

HELEN PHIFER

A room with a deadly
secret.

A detective determined
to unlock it.

THE GIRLS ON FLOOR 13

DETECTIVE
MARIA MILLER
BOOK 3

A completely gripping crime thriller with a shocking twist

THE GIRLS ON FLOOR 13

HELEN PHIFER

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*For all the readers who love a spooky story as much as I do, this one is for
you. Thank you xx*

PROLOGUE

Seventeen-year-old Dory Painter was lying on the bed surrounded by xeroxed photos of the Parker Hotel in New York. To say she was obsessed with the building and its history was an understatement. The red brick, fourteen-story-high hotel was iconic. Once a mecca for all kinds of artists, it had a dark past—and an unusually high number of murders and suicides. The black, wrought-iron balconies—and the fact that it had a floor thirteen—gave it something most other hotels in the city didn't have. Not to mention its history of haunting, which was the real attraction for Dory.

She loved watching reruns of old ghost shows. Her favorite accounts on TikTok showed visits to the haunted Ed and Lorraine Warren Museum. They scared the crap out of her, but she couldn't stop watching. Dory hadn't even heard of the Parker Hotel until she'd stayed there with her parents for a few days, when she realized her favorite TV show had done a three-night special investigating the hotel.

The atmosphere inside its corridors was electric and she'd quickly found herself falling in love. Although they'd stayed on the ninth floor—not the infamous thirteenth—it had still been creepy as hell. Dory had experienced the worst bad dreams of her life on the rollaway cot in that room, dreams of being chased through the empty floors of the hotel by a black shadow. Each morning, she woke up at three am, shivering, her heart racing, relieved that she was sharing a room with her parents and not on her own.

When they went shopping the first day, she begged her mom to leave her

at the huge Barnes and Noble on Fifth Avenue for an hour. She found a book detailing the history of the Parker and another which called it “The Most Haunted Hotel in New York”. Dory had spent her allowance buying both books, then took them to the coffee shop on the first floor, bought herself an iced coffee and lost herself inside the pages.

Since then, she’d joined a forum for ghost hunters online, looking for anyone who could get her access to the Parker Hotel to do a ghost hunt without getting caught and thrown out.

“Michelle’s here.”

Her mom’s voice broke the trance she was in as she stared at the pictures.

“Tell her to come up.”

Michelle’s voice drifted up the stairs, as she chatted to Dory’s mom. Dory’s best friend was the reason her mom left Dory alone much of the time. She trusted her more than she trusted her own daughter. Dory was aware that her attitude wasn’t always the best. When she came over, Michelle had longer conversations with her mom than Dory ever did. But that was Michelle. She was one of those people who could talk to anyone about anything. Dory, meanwhile, hated her mom knowing her business. When she tried to talk to her mother about the ghosts at the Parker or the latest episode of *Ghost Hunters*, she just rolled her eyes.

After a soft knock on the door, Michelle stepped inside.

“Your mom is pissed with you for not taking out the trash again—or loading the dishwasher.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. She’s always mad at me about something.”

“Why don’t you just do it, though? I hate putting out the trash, but if it means my mom won’t be nagging me for the rest of my life, I’ll do it every day.”

“That’s cause you’re a such a kiss ass. Why don’t you go put my mom’s trash out while you’re at it and save me the hassle?”

Michelle grinned at her, picked up a cushion that had fallen on the floor, and threw it at Dory’s head.

“You’re a douche, Dory.”

“That may be, but I’m a douche with access.”

Michelle jumped on the bed next to her. “You found someone?”

Dory nodded. “Found a maintenance guy online who said he could get us into the hotel and up to room 1303.”

Michelle squinted at her. “Why would he do that for us?”

“Maybe he’s a nice guy who is as interested in the ghosts of the Parker as we are?”

“And maybe he’s a creep.”

“So what if he is? There are two of us and one of him. We let him give us access to the room, film it, take our shots and whatever else, then thank him and be on our way home before any of our parents realize that we went out of town.”

“Yeah, but he might want something in return, Dory.”

She shook her head. “Honestly, he seems like an okay guy. He said he hates working on that floor, so much weird stuff happens. He doesn’t have a problem with getting us inside as long as we don’t take too long. He said he’d accept a coffee as his payment and access to the photos and videos we take.”

“No funny business?”

Dory laughed. “What’s funny business?”

She made a face. “No sex in return for his favor?”

“Well, it depends—if he’s decent looking I might have some fun.”

Michelle shuddered. “Don’t even joke. In a hotel room where two women were murdered? Yuck, I’d rather not, thank you. That’s just weird, Dory.”

“Look, we can’t afford to rent a room at the Parker ourselves, and there’s no guarantee we could get access to *the* room if we did.”

“When can we go?”

She grinned. “Tomorrow. I bought the bus tickets already with my left-over Christmas money. You tell your parents you’re stopping here; I’ll tell mine I’m going to yours. We’ll skip school and get the Greyhound to NY. I’m so freaking excited about this, Michelle; we waited months to find someone, and this could be our only chance.”

Michelle frowned. “It’s all a bit sudden, though. What if the school phone to see why we didn’t turn in?”

“We phone the absence line for each other, simple. This is going to be brilliant—we can’t not do it. You promised you’d come with me. We could get some amazing footage to show on our YouTube channel when we launch it.”

Reluctantly, Michelle nodded. Dory felt bad. She was pushing her friend to do this, but she couldn’t let an opportunity like this go. The Parker was calling her to it, and she wasn’t about to ignore it.

ONE

The woman in the long, blue dress stared down onto West 23rd Street. She watched the flurry of tiny figures walk by, their heads down, never looking up. Her palms pressed against the thin glass of the window, leaving prints in the condensation. The glass needed replacing, as did the rotting, peeling wooden frames. Every damn thing in this hotel needed ripping out; every fixture and fitting was way past its best. A wave of sadness rushed over her. It was the same every day without fail. The feeling of isolation and desolation was so overpowering she had no choice but to give in to it. She was stuck in a loop, reliving the same day over and over, ever since 1945, always with the same ending.

She had no idea how long this had gone on for, how many days, years, her world had been this way. She watched the people below her going about their business without a second thought for the woman balancing on the precipice of life above them, wishing that just one of them would spare a second to lift their gaze from the sidewalk and see her. It would be so nice for someone to acknowledge her existence, just for once.

Kids were different. Occasionally a hurried parent with a child dragged behind them would pause, wondering why their kid had suddenly stopped and stared upwards. But even so, kids had no concept of what they were looking at. Now and then, she'd wave, hoping a child below would see her, but they never did. Or if they did, it was brief. She was nothing more than a blue smudge, gone in seconds, as they hurried past, continuing with their

lives, as self-obsessed as every other native New Yorker.

She pursed her lips as a sigh escaped them. She felt heaviness pressing down on her shoulders at what she was about to do. She wasn't even sure why she'd done this in the first place. It had been so long ago. Some stupid argument with her daughter, perhaps. They'd often argued over silly little things. All she knew was she was now destined for the rest of eternity to repeat it. A decision had been made, for whatever reason, and there was no going back from it now. It was as if it had been written in the stars, and there was no escape. No escape from this awful hotel. She wished she'd never set foot inside the Parker, but she had, and now she was stuck for the rest of eternity.

She crossed to the queen-sized bed, the one she was supposed to be sharing with her daughter, who was now long gone. She'd gone out one day and decided not to return, and as sad as that made her, she didn't blame her daughter one little bit. Who needed a mother like her? A mother full of such melancholy and sorrow wasn't much fun.

She stared at her withered hand, remembering the accident that had stopped her from pursuing her one true passion in life: sewing and making beautiful clothes. The gown she wore now had been painstakingly sewn by hand, a beautiful silk gown the same color as the bluest sky on a warm, summer day. It was her favorite dress she'd ever created, with every little diamond and pearl sewn on painstakingly by hand. Before her accident ruined everything. It seemed only fitting she should wear this gown for her final journey.

On the bed lay the pair of heavy, brass dressmaking scissors that had once been the tools of her trade and now were nothing more than a dreadful reminder of everything she'd lost. She picked them up, marveling at how heavy they were, how sharp their blades were after all this time, and then without pausing, she used them to cut off her left hand. She severed tendons, muscle and cartilage, blood spurting fast, as the heavy appendage fell onto the white bed linen, staining it a deep crimson.

She felt bad for the maid who was going to have to clean up her mess, for nothing more than the minimum wage. She turned and walked to the window, opening it as wide as she could, and stepped out onto the narrow balcony—then she closed her eyes and threw herself off. As she hurtled down towards the crowd of passing pedestrians, there was no fear; she was finally free and soaring like a bird.

TWO

Homicide detectives Maria Miller and Frankie Conroy from the 6th Precinct were just about to walk out of the door of the office of the Strange Case Review team when the desk phone rang on Maria's side. Frankie shook his head.

"Don't do it. I'm telling you if you do, it's trouble."

Maria, who as always felt a strong sense of responsibility towards her job, stared at the handset willing it to stop ringing. But she couldn't ignore it and reached out to pick it up.

"Miller."

Frankie shook his head and mimed holding a gun to the side of his temple. She turned away. "Uh huh, right. Where at?" She scribbled an address down on a scrap of paper. "I'll go, but I'm not supposed to be on active duty. We're on the weird and wonderful case review team so you're gonna have to find someone from regular homicide to take over from me as soon as they're free."

She hung up and turned to look at Frankie who leaned against the door, next to a faded poster of Mulder and Scully from the X-Files.

"Why did you answer that when I told you not to?"

She shrugged. "Because it's my job and we're still on the clock."

"Jeez, Maria, you really are a pushover. I thought we were going to grab a bite to eat at the Fat Black Pussycat, maybe down a couple of cold beers, before going home to our depressing lives."

“You were going to. I never agreed to that. I have a date tonight with Harrison. I was going home for a shower.”

“Can’t believe you’re still stringing the rich guy along. Yet you’d rather go to a double homicide than out for a drink with him. Something’s not right there, kid. You need to figure it out.”

“Don’t call me kid. I have more grey hairs than you do.”

Frankie grinned at her. Maria had a band of pure white hair running through her grown-out bangs. She hadn’t had more than a few stray grey hairs before she went into the abandoned hospital in Beacon, but the things she’d experienced inside there had scared her so completely it had turned her hair white. Maria was grateful to him for not pushing her to reveal what had happened, other than the official version of the incident that she’d given to everyone.

“I’m not stringing him along. I like him, we have fun. But it’s nothing more, okay? And if there’s nobody else to go to a double homicide, then I’m going, end of story. I like that we can occasionally keep our fingers in the pie with the normal kinds of cases, and I never said you had to come with me.”

He sighed. She knew he would never let her go on her own. He was her best friend, protector and pain in the ass, all rolled into one, and she loved him deeply for that.

The fire trucks were all over the sidewalk and street when they arrived; Maria had to abandon the Honda behind the paramedics. Frankie, meanwhile, was still complaining.

“Why did Tenth Precinct not send someone?”

“Because it was the funeral this afternoon of that officer who got killed last week. They’re probably short on staff. Quit complaining, Frankie. I told you I’d manage. You can go home.”

He crossed himself. “And there but for the grace of God, you’re right. Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. It’s a sad day for those guys. I guess we’ll cut them some slack.”

Crowds of people milled around outside on the sidewalk, huddled in groups. Maria stared up at the Parker Hotel. For a split second, she was sure she saw a woman in blue staring out of the upper floor window, looking down at her. Maria tugged on the arm of the firefighter standing beside her.

“Hey. Has the building been completely evacuated? There’s someone looking out of that window.”

He cupped his hand across his forehead and stared up. “Should have been, but it’s a hotel, there’s a lot of people around and it’s pretty hard to make sure they’re all out. Besides, the fire was contained on the thirteenth floor. Some quick-thinking guest saw smoke billowing out from underneath the door and hit the alarms. Then she ran to get the extinguisher off the wall and managed to keep it under control. Saved a hell of a lot of lives and the building. Only the room it was started in is smoke-damaged. It didn’t have the chance to get going.”

Maria nodded. “Brave guy.”

The firefighter pointed to the back of the open ambulance where a woman with honey-colored, soot-stained hair and dark smudges across her cheek sat with a foil blanket around her shoulders.

“Brave gal. She’s over there.”

Maria nodded. It was wrong of her to assume he was talking about a guy, when she knew fine well that she’d go into a burning building to save someone without a care for her own safety. Hadn’t she gone into a haunted hospital to find a missing girl and bring her home safely, even when the odds were stacked way against her?

Without realizing she was doing it her fingers reached up and gently touched the streak of white hair she’d come out of Beacon Hill with. Before going into that hospital on her own, she’d had a full head of thick, black, wavy hair with only a few strands of grey running through it. Now, as Frankie liked to remind her, she looked more like Lily Munster than Lily did.

Maria headed towards the woman in the ambulance and held out her hand. “Detective Miller. You did a great job. Fast thinking probably saved an awful lot of lives and the hotel a lot of money.”

The woman, who Maria placed in her forties, took her hand and shook it. “My name is Mina Barrow. Thanks, but not so great for whoever was inside that room. I was too late to help them.”

“Hey, you did good. They were most likely already deceased long before you knew about the fire. That’s out of your control.”

“I know, but I still wasn’t expecting to see them like that.”

Frankie joined them, and asked, “Like what?”

Mina shuddered. “On the beds, just staring into space. And with no feet. Just bloodied stumps. They look like they’re just kids, too. God rest their souls.”

“Kids?”

“Teenagers, maybe fifteen or sixteen. Far too young to be in a hotel like this in downtown New York.”

“Are you staying here, Mina?”

Mina nodded. “I’m in a long-term rental unit on the tenth floor. I couldn’t afford the rent on my uptown apartment when I got let go. Split up with my partner and decided I’d rather move downtown and try to manage on my own than stay with that piece of work.”

Maria gave her a sympathetic nod. “What were you doing on the thirteenth floor if you live on the tenth?”

Mina’s eyes narrowed. “What, am I a suspect?”

“Of course not, unless you give me a good reason to make you one. I’m curious to know why you’d stop off at the thirteenth.”

Mina released an epic sigh. “I always use the stairs. Can’t afford a fancy gym membership. If I hadn’t been heading up to the roof for a quick smoke before going out to the library, I wouldn’t have seen it, and this shithole would be a smoldering wreck. I could smell the smoke in the stairwell when I got to the thirteenth floor and thought I’d better go check it out. I don’t particularly love the place, but it’s home and it’s better than a shop doorway if you get my drift.”

Maria felt a pang of sadness for the soot-stained woman staring back at her. She’d probably had it all and lost it, yet she still carried on, when she could have hit rock bottom.

“How did you know about the bodies?” Frankie asked.

“The door wasn’t locked. I kicked it open with the fire extinguisher and sprayed foam everywhere. I could see them lying there on those twin beds, not moving, and I shouted at them, thinking maybe they were stoned or drunk. I pulled my scarf across my face and ran towards the first bed; the girl was stone cold. My prints are probably on her arm. I tried to shake her awake, but I saw the bloodied stumps where her feet should be and realized she was cold and stiff.”

Maria nodded. “Then what?”

“I got the hell out, raised the alarm and rang the fire department. Now here I am talking to you guys.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I expect you want to get back inside and shower. Do you have any injuries that need looking at?”

Maria knew the woman would say no even if she did. Medical bills were expensive, and the insurance was just as bad. Mina shook her head. “Apart

from the shock of seeing those girls like that, I'm okay."

"Well, thank you, but if you do have any injuries, they can be taken care of. If the cops send you to the ER, it doesn't cost you. We appreciate everything you did, Mina."

Mina shrugged. "I'm good, but thanks. I didn't know that."

Maria and Frankie began to walk away, but Maria paused, turning back. "Did you see anyone loitering in the hallways? Did you recognize the girls? Ever seen them in the hotel before?"

"Nope to all of those questions. Sorry, I've told you what I know. There are always people loitering in the hallways. It's that kind of place. But not today. Today it was eerily quiet, considering there was smoke billowing out from underneath that door."

Maria looked up to count the floors, and realized it was the tenth floor where she'd seen the person in blue at the window. She turned back to Mina.

"I saw someone looking out of the window on the tenth floor. She was wearing a blue dress."

Mina shrugged. "And?"

"I wondered if you knew any of the other tenants up there."

Mina shook her head. "You know what, I thought I saw someone in a blue dress standing in the corridor, but it was smoky, and it was only for a second, and then they were gone. This place is crazy. I don't want to know any of my neighbors, if you get my drift. Bad enough I'm living here. I don't need no charity cases on my doorstep. You should ask Rickie, the manager. He knows everyone, although I don't think he keeps an eye on what they're wearing."

"When you say they were gone, gone where?"

"Disappeared into thin air. I probably imagined it, or it was wisps of smoke."

Maria smiled. Why was she so bothered about the person in the window? The fire was out; they were in no danger. But something about the way they'd been staring down had unsettled Maria. It was also strange that Mina had seen a flash of blue outside the room where the bodies had been found. Maria knew what the urban legends said about this hotel: that it was haunted. The most haunted hotel in New York City. But she was here to deal with the murders. The case didn't fit the criteria for the Strange Case Review team to investigate. They walked towards the rear of the car. It was time to get suited up, then go take a look at the scene for themselves.

THREE

By the time they were dressed in protective suits, boots and gloves, the fire chief gave them the go-ahead to enter the building. The duty manager, who Maria assumed was Rickie, was having an animated phone call. Whoever he spoke to must have been stressed judging by the amount of swearing echoing through the speaker.

Frankie headed towards the elevator and Maria caught his arm, pointing towards the stairs. There were fire officers with hoses everywhere.

He shook his head. “The fire is out. There’s no danger now.”

She supposed he had a point. Nobody stopped them when Frankie pressed the call button, so she assumed they were good to continue. They travelled to the thirteenth floor in silence. The creaking, clanking elevator made them hold their breath, fearing they’d get stuck between floors. With a sudden jerk, it juddered to a halt, before the rattling doors slid open.

Maria led the way. As always, it made her feel better if she could see the body or bodies first, instead of hiding behind Frankie’s broad shoulders. There were a couple of fire officers in the hallway—which was desperately in need of decorating. The old-fashioned wallpaper was dark and gaudy with some awful abstract pattern that hurt her eyes. Strips peeled away from the corners of the walls. Maria couldn’t think of a worse place to find yourself booked into for a city break. It gave off serious depressing vibes, not the sort of hotel you’d recommend to your friends unless you hated them.

“Are we good to take a look?”

One of the fire officers nodded. "All yours. Our investigators are on the way. When they get here, you can battle it out between you about who's running the show."

Maria smiled at him. Underneath the yellow helmet and streaks of dirt and grime on his cheeks, his eyes were the most beautiful green she'd ever seen, with tiny flecks of gold running through them. She wondered if he was wearing contacts, although if they were they must be expensive.

The door to room 1303 was wide open. Water puddled on the carpet, making it sodden and spongy to walk on. Maria was glad she wore sneakers and not pumps. Frankie, on the other hand, had his expensive Italian brogues on, and she knew he was going to complain for the next hour about ruining his shoes. Despite the fact she told him regularly to save those shoes for best, he didn't listen. When working, he liked to wear a snappy suit, shirt and tie along with his fancy shoes, even though they weren't at all practical.

Maria stepped over the pools of water into the room. On twin beds were the bodies of two fully clothed, teenage girls. The sight of their bloodied stumps where their feet should have been made Maria's stomach clench tight. She hoped to God that whoever did this had removed their feet once they were dead, not while they were still able to feel it.

"Why? Why the hell would you want to remove their feet? What the hell is he going to do with them?" Despite the horror, she struggled to tear her gaze away. Both bodies had deep, thin grooves around the girls' necks; whoever had done this must have been strong.

"Garroted," whispered Frankie behind her. "Had to have used something to do it fast, so he could kill them both before they managed to escape. Manual strangulation can take a long time. Otherwise, while he attacked the first one, the other could have made their escape."

"Not if they were restrained."

"Why didn't they scream? Surely somebody would have heard them."

A loud voice behind them made them both start, and they jumped back from the body.

"Good afternoon, Maria, Frankie. Do you want to let me take a closer look? I might be able to tell you what's happened here." Doctor Betsy Conner was smiling at the pair of them.

Frankie grinned back. "Well, if it isn't my favorite medical examiner. How you doing, doc. You're looking good if you don't mind me saying."

"All the better for seeing you guys. Though I thought you weren't

working active cases? I was gutted when I got told you were moved to something else, something top secret.”

Maria gave the woman a warm smile. She was one of the good guys. She always made working a homicide that much easier with her willingness to cooperate and keep them up to date with findings.

“Technically we’re not, but Maria answered the phone on the way out of the office.” Frankie did an exaggerated eye roll of epic proportions. Maria crossed her arms and glared at him.

Betsy smiled. “Well, I’m glad you’re here now. May I?”

Frankie did a little bow as he stepped out of the way and winked at her.

They both stepped away from the beds to give her space to work. She took one look at the missing feet and sighed. “What the hell do you suppose he’s going to be doing with those?”

“I’m not sure I want to know,” muttered Maria.

Betsy nodded, picking up the hand of the girl on the bed nearest to her. “No defensive wounds. This one didn’t put up a fight.” She walked to the other and stared at the palms of the hands of the second girl, which were facing upwards. “Neither of them did. I’ll take fingernail scrapings and clippings from victim one before I touch victim two.” She turned back to examine the first girl’s wrists. “No marks, so they weren’t tied up or restrained. I suppose the tox results are going to come back as positive for drugs and/or maybe alcohol. There is no way you would watch some creep strangle then cut off your friend’s feet and not try to escape, unless you were unable to.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Was he trying to flirt with her? Jeez, she hoped not. There wasn’t a more inappropriate place to come on to someone than a murder scene. Or was he just being his usual brazen self? Maria had a sneaking suspicion that now he was a free man he was putting himself out there. She wanted to tell him to pack it in. Instead, she tugged his arm and he looked at her. When she raised an eyebrow, he shrugged.

“Will you be attending the autopsy? It won’t be tonight. I might be able to squeeze them in tomorrow after lunch if you’re free?”

Maria opened her mouth to say probably not, but he beat her to it. “Sure thing, doc, be like old times, eh? It’s been too long. Be good to catch up with you. Maybe we could go for a drink and grab a bite to eat?”

Maria ignored Frankie and smiled at Betsy. “We’ll leave you to it. If it’s not us, I’ll give you a ring and let you know who’s taking over. Good night.”