

A twisty and heart-stopping crime thriller
Detective Morgan Brookes Book 13

TWO BROKEN GIRLS

HELEN PHIFER

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A TWISTY AND HEART-STOPPING
CRIME THRILLER

DETECTIVE MORGAN BROOKES

BOOK 13

HELEN PHIFER

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Little did she know that this morning would be the last time she would look in the mirror. It was the last time she'd spend thirty minutes agonising over the shade of her lipstick, the style of her hair and whether she should wear the boots or the trainers to college. If she knew that this was going to be her choice of clothes for all of eternity, would she have chosen differently?

He looked down at what he was wearing, in contrast. He would be quite happy if he died now and had to haunt the world dressed like this. It would, he supposed, be quite fitting for a man like him. She was rushing around her bedroom now, curtains open wide, Taylor Swift loudly filtering down onto the street through the open window. Everyone listened to Swift's music – he didn't see the attraction, but he wasn't a woman and didn't appreciate the lyrics. His stepdaughter listened to her too, as well as his ex who he thought had got her courage and inspiration to end their relationship from one of her many songs. He wasn't too sad when his ex had found the strength to tell him it was over, as it had been coming to an end anyway. She was just a good person to hide behind; loud, funny, friendly. He supposed she had taken him under her wing and tried to bring out the best in him, and she had succeeded for a little while. If he was honest with himself, he was somewhat relieved that she had called it a day. He felt as if he could breathe again, was free to

take up where he'd abruptly left off. The thing was, he thought, you can't keep who you really are bottled up like a jar of ketchup at the back of the store cupboard. He was now, and always had been, a bit of a predator, collecting girlfriends – then victims – like trophies.

He looked across at the small wooden box in which he kept his little keepsakes, and he smiled; the engraved lid had the name *Sarah* faintly written on it. Sarah had been his first. Whenever anyone asked about it, he told them it belonged to his gran, end of that story and no further questions asked. He loved collecting little trinkets that fit inside of his box. What could he add to them? He hoped she was wearing the small gold cross today. It would be a fitting reminder of his time with her; and it would make an excellent addition to his collection.

He looked at his watch. He had all the time in the world.

She would leave the house at some point, there was no hurry. Her mum had left the house to go to work, and he knew she wouldn't be back until at least four, maybe even later. Her mum worked full time so that gave him at least six glorious hours of not worrying about anyone coming back.

He had the car window down, and the spring air was warm today. It was heating up nicely after the miserable wet winter they'd suffered through. He closed his eyes, the warmth from the sun relaxing him nicely. He wouldn't fall asleep, though; he was just resting them, as his old dad used to say. He was alert to everything, the traffic, the sound of a lawnmower a street away, the music coming from her bedroom. He had to be careful, as he could be lulled into a false sense of security, and he knew that it would be a fatal mistake if he did fall asleep. He was too tightly wound for what he was about to do: sleep was not an option. He was merely trying to keep his blood pressure down and keep calm – he had to pull this off with no mistakes.

He was a little rusty, but he was sure it was like riding a bicycle. Once he got back in the saddle he would be right back where he left off. He reached out one hand and trailed his fingers across the old, worn rope that had served him well. He didn't do knives or blood, not in large amounts as he couldn't bear the mess. What he liked was a nice, clean kill with no fuss.

Once you started using weapons it began to get very messy. Besides he hated the smell of blood, that coppery tang turned his stomach. Choking someone to death took a little more strength. It was more intimate too because you had to get really close to them. And he enjoyed the smell of fear that would seep from the pores of his victims too much to spoil it by tainting it with the stench of blood.

Lost in his thoughts it took him a moment to realise the music had stopped. He opened his eyes, pushed the rope into his pocket and tucked the small wooden box underneath the front seat of the car. He popped the button for the engine and then jumped out of the car. Lifting the bonnet, he stood there staring down into the engine. Just in time, too, as the door to her house slammed shut. She walked past him, headphones on, backpack slung over her shoulder, then paused and turned back. 'Oh hi, is everything okay?' She pointed to his car, and he shrugged.

'Hi, Melody, it's making a funny noise but I'm not sure what it is. I don't know anything about cars.'

She shrugged. 'Me either, sorry.'

When she smiled at him, it was such a beautiful smile it made him feel a little sad that out of all the people he could have chosen he had chosen her. Then he pushed his fingers into his pocket and felt the rough hemp rope, and his sadness lifted.

He grinned back at her. 'Don't worry. Do you want a lift to college? Well, I can't guarantee we'll get there on time if it breaks down, but I'm heading that way.'

She didn't even pause, which made him even sadder. She turned around and walked towards the front seat of the car. 'Yes please, I hate the bus.'

He stayed hidden behind the bonnet of the car so she couldn't see the gleeful expression that had spread across his face. Sucking in a deep breath he stopped smiling to himself and slammed the bonnet down. The voice inside his head repeatedly whispering *keep it cool, keep it cool*, he got inside the car, pressed the button and the engine turned over as smoothly as always.

Melody slipped her headphones around her neck. 'Sounds okay to me.'

He nodded. 'It does when I first turn it on, then after a couple of miles it starts to make a funny clunking sound. But let's see how far we get. Don't let me stop your entertainment, are you a Swiftie too?' He pointed to the Beats headphones, and she smiled at him.

'I'm listening to an audiobook, I love them. It's a cool way to start the day, getting an extra hit of education, but yes, I do love her as well.'

'Well, I'd be a fool to say if it isn't.'

She slid the headphones back onto her ears and stared out of the window as he drove out of the street. Damn if he didn't have even more regrets about what he was going to do to her very soon, but it was too late – he had set it in motion and couldn't back down. If he let her go and she told anyone about his broken-down car, they could tie his *modus operandi* to the last woman he had strangled and dumped in woodland. He hoped they wouldn't, that their bodies were far enough away, but he knew that the team here in Rydal Falls was very good, they had more experience with murders than most inner-city cops. He wasn't prepared to get caught before he'd finished what he wanted to accomplish, even though the older he got the worse he felt about it. He glanced at his eyes in the rear-view mirror and scolded himself. He had a plan, and he had to stick to it.

Detective Constable Morgan Brookes had decided to walk to work this morning, much to Ben's amusement.

'Are you feeling ill, do you need to go see a doctor?' he'd said. As her partner and work colleague, he knew first-hand that this was a very rare occurrence.

'What, because I want to walk to work? Don't be so cheeky. It's a gorgeous morning and I want to start exercising a little bit. I hate the gym. I equally hate running too, but walking doesn't seem too bad. Why don't you walk with me?'

He paused as if thinking about it, then shook his head. 'Absolutely not, Brookes, I hate walking as much as you hate running.'

'Suit yourself.'

'You haven't made some crazy bet with Cain again, have you? Because we know how that one ended. He got himself stabbed to get out of it.'

Morgan's eyes almost popped out of her head in horror. Cain had been stabbed and left bleeding at the bottom of a staircase when they were hunting for the guy who'd killed Cora Dalton, leaving her body at Castlerigg Stone Circle. 'You did not just say that.'

'I did.'

He was grinning at her, and she loved it when he grinned. His eyes crinkled and his whole face lit up, sending a rush of overpowering love straight to her heart like a direct dopamine hit. She decided there and then that she needed to make him laugh a lot more. He was so serious a lot of the time because of the high pressures from his job. Seeing him relaxed as he wandered around in his Calvins and a washed-out T-shirt had her questioning whether she should spend the twenty minutes it would take her to walk to work in the bedroom instead.

‘Well, good luck, I’ll see you on the other side when you’re all sweaty. Make sure you have a tin of deodorant in your bag.’

And with that statement every ounce of passion she’d been feeling seconds ago was wiped clean. ‘Bugger off, I will not. See you at work.’

She grabbed her backpack, turned on the *outside walk* mode on her watch and watched the green numbers count down then give a little beep.

‘See you soon, I love you. Are you stopping off for coffee on the way?’

She turned around and gave him the middle finger, which made him laugh even louder. Then she was out of the front door, slamming it shut behind her loudly for effect.

She had no idea why it amused everyone whenever she tried a different method of exercise, and then she smiled to herself. Actually, she did. She complained about it nonstop. Today, she had on a pair of trainers but had left a pair of Docs in her locker at work ready to change into. Her trusty Docs were a part of her identity and had saved her arse on more than a few occasions. The spring sunshine felt good as it warmed her face, and it wasn’t hot enough to burn her fair skin yet. Her copper-coloured hair was in a high ponytail and she wondered if she should have put it in a messy bun instead, but she wasn’t planning on getting all sweaty like Ben had mentioned – it would ruin her perfect winged eyeliner – she was merely taking a brisk walk to work.

She ducked past Mrs Walker’s bay window, not wanting to get caught up in a conversation about the rising crime rates before the start of her shift, or what the man a couple of doors down had been up to. Morgan didn’t like that

kind of gossip, purely because she wasn't interested. Work gossip was far more entertaining and a bit of fun. Cain would be a great match for Mrs Walker; he was her constant source of who was having an affair, who had got themselves in trouble, who was up to what at work. As she reached the high street and saw The Coffee Pot, the lure of a latte was too much. Deciding that she wasn't carrying a tray of coffees to work but could treat herself to one, she popped inside.

She was surprised to find it so quiet, considering it was almost lunchtime – she must have beat the rush. Jade was smiling at her from behind the counter.

'How many?'

'Just one, please.'

'Oh, are you not at work? Should I put it in a cup, and you can sit down at a table like a civilised customer and not rush out with it?'

Morgan laughed. 'I hate to ruin your day, but I'm definitely not civilised, unhinged more like.'

Jade shook her head. 'You are most certainly not unhinged. Have you seen my two o'clock customers? There's three of them come in every day and not one of them can speak a word of sense, but they turn up rain or shine and I love them dearly for that.'

Morgan snorted with laughter. 'You're just trying to make me feel better.'

She shrugged. 'Come back at two, that will definitely make you feel better.'

She passed a pink cardboard cup across the counter towards Morgan. 'Cake?'

Morgan surveyed the cake cabinet. There were tray bakes of every flavour, cupcakes, brownies and cookies. She let out a sigh. 'My heart says one of each, my trousers are saying not today, Satan.'

Jade crossed her arms. 'I think you should follow your heart because those trousers are lying to you.'

'I'm okay, thanks, I've got myself a little packed lunch for when I get to work.'

Morgan double-clicked the side button on her phone to pay for the coffee, and Jade shook her head. 'This one's on the house. I couldn't do what you do for all the money in the world.'

Morgan felt her cheeks burning; she wasn't good at taking kindness and compliments.

'Are you sure?'

'One hundred per cent.'

'Thank you so much, that's really kind of you.'

She left the café feeling a little overwhelmed; random acts of kindness were so lovely. She would be sure to pay it forward at some point today.

Her phone began to vibrate, and she saw Ben's face. Taking a sip of her coffee, she slid her finger across the screen. 'What's up, bragging you got to work first.'

'No, just checking you don't want picking up?'

'I'm good, thanks. See you soon.'

She hung up. She was going to sip her coffee and enjoy the walk before the stress of whatever was waiting for her at the station took over.

She heard the sirens before she saw them, and felt her heart skip a beat. There were multiple sirens, meaning multiple vans off to an IR: an immediate response.

It was too nice a day to have to deal with death and sadness right at the beginning of her shift, and surely, they had to catch a break at some point. She was still having nightmares about High Wraith Cottage and seeing Margery's body swaying from the tree in the middle of a raging storm.

Arthur Brown walked his dog by the riverside at the same time each day, and he had since he'd got the little pug as a puppy. He had never thought he'd take to owning a dog, but his daughter had turned up with it a month after his wife had died and told him it was his. She had brought everything a dog needed, plus more teddy bears than it knew what to do with, and then she'd left. Leaving him staring at the tiny puppy sitting in the cardboard box. It had stared right back at him, and once he'd got over the initial shock of how ugly it was, combined with the shock that his daughter had done this to him, he had fallen in love with it.

Scooping its trembling body into his arms he'd cradled it, stroking it and talking to it. Wrapping it in a soft blanket to keep it warm, he had marvelled at how soft it was and how he now had to be responsible for the small animal, which was huge for Arthur because he'd never owned a dog in his life. The first thing he had done was to think of a name for it. He had placed it on the floor and the poor thing had tried to run after him, but ended up rolling around on its belly, which had made him laugh so much that tears had trickled down his cheeks and he decided that Tumbles was the perfect name.

Now as Tumbles sniffed and grunted his way along the riverbank, Arthur unclipped the lead from his harness and let him off to have a run around. He wouldn't go far, he never did – always having to keep Arthur in his line of sight – but Tumbles took off running towards the wooded area, which puzzled him. Arthur thought nothing of it until he heard the familiar bark of his dog, and he picked up his pace, calling his name repeatedly, but he didn't come running back like he usually did. Getting annoyed, Arthur made his way through the small patch of oak trees and stopped in his tracks, not sure what he was looking at.

Lying on the floor, curled up at the base of the tree nearest to the riverbank, was a woman. He blinked and told himself it must be one of those shop mannequin things; there was no reason for a woman to be lying in the woods. For one thing it wasn't warm enough and well, it wasn't that kind of place. The dog was standing near to her, still barking, and reluctantly he forced his feet to move towards whatever it was.

'Hello, are you okay?'

There was no movement, no sign of life.

'Tumbles, come here now.'

The dog looked at him then turned back to the woman and carried on barking. As Arthur got nearer, he could see she had something around her neck, and he realised it was a pair of those oversized headphones all the kids were using nowadays. He saw her hands, they were folded neatly across her stomach, and she had a dazzling, glittery shade of sky-blue nail varnish on her nails. Her head was turned away from him, exposing an angry red mark on the skin around her neck underneath the headphones.

Arthur wanted to get out of there, afraid that she might turn her head and scream as if he had done this to her. His hands shaking, he felt in his pocket for the phone he rarely used and remembered he had left it charging on the kitchen side. *Damn you, Arthur, all you had to do was unplug it.*

He heard his dead wife's voice inside his head, and he pleaded with her what to do. *Go make sure she doesn't need your help is what you should do.* He looked around, feeling somewhat like a voyeur, walking towards a young,