

# One

It was a bright sunny morning in early summer, as Alan Westbrook trudged along the stony path that led up onto the moors. He had parked the camper-van in a lay-by, put on his boots, slung the small rucksack over his shoulder and set off on a little-used path. He was happier than he had been for a long time. A cool breeze wafted through the heather, a lark was singing nearby and in the distance he could hear the call of a curlew as it flew low across the moor. Not a soul was in sight, and that was how he liked it. He had a pet hate of ‘walkers’ with all the gear – socks rolled down over their boots, large rucksacks containing everything to cover all eventualities from a grazed knee to a nuclear strike. They would each be armed with at least one ski pole, without which they seemed unable to walk. He used to ask them what the skiing was like and was rewarded with blank expressions. But really his worst hate was the folded map in a plastic wallet hung around their necks. He really didn’t think these people should be let out on their own.

Once he was walking in the Lakes and was wearing a pair of chunky sandals, which had commando soles. They were very light and comfortable and his feet didn’t overheat in them, but the looks he got from the ‘walkers’ were unbelievable. One even commented on them and asked if he didn’t stub his toes. He replied that if people went about stubbing their toes they would be likely to end up hurtling down the mountainside head first.

But today seemed clear of people and he was able to enjoy his own company and watch and listen to nature all about him as he made his way up the winding path to the high moorland beyond. He was surprised when a brace of grouse broke cover, way over to his right, and sped off down the valley. He couldn't see what had disturbed them, as he wasn't high enough to see over the ridge, but it could have been anything. *Maybe a stoat*, he thought.

At the top of the climb he decided to sit among the rocks for a while and have a snack from his rucksack. He found a nice sheltered spot among the rocks and selected a comfortable looking flat surface to sit on. From his perch, he could look out over the valley. He could see the little lane where he had parked the camper and the sun glinting off its roof. About half a mile further down the lane, he caught sight of another car that was parked just off the road. His heart sank to think that he didn't have the place entirely to himself. But perhaps they had gone the other way. He hoped so.

After a while he set off again and was soon walking along the flat rocky surface above a steep cliff with a sheer drop of over a hundred feet onto the scree below. The height didn't bother him as the surface was flat and firm and there was no danger of accidentally walking over the edge.

He stopped suddenly. His sharp ears had picked out a sound amongst all the other sounds, which alerted him to company. It was the sound of a boot scrunching on loose gravel. Someone was approaching from his left, a little behind him. He chose to ignore them and walked on.

"Peter! Where are you going?" It was a woman's voice. He carried on walking, as he had no desire for company today.

“Peter! Wait for me, please.” The sound of footsteps speeded up into a run. Perhaps she would head off down the slope the way he had come up.

But that was not to be. She was getting nearer and he could hear her panting breath. *What was this woman thinking, running along the edge of this cliff?*

“Peter, will you wait for me please.” It was a command. Alan looked about him to see where this Peter was and why he wasn’t waiting for this noisy woman. She was almost behind him now, so he stepped off the path to let her through, and as he turned, she stopped dead in her tracks, mouth open in surprise. She was a small, quite attractive woman in her late fifties or early sixties, he guessed, wearing a bright orange anorak with a pair of binoculars hanging around her neck. She wore a tweed skirt above long socks and lightweight boots. In her hand she had a lightweight haversack that appeared to be almost empty. She stood, panting from the exertion.

“Oh, I am sorry,” she said. “From a distance you looked just like my husband.”

“Oh, I see,” said Alan. “Sorry.”

“Same anorak, same rucksack, same trousers... well almost, and the same grey hair with the bald patch on the top.” Alan grimaced.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, looking embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to be rude about your hair.”

“Or lack of it,” said Alan. “You can’t be rude if it’s true.”

“Well, that’s kind of you,” she said. “You haven’t seen someone who looks a bit like you, have you?”

“Sorry, no,” he replied. “You’re the first person I’ve seen today. But I think there might have been someone up here a bit

earlier. I saw a couple of grouse take off in alarm from a bit further along this ridge. What was he doing?"

"He went off on his own and left me to have a rest and a bite to eat," she said. "He wasn't very hungry and was keen to see if he could see the peregrines."

"Peregrines?"

"Peregrine falcons."

"Yes, I know what they are," said Alan. "But I didn't know there were any round here."

"Perhaps there aren't," she said. "But he had been told that there was a nest in the cliffs along here and he wanted to see them."

"Keen twitcher, is he?"

"Not as such, but we both like watching birds. We don't really know the names of most of them, but we like to see them in their natural habitat."

"If there are any," said Alan, "they'll be along here. I'm going that way so I'll walk with you, if you like."

"Thank you," she said, smiling. "Very kind of you." They set off along the path in single file with Alan in the lead.

"I saw a curlew a bit earlier," said Alan.

"Did you?" she replied. "I'm told they are returning to the moors again."

"I believe so."

The ground rose steeply and they had to concentrate on what they were doing. It wouldn't be a good thing to slip here. At the top, Alan waited and held out a hand to help his companion up the last bit of the ascent.

"I'm sorry," said Alan suddenly, "but I didn't introduce myself. My name is Alan Westbrook."

“Maggie Finch,” she replied. “My husband is Peter. I’ll introduce you when we find him.”

“A very appropriate name.”

“Maggie?”

“No, Finch,” said Alan with a grin. “Bird watchers?”

“Oh, I see what you mean,” she replied. “That has been said before.”

“The old ones are the best.”

“Are you on your own up here?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t your wife like walking?”

“Divorced.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She looked a bit embarrassed.

“I’m not,” he said. “I’m quite enjoying the freedom.”

“Aren’t you lonely?”

“Sometimes, yes,” he said. “But overall it’s worth it.”

He stopped suddenly, causing Maggie to walk into him. She started to apologise but then, following his gaze, saw what had caused him to stop. Down below them on the scree was a figure lying head-first down the slope.

“Oh no,” she gasped.

“I’ll ring for help,” he said, taking out his mobile phone and switching it on. “I hope the battery’s OK. I don’t use this thing much.”

He found that it had enough charge in it to make the call and alerted the police and ambulance services.

“I must get down to him,” said Maggie, moving to the edge of the cliff.

“Not that way,” said Alan. “There’s a steep way down just along here, but I think we ought to go round the long way. It’s less dangerous.”

“No. I’m not doddering yet, thank you. Show me the steep way.”

Alan led the way, further along the cliff path, until they came to a cleft which looked too steep to get down, but he shuffled his way down on his backside until he was almost out of sight. Maggie followed as best she could and found him waiting just round the corner on firmer ground. She looked down and grabbed his arm.

“You’ll be OK,” he said. “Just follow me and keep close into the cliff face.”

The path was barely more than a broken ledge with a long drop to one side. Alan began to wonder if it had been such a good idea to bring Maggie down this way. He turned to see that she was all right and saw the terror in her face as she gripped the rock for all she was worth.

“Perhaps we should go the other way?” said Alan.

“It’s all right,” she said, looking anything but all right. “Just keep going. I’m right behind you.”

Alan moved a step further on and a handful of pebbles went cascading down the side of the cliff, bouncing out and onto the scree below.

“A bit of loose ground here,” he said. “Go carefully.”

“I am going very carefully, I can assure you.”

After about twenty yards of painfully slow progress, the path improved slightly. It was still narrow but firmer underfoot. By the time they were halfway down, Maggie was moving more easily and progress became better.

“I think I’m getting the hang of this now,” she said.

“Don’t get carried away,” he replied. “It’s still a nasty drop to the bottom.”

There was the sound of a vehicle moving slowly down the road below.

“That was quick,” said Alan. “I thought they would take much longer to get here.”

“It’s not the ambulance,” said Maggie. “There’s a black car going down the lane at the bottom.”

“I thought that was your car,” he said.

“No. We came by bus and walked up from the other side.”

“I didn’t see anyone up here,” said Alan. “I wonder where they were.”

“I hope they don’t meet the ambulance on that narrow lane,” said Maggie. “They’ll never get past each other.”

“I think the ambulance will come from the other direction.”

They were almost at the bottom of the steep part. In another few minutes they had reached the scree, which consisted of loose rock and shingle that sloped down to the level ground below. They needed to make their way back along the top of the scree, but found this too difficult as they kept sliding down the slope.

“It’s no use,” said Alan. “We’ll have to go down and walk along the bottom and then climb up again further along. The thing with scree is to go with it. Don’t hold back. Stride out.”

He set off down the scree, taking large strides, and was soon at the bottom. Maggie tried to emulate his action but ended up slithering on her backside. She got to her feet and tried again and had soon made it to the bottom.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

“A few scratches, I think, but nothing much really.”

It was much easier going at the bottom, though they did have to skirt some gorse bushes at one point.

As they came round the outcrop that had been obscuring their view, they could see that the ambulance had just arrived, two men had leapt out and they were making their way across the rough ground to the foot of the scree, carrying what looked like a stretcher. Just behind them, two other cars had pulled up. One was a police car and the other, Alan assumed, was the paramedics. There were six of them in all.

Alan and Maggie arrived at the foot of the scree just after the ambulance men had started to climb up to the prostrate body lying on the scree above them.

“He hasn’t moved,” said Maggie.

“Are you the people who called us?” said one of the policemen, walking towards them.

“I rang you,” said Alan.

“Perhaps you could wait here until the medics assess the situation.”

“Is he all right?” asked Maggie, getting quite agitated.

“We’ll know that when they have had a look at him. Constable Jones will look after you.”

Constable Jones turned out to be a policewoman who came over when called by her superior officer. She was quite young but of very stocky build. She ushered them to one side, out of the way of the paramedics and ambulance men.

They seemed to take an age up there and didn’t appear to be doing anything.



“What are they doing?” asked Maggie, getting more agitated by the minute.

“They have to assess the damage before moving him, and it isn’t easy on this loose stuff. Moving an injured man can do more damage than the original fall,” said the constable taking out a notebook and pencil. “Now perhaps I could take a few details. You are?” She was looking at Maggie.

“Margaret Finch.”

“So you’ll be Mr. Finch, I presume?”

“No. I’m Alan Westbrook. That is Mr. Finch up there.”

“Is he a relative?”

“No relation at all,” said Alan. “Mrs. Finch was looking for her husband when she met me. We were up there.”

“Where were you when Mr. Finch fell?”

“I didn’t see him fall,” said Alan, “but I started from the road down there and came up the slope onto the top. You can’t see the path from here. It’s round the corner. I did see some startled grouse fly off from somewhere round here though. That would have been about an hour ago.”

“And you, Mrs. Finch? What were you doing?”

“I had stayed at our picnic spot to eat my sandwiches,” she said. “Peter, that’s my husband, Peter wanted to see if he could see the peregrines and went off in this direction. When I had finished my sandwiches, I packed up my things and set off to find him. When I got near the cliff, I thought I saw him walking along the cliff path and chased after him, but it turned out to be Mr. Westbrook.”

“Yes, I can see why you thought that. They do look similar.”

“Then Mr. Westbrook said he’d accompany me along the cliff path because it could be dangerous, and then we saw Peter... lying down there. He must have slipped as he tried to see the birds.”

“That’s when you called us, is it?”

“I rang you,” said Alan. “Then we went to find a way down. There is a steep path down, back there. Mrs. Finch said that she could manage it, so we came down that way.”

“You seem to have cut yourself, Mrs. Finch,” said the policewoman. “I’ll get the paramedics to take a look at you before they go.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said.

“Better not risk it.”

The ambulance men had manoeuvred the injured man onto the stretcher and were lowering him down the scree. Maggie made to move towards them but the policewoman held her arm to restrain her.

“I want to see him,” she pleaded.

“Wait until they are on the level ground and one of the medics will put you in the picture.”

It was a slow process bringing a stretcher down the scree, as the whole surface moved with them, but eventually they had arrived at the bottom and placed the stretcher on the ground. One of the paramedics was talking to the policeman who turned and indicated Maggie. The constable nodded and walked over to her.

“I’m sorry, but it’s bad news I’m afraid,” he said. “He must have died instantly. There was absolutely nothing that could be done for him.”

“My deepest condolences, Mrs. Finch,” he said. “He’ll be taken back to Skipton for the post-mortem but we would like you to accompany us to the station to fill in the details. We’ll need to speak to you too, Mr. Westbrook. Do you both have transport?”

“I have my camper-van,” said Alan. “I believe Mrs. Finch travelled here by bus.”

“In that case, sir, Mrs. Finch can travel in the police car and Constable Jones will travel with you,” he said. “She can show you the way.”

“I think I can find my own way, thanks.”

“No trouble at all, sir,” he said. “Just procedure.”

The ambulance men had reached the ambulance with the stretcher and were loading it when they set off towards the road.

“But I haven’t had a chance to say goodbye to him,” Maggie said to Alan, who was walking beside her.

“Probably for the best,” said the policeman. “You’ll be able to do that in the chapel of rest, eventually. He’ll look more presentable by then.”

He said goodbye to Maggie, who was escorted off towards the police car, while Alan, escorted by Constable Jones, headed further up the road to where his camper-van was parked. It was over half a mile and as they walked, Alan asked her name.

“Pam,” she said frostily.

“I see,” said Alan, realising that he must be a suspect, “and you think I might have had something to do with it, do you?”

“I don’t, personally,” she said, “but, at this stage of an investigation, anyone involved must be classed as a suspect until eliminated.”

“What do you mean, investigation?”

“When someone dies in unexplained circumstances, there has to be a coroner’s investigation. We need to establish what happened and what part everyone involved played in his demise.”

“And all I wanted was a quiet walk on my own.”

“Do you usually leave the door of your van open?” It was a surprise change of subject and it took Alan a few seconds to realise what she was asking him.

“No, I don’t,” he said, and broke into a run, with Constable Jones close behind him.

“Be careful,” she said. “There may be someone still in there.”

They arrived at the camper-van and Alan looked through the windows to check before going inside. There was no one there so he climbed in to be met by utter turmoil. The place had been thoroughly turned over. Things were lying everywhere.

“Good God,” he said.

“Bit of a mess,” said Constable Jones. “Anything missing?”

“I don’t know. They don’t seem to have been interested in money. They’ve left a twenty-pound note that I kept in the drawer. I can’t see my laptop anywhere, can you?”

“No,” he said, “just the laptop as far as I can see.”

“Was it valuable?”

“No. It was quite old,” he replied. “I used to use it to demonstrate software to prospective customers, but I don’t use it much these days. I don’t like the things.”

“Computers?”

“No, just laptops. I like a proper-sized keyboard and a proper mouse.”

“So you have a desktop computer, then?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” he replied. “It’s built into the van. I use a cordless keyboard and mouse to operate it.” He lifted the top of one of the bench seats and pointed at what looked like a lot of old computer junk. Then he lifted the table-top from its folded position and swivelled it round to reveal a flat screen attached to the back. “Voilà!”

“Why did you conceal it like that?”

“I didn’t do it to hide it,” he said. “When you travel about in your home, you have to have things secured or they end up flying about and smashing into things. So it’s best to fix everything down and arrange it so that it can be folded neatly away when not in use.”

“It would appear that whoever broke in here was looking for something,” said Constable Jones. “They didn’t take the money but they did take your old laptop. Now why would that be?”

“I do some work for the government,” he said. “Maybe they were after that.”

“You mean you keep sensitive government information in your camper-van?”

“Of course not,” he said, “but whoever broke in here must think that it was a possibility.”

“Who would want to get hold of government data?” she asked.

“You tell me,” he said. “It could have been anyone. Not just your casual burglar. More likely agents of a foreign power.”

“Russians?”

“More likely the Americans,” he said.

“But they are on our side,” she said.

“Oh no,” he replied. “The Americans are on their own side. They are just friendly with us when it suits them.”

“But surely they wouldn’t try to steal government secrets, would they?”

“You can’t rule anything out,” said Alan.

They set off towards Skipton and a long and tedious session of questioning. The day had been a complete disaster. He had hoped for a pleasant solitary walk on the moors and had ended up being taken to Skipton Police Station for questioning as a murder suspect, and on top of that, his van had been broken into and wrecked.

\*\*\*\*\*