

DETECTIVE MARIA MILLER, BOOK 2

# HER LOST SOUL

She thought she was  
alone but somebody  
was watching...



A totally unputdownable crime thriller

HELEN PHIFER



HER LOST SOUL

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# CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[December 1960](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[December 1960](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[December 1960](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[December 1960](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[December 1960](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[December 1960](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Email Signup](#)

[Also by Helen Phifer](#)

[A Letter from the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)



# PROLOGUE

## BEACON HILL ASYLUM

*December 12th, 2023*

They left the warmth and safety of the car to go out into the darkness. Ryan had parked a few blocks away, so their arrival wouldn't stand out and give the security guards reason to check them out. Riley peered upwards at the old building. The frost-coated turrets and boarded windows could be seen peeking through the overgrown tangle of trees and shrubs, bare of their greenery that winter brought, giving the grounds that skirted the edges of the place an eerie feeling of desolation. The four of them—Drew, Noah, Riley and Ryan—had been laughing loudly and fooling around until they'd driven through the gates for the abandoned hospital. Now, they were silent.

Dressed entirely in black, they looked a formidable sight. If their age didn't give them away, they could have been mistaken for a SWAT team, minus the guns. Drew lingered by the car and Riley knew without asking that she'd changed her mind. Her friend had never been a hundred percent into this idea in the first place and Riley felt bad that she'd begged her to come along. Earlier that evening they'd stuffed their backpacks with cameras, flashlights, EMF meters, digital recorders, drinks and whatever else they thought they might need for a night spent investigating the old hospital. They knew they couldn't put off paying it a visit any longer. Later that week, the contractors would begin ripping the place to shreds.

The new owners were strict; the hospital was out of bounds to everyone. Guards patrolled around the clock and had erected heavy steel gates that were always chained up at the front. Ryan led the way. He'd been inside the grounds before and knew a way they could get in without being caught. The rest of the property was surrounded by a crumbling red brick wall, but Ryan knew where it was low enough to clamber over if you were tall or if someone gave you a leg up.

Riley hovered behind, while Noah and Drew silently pressed themselves through the overgrown mess of trees to get to the perimeter. A dog barked somewhere in the distance.

Ryan whispered, "It's okay, there are no guard dogs on the premises. I checked a couple of days ago. I climbed over and wandered around. None came running."

Drew shook her head. "Praise the Lord. I don't want to get my ass savaged by an angry dog before we even get close."

Riley grinned. Drew was funny, even if she was a bit of a scaredy cat when it came to stuff like this. It was a surprise that she'd come at all, after their last attempt at exploring the hospital. She'd insisted on sitting in Ryan's car while they'd all wandered around the perimeter in the dark before calling it a night.

Ryan made the climb over the wall look easy. He waited on the other side to give Drew a hand down. Next came Riley, then Noah. When all four of them were safely on the ground, they turned to look at the building, which was steeped in darkness. Its turrets and dramatic Gothic details would have made it the perfect place to film *The Munsters*. Riley was in love. There was something about lonely and unloved old buildings like this that made her want to explore them even more.

"She's beautiful. Come on, let's go before we get caught. I have to see what she looks like from the inside before she's torn to pieces."

Drew muttered, "Beautiful in a Frankenstein's monster way, Riley. It's creepy as hell."

Again, Ryan led the way. They didn't approach the front entrance—that was too obvious, and they didn't know if there were cameras installed above it. Instead, Ryan took them around the back.

Drew whispered, "So many windows, so many boards. Have you got a screwdriver?"

Ryan nodded. "I loosened one the other day on my recon. We only have to unscrew them a little."

He led them to a small window; it was too small for Riley's liking.

"Could you not have picked one of the bigger ones, Ryan? My ass might get stuck."

He smiled. "No one will notice if this is missing. If we removed one of the huge ones it will stand out too much."

He had a point. Noah passed him a screwdriver and Riley shared a glance with Drew.

"How amazing is this? Are you excited?"

"Excited? I'm scared, Riley, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "A little, but I can't wait to explore."

Drew gave her a look that questioned her sanity, but Riley ignored it.

Next moment the board was on the ground and Ryan, who was tall and skinny, climbed through the window. Riley followed him, and Noah followed behind her. All three of them waited for Drew's face to appear. When it didn't, Riley pulled herself up onto the small windowsill and peered down at her friend.

"Are you coming? We have to hurry. You'll get caught hanging around out there, and besides, if you wait outside it will be just you and the ghosts from the cemetery."

Drew paused. She looked around the overgrown garden at the gnarled trees and shadows.

"I don't know if we should be doing this."

"Why? We're not hurting anyone. We're just taking a look at it before they come and tear it to shreds. If anything, we're doing them a favor by documenting it one last time." Riley wasn't sure who *they* were, but it was

true they weren't there to damage or steal anything. They just wanted to film it, snap some photos and maybe see if they could see a ghost or two.

The dog that had been barking earlier began to howl as the almost full moon broke through the inky clouds in the sky, illuminating the unloved, forlorn gardens as if someone had turned on a spotlight and aimed it directly at them.

Riley hissed, "Come on, Drew."

Drew took one last look around, then clambered onto the window ledge and through the window.

Noah and Ryan both clapped, and Drew gave them the finger. Riley smiled. She loved her friendship group. They'd been friends ever since they were little kids. They were as geeky and weird as she was, and she wouldn't have it any other way. All of them lost any popularity contests at school. Riley, with her beachy, blonde waves and blue eyes, looked like she would fit in with the cheerleaders and jocks, but because of who her dad was the rest of their classmates scorned her. Nobody wanted her to tell tales on them after football games when the students would party hard to celebrate or commiserate their performance. Not that she was the tale-telling type. Ryan and Noah, meanwhile, were members of the science club and spent hours building radio systems and other stuff Riley didn't understand. She was more interested in computer programming than science, but each to their own. All of them shared one common interest, however: their love of ghost stories, and so it had made perfect sense when they had decided to form their own paranormal club.

With flashlights out, they entered a small room that must have once been a closet. Papers were scattered all over the floor and the air was filled with the earthy smell of damp and decay. Next, Ryan led them down the hallway and through a doorway, into a room so big it could have fit all their high school class in and still had room to maneuver.

"This must have been some party house," muttered Noah.

Riley smirked. Noah didn't like to party, but he was right; it would have made a great frat house.

Drew shook her head. “I don’t like it... I don’t think we should be in here. It feels wrong.”

“We’re just having a look around,” said Riley, “documenting it for the history books kind of thing.”

There was a shuffling noise as something heavy crossed the ceiling above, making them all stop.

Drew whispered, “What the hell is that?”

“Racoons, mice, possums maybe,” replied Ryan.

They waited. Riley didn’t say anything, but she was sure it had been the sound of feet—human feet. It didn’t happen again, so they carried on.

“There’s supposed to be a music room with one of those huge church organs inside that apparently plays on its own. Imagine if we caught that on camera?” said Ryan. “There’s also a few of those treatment rooms where they gave the patients electric shock therapy and God knows what else. I want to see inside those, get them all photographed.”

Ryan was the most excited to be here. He was the one with a lifelong fascination with TV ghost shows and had the greatest passion for empty, abandoned buildings. He’d been Riley’s best friend ever since kindergarten, and she’d follow him anywhere he went because he’d always been there for her, even throughout the tragedies of the last few years, and she would always be there for him.

He pushed open the peeling, warped door to a room that had been the rec room. It was grand enough to have been a ballroom, with a rotting, wooden parquet floor. Huge columns were intricately carved with cherubs that must have once been painted white and were now daubed with terrible graffiti. The columns held up a series of arches and the walls behind them were shelved from floor to ceiling with only a couple of tattered, damp books lying discarded. Riley walked straight over to them; books were her one true love and she wanted to see what kind were deemed “recommended reading” for a hospital full of psychiatric patients. Her three friends were already filing out of the door, but she would catch them up.

Picking up a mottled, green leather cover she was surprised to read part of the word *Frankenstein* in faded gold letters. This and *Dracula* were Riley's favorite stories. The book was in much better condition than the one next to it which was unreadable. It was swollen, bloated like a rotting corpse. This thought made her flinch. Where had it come from? She'd never in her life described anything as being like a rotting corpse.

That moment a noise above made her head jolt backwards. This time it was clearly footsteps. They were light and hurried, as if someone was rushing around trying to get things done. Riley figured the book didn't belong to anyone now except for maybe the ghosts, so pushed it into her backpack, deciding she would add it to her collection. As she did so, a cold breeze enveloped her neck and shoulders. Icy fingers felt as if they were touching her skin. She opened her mouth to scream when she heard a loud cry from somewhere down the hall. Snapping herself out of her trance, Riley ran to see who had screamed. It had sounded like Ryan.

"Where are you guys?" she called. "Who's screaming?"

The corridor was empty. The scream had come from further down the hallway. She didn't feel as brave on her own. The beams from the ceiling light wavered around, up and down. Riley heard her friends talking in a room upstairs, and she realized that it must have been their footsteps crossing the floor above her. Ryan had probably jumped out on Drew and scared the crap out of her. This made her sigh with relief. She was doing a better job of scaring herself than Noah or Ryan could ever do.

"Come on, you guys, you're not even funny, and why didn't you wait for me?"

Riley burst into the room she'd heard the voices coming from, shining the flashlight around. Seeing what was inside, an icy cold liquid filled her veins, so much so that she couldn't speak. This was the entrance to a ward. There were two long rows of rusted metal bedframes and discarded, overturned chairs. As far as she could see it was completely empty. Although the beam of her flashlight didn't reach the dark corners at the end of the room, she knew her friends wouldn't be so cruel as to hide there in the pitch black.



The faint smell of wood smoke filled the air. Then she saw the glowing embers of a small fire that had been lit in an old metal drawer, a little way inside the room. Someone must have lit it trying to keep warm, she realized. Riley felt bad. If this was the best place someone had to call home, that was so sad. Then the thought passed through her mind that whoever was living here could be nearby—and they might be dangerous. She shivered.

Turning to go back into the corridor, she saw with a jolt of fear that someone was standing there, blocking her exit. Through the cracked panes of glass in the door she could see they had straggly, long black hair. Their face was hidden because they were leaning forwards, staring down at the floor. Finding it hard to breathe, she cupped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from screaming. Who was this person? It couldn't be Drew, who had chestnut hair tied back in a neat ponytail, and both Ryan and Noah had short, brown hair. The figure on the other side wasn't moving. It was just waiting there. Was this the person living in this awful room? Did they know she was there?

Pulling out her phone, she hit Ryan's number. To her alarm, there was no signal. Now she really started to panic. Whoever was on the other side of the door didn't seem to notice her presence because their head was still bent. Riley stepped back into the shadows, in case they suddenly looked up and made eye contact with her. She had a terrible, foreboding sense that if she looked at their face, she'd be snared like an animal caught in a trap. Her legs and hands trembled as she pressed the off button on the flashlight. Silently, she prayed the person on the other side of the door hadn't seen her.

"Riley, Riley." She heard Ryan and Drew calling her name. The blackness in front of her was so consuming that she couldn't see her hand in front of her face. She wanted to call out to them, to warn them about the person blocking her exit from the ward. She turned the flashlight back on and shone it in the direction of the door. Whoever had been there was gone. The relief rushed from her, propelling her forwards. She ran for the door, threw it open, and crashed straight into Noah. They both screamed, as did Drew.

Ryan laughed. “Oh my God, you got us good,” he said. “That scared me—why were you hiding in there on your own, you weirdo?”

“I thought you were inside. I heard voices but when I went in, it was empty. Then I turned around and there was a person standing on the other side. Did you see them?”

Noah shook his head. “We haven’t seen anyone; we’ve been all over this place looking for you.”

“They had long, straggly hair,” Riley went on. “I couldn’t see their face.”

“Must have been some homeless dude. Maybe they stay here.”

What Ryan suggested made sense. In any case, it was easier to accept than what she had been thinking. “I don’t know, maybe. Whoever it was, they had a fire burning in the old ward that was almost out. Hey, don’t leave me alone again. In fact, I think we should leave. That person might be dangerous.”

Drew shook her head. “Are you kidding? This place is amazing. I want to go up in the tower—apparently some famous actor’s mother killed herself up there back in the day. There’s four of us. Even if it’s a drunken homeless person they won’t want to bother us, not when we have two big guys to protect us.”

Riley shrugged. “Okay.” Deep down inside her stomach she knew that it wasn’t okay. It wasn’t okay at all. They shouldn’t be here, and whoever she’d seen didn’t think so either. Why had Drew had this sudden change of heart, when she’d been so scared before? Now she was practically buzzing with excitement. Riley didn’t understand it. All she wanted to do was go home.

They walked in a line down the hallway. The air was much cooler now. Ryan held the EMF meter which kept going crazy, and Noah had the digital recorder. As they made their way in and out of rooms, Riley felt exhausted, as if she was carrying a heavy load on her back. Her stomach churned like she was walking on a boat and didn’t have her sea legs. Her instincts were screaming at her to get out of this place, but fear and a sense of loyalty kept her with her friends. She was petrified of seeing the dark-haired figure again and so she had no choice but to follow them.

The rooms further down the corridor were much plusher than those they'd been inside before. They must have been for the wealthier patients; they were more like hotel rooms. Although there was no furniture left, the walls were decorated in soothing pastel, floral colors. The carpets, which had decayed into sodden, spongy clumps, must have been good quality to have survived this long.

Finally finding her voice, Riley spoke. "Marilyn Monroe stayed here."

Ryan turned to look at her. "She did, in this room?"

"I don't know what room, you idiot, but I read that she stayed here for a while before the end of her marriage and the whole Kennedy thing blew up."

"Imagine being here because you're unwell. You go to the bathroom and see Marilyn Monroe coming out of her room." Ryan shook his head. "You'd think you had either died and gone to heaven or completely lost it."

Riley always felt sad whenever she thought about the lonely life that Marilyn had led. She would've been a good friend to her, would've looked out for her, if she'd been around back then. She peered through the cracked window down onto the overgrown gardens.

"Whatever room she was in, Marilyn would have looked down on this view. I bet it was much nicer when she was here. Isn't there supposed to be a pool house? Do you think they left her alone or do you think they'd have kept bothering her for autographs? It's so sad what happened. It makes my heart ache just thinking about her being so lonely."

"It was a hospital," replied Drew. "I hope they left her alone and helped her find some peace whilst she was here."

A loud metallic clatter from above made Drew and Noah shriek. Ryan jumped, and, silent with terror, Riley felt her heart race so hard it threatened to explode from her chest. This place scared her beyond belief, and she was sure that if she screamed, whoever she'd seen earlier would come back for her.

Ryan whispered, "What was that?"

"Time to leave is what that was," replied Riley, her voice so low it was barely audible.

They stood huddled together, waiting for something else to happen. It didn't.

"This is an old wreck—things are going to be falling to pieces! It's why they're knocking it down. Look at you lot, screaming like a bunch of losers." Ryan laughed. "Come on, you pussies, let's go take a look at the tower, get some photos and make our way out."

A voice whispered so softly in Riley's ear that she couldn't be sure that she'd heard it. "Don't go in the tower." It was gentle, like a cool breeze against the soft skin of her neck.

Turning around, there was no one there; whoever had given her that warning had gone or had never been there in the first place. For a split second she wondered if she was having some kind of episode, a mental breakdown. Was being inside this old asylum affecting her more than she could have ever imagined? Or were there actually ghosts here?

They carried on walking, all of them a little edgy after the loud noise. Investigating a room at the far end of the corridor, they saw a huge chair, its leather worn away so much that there was a fern growing out of the damp material. It resembled a dental chair, only it had worn leather straps, one either side of it.

"Oh Lord, I thought they'd have taken away all of this stuff," whispered Riley.

In the corner was an overturned, rusted wheelchair. Riley poked Ryan with her finger. "Do you think that's what fell over and made that clatter against the broken tiles on the floor?"

He was busy snapping photos. "Could be—how did it fall though?"

Riley didn't want to think about the how.

Noah pushed Drew forwards. "Go get in the treatment chair, Drew, so we can take a photo, pretend you've been lobotomized."

Drew giggled. Showing off, she flicked her long hair over her shoulder, gave Noah her best seductive look and clambered onto the chair. "Ooh," she wailed, "this is damp and feels weird."

"Get off there," hissed Riley, who had a bad feeling inside her stomach.

Instead, Drew lay down and spread out her arms, rolling her eyes to the back of her head pretending to be getting electric shocks, her body jerking. Noah laughed, and Ryan joined in.

Riley, who was horrified, shouted, “Get the fuck off it, Drew. Have some respect.”

A crack filled the air and a large chunk of plaster plummeted down from the ceiling, catching the side of Drew’s head. She let out a high-pitched screech as the masonry sliced open her temple. Scrambling to get off the chair, she slipped on the damp leather and fell forwards, landing on the floor with a loud thud.

“Ouch,” she cried, “I’m bleeding.”

Noah helped her up, a look of panic on his face. He shone his flashlight at the cut on her head.

“It’s just a scratch. It’s more bruised than anything. Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay. I was almost killed.”

Riley shook her head; Drew wasn’t a drama major for nothing. “You’re fine, it’s just bleeding a little.” She pulled a scrunchie from her jeans pocket. It was the only thing she had that she could use to dab the blood.

“Thanks, but what if I get some disease?”

Riley shook her head. “We’re not in the Amazon rainforest, I’m sure you’ll be fine. You shouldn’t have been messing around like that. It’s disrespectful to the patients who lived and died here. We don’t know what kind of horrible torture they went through strapped on that chair.”

“People died here?” Drew replied. “I thought this was one of those rich places like the ones where famous people go for rehab.”

“Yes, people died here. Before it was a private hospital it was a state lunatic asylum for the criminally insane. There were lots of deaths—natural, suicide and murder.”

“Murder?”

As the words left Drew’s mouth they seemed to freeze in the air, and Riley realized the room had turned icy cold, so her breath was a visible fog. They were no longer alone.

Feeling an impending sense of doom, Riley shouted, “Run!”

Ryan didn’t need telling twice. “She’s right. We have to go, someone... or something is coming.”

A low growl pierced the air. Drew ran out first, then Noah with Ryan close behind. Riley was frozen to the spot. Her legs shook, and she couldn’t think of a time that she’d ever been this scared. The others had run off and left her behind. Once again, she was alone.

\* \* \*

It was like a cartoon chase. Drew led the way and Noah followed close behind her. Ryan came thundering down the stairs, almost slamming into them both as he reached the bottom.

“Where’s Riley?” Drew whispered, breathing heavily.

“Behind me.” Ryan turned around, but Riley was not behind him. “Oh, crap, she was like a nanosecond ago.”

All three of them stared at each other, eyes wide, out of breath, hearts beating wildly.

“Who—or what—was that?” Ryan asked.

“I don’t know,” replied Drew. “Did you see them?”

He nodded. “I thought I saw someone. It terrified me.”

Noah stood at the bottom of the stairs, one hand gripping the rail. “Riley?” It wasn’t a shout, more of a subtle whisper. There was no answer. “Riley?” he tried again, louder this time.

Ryan grabbed his arm, lifting a finger to his lips. From somewhere above came a muffled dragging, shuffling sound.

“Oh God, we can’t leave her up there.” Drew was trembling. She took out her phone. “We need to call the cops—what if it’s that weird person she saw? They might be dangerous.”

“We’ll get in trouble; we can’t call them,” insisted Ryan. “And isn’t her dad working tonight? He’ll go batshit with us if he finds out we’ve been sneaking around in here. We’ll all get arrested.”