ONE LEFT ALIVE

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bookouture

Published by Bookouture in 2020

An imprint of Storyfire Ltd.
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.bookouture.com

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ISBN: 978-1-83888-849-7
eBook ISBN: 978-1-83888-848-0

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CHAPTER ONE

Police Officer Morgan Brookes was driving around aimlessly, trying to get to know the vast rural area that she was responsible for until the end of her shift. Lifting her wrist, she looked at her watch: only another seven hours to go. She loved it here, was grateful she got to work in such a beautiful part of the Lake District. But God it was boring being on your own. She much preferred it when she was in company with another officer. Her colleague, Dan, had been her tutor since leaving her training at headquarters. They had spent hours in each other's company and become friends; despite his terrible jokes and sometimes blasé attitude, she missed his company.

A burst of static as the radio came to life made her jump.

'5129 we have an IR at Lake View on Easdale Road, Grasmere. A suspected suicide. There's a female hanging from a tree.'

Morgan felt a surge of blood rush through her veins, as the adrenalin kicked in. She hadn't attended a suicide on her own before, but she had been to several when she was completing her training and in company with a more experienced officer. She was ready for this.

'On my way. I'm single crewed though. Are ambulance travelling?'

'Yes, we'll get another patrol travelling as well. You're the nearest.'

She was glad to hear backup was coming, as she put on her blues and turned the van around, speeding through the lanes to get back to the road she hadn't long left. Morgan knew where Easdale Road was; she'd driven along it already today. Unsure which house was Lake View, she hoped it would have one of those fancy slate

plaques outside the gates, which most of the wealthier houses in the Lakes had. She slowed the van so she could read each one. It was a nightmare; she couldn't see any house numbers and was relying on a name plate. Passing a cluster of houses without spotting the name or the female figure control had mentioned, she radioed back.

'Do you have me on ARL?'

'Yes, we do. According to this map you're about half a minute away, keep driving, it's the next house on your right.'

Putting her foot down, Morgan sped up until she found the sign for Lake View and turned into the long driveway. The van rattled as she drove too fast along the narrow drive. Just ahead, in front of the large house, she could see the body dangling from a tree and her stomach did a complete flip. A teenage boy was standing underneath, trying to hold the feet up with his shoulders and her heart felt for him. What an awful thing to find. A phone was clamped to his ear, and the look of relief on his face as she jumped out and ran towards him seared into her mind.

'Please help me, are you on your own?'

'Help is coming. They'll be here any minute. Who are you?'

One look at the woman hanging from the tree told Morgan that it didn't matter how long the other patrol took; there was nothing they could do for her. Her glazed eyes were staring blankly into the sunset; her small frame looked lost hanging from the branch of the large oak tree. There was a gentle breeze blowing her shoulder-length blonde hair across her face as her body swayed in the breeze. On the branch next to her was a worn child's rope swing and Morgan wondered if she had young children. It was desperately sad; she looked too young and beautiful to be dead.

'I'm Harrison.'

'Harrison, you're doing a great job. Do you know where there are any ladders?'

He nodded.

'I'll take over, you go get them. We'll need them to cut her down.'

She grabbed hold of the woman's legs and the boy ran towards an outbuilding. He came back moments later carrying a stepladder, his face red and eyes brimming with tears.

'Is this your mum?'

He shook his head. 'No, it's my girlfriend's mum. Oh God, why has she done this? Is she alive?'

Morgan couldn't be the one to call it even though she knew the woman was dead; she needed a paramedic to confirm it, and she didn't want him to think she wasn't trying to help despite the hopelessness of the situation.

'Harrison, I'm Morgan. I don't think she is, but the paramedics will be able to tell us for sure.'

The sound of an approaching siren filled the air and Morgan had never been so glad to see her colleague, Dan Hunt, in her life as he parked the van, leaving the flashing lights on, and ran towards her.

He took one look at the woman and shook his head, confirming what she already suspected.

Harrison had put the stepladder out. Dan climbed up it and pressed his fingers to the side of the woman's neck.

'There's no pulse. How long ago did you find her?'

Harrison shrugged. 'I don't know. It seems like hours ago, but probably ten minutes.'

Dan pulled a Swiss Army knife from his cargo trouser pocket and began to saw at the rope above the knot.

'Morgan, she's going to be a dead weight when she drops, can you both catch her?'

She looked at the boy. His complexion had lost all colour and his eyes were streaming tears now, but he nodded. They managed to catch hold of her. Dan grabbed her underneath her shoulders as the rope gave way and Morgan and Harrison took the weight of her legs and laid her gently onto the ground.

Harrison let out a loud sob. She put her arm around him, leading him to the van as the paramedics arrived in a first response vehicle

and the scene became a flurry of activity. She heard Dan request a sergeant and being told the duty detective sergeant was already en route to attend the scene. Helping Harrison into the back of the van, where the windows were tinted, she sat him facing away from the direction of the tragic scene, where she could see the paramedic shaking her head at Dan. Morgan's heart felt heavy; this was terrible. Any sudden death was awful, but for this boy to be the one to find this woman was so unfair.

'Harrison you've been very brave. Can you tell me what that lady is called?'

He nodded. 'Olivia Potter.'

'How old was she?'

He was sitting with his head buried into his arms, which were balanced on his long legs, and shrugged.

'Not sure. Forties?'

'Is your girlfriend home?'

'No, I don't think so. The car isn't here. I didn't think anyone was home when I got here. I had a heart attack when I turned and saw Olivia like that. I didn't notice her when I arrived, I was checking my phone to see if Bronte had messaged back. Why, why would she do that? It's not right, is it? She was always so happy and chilled, not the kind of person who would do anything like that.'

He looked up at her, the tears were flowing freely again, and Morgan reached out to take hold of his hand.

'I'm so sorry, Harrison, that must have been a terrible shock for you. But I can't say. I don't know why she would want to do that.'

He nodded. 'Oh God, poor Bronte is going to be broken. She is really close to her mum.'

'Who else lives here?'

'Saul, Bronte's dad. Bronte, and her younger sister, Beatrix.'

'Do you have a number for Saul?'

He shook his head. 'I've got Bronte's.'

Morgan smiled. 'How old is Bronte?'

'Sixteen. She's not speaking to me because I liked Sophie Wood's Snapchat. That's why I came here to tell her it was only a like, it doesn't mean I want to run away with her and get married. She gets very jealous.'

Morgan nodded. 'Ah, teenage girls. It's a tough time being a teenager, isn't it. How old are you, Harrison?'

'Almost eighteen. What should I do? Do I message Bronte and tell her what's happened?'

'No, I don't think that's a good idea. I need to speak to Saul first; maybe you could find out where they are for me. Tell them you need them to come home, that there's been an emergency.'

'I can try; I don't really want to be the one to tell her. How do you tell someone their mum hanged herself from the rope swing?'

'That's our job, we'll take care of that. I just need you to try and get them to come back here, please.'

Another car pulled up and she recognised Detective Sergeant Ben Matthews from CID as he emerged.

'You stay here, I'll be back soon.'

Morgan crossed towards the DS, eager to introduce herself. She knew who he was but doubted he'd have a clue about her. She was probably just another name and number to him. As she got closer she heard him ask: 'Who was first on scene?'

'I was, Sarge.'

He turned to look at her and she felt her stomach tighten. She'd heard rumours that he was a miserable sod most of the time and didn't take too kindly to younger officers who were fresh out of training.

To her surprise, though, he smiled, completely disarming her.

'You are?'

'5129 Morgan Brookes.'

'Well, Morgan, talk me through what happened when you arrived, and *tell* me you didn't drop your lunch over there.'

He was pointing to a trampled KFC bag.

She shook her head.

'Not mine, sir, it must belong to the caller, Harrison Wright. When I got here, he was standing underneath the woman who was hanging from that branch.'

She pointed to where the frayed piece of rope was still swaying in the breeze.

'She was clearly dead, but we tried our best to hold her up and take away some of the pressure from her neck.'

'How did you know she was deceased, Morgan? Are you also a paramedic in your spare time?'

Morgan felt a burning sensation rush from her throat up to her forehead and knew she was probably the same colour as a cherry tomato.

'I, she looked dead. Her eyes were fixed; she didn't look as if she was breathing.'

Morgan could see Dan, who was standing behind the DS, grinning at her discomfort. He was such an idiot at times.

'How long have you been out on independent control?'

'This is my first shift on my own.'

'And how many sudden deaths have you attended?'

'Four: two suicides, one accident and a heart attack.'

'But this is the first on your own, yeah?'

Morgan wanted the ground to swallow her up. She hadn't done anything wrong. Why was he giving her a hard time?

'Yes, Sarge.'

He smiled again.

'It takes some getting used to, but you will. Look, all I'm trying to get at is we don't call death unless it's pretty obvious, like a body is missing a head or the person's brains are splattered all over the inside of a car. I've turned up to scenes where a body has smelt as if it's been decomposing for a week and then they've moved and still been breathing. Just, don't presume, okay? At least not until you've been doing this a lot longer than you have.'

She nodded, feeling embarrassed at his lecture, but determined not to let him see.

'Family?'

'Yes, Sarge, the woman is Olivia Potter. She has a husband, Saul, and two daughters, Bronte and Beatrix. The family car isn't here, and Harrison said there's no one home. He's sent Bronte a message asking her to tell her dad to come home.'

'Call me Ben, you can drop the whole Sarge thing. It's far too official for my liking.' He raised an eyebrow. 'Bronte and Beatrix Potter; I guess Olivia liked reading.'

Morgan smiled.

'Have you checked the house?'

'Not yet, I'll do that now.'

'What are your first impressions of the scene?'

'Is this a trick question? Am I supposed to answer or is it an excuse for you to tell me off again?'

Ben laughed out loud, then obviously realising how inappropriate it was he lifted his hand and pretended to cough.

'No, it's not a trick question.'

She shrugged. 'I don't know, she lives in this gorgeous house with her family, and Harrison described her as "happy and chilled". Not the kind of woman you'd expect to do this kind of thing. Not many women kill themselves by hanging, do they?'

'Not often, but some do. We need to locate her family and find out what her state of mind was before we make any judgement. It looks like a straightforward suicide to me.'

Morgan nodded and began to walk towards the house. She paused then turned to face Ben.

'How did she get up high enough to do it? There was no stepladder. Harrison ran and got that out of the shed.'

Ben shrugged. 'Maybe she was an excellent climber or used the rope swing. That tree doesn't look too difficult to get up to that branch. But I'll bear it in mind.'

Morgan left him and carried on walking up to the large detached house. It looked as if it had been recently painted the walls were so white, and the dusky pink front door made it stand out. Morgan loved it. It was modern yet quirky. There were pots of scented lavender and roses either side of the door and she inhaled the heady smell. It was such a perfect place to be able to call home. She tried the front door: it was secure. Then she walked the perimeter of the building checking the windows and other doors. All of them were shut tight and locked; there was no sign of life inside.

At the back door, Morgan turned and took in the view. She could hear a small creek at the end of the garden as it babbled along. The burning sun was setting against the backdrop of the Lakeland fells, giving out the last of its warmth. Olivia Potter lived in a beautiful place; she wondered what had happened to make her do such a terrible thing.