose to take his life away. For the first time Michael caught the smell of death and decay. His hand went to his mouth as he gagged, and he knew for certain then that the boy would be following him in the darkest corridors of his dreams. Back up those stairs and into the real world.

Outside the hospital a curious mist had now replaced the rain. It sat heavy, suffocating the car park. Michael went to light a cigarette and noticed his hand was still shaking.

'What happened to him?' Michael said. 'That wasn't ...'
Wasn't what?

'We're still in the early stages of the investigation. Thanks again for coming in,' the detective said, turning away from him.

'What happens now with Nichol?'

She stopped, looked back over her shoulder, silhouetted against the bright white entrance to the hospital. 'I'll get someone to give you a call.'

'I don't think he would just go off like this.'

She turned back to face him. 'I'm not being funny, but we hear that a lot when people go missing. It's difficult when someone's over the age of sixteen. Technically they're an adult.'

'There must be something you can do. I mean he could be in danger – you saw what happened to that boy in there.' Michael tried to keep the rising anger out of his voice.

'I've read the report on Nichol, Mr Bach. He was seen boarding a train. Unless I'm missing something, there's no suggestion of a crime having been committed.'

‘He’s only seventeen.’

Her hand went to her forehead, something behind her eyes, thoughts buzzing. Michael realised that she was weighing him up, judging him. ‘Was there anything unusual with him? Before he disappeared?’

Michael stared at her. Those dark eyes, tiny laughter lines visible in the light from above the hospital door. Although it was hard to picture her laughing. He squeezed his brain, needing a reply, because this was exactly the type of question to shut an inquiry down. The inevitable response: *Nothing I can think of.*

‘There was something.’ He shuffled his memories of Nichol.

The detective tilted her head, both hands on her hips, her dark coat spread wide.

‘A month – a few months ago – Nichol started carrying something around with him.’ Michael felt the cigarette lighter in his pocket, gripped it in his fist.

‘What was he carrying?’

‘It was a rock. A black piece of rock.’ Michael swallowed, knew that what he was saying sounded insignificant. He expected the detective to see straight through his stalling.

‘Why was it strange?’

‘I don’t know.’ He paused, suddenly embarrassed by what he was going to say. ‘He used to rub it on his lips, almost kiss it.’

The detective watched him. Maybe she was about to say something, but then the door behind was pulled open again. A small, thin man emerged. He must have been in his late twenties or early thirties, although the wear in the face was of someone older. There was something dishevelled, almost wild about his expression. An archetypal Highland face with high cheekbones, a sharp nose, bent where it had been broken more

than once. With his red hair and those staring eyes he had the look of an undersized Celtic warrior.

The man started to say something to the detective, but noticed Michael and stared hard at him for a couple of seconds until Michael looked away.

‘They’re ready for us, for the autopsy.’

Michael felt a moment of relief. That it was them not him who’d be there for it. He wouldn’t have to see them pulling that sheet all the way back and cutting into the boy’s body. He watched as she nodded to the man, who Michael now presumed was also a detective. They both turned, standing together. She was almost a foot taller than him; from a distance they could easily be mistaken for a mother and son. They both looked again at Michael for a moment then the woman nodded a quick thanks at him before the two went back inside to the morgue.

Chapter 5

Monica put the empty cardboard cup down on the metal worktop, her head buzzing from caffeine. She thought back to the call that had come in just as she was about to take Lucy into the cinema. They'd been standing in the lobby choosing a film, her little girl bouncing from heel to heel in excitement. It was going to be their little slice of time together.

Then, of course, her phone rang. For a moment she'd considered letting the smell of popcorn steal her away from the job. She could easily have taken Lucy's hand and walked her to the ticket counter, then on to the pick 'n' mix and the cushioned theatre seats. All the way to her profound apologies three hours later to her boss. It was at moments like this that Monica wished she was a different person: a better mother and shittier police detective. Because when her mobile phone rang she had let go of Lucy's hand and taken the call.

Instead of the buzz of sugar and a film, she was left with the stabbing look of disappointment on her child's face as she tried to explain that work had called and Granny would come over to the flat and watch a DVD with her instead. They could go to the cinema tomorrow. Maybe. Monica glanced up at the clock on the wall of the morgue. Almost 10 p.m. on Saturday night. Unless the killer miraculously handed himself in in the next couple of hours there wasn't much chance of that happening now.

She shook her head to dismiss the useless thought, stepped closer to the body. So close she could have reached down and touched the dark marks on the boy's neck, the purple stains of settled blood on his legs and stomach. The electric light flickered above her head. Why always in a basement with no windows? She'd googled this once: 'Why are hospital morgues located in basements?' The consensus was that back before electricity being underground helped keep the bodies cooler so less likely to rot. But she liked to think that maybe in the middle of the nineteenth century when they were building the first public morgues they'd put them underground because the builders knew that we all end up in the ground eventually, one way or the other. That the ground is the correct place for the dead.

The pathologist turned to face Monica. It was the first time they'd met, but he didn't offer a greeting. Instead he nodded at the body lying between them as if it was nothing more than a dead animal laid on a butcher's block.

'You've witnessed an autopsy before?'

She nodded but didn't reply. How many had she seen? More than she could remember.

'It's a difficult thing for some people, seeing how simple we really are under the skin, all these simple horrors. Your forensic boys have done what they needed to?'

She stared at him. 'Forensic girls. The team's led by Gemma Gunn, a woman. They've examined him at the scene, and earlier tonight.'

'Of course they have. We do things by the book though, don't we, Christian?' Raising his voice and addressing the nurse typing on a computer behind him. 'What did they find?'

Isn't that what you're supposed to tell me? Monica thought, but didn't say. The doctor was in his late fifties or early sixties. Thin

with shaved grey hair visible under his standard hospital head covering, blue eyes and an accent she couldn't place. English or maybe something else.

When she didn't reply he tried again. 'I heard there were marks on the boy's back?' he said slowly with a thin smile. Monica understood then that the new pathologist was trying to test or intimidate her. To establish his authority.

'They could be bite marks,' Monica said. 'The forensics team told me informally that they were bigger than any human bite they'd seen though.'

'A monster then?' he said with a chortle.

Monica stared at him, ignored his unworthy laugh. 'They swabbed for any traces of saliva at the scene before they moved him. But they suggested that it could have been an animal skull or a model of a jaw.'

He nodded slowly, face falling back to blank. Perhaps a little disappointed that Monica didn't seem rattled by the bite marks. He turned and looked at a computer screen, began reading off the preliminary results of the forensics report in a low voice.

'Dirt under his fingernails. No defence wounds. Cuts on his wrists and ankles suggesting he was restrained. Probably with plastic cable ties. Multiple bruises around his neck. He was choked repeatedly before he died. Cuts and bruises across his body, series of shallow puncture wounds low on his back.' The doctor laid a knife on the slab, metal ringing on metal. 'It's an awful thing to do to someone.' Monica took a deep breath and wondered exactly which 'thing' he was referring to.

'We're ready to go, Dr Dolohov,' the nurse said, stepping away from his computer. An audio recorder was held in the nurse's gloved hand.

‘Maybe we can find a little more,’ Dolohov said, half a smile at Monica before he pulled the white mask tight across his face and picked the knife up again.

When she was younger Monica had believed she would never get used to seeing a blade cut into the skin and flesh of a human body. Yet after five years working murder cases in Glasgow, ten in London and now here, back where she started life, seeing men, women, children opened up on slabs like this one felt horribly close to ‘normal’. She watched as the pathologist made a cut on each side from armpit to sternum and one from sternum to groin forming a Y down the boy’s body.

Dolohov laid the knife on the table, used his hands to fold the skin back, exposing intestines and internal organs. All the sacred things, the things that were never meant to see the light of day. The sacrificial parts.

She watched out of a sense of duty to the boy as much as anything. A boy who might have had family, might have had friends who cared about him, but was at least the most important person in his own life. She watched the doctor cut his rib and chest plate away and remove the organs. Cutting them free piece by piece with practised movements, like a hunter butchering an animal.

The boy had been tortured and killed. Savaged by a monster. But he had then been posed in a particular way. Pointed to the west, almost like he was praying, almost like a message. A message for who though?

Dolohov wiped blood off the pink lining of the boy’s stomach with a towel, then ran the knife across the organ and slid a gloved finger into the cut. He’d done this before, lots of times, she could tell. The way his fingers moved and his hands followed, slowly, slowly, as he opened the stomach out.

‘Empty. Either he hadn’t eaten for a while or probably he vomited everything back up during his ordeal,’ the doctor said into the recorder being held by the nurse.

The smell caught her then. Even though the body had been refrigerated, there was still that iron smell of blood, meat, mixed with traces of digesting food escaping from what was left of his stomach.

‘I don’t see anything caught in his teeth. It’s possible he was cleaned by his killer before he was dumped,’ Dolohov continued. Monica nodded at this information, stored it in her brain.

The door creaked open and DC Crawford stepped into the room. Monica glanced at him and caught the expression on his face; the tightness in his jaw told her exactly why he’d needed to visit the toilet before the autopsy began.

‘I now move to his throat,’ Dolohov dictated as he stretched the boy’s head back. There was a grim click as he realigned a bone in his own neck.

He reached in again, made cuts, worked the tube of the boy’s windpipe loose and laid it on the slab.

‘You can see where it was traumatised, then crushed. Someone strong. Probably he was choked unconscious, then revived. The toxicology report will tell us more.’ He used his knife to point out the injuries. ‘He bit his tongue almost off. Or else it was bitten by his attacker. Monstrous.’ He turned to the nurse. ‘Take a picture of the wound. We can check it against the marks on his back.’ The nurse nodded and reached for the camera on the worktop.

When he’d finished, the doctor ran his fingers down the bloody windpipe again, paused, and then repeated the action.

‘Funny,’ he said, his face blank. ‘There’s something lodged in the pipe.’ He cut it lengthways, opened it out and held something up for Monica to see.

She snapped a glove onto a hand and took the thing from him, shook her head in disbelief and whispered the name that immediately came into her head: ‘Michael Bach.’

Sunday

Chapter 6

Monica took a deep breath of the cold night air. Pleased to be outside again after the hours underground in the morgue with the organic smells of the opened body hanging in the air.

She glanced over to the main entrance of the hospital. The Saturday night casualties were beginning to roll in to the emergency department. Monica watched as an ambulance pulled up, a man stretchered out, blood down the front of his shirt, head bandaged like a wounded soldier. The compact city centre of Inverness seemed to specialise in its own vision of hell at the weekends.

‘Do you want a lift?’ Crawford asked.

She turned at the sound of his voice. She had almost forgotten he was walking beside her she was so intent on driving home, crawling into bed for a few hours at least before they went to speak to Michael Bach in the morning. She remembered then that she’d left the Volvo over at police headquarters, but it was only a five-minute walk away from Raigmore Hospital across the roundabout.

She checked the time on her phone. After 1 a.m. She opened her mouth to refuse his offer. The old habit: never owe anyone anything. Then she reminded herself that it was only a lift, that if they were going to work together she was going to have to get used to him at some point.

‘Sure, thanks.’

Crawford nodded, gestured over to the Audi. ‘It still bothers me when they cut them open ... I suppose I’ll get used to it eventually.’

Monica looked at him, surprised he’d been so open. But why would you want to get used to the smell of a decomposing corpse? Why would anyone? It was a question she’d asked herself more than once over the years.

Monica climbed into the Audi beside him and slid the seat back almost as far as it would go to fit her legs in. She would be home to make breakfast for her daughter anyway. It was something, even if the rest of the weekend had gone to shit.

She felt the phone vibrate in her pocket. *Mum?* She could already picture her mother’s expectant face. Could imagine just how excited she’d be about the high-profile case her daughter was in charge of. Desperate to offer her own opinion on the murder. Angela Kennedy had hoards of ‘information’ gleaned from reading crime websites and watching television shows.

It wasn’t Monica’s mum though. With a sinking feeling she answered the call.

‘DI Kennedy?’ The echoes of a call centre in the background.

‘That’s right.’

‘You put out a call for missing persons – young males?’

I did, didn’t I? That sinking feeling growing all the time.

‘We’ve just had a call come in. A man named Steven Wright has just reported his son missing.’ Monica stared out at the rain, which had started up again. Watched it land on the wind-screen and blur the wall of white lights from the hospital building.

‘Where do they live?’ Monica asked, feeling Crawford’s eyes on her.

‘That’s the thing, they’re over in Wester Ross. In the mountains. Only about twenty miles from Gairloch, where the body was discovered.’

Monica clicked the phone off.

‘What is it?’ Crawford asked, the excitement in his voice barely contained.

‘A possible ID on the victim,’ Monica said. She felt the phone vibrate as the address came through. Near Achnasheen, in the mountains just off the main road to the west coast.

‘We should go then, shouldn’t we?’ Crawford asked, seeming to hesitate. Perhaps surprised by her lack of enthusiasm.

Yes, we should, shouldn’t we? Monica thought. She pictured Lucy waking up, wondering where her mummy was again. Maybe it could wait – they could visit Steven Wright first thing in the morning. What difference would it make anyway? She imagined asking the question of her boss, Detective Superintendent Fred Hatley. Could almost hear his response: *You’re the senior investigating officer, DI Kennedy. It’s your call, your responsibility.*

She stared out of the windscreen at the mist and the rain again, coming on heavier now. Just as thick and dark as the guilt that was hanging over her, which seemed inevitable whichever way she turned.

Chapter 7

Connor Crawford pulled the Audi to a stop in front of the row of darkened houses. The steep black of the mountains rose up behind them like a vision of impending doom. Ready to collapse on those homes, on the lives of the residents.

Well it's coming for all of us eventually, Monica thought. She climbed out of the car and felt the rain, falling more as mountain mist now, hitting her face. The scattered lights from the row of houses, the smell of coal smoke hanging in the air, gave the place a strangely medieval feel. The hamlet that was safe, self-contained, until one day an unexpected horror came into its midst. Or from its midst more likely. If you wanted to bet on it, then it was probable that whoever killed the boy had known him. Far more likely than being murdered by a stranger.

'It must be that one,' Crawford said, stating the obvious as he pointed to the only house with all its lights on. A marked police Vauxhall parked outside. Monica nodded. Crawford had drunk off a can of Red Bull before they left the hospital car park. Another one at the turn-off after Garve. He'd tried to make small talk, speculating about the case as she'd typed out a text message to her mother to explain that she wouldn't be home.

After a while Crawford had given up and they'd completed the forty-minute drive through the dark night, among the

mountains, in silence. To take her mind off the journey she tried to flesh out a profile of her new colleague. She noted the neatness of his vehicle's interior. The cables of muscle and vein on his forearms when he'd rolled up his shirtsleeves to drive. He seemed to carry almost all of his muscle across his narrow shoulders and his neck, which was almost as thick as his head. Like a tom cat's. She'd noticed his misshapen nose, concluded it could be from boxing. Some kind of martial-arts training would fit with that insecurity he seemed to wear like a jacket.

She followed Crawford up the path to the front door of the house, let him go in first. On a night like this it was only right to spare the father the extra shock of a giant woman showing up at his door out of the darkness.

Monica clocked the garage to the right of the house. A small untended garden sat scruffy in the light coming from over the door: a square of grass that hadn't been cut, flower pots overtaken by weeds. Just too busy to deal with these little jobs or some kind of stress in the household? The kind of stress that would lead a kid to run away, to find himself in a nightmare? The kind of stress that could make a father kill his son, stage it to look like something else?

She remembered the body. Posed in that particular position, the traumatised windpipe. What kind of father could do that to his son? And the unpalatable answer that her mind served up for her: some. More than you might think, given the right circumstances.

She dipped her head to go inside when a uniformed police officer answered Crawford's brisk knock. The officer – PC Carol Stewart, Monica recalled with a hint of satisfaction – led them into the hallway.

Monica noticed that Stewart had a pistol strapped to her belt. The Highlands were the only part of Scotland where armed police regularly responded to non-emergency call-outs. Something Monica still wasn't used to. She couldn't help thinking of the Police Scotland motto – 'Keeping people safe.' That and occasionally shooting them if necessary.

Monica caught Stewart's arm and spoke under her breath. She wanted to know for certain before she faced the father: 'Do you have a photo of Robert?'

Stewart – neat short hair, thick-framed glasses – looked down at Monica's hand on her arm, then nodded to a pinboard behind her on the wall.

Monica scanned the collage of family life: suntanned faces on holiday somewhere. A birthday meal at a restaurant and a boy she knew. One she'd met not long before in the morgue. The same short dark hair, the same scraps of facial hair, worn with adolescent pride. A smile that looked intelligent, a kid you could imagine on a school quiz panel. Monica felt a mix of emotions rising. Satisfaction that they were making progress in the investigation, a familiar dull horror at the conversation she was about to have.

PC Stewart led them into the small living room. A gas fire was burning blue; a landscape print hung above the mantelpiece. The lights overhead were switched on bright, as if they might somehow ward off the night out there and all of the terror. Because in Monica's experience most parents would do anything to convince themselves that it wasn't their child. That it was the wrong door, the wrong name.

She watched Steven Wright's face closely as he looked up from the untouched mug of tea in front of him. Greying hair, a thin care-worn face. He was wearing blue jeans and

a checked shirt that somehow gave him an air of vulnerability. The poor soul who was underdressed for the party. Her initial instinct was that whatever had happened to his son, he wasn't involved. Well, instincts could be wrong; a lot of the time they were.

Monica sat down opposite on the sofa, asked herself whether she should take him to the station to interview him. Something told her not to. Until the body was formally identified it was still a missing-person inquiry. Steven's memory might be clearer while there was hope his son was alive. Harsh as it sounded.

'When did you last see Robert?' Monica asked. She watched Steven Wright's expression change as he formulated the response, flicked his eyes up to the left. According to some online experts this meant that he was telling the truth, accessing a memory rather than inventing a new story. But only if the person is right-handed, if they're left-handed it's the opposite. And what if the person's remembering a lie?

'It was Friday ... late. I'd been sitting down here—'

'What were you doing?' Crawford asked, cutting in.

Monica glanced at him, a little annoyed that he'd interrupted. But she was interested to see how Steven Wright responded. His eyes flicked from Crawford to Monica. 'I was watching TV. The news at ten o'clock. There was a story about a pilot whale being beached near Inverness. I remember the time because Robert still wasn't home and I was worried – he hadn't called.'

'Is it normal for him to come home late like that?' Monica said.

'It ...' His eyes darted around the room. 'It's been difficult. His mother left. She walked out, six weeks ago. Since then he's been ... It's been difficult for both of us.'

‘Where did his mother go?’ Monica imagined the darkest answers: into a hole in the back garden, into a ditch. She watched closely as Steven Wright’s hand went to his mouth and his eyes went up to the left again.

‘I don’t know. She said she needed to be on her own, needed time to think.’

‘To think about what?’ Crawford asked.

Steven Wright shook his head quickly, as if warding off an attack. ‘She’s got nothing to do with this. My son’s missing—’

‘Have you heard from your wife? Since then?’ Monica asked.

Steven Wright stared at her for long seconds. He seemed confused that she was asking about his wife when it was his son who was missing.

‘Not directly,’ he said finally. ‘She called her mum, two weeks ago. Just to say she was safe.’

Monica made a note to have someone check with the woman’s mother, to track her down as quickly as possible. At the least to save her from finding out from a news report that while she was away finding herself her son had been brutally murdered.

‘So he came home after ten? You checked on him?’ Monica said.

‘That’s right, half an hour later. Something like that. He was fine. Lying on his bed, half asleep. I had to get up early the next morning. I drive a truck, doing industrial deliveries across the Highlands. I’ve tried not to be away at the weekends, but it’s difficult. I’ve got to work.’

‘So Robert was safe in his room at ten thirty on Friday night. What about the next morning?’ Monica asked.

‘I didn’t want to wake him. It’s important he gets his rest. He’s got exams this year – he has to do well in them if he’s going to go to university. He needs to study hard, stick in ...’

‘It’s just the two of you now? He doesn’t have any brothers or sisters?’ Monica asked.

‘That’s right, just me, Robert and Ellie – our dog – since Amanda left.’

Monica looked up at this. ‘Where’s Ellie now?’

Steven looked around the room. A look of panic crossed his face – a sudden realisation that Ellie might be missing too. He stood up from his chair, shouted, ‘Ellie! El!’

There was a low sound from upstairs, a door scraping over carpet. A few seconds later Monica watched as a grey shaggy-haired old dog came slowly to stand on the upstairs landing. She looked down at them through the bannisters briefly before turning and wandering back in where she’d come from.

Steven Wright sat slowly back down again. Grateful for the moment of relief in the chaos of uncertainty he found himself in.

‘So Robert was in bed safe on the Friday night,’ Monica said, working out the times in her head. Robert’s body was found in the early afternoon. Saturday, around 1 p.m. Assuming Steven was telling the truth, that gave a window of about thirteen hours from when Robert was last seen to when his body was discovered. Although she struggled to believe that even the boldest murderer would have dumped the body on that open croft land in broad daylight. ‘What were his plans for today? What were his routines for a normal Saturday?’

‘I don’t know. Occasionally he takes the bus to Inverness with his friends. He likes to read books, the Internet. Just the normal things that kids do up here. Moan about having nothing to do. He’s been going out on his mountain bike a lot.’

‘Have you checked if his bike’s still here?’ Monica asked.

Steven Wright looked up at that, a pitiful moment of hope crossing his face. Maybe Robert had fallen off his bike somewhere. Sustained a slight injury, but otherwise was fine. 'I haven't checked. He keeps it in the garage.' Steven gestured out to the front of the house.

They followed Steven Wright as he led them back out into the night, over to the garage. The twin doors were open a crack. 'Is it normal to leave it unlocked?' Crawford asked as he pushed the door further open with his foot.

'No one locks their doors up here – who would steal something?' Steven said. Managing to sound appalled by the idea.

Who indeed? Monica thought as she followed Crawford and peered over the top of his head into the shadowy garage. She saw the bike illuminated by the torch on Crawford's phone. It was propped just inside the door.

'Is that his bike?' Crawford asked.

Steven looked past them, desperate hope lingering. 'That's it. That's his bike.'

'Did he have a mobile phone? A laptop?' Monica asked.

Steven Wright glanced between them as she spoke. The panic seemed to rise like a tide now. She noticed that his hands were shaking, as the realisation built. 'Of course he's got a bloody phone. I've spent all night trying to call—'

'And a laptop?'

'He keeps it in his room, in the desk.' Steven gestured back into the house. Arms folded across his chest now. An attempt at self-comfort as the cold mountain mist settled on his face and worked its way through that thin shirt and into his bones, where it would stay.

'Who are Robert's friends? Does he have a girlfriend? Anyone he would have sneaked out last night to meet?' Monica asked.

‘Sneak out?’ Steven Wright looked horrified at the idea. ‘Why would he sneak out? He’s got friends at school but none nearby. They’re all spread out. It’s a rural area, too far to cycle to—’

‘And none of them have cars?’ Crawford asked.

‘Why are you asking about cars?’ Something clicked in Steven Wright’s mind then. Something that had been on the verge of his conscious thoughts but been held back by a dam of denial. ‘Why are you asking about cars?’ He repeated the words slowly as if they had some kind of deep significance. ‘On the radio, this afternoon, when I was driving home they said that they’d found a boy. He’d been murdered in Gairloch. They said that ...’ his voice broke then, his whole body shaking at the words he was about to say ‘... they said he’d been tortured. It isn’t Robert, is it? It can’t be. He was upstairs in bed. It isn’t Robert, is it?’

His eyes went up to Monica’s, then down to Crawford’s and back again, the desperation rendering him somehow less than human. *It is Robert*, Monica thought, and you’ll come to know that well.

‘Robert fits the description,’ Monica said finally. What else could she say? She watched the disbelief on the man’s face and the shadows growing deeper. ‘I think it’s him. I’m really sorry.’ Her words came out almost mechanically. Who would ever have thought that those words could come so easily.

She watched as he bent forward, head still shaking. The uniformed officer – PC Stewart – stepped towards Steven Wright and put an arm round his shoulders.

Monica turned to look down at Crawford.

Strangely, it was at that terrible moment she noticed for the first time just how green Crawford’s eyes were when they caught in the lights above the door. Green like he could be wearing

coloured contact lenses. A look of horror was frozen on his face and she wondered just how much he was enjoying his first murder investigation.

‘We’ll have to take him to Inverness to identify the body,’ Monica said. She was leaning to whisper into Crawford’s ear. ‘And we’ll need forensics in here. Make sure that no one touches the garage door or the kid’s bike. Get DC Fisher on the phone, tell him that we’re going to need to track Robert’s phone and get his laptop fast-tracked by Digital Forensics today. There’s bound to be something on there. Maybe he arranged to meet someone.’

Chapter 8

Michael sat bolt upright in bed, soaked in sweat and in the darkness. In his dream Nichol had been standing outside his window, staring in. Not moving but with his laptop bag over his shoulder. Rubbing that stone over his mouth and shouting, ‘What happened to him, Michael? Why did you leave him?’

Michael wiped the sweat off his face. He tried to slow his breathing as he looked around the bedroom and fumbled for a cigarette with his shaking hands. He remembered that he’d lost them somewhere between the morgue and home. He leaned across to flick on the lamp and check the time: 4 a.m. The dark hours, the lonely hours. He blew pretend smoke into the air, whispered, ‘Shut the fuck up.’

At the end of the bed Colonel Mustard, one of three semi-feral cats that had taken up residence in the house, lifted his head at the sound of Michael’s voice. The cat stretched his legs out into points and glanced over for a moment as if to say, *Is it time for food?*

Michael closed his eyes in reply, but then the marks on the boy’s face filled his mind. All he could smell was the stench from the morgue. He swung his legs out of bed. He knew he needed to do something to find Nichol. To take action. That had been his father’s answer to everything, until Joseph hadn’t ever come back.

For a second Michael was eight years old again, sitting on the stairs crying while the adults stood in the corridor below, talking in low voices. He took a deep breath – knew he needed a cigarette more than oxygen – then pushed the memory down into a hole with the others as he went through to his kitchen.

The house stood on a moor close to Ullapool. He'd bought it a couple of years previously, not long before his father got ill. They were going to share it. Michael would keep his flat in Inverness and come to visit at weekends. It hadn't worked out like that.

The cats followed him down the hall, Colonel Mustard in the lead, shrieking and crossing his path until Michael opened a can of meat and split it into three bowls. He watched them devour it as he waited for the kettle to boil and tried to work out what he'd done with his cigarettes.

A squall battered at the window, and as he started at the unexpected sound his dream came back to him, and an almost panicked impulse: *You need to look for Nichol; you need to find him.* He remembered the boy staring in through the window, the bag over his shoulder, holding that stone up in front of his mouth. A gesture that was somehow obscene.

Michael forced the image out of his mind and went back to searching for his cigarettes. Eventually he found them in the lining of the down jacket – they must have escaped through a hole in the pocket.

He lit one off the gas stove then went out into the storm anyway, just to check. There were no traces of his dream, of course: no footprints in the mud, no message. Just the mist and the rain. Safe inside, Colonel Mustard jumped up onto the window ledge and settled down to stare out at Michael through the dirty glass. *What are you going to do about it?*

Chapter 9

Monica stopped at the top of the stairs. Under the normal smells of an unfamiliar house there was a faint hint of an odour. Almost a perfume. She paused, glanced downstairs then pulled the forensics suit on, followed by the gloves and the shoe covers. There was a strip of ghostly pale flesh between where the suit ended and the gloves began, and she tugged harder at the materials, forcing them to meet. Experience told her it was improbable that Robert's room would be a murder scene, but experience also told her to never feel safe because of knowledge. She pushed the door slowly open. The sound as the wood scraped over the carpet was loud and intrusive in the silent space.

She clicked the light on and scanned the unfamiliar room, took in the empty bed. A desk with a half-drunk mug of something still standing on it. Robert had been out on his bike and come home late. Where had he been? Monica tried to sense his mood as she looked for tiny details and any signs of what the boy had been feeling and thinking when he was last in the room. The bed was still made but with the top sheets slightly ruffled. She glanced at his pile of dirty laundry over by the window and wondered if he'd changed his clothes when he came in. Had he planned to go out again? To meet someone? She made a mental note to ask Steven Wright to go through his son's clothes and look for anything missing. If Robert had put his best clothes on maybe it was some kind

of romantic meeting gone wrong? Gone very wrong. Someone he had met online? Or some kind of jealousy that led to murder?

The tentative theories drifted up and away as Monica leaned closer to the desk. She noticed the pile of school books. History, astronomy, maths. A few postcards Blu-tacked up beside a timetable, the stub of a ticket to a gig in Inverness. The little fragments of a life, of an identity being formed.

Had he sneaked out to meet someone once his father was asleep? That's why Steven had seen him lying on top of the covers? Pretending to be asleep? Friends or a girlfriend that he hadn't told his father about? A boyfriend?

But the bike. The kid was too young to drive. He went everywhere on his bike, and it was still there in the garage. So someone picked him up? Then what? An argument? Suddenly finding himself well out of his depth?

Monica thought back to the way the body was laid out precisely on the croft land near the sea. Those strange bite marks on Robert's back. The repeated trauma to his windpipe. The injuries all seemed to point to someone who enjoyed what they were doing. Someone of considerable physical strength – almost certainly a man – who wanted to prolong the act.

She looked around the room again, hoping that Steven Wright was wrong and that Robert had conveniently left his phone for her to find. Because if he had met someone then there had to be something – a message, a call, a contact name. Monica knew how many apps immediately deleted messages you might want hidden, but there had to be some trace.

For a fleeting second she thought of Michael Bach and his lost boy. Nichol Morgan. The name was somehow familiar. She pushed the thought away as quickly as it had come.

She crouched by the bed, used a pen to carefully open the drawers of Robert's desk. Inside was the laptop that Steven Wright had mentioned. She lifted it out and slid it into a clear plastic evidence bag. So far it was their best bet – the most obvious chance of finding a clue that would lead them to the identity of Robert's killer.

A sound from the back of the room caught Monica off guard. Wood on wood. She turned quickly to face the noise, the surprise making the breath catch in her throat.

The dog that Steven Wright had called earlier tilted her head to look up at Monica. It was partially obscured by the curtains so she hadn't seen it when she'd come into the room. Monica let out a deep breath and took a step closer. The dog lifted a paw and again ran it over the wood panel beneath the window. The sound Monica had heard.

'You miss your friend, don't you,' she said as she crouched beside the big dog – a Scottish deerhound, she thought. Like a greyhound, only bigger and with a thick shaggy coat. The dog's back end was pushed up uncomfortably against the pile of washing.

'Just like me, too big for normal things,' Monica whispered as she ran a hand through the dog's soft downy fur. 'I wish you could speak; you'd make my job so much easier.' Ellie slapped her long tail on the carpet and pawed at the window again.

Monica stood up and looked out through the glass at the night outside. It was lit by a bright chunk of the moon now. Outside the window was the flat roof of the garage. If Robert had wanted to sneak out without waking his father he could easily have climbed out onto the roof then pulled the window closed behind him. At the end of the garden there was a commercial pine forest. Planted in straight lines and dense so

the sun would never touch the ground. Beyond the forest she could see the steepening slopes of those dark mountains.

What had drawn him back out there? What was so tempting that he'd leave the warmth of his bed? Monica wished she could ask Robert Wright himself. She felt the tiredness gathering; it was after 4 a.m. now. Lucy would be in a deep sleep. In a different world Monica would be lying there beside her. Enjoying the warmth and comfort of those blankets, and all of Sunday to look forward to with her daughter when they finally did wake up. Wouldn't life be simpler like that? Without that obsessive need to know – that need to identify some kind of meaning behind the chaos of a terrible crime.

She glanced back down at the dog, who was curled up as tight as its large frame would allow. She contemplated her actual Sunday. Like it or not, there was no way she could take a break while the investigation was at such a vital early phase. There would be another trip to the mortuary. With Steven Wright this time for the formal identification of Robert's body. Then the interview with Steven and a visit to Michael Bach's house. Who knew what else would come up in between?

Chapter 10

Michael spent almost ten minutes wandering around outside the house in the early morning. Looking for ghosts from his dreams up here on the moor? Maybe he really was going mad this time. He lit a cigarette. It was still dark, and the distant mountains across the water to the north and south were only visible as heavy black walls.

He took a deep draw from the cigarette, realised that he was standing in front of the small byre at the end of the house. His dad had renovated it not long before he'd died. He had been strong right up until near the end. Almost like he could fight off the cancer through force of will alone. Part of Michael still couldn't believe that anything could have made his father as weak as he was in those final days. It seemed almost to violate a law of nature.

He couldn't make himself go inside the byre. Go through his father's things like he'd asked. Instead he turned and walked down through the dark of the early morning towards the beach. He felt the icy bog water run into his shoes. The fetid smell of the bog followed, but thankfully no cloud of midges; it was too late in the year for them now.

At the shoreline Michael sat down on a rock. He stared out across the water, smoking as the dawn broke. The sea was flat calm this morning, slack and thick and dark like wine. Almost purple: the colour of bruises, the colour of love bites on a body.

He remembered the boy's face, pale white on that slab. He tried hard to put it out of his mind, but it was only replaced by a memory of the dream, of those dark corridors. Of Nichol standing at the window, staring in, and the feeling that he had somehow brought with him to Michael. The panic of grief, of loss, of needing to look for someone but having no idea where to start.

The dark water spread to the horizon. To the edges of the primordial mountainous landscape. There were times when Michael thought it was the most beautiful place imaginable. This morning it couldn't have felt more bleak, magnifying his insignificance and the pointlessness of it all.

Impulsively he stood up and stripped his clothes off then walked out into the cold water until it burned his skin and took his breath away. Dad would have admired this at least, he thought as he trod water and tried to slow his breathing. Something brushed his leg and made him wonder: was there any truth in the story that great white sharks occasionally ventured into these cold waters? Could there really be a monster down there in the dark? He ducked his head under. Tasted the salt and let the bitter cold take away all the thoughts, for a moment at least.

When his teeth were chattering he swam back to the shore and dried himself off as best he could with his T-shirt. He pulled his clothes back on then struggled to get the lighter to spark with shaking hands. Like a shipwreck survivor desperate to start a fire, he thought as the cigarette finally caught.

He pushed the lighter back into his pocket and felt his phone beside it. It made him wonder if the police would contact him if they heard anything about Nichol. Probably not. It wasn't like he was next of kin. He flicked through the

messages on the phone to check anyway and found himself stopping on that last one from Nichol again: 'The future is in the stars.' It still didn't make any sense. There had to be someone who knew where he'd gone. Someone who knew Nichol better than he did.

It occurred then to Michael just how little he actually knew about the kid's life. He knew that Nichol's mother was dead and that he'd never met his father. But what about his friends and his extended family? Michael had never met any of them, had barely even spoken to Nichol about them. He hadn't even gone to the boy's accommodation with him that time he'd asked. Just dropped him off in the street outside and driven on to another appointment.

With bubbling guilt Michael recalled Nichol's face that day as he had turned away from the Land Rover towards the double doors of that grim 'house of multiple occupancy' – a hostel by any other name – on Union Street in Inverness. An expression that was hard to pin down. Was it disappointment? Resentment?

'Well what can I do about it now? Fucking hell!' Michael stared up and down the lonely beach, vaguely startled by the sound of his own frustrated and guilty voice. But unexpectedly an answer came into his head: *Go to Inverness. Look for him.* Suddenly it even seemed obvious.

It was still early when Michael set off to drive east through the mountains, past Beinn Dearg and then Ben Wyvis, standing alone like a worn-down tooth, back towards Inverness. The deer had come down from the hills and gathered by the sides of the road, drawn to the heat of the tarmac as the cold autumn nights grew longer.

Michael lit another cigarette and turned up the heater to dry his clothes, which were still damp from the seawater.

Colonel Mustard lifted his head at the welcome heat. The warm air from the heater fan ruffled his fur where he lay on the dashboard. He stretched his ginger paws out in contentment so his toe pads splayed open showing the soft downy fur between.

The cat had barged his way into the Land Rover when Michael had made the mistake of starting the engine with the door still open. The sound of the motor was a signal to Colonel Mustard that there was warmth on offer, and he had dug his claws into the dash when Michael tried to remove him. Finally Michael had given up, not for the first time, and let Colonel Mustard come along for the journey.

Part of Michael was secretly glad of the company. He reached through the steering wheel and ruffled the fur on the cat's head. In response Colonel Mustard stared at him for a moment then closed his eyes and stretched out further.

Michael shook his head and pushed a CD into the player, *Trojan Rastafari Box Set (Disc 3)*. The sound of the Caribbean filled the vehicle, and Michael stared out at the long thin clouds hanging among the mountains. He'd found that reggae suited the Highland landscape much better than the awful 1970s folk music his dad had insisted on playing any time they were in the car together.

The thought triggered a memory. One that seemed to belong to someone else: Michael and a brother in the back of a car. A brown interior. It must have been the days before seat belts because the two boys had climbed over into the boot together. They were waving at the cars following them on the motorway.

Two boys laughing, smiling.

Michael wiped a hand across his face as he suppressed the memory. *Jesus*, he thought, *what's going on with me today?*

He pulled up outside the hostel on Union Street. Took in the Victorian buildings from a time when the architecture of Inverness had been some kind of Walter Scott Highland fantasy. It was rough at the edges now though. More than at the edges, Michael thought, glancing up and down the street. His eyes landed on a patch of blood on the pavement and a matching spray of vomit against a wall. Just another Saturday night.

The double doors of the hostel were propped open with an empty beer crate. Michael stepped over it and caught the smells of smoke and dust in the dark lobby. He glanced around the shadowy space then moved towards the staircase.

‘Ho!’

Michael jumped at the shout, turned and realised that there was a small office at the opposite end of the lobby. A counter barred the doorway, and a man was on a seat behind it, legs propped up on a table. ‘You don’t just wander in off the street, gudgie.’

Michael stepped closer and took the man in: long greasy hair, dark stubble spattered across a suspicious face. A guitar balanced on his legs. He stared at Michael with an accusatory expression.

‘The door was open,’ Michael said.

‘Yeah, well there’s a buzzer. And you come to the office; you don’t just walk up the stairs.’

Michael stared over the counter at the mess surrounding the man in his ‘office’. Stacks of old newspapers and a row of dirty

mugs with cigarette ash in them. Even after more than a decade as a social worker, Michael was surprised how some people would clutch at any crumb of power.

‘Sorry. I didn’t realise.’

The man shrugged. ‘Well you’ll know for next time. What do you want anyway?’

Michael forced a smile, thinking, *There won’t be a next time, believe me.* ‘I’m a social worker. One of my clients was in temporary accommodation here. He went missing. I spoke to someone ...’ Michael searched for the name but his mind was blank ‘... on the phone last week?’

The man’s eyes dropped to the floor, suddenly shifty. ‘I don’t know anything about that; I’m just the manager.’

‘He was seen getting on a train,’ Michael said. ‘I just want to know where he’s gone. His name was Nichol Morgan. You must have seen him.’ The man’s eyes flicked around the office as if deciding on the best lie to tell. Michael leaned on the counter. ‘I need to know. It’s really important.’

‘I probably saw him,’ the man said finally, realising that Michael wasn’t about to leave. ‘There’s loads of them in here, they come and go ...’

‘What about friends?’

The man shrugged. ‘He kept himself to himself, just came to his room to sleep. They’re transient, these kids. From all over the Highlands. Congregate in the city for a free doss – that’s why the centre of town’s the way it is now. Fights. Junkies. Just last week one of them woke up, decides to throw himself off the top of Rose Street Car Park. Splat. A nice mess for them to scrape up.’ The man laughed at that, lit a cigarette, patted his greasy hair down at the back. ‘Probably your boy just wanted a change of scene. It’s a free country, isn’t it? Have

you never thought about just packing up and heading off somewhere else, gudgie? To Rose Street Car Park even.’ The man’s face came alive, but his laugh drifted a long way from anything funny.

Michael leaned further over the counter and for half a second found himself reaching out to grab the collar of the man’s shirt, imagining himself pulling him over the counter and shaking him. He managed to stop himself and found he was patting the man’s shoulder instead. A strange and threatening gesture. The man looked down at Michael’s hand and tried to brush it away, clearly unnerved.

Michael took a step back. Unnerved himself by what he’d done. But the thought from his subconscious rose to the surface: *How have you put up with these horrible people – for ten years, for longer? Maybe you should just drag him over the counter and strangle him. You’d be doing everyone a favour.*

Michael patted himself down for a cigarette. His hand was shaking when he found the damp packet in his pocket and lit up. Then he looked back at the man across the counter, who was now eyeing him differently. He looked frightened.

‘Did Nichol leave anything in his room?’ Michael asked finally. Repressing the urge to apologise to the man for his aggression.

‘Someone else is in it now. We have to turn the rooms over quickly when someone leaves, it’s the only way we make money,’ the man said, his tone almost apologetic now. He glanced beyond Michael as if checking for a potential escape route. ‘The police came for his things when he was declared missing the other day. I saw them take everything out. There wasn’t much: some books, his laptop—’

‘Wait, his laptop?’

The man nodded. 'That's right, I saw them carrying it out.' Michael remembered his dream, Nichol standing at the window with the laptop bag over his shoulder. He could barely remember seeing the kid without the thing. It was probably his only valuable possession. There was no way he would have left without it unless something had gone seriously wrong.