

A completely gripping crime thriller
Detective Morgan Brookes Book 4

FIRST GIRL TO DIE



HELEN PHIFER

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A COMPLETELY GRIPPING CRIME THRILLER

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Acknowledgements

For Emily Gowers, thank you for being so amazing.

PROLOGUE

The sky from the patch of damp, mossy grass outside of Rydal Caves looked as if it was cloaked in thick, black velvet. Tiny stars glittered throughout, as if they were diamanté that had been painstakingly sewn across it by hand to make it sparkle. The group of teenagers were huddled not too far from the entrance to the caves. Gusts of wind kept carrying away the tinny music playing from a mobile phone, distorting it, but they didn't care. They giggled and huddled closer to keep warm. The vodka they were drinking straight from the bottles warmed their insides enough to heat their hands and make their thoughts fuzzy.

The circular edge of the full moon as it appeared at the very tip of Loughrigg Fell cast a silvery glow down onto the caves and the teenagers. As it rose slowly above them it was as if they were the characters of a play on the centre stage, the moon their spotlight. As the alcohol diminished, so did their inhibitions. Brad, the only boy amongst the four girls, stood up. Stumbling and crashing his way through the bracken, he clambered up the hillside until he reached the top of the cave. He was so glad he'd come tonight. He very nearly hadn't, but he was having a great time. As he stumbled towards the edge of the cave, he heard the voices of his friends carried towards him, and he teetered on the edge, grinning down at them. Cupping his hands to his mouth he yelled, 'Look at

me I'm the king of the world.' A loud noise from behind startled him and he turned to see what it was. The grass was slippery and then he was sliding, unable to stop himself, his trainers not holding traction. He looked back to see her watching him and then he was flying through the air to a cacophony of high-pitched screams as the wind carried the sound towards him. The ear-piercing screams echoed around the fells and then he hit the rocks with such speed and force that they stopped in a split second, and he heard nothing more.

ONE

Detective Constable Morgan Brookes had woken up early to the sound of the dawn chorus and had taken her morning coffee out into the garden to drink, along with the newspaper. It was so lovely to hear the blackbirds and song thrushes chirping and calling to each other. This was more like it. As much as she loved the dark autumn nights it was nice to see the sky bright in the morning; it made her early starts a little more bearable. She scanned the paper to see if there was any sign of Gary Marks's capture, but there was nothing. He had managed to escape from his prison guards back in October, while on a visit to the hospital, and hadn't been seen since. A part of her hoped he was dead, that he'd fallen foul of an accident and because he had no ID on him, hadn't been identified. She wasn't a bad person, but he was, and her life would feel so much safer if she knew there was no way he could come back to hurt her or anyone she cared about.

When she reached Rydal Falls police station, she wondered what the day would hold in store for her. Thank God the small town had been relatively quiet since they had arrested that horrid man for the murder and kidnap of two little girls. Morgan still had bad dreams about not being able to save Charlie Standish, but it helped a little knowing that she had rescued Macy Wallace from the same fate. Sometimes she wondered if Macy had saved her

and given her a spark for life she hadn't felt since her mum's death. The kid was tough and relentless. Morgan still saw her every couple of weeks. She would turn up at the police station with a packet of biscuits or some home-baked fairy cakes covered in pink icing and sprinkles for Morgan, who repaid the favour by giving her lots of chocolate in return. Every day since Macy's case Morgan went to work hoping that there had been no murders. She would be quite happy to never have to work a murder investigation ever again. As she walked up the back staircase to the third floor and the CID office, she heard Amy's and Des's voices as they bickered with each other, and she smiled. That was good; it meant nothing too serious had come in overnight. Life was pleasant at the moment; she was happy working and spending time with her friends. Together with Ben, her boss, and Amy and Des, she had taken to attending the weekly quiz at The Black Dog and they were still to come higher than last, but it wasn't about the winning, as Ben regularly told them, it was the taking part. Before she could step onto the third floor, she heard a flurry of heavy boots below as officers rushed out of the back door to answer the latest emergency call which had come in. As she walked into the office, she was surprised to see Ben's office empty.

'Where's the boss?'

'No idea. I thought he might have been with you?'

Amy grinned at her, and she shook her head. 'Why would he be with me?'

'Because he left the pub with you last night. I thought you might have been consoling him over him getting that question wrong about what year England won the Rugby World Cup. He looked pretty devastated about it.'

'He looked pretty drunk more like it. No, I didn't go home with him. I dropped him off at his house though. Do you think he's okay?'

Morgan's phone began to vibrate in her pocket, and she pulled it out to see Ben's name flashing across the screen.

'Morning, are you having a day off?'

'No, I slept in. My alarm never went off. I'll be in soon.'

'No worries. Do you need a lift?'

'That's what I was phoning for. I left my car at the pub.'

'Right, well I'll come get you, but you can buy the coffees.'

She hung up, and Amy smiled.

'I'll have a hazelnut latte, and Des will have a semi-skimmed giraffe milk skinny cappuccino.'

Des glared at her. 'Sod off, Amy, I told you I'm not vegan. I'm not even vegetarian now. I'll have a normal cappuccino, please, Morgan.'

Morgan turned and made her way back out to the stairs, wishing Ben had phoned a few minutes earlier, before she'd found a parking space and trudged up three flights. As she reached her car, the radio in her other pocket began to ring. She looked at it, somehow knowing that her morning was about to get a whole lot worse than having to fight for a parking space.

'Hello.'

'It's the control room. We can't get hold of Sergeant Matthews. Do you know if he's around?'

'He might not have his radio. I'm about to see him. Should I give him a message?'

'Yes, please. Can you ask him to attend Priory Grove? He's the only negotiator working today for South. There's a teacher threatening to jump out of a window.'

'Blimey, they must be having a bad day. Yes, I'll let him know.'

'Thanks, Morgan.'

Morgan ran the last few metres to her car and drove off towards Ben's house a lot faster than she would have usually,

wondering what had happened to tip the poor teacher over the edge.

As she turned into Ben's street, he was already walking towards her car. She pulled over, and he opened the door and got in.

'They need a negotiator. You're the only one on for South.'

The look of horror on his face didn't go amiss. 'Where?'

'Priory Grove School.'

'What? Are you winding me up? Isn't that a junior school?'

'Yes, it's a primary school and no, I'm not. There's a teacher threatening to jump out of a window.'

'Christ, and I thought I was having a rough morning.'

She glanced at him. He had a five o'clock shadow and his eyes were watery. He looked sad, weary, or maybe was he just hung-over. He'd been drunk last night, but not steaming; he'd still been able to walk without falling over and had managed to open his front door without too much of a fight.

'Are you okay, Ben?'

'Cindy's birthday.'

He didn't say anything else, and Morgan didn't ask. His wife had been dead for six years, and he still carried the guilt around his shoulders like a heavy, leaden cloak that he couldn't shrug free.

TWO

The school, which was situated behind a busy road and looked out onto a funeral home, was a hub of activity. There were no children around, which was a blessing. There were two police vans with lights flashing and a car. Ben jumped out of Morgan's car and shouted at the huddle of officers who looked unsure of what to do.

'Turn those bloody lights off, now.'

The drivers of the vehicles ran towards their respective vans, and the flashing blue lights died one after the other, returning the street to seeming normality.

Ben looked at Morgan. 'Christ, some poor bastard is having the worst day of their life and they're illuminating the street and putting them under the spotlight. Could they draw any more attention to the plight of whoever this is?'

He strode towards the front gates. Cain was inside the entrance to the school, talking to a tall woman who Morgan recognised from a previous case as the head teacher, Andrea Hart. She hurried to keep up with Ben. He was on a mission. As they got closer, she saw Andrea look at her with an expression of relief on her face and she hoped she wasn't expecting her to be the one to end this.

'Morgan, thank you for coming.'

'Andrea, this is Ben, he's a trained negotiator.'

Andrea looked at him, then held her hand out, shaking his.

'I'm not sure what to do. Brittany is a lovely girl and a very highly thought of teacher.'

'Where is she now?'

'In the staffroom, upstairs by the window. She's acting really strange; she's mumbling and talking rubbish. To be honest with you, I think she may have taken some kind of recreational drug because this is completely out of character for her.'

Morgan felt a chill settle over her shoulders. Her friend from school was a teacher here, and there weren't a lot of Brittany's in Rydal Falls. 'Brittany Alcott?'

'Yes, do you know her?'

She nodded, feeling her throat constrict. 'Yes, she was one of my best friends at school.'

Ben glanced at Morgan. 'You might be better speaking to her then. Normally, I like to talk to people on the phone at first, but if she's taken something then it's going to have to be face to face.'

Morgan shook her head. 'I don't know what to say.'

'I'll tell you.' He asked Andrea, 'Can you take us to the staffroom?'

Andrea nodded and led them into the school. Ben turned to Cain. 'Get fire and rescue here ASAP, they might be needed.'

A loud crash followed by a heavy thud came from above them. Morgan followed Andrea through the long corridor until they reached a door that Andrea pulled open. There was a steep staircase. Morgan took the stairs fast and then stopped on a landing where a blonde-haired woman, the same age as Morgan, was standing outside the door to the staffroom.

'Paige, this is Morgan, she's a policewoman. She went to school with Brittany.'

Morgan realised that Andrea was now pinning all hope on her shoulders, as if by knowing Brittany she could save her. There was another loud crash from inside the room, and the two women