

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten

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Hi Crime Junkies, I'm your host Ashley Flowers.

And I'm Britt.

And today's story is about a vibrant young woman who was on the verge of having all her dreams come true when she was killed in a mysterious auto crash while on a trip to visit her fiancé.

But unlike investigators, her loved ones can't write this off as just a tragic accident.

And after digging into this case, I can understand why.

This is the story of Morgan Patton.

It's late on a chilly night in the small town of Mazeville, North Carolina, and a man named Randy is settling in to watch TV.

But his peaceful night is shattered when suddenly he hears this loud boom.

Now Mazeville is pretty close to the Camp Lejeune Marine Corps base.

So loud booms aren't necessarily out of the ordinary.

Right, and even at this time, which is about 10:51pm on Friday, November 8th, 2019.

But this boom sounds too close.

And when Randy looks outside, he sees that a pickup truck has crashed into the yard across the street from him.

He tells his wife to call 911.

He grabs a flashlight and he hurries over just in case he can be of some assistance.

But when he approaches the crash, he can barely believe his eyes because the truck is just demolished.

I mean, the frame is nearly torn off.

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The truck bed is even farther up the road.  
There's another chunk of the truck across the street in a ditch.  
Three of the tires are gone.  
One rolled all the way into Randy's yard.  
And to top it all off, there is debris everywhere.  
And we're not just talking pieces of the truck, like there are cans of beer, torn trash bags filled with red solo cups, cigarettes, food wrappers.  
There's even a white cowboy hat on the ground.  
Did they run into something or did this thing explode?  
No, so this thing ran into a tree.  
And I know I said yard, which might sound like our local weatherman situation.  
I don't know if you remember that when he ran his own car into his yard and called police.  
But basically the police later determined that the truck was doing like 86 miles per hour when it tried to like navigate this hairpin turn.  
So the driver basically over corrected, lost control, skidded across the two lane highway and then hit this tree, which caused the truck to roll over.  
That's why it's split into pieces and why everything from inside the truck is just, I mean, truly everywhere.  
The debris field is literally the size of a hockey rink.  
Now as Randy is just taking everything in, he notices a pair of boots sticking out of the rear driver's side window.  
And he realizes that there's a man in the back seat.  
And he can tell that this guy is having trouble breathing.  
But before he can even approach him, another man climbs out of the driver's side door.  
So there are survivors of this crash?  
The way you were describing it, I'm surprised anyone's even alive.  
Britt, not only is this guy alive, the one that runs out of the driver's side door, he runs around the front of the truck and yells for someone to wake up.  
And then he rushes to the back passenger seat and frantically tries to wake up the guy back there.  
Randy meanwhile goes around the front of the truck and that's when he sees a young woman.  
And it looks like she had been ejected from the vehicle.  
So now she's on the ground with her legs under the cab near the front passenger door.  
And to Randy, it doesn't seem like she's breathing.  
But just a few minutes later, first responders show up.  
And when they arrive, this woman is apparently now gasping for air.  
So they pull her out from underneath the truck, hoping they can do something to save her.  
But they quickly realize there isn't anything they can do.  
And she is pronounced dead at 1107 PM.  
Meanwhile, the backseat passenger appears to be in bad shape.  
So he's airlifted to a local hospital.  
Only the driver seems to have escaped largely unscathed.  
And he's like walking in circles, telling anyone who will listen that he didn't mean to hurt anybody.  
According to him, the three of them were just having a good time planning to go shoot guns.

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And I'm sorry, where?

This is like late at night.

Well, he doesn't elaborate like then and there in the scene or anything.

But it's a story that he does stick to when he's interviewed at the hospital in the early morning hours of November 9th.

Although I don't know that he ever specifies where they were going to shoot these guns.

By the time they're really talking to him, though, at the hospital, investigators know that this guy's name is Hunter O'Neill Wells, a 22-year-old from West Virginia.

And Hunter identifies the man in the backseat of the truck as his friend from Montana, 20-year-old Charles Edward Cornwall V, who's known as Charlie.

They're both Marines serving with a military police battalion at Camp Lejeune.

But the problem is, police still don't know who that young woman is.

They can't yet find an ID for her among all of the wreckage, and Hunter isn't much help.

He says that he and Charlie just met her a few hours ago while having drinks at Applebee's in Jacksonville, some 13 miles from where they crashed.

He basically just tells police that they had started chatting at the bar, so he found out her name was Morgan, and she was staying at the hotel by the Applebee's that they were all in.

And then after a while, he says that they all decided to go shoot guns together, and before that, they stopped by to buy some more beer on the way.

Now, he says, as far as the logistics of this crash, she was in the back middle seat with Charlie to her right, and Hunter claims that neither of them were wearing seat belts.

Hunter tells police that he was supposed to be the designated driver, although he admittedly had one beer.

But the officers notice that this dude smells like alcohol, and his eyes are just red and glassy as he's talking to them.

So he's given two breathalyzer tests a few minutes apart, and this is happening at 1am.

Both times, his blood alcohol concentration is .06.

Whoa, and what I am is like hours after the crash, right?

So he could have been way more drunk at the time.

Right, so that seems like more than one beer.

Yeah.

And they're gonna try and get to the bottom of that, but for now, the primary focus is still finding out who the woman is.

Between that limited information that they get from Hunter and the discovery of her cell phone back at the scene, investigators are eventually able to determine that that woman is 24-year-old Morgan Patton.

She'd been living in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, but she grew up in New Hampshire, and her parents, Steve and Renee Patton, still live there in New Hampshire.

So investigators get their address and contact their local police department to go break the news.

That's literally every parent's worst nightmare, that knock on the door in the middle of the night.

And for the Pattons, it comes just before 5am.

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But as Steve heads downstairs to see who's there at his door, he's not even thinking the worst yet.

As far as he and Renee know, Morgan is safe in Soundon Jacksonville, where she's visiting her fiance, a 28-year-old Marine named Philip Brandon at Camp Lejeune.

So when Steve sees police outside, he thinks that something must have happened to maybe a neighbor or a friend, but to his horror, a lieutenant tells him that Morgan was killed in a car crash in North Carolina.

Steve and Renee told our reporter Nina that they genuinely didn't even believe it at first, because even the most rudimentary facts about this story just didn't make sense to them.

How had she even accessed a vehicle?

She didn't rent a car, she had no reason to even be in a car at all, because remember that Applebee's is literally in the same parking lot as her hotel.

And they know Phil doesn't have a car because he's in training and he doesn't have much freedom.

So if this is true, they're like, she must have been in someone else's car, but that can't be right to them because who would that be?

Because again, she couldn't have been with Phil.

He's not allowed to leave base until Saturday morning at eight.

And it's not like she would have been with someone else.

She didn't know anyone else in that area, and she had only been in town for like half a day.

She'd actually just gotten there around 6.15 p.m. after a long day of travel, like 13 hours that included a ferry, a bus, three flights, and an Uber.

And they know that she got to her hotel okay because they had even talked to her.

So because of all of this, they are praying that this is a terrible mistake, that their local police are somehow confused or there's some kind of mix up in North Carolina.

But when they call the North Carolina Highway Patrol Sergeant in charge of the investigation, they learn that it's not a mistake.

Their daughter, their only child is dead, killed in what the sergeant refers to as an unfortunate DUI fatality.

Now this phone call is also when the parents learned that Morgan was in fact with someone during the crash.

Two young men named Hunter and Charlie, and I take it those names don't mean anything to them.

They have no freaking clue who these guys are, and they are certain that Morgan didn't know them either.

Like I said, Phil is the only person she knew there, and the only reason she went there.

Plus, Morgan wasn't the type to just jump in some random dude's truck for a joy ride.

Girl's always been a planner.

She's so cautious, so responsible.

So alarm bells start clanging in the parents' heads immediately.

They know that they have to go to North Carolina and find out more.

But first, they need to tell Phil the awful news.

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You guys, Jo has been on the move since she's been 10 months old.  
I am talking non-stop moving from sun up to sun down.  
That girl does not sit still.  
And she doesn't quite tell me when she needs a diaper change either, so I need something that is going to hold up even if she is hanging upside down.  
Enter Pampers Cruisers 360.  
Pampers Cruisers 360 aren't just for potty training.  
You can start using them when baby is just one year old.  
Not only do they absorb and hold everything in, thanks to the unique 360-degree stretchy waistband, it makes it easy to change your wiggling baby fast.  
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I love that name because it is so honest.  
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Phil is stunned and devastated.  
He and Morgan had been counting the minutes until they were together, and when he went to sleep late Friday night, all he could think about was that he'd be able to be with her soon.  
Steve and Renee beg him to stay close to a chaplain while they and Phil's parents who live in California make their way south to see him.  
When they all get together later that day, they compare notes and review their texts with Morgan, just trying to figure out how this could have happened.  
Now, there had been some concern about her traveling to Jacksonville in the first place. Every town can have kind of sketchy reputations, and Steve, who is a former Marine himself, actually formally stationed at Camp Lejeune decades ago, worried that things were going to get rowdy, especially with so many service members going on leave for a long weekend to celebrate the Marine Corps' 244th birthday.  
The patents had advised Morgan to just stay in your room until Phil comes to meet you, which is what she was planning to do.  
Her only exception was to go to that nearby Applebee's to get some food, but I can't stress this enough how close they were.  
You could literally throw a rock from the hotel and hit the restaurant, so Morgan thought it would be safe to go grab a bite to eat.  
Now, they're able to determine that she walked over to the Applebee's at around 7.05 and stayed for at least a couple of hours texting her parents and Phil throughout.  
At 9.42, she told her parents that she was going to sleep, so they assumed that she was back at the hotel when they got that text, but Phil shows them that she kept texting

him well after that.

At 10.24, she told Phil that she couldn't wait to see him, and then one minute later, she sent him another message that we have a copy of?

And it's a little weird, I'm gonna have you read it, Brett.

Okay, it says, quote, also people bring in cocaine onto base through pizza, just BTW, end quote.

Is there any more context for this?

What were they talking about before this text?

Not drugs.

This text was really like out of nowhere at the time.

And so I think when he got this, at first Phil thought that Morgan was just sharing some like random info, maybe she overheard it Applebee's.

So he literally replied just like, do they really?

And she responded, quote, yes, they do.

And that was at 10.40.

And that text, yes, they do.

That was the last text Morgan sent.

Now Phil had kind of laughed about this Friday night, but now it strikes him as unusual.

It's just not a typical conversation they would have.

Well, and on top of that, the timing is ominous.

I mean, that last text is just what, 10, 11 minutes before the crash?

I mean, was she even still at the Applebee's?

I mean, Phil assumed so, but I mean, it's at least a 15 minute drive from there to the crash site, although, you know, considering how fast Hunter was going, it might have been quicker.

So I don't know.

Yeah.

I mean, if they were going 86 when they crashed, I mean, maybe she could have sent that right before or even as they were leaving the Applebee's.

And speaking of driving, a Hunter's been charged with something by now at this point, right?

Multiple felonies like death and serious injury by a motor vehicle, plus DWI and like a bunch of various traffic infractions, which all of that does come as a bit of relief to Morgan's loved ones, but they're also really frustrated because it's clear to them that investigators see this.

I mean, pretty much is what they said when they first called them a tragic accident.

But they are sure there is just something more sinister at play here.

They just not even sure what yet.

So do the police believe Hunter's story about going shooting that night?

They don't seem to, although it is worth noting that like a sergeant mentions that he did find a broken rifle and a handful of mixed caliber bullets in the wreckage.

So there was some gun there again, it's not like there's multiple guns.

There's this one gun that maybe they were going to use to go shooting, but nobody's really buying that story.

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So to the patents, the fact that there is this gun at all, to them and Phil, it almost bolsters their suspicions that maybe these two men coerced or straight up forced Morgan into the truck, like abducted her.

And moreover, they wonder maybe if the truck crashed to begin with because Morgan was trying to fight them off because the bottom line is Morgan was crazy about Phil.

This was going to be their very first visit since he proposed over the phone a few weeks ago.

There's no way she would spend all of that time traveling to see him, only to take off with two random dudes to go shoot guns somewhere in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.

Like, it makes no sense to them.

Well, and you mentioned the location, is there anything really out that way?

So that's a thing, not really.

There are some houses, some farmland, forests.

There is one shooting range, like seven miles up the road, but it's exclusively for Department of Defense training.

So, they're not just going to roll up there, it's not open to the public.

And while they theoretically could have planned to go shooting in the woods, it's nighttime.

What's the point?

So if shooting wasn't the goal, and her family is confident that it wouldn't have been the goal for Morgan, then why would those men have been out there with her?

The only answers they can come up with, chill them to the bone.

Any chance Phil knows these guys if they're all stationed at the same place?

Nope, never heard of them.

And of course, I mean Camp Lejeune is huge, and Phil is actually at this substation of it called Camp Geiger.

But honestly, the fact that they're Marines just hurts Phil and Morgan's dad even more, because Marines are supposed to have each other's backs, not ruin each other's lives.

Now once the patents show investigators Morgan's texts and explain the situation, police seem more open to the possibility that there was a greater element of foul play.

And just in time too, because the sergeant says that Hunter told police he wants to tell them what happened after he speaks to an attorney, which he'll be doing at his arraignment on Tuesday.

So investigators hope to sit down with him soon and really learn like the truth of what happened.

But in the meantime, police decide to go to Applebee's on Sunday to talk to the bartender who served the three of them, this guy named Joshua.

Joshua says that that night, Morgan came in, sat at the bar, chatted about visiting her fiance and ordered a salad and a beer.

Later, two men wearing cowboy hats who police know are Hunter and Charlie set down next to her.

They order beers and then they strike up a conversation.

Now Joshua says that Morgan didn't seem distressed and when they offered to buy her a beer and a shot of Jack Daniels, she accepted.



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In fact, he tells investigators that he specifically asked her if it was okay for them to buy her drinks and she said yes, although he doesn't mention if she actually drank the drink or took the shot.

Joshua says that after the guys paid their taps, they hung around for another 15 minutes or so.

At some point, Morgan went to the restroom and one of the cowboys walked out the front door.

The other was still at the bar, but then Joshua went to the kitchen and he says that when he came back, that guy that was still at the bar was gone too and he says he never saw any of them again.

But later he realized that Morgan hadn't paid her bill.

Now when her family hears this, this is another clear sign to them of foul play because Morgan spent years waitressing.

She would never skip out on a tap, so they wonder if maybe Hunter or Charlie, whoever was the guy still left at the bar, maybe grabbed her before she could make it back to pay her bill.

I just can't imagine that they could have taken her without anyone noticing though.

Well, there is this side door right next to the restroom, but that doesn't mean that that's what happened because it doesn't appear that anyone saw Morgan leave out of any exit.

I mean, though we know she had to have, right?

And maybe no one saw her because she went out the side door.

Maybe she went out the side door on her own.

Yeah, and like if the first guy goes out the front, pulls the truck around to the side.

Yeah, maybe, maybe.

What about any security cameras by that door, any door or in the parking lot to see if that's what happened?

No, there's none by the door.

Actually, the closest security camera belongs to the hotel.

It's in their parking lot.

The problem is, of course, it's facing away from Applebee's.

And just to be clear, she's nowhere on that, right?

Like she didn't leave out the side on her own to go back to her room for some reason.

No, they can see her arriving at the hotel earlier on her own and they can see her going in the direction of Applebee's later, also on her own, but then she's not seen at any time on that footage after that.

So can Joshua the bartender at least confirm when the three of them left or weren't there anymore?

He's not 100% sure, but when they look at the restaurant system, investigators see that Charlie and Hunter's tabs were paid at 9.41 PM, which was one minute before Morgan text her parents about going to sleep.

But that's kind of early, like that would put her for sure out of the restaurant by the time she's texting Phil after 10, right?

Right, there's this gap where I don't know if she is still in the restaurant.



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We have Hunter, again, if we want to believe his story about going to buy beer and then going to shoot and we have Hunter saying they're buying beer, maybe they're somewhere else. But it's kind of like ghost time.

It doesn't really fit anywhere.

It's all weird.

It's all strange.

And if you want to say someone else who's using her phone to like text, why are they texting about Marines smuggling in drugs?

Like it's something that is out of the normal.

You'd think they'd want to like be texting something that sounds like her.

You know what I mean?

Yeah.

Now to go back to the Applebee's, they can also see from the restaurant's daily sales report what each man ordered.

One of them ordered two shots, a double and a single and a tall beer, which is 20 ounces at Applebee's.

The other guy ordered three shots, two singles and a double and two tall beers and a pint. Now based on what Joshua told them, it seems like one of those shots and the pint was for Morgan, although again, whether she actually drank them totally unclear, but the autopsy might help them take a guess whether she did or not.

And that's conducted on Monday morning, November 11th.

The medical examiner determines that she died from blunt force trauma, a quote unquote crash injury that damaged her organs and caused internal bleeding.

Investigators send a blood sample and a sexual assault evidence collection kit to the lab for testing.

But here's the thing.

The Sergeant warns Morgan's family that if her BAC is above the legal limit, he's basically gonna assume that she got into Hunter's truck willingly.

I'm sorry, how does her BAC give them her past intent?

I mean, how does that track?

I don't know, but at the time, it's not even something that the patents really dwell on because they're confident it won't be higher than 0.08 since she has never even been much of a drinker.

Plus, they know all the answers aren't going to be in the autopsy.

They've got an uphill battle ahead of them, and though this is all for Morgan, they actually lean on her in a way to keep them going.

Her favorite poem was Robert Frost's Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, and she had the phrase, miles to go, actually tattooed on her back.

So that quickly becomes their rallying cry, miles to go, a reminder to stay strong for the long haul, and it's not easy, especially when the patents have to return to New Hampshire, and they can't help but feel like they're leaving Morgan behind.

Back home, all they can do is wait, but weeks after her death, they are no closer to finding out what happened.

If anything, they feel farther away because by this point, Hunter decided to actually

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not talk to police after all, after he met with his lawyer.

And are the investigators keeping the family updated on all this?

I mean, some, like they end up learning that Highway Patrol, who had been the ones that had been investigating so far, they directed the Onslow County Sheriff's Office to open its own probe into the circumstances leading up to the crash, because I guess Highway Patrol only handles truly traffic-related crimes.

So to them, that's at least good news, like that indicates that this is more than just a traffic accident, and police update them and tell them that they finished analyzing the truck's event data recorder, which tracks things like speed or whether the brakes were used.

And so they do end up finding out that Hunter's recorded speed was 86 miles per hour when that truck veered off the road, and it was like going 70 miles when it hit that tree.

The weird thing is, is that he didn't step on the brake.

Now Morgan's dad, Steve, takes the analysis one step further, because he discovers that Hunter never recalibrated his speedometer after replacing the tires with larger ones.

And very long story short, based on his calculations, he believes that Hunter was actually going closer to like 93 miles per hour.

So I mean, it's a wonder anyone survived that crash.

Wait, whatever happened to Charlie, is he still alive?

Oh, he's alive.

The Sergeant even tells Jacksonville Daily News reporter Janet Phippen that he is expected to fully recover, which is probably a little encouraging for the parents and family because that means even if Hunter isn't willing to talk, there might be someone else who can explain what happened that night.

But investigators tell them they don't know if Charlie will ever be able to provide much information because he has some sort of traumatic brain injury, maybe even permanent brain damage.

But the thing is, Charlie is already providing information to someone else.

Officer.

Unbeknownst to the parents at the time, the Marines are conducting a line of duty investigation into Charlie's potential misconduct, namely underage drinking and how it might affect his disability compensation.

According to the military investigation records, Charlie broke his wrist, broke his breast bone, hip or tailbone and four ribs, and he had a collapsed lung, lacerated spleen, ruptured diaphragm and pancreatic fluid leak.

But the thing is, there's no mention of a head injury in this report.

But during a phone interview that December, Charlie gives a sworn statement to his commanding officer and says that he has no memory of the crash or the details surrounding it.

What's interesting is, even though the whole thing is a blank, he somehow says he knows he was not tired or sick or hungry prior to the crash.

He also says he knows he was wearing a seat belt and that the hospital told him there was no alcohol in his system.

But that's not what the non-military authorities tell the parents.

So again, all that military stuff that's happening is like nobody knows that's happening

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but the military and the military is not sharing that with anyone at this point.

So the prosecutor tells the patents that Charlie's BAC at the hospital was about 0.13 and that he was not wearing a seat belt.

Oh, and speaking of BAC results, Morgan's toxicology tests are in and her BAC was 0.13. But how?

I don't know.

I think the assumption is it's from the beer that she ordered and possibly that other shot and that other beer at Applebee's that the guys bought for her.

Okay, so I don't want to get stuck on this and sound like police saying, oh, if she was drinking, she definitely wanted to go with them because that's obviously not true and can't be true if she was that inebriated.

But actually, I feel like we've got to be missing a piece of the puzzle that takes her from, you know, one or two beers and maybe a shot to almost double the legal limit hours after the accident.

It seems quick and it might be because she wasn't much of a drinker, but there might also be another explanation.

But this alternate explanation is one that the sergeant does not take into account because the patents say that once he hears this, he perceives the results as basically like proof that she willingly left with them and then he mentally checks out of the investigation. I'd like to pause and say like willingly left is much different than knowingly chose to leave.

Yeah.

Yeah, totally.

But again, this this alternate thing, this thing that he's not considering that I think we know, and our listeners probably know, is that decomposition can produce alcohol in the body, making it pretty difficult to accurately measure a postmortem BAC.

So that blood sample that they tested wasn't collected until Morgan's autopsy, which was nearly 59 hours after she died.

And it came from her aorta, which experts say can show falsely high levels of alcohol, especially if someone suffered extreme physical trauma before death, as we know Morgan did. Plus, the level of alcohol in her vitreous fluid, which comes from the eyeball is only point zero two.

And unlike blood, vitreous fluid isn't affected by the body's alcohol production during decomb.

And it stays sterile for days after death.

So why aren't we going off of that one?

I mean, that's a huge difference.

I know.

And when the patents see this discrepancy, they contact the prosecutor to see what's up.

But the prosecutor says that there just must be something wonky about the results and they'll have to assume that Morgan's BAC was just somewhere between the two.

So somewhere between point zero two and point one three sir.

That's not wonky.

That's science, bro.

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And also somewhere between point zero two and point one three somewhere, you know, somewhere. That's a pretty wide range and that's totally unhelpful.

Yeah.

It's just not registering here.

Like, and to your point, like, if you're going to write off everything as she went in the truck, like she wanted to go in that truck because of her BAC, I don't think you can be like, oh, somewhere in between.

We'll just, you know, 50, 50, we'll just call it.

Right.

Then the BAC actually really matters.

Yeah.

Okay.

Was there anything else in her system?

Like could she have been drugged to make it easier to get her out of the restaurant and into the car?

I can't actually tell you that because although her blood was negative for benzodiazepines, cocaine, opioids, and a couple other substances, there is no guarantee that she wasn't drugged because testing for drugs used in sexual assaults is notoriously unreliable.

An investigation by BuzzFeed News reporter Rosalyn Adams revealed massive widespread flaws in how that kind of stuff is handled.

And most labs only test for a fraction of the 100 plus substances that have been used in sexual assaults.

But was there any indication that she had been sexually assaulted?

So at the time that they get her toxicology results in December, 2019, her parents still don't know this.

They're still waiting for those results to come back.

But while they're waiting for them, they get some other evidence back that makes them believe in their core that the answer is yes.

Our autumn back to school schedule is super-hectic and it doesn't always leave us with a ton of time to sit down and eat, let alone plan, shop for and prepare an actual, delicious wholesome meal as a family.

But HelloFresh is here to make sure that happens.

HelloFresh does all the hard stuff like meal planning, delivering ingredients, basically everything but turn on the stove and put a spoon in your hand, making sure you have everything you need to cook up a tasty meal right at home.

Last time I talked about HelloFresh, I was about to make the spicy Peruvian chicken with loaded rice, which was a new meal we hadn't tried from HelloFresh yet.

Oh my word, you guys, it was a huge hit with the whole family, especially my teenage son who loves jalapenos and got to help me quick pickle some for the meal.

And he didn't need like any oversight from me because HelloFresh recipes are not only simple, but the recipe cards truly make putting together the entire meal such a breeze.

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## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten

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In early 2020, Steve and Renee hire a North Carolina based attorney hoping to kind of help bridge the gap between them and the county DA's office.

So their lawyer gets a bunch of records for them, including photos of Morgan at the scene. And what the photos show is that even though the belt she was wearing was buckled, her jeans were unzipped a little bit.

And there's a part of her pants that had been like cut.

Now it's not like between her legs completely, it's like this small area kind of like on her pelvis underneath like where her buckle or zipper would be.

And it's running like horizontal right under the zipper.

So I mean, obviously like for the patents who again are already suspicious that something sinister had happened here.

They are really taken aback when they see this because they're wondering why investigators would have never mentioned this to them.

And when they go and ask investigators about this like, okay, what's the explanation for this cut in her pants?

They said they don't really have one.

Is her underwear cut too or or just the pants?

No, it's just the pants like her underwear is totally intact.

But I mean, the patents still have this kind of question in the back of their mind, a question that they still have for months while they wait for the results.

But again, couple months later, the results of the sexual assault kit finally do come back and investigators tell the patent that they are confident Morgan was not sexually assaulted.

Though they did mention that foreign DNA was found in her fingernail scrapings.

They say it was a mixture from three people, Morgan being the primary contributor and frustratingly there's not enough DNA to know who the other two were.

Although follow up testing reveals that at least one of the two is male.

Now the problem is investigators say that that DNA though could have come from anywhere, even if Morgan picked up a pen that someone else had used.

So it's doesn't like prove anything.

But under her fingernails though.

Yeah, but the thing is, I know that sounds suspicious because we hear about that all the time in true crime stuff.

But we're talking trace amounts.

I don't think they found like, you know, skin or like anything bloody trace amounts means actual like tiny skin cells.

Right.

So theoretically it could belong to anyone like I'm thinking she's tapping her fingers on the bar that night.

I mean, it could be someone not even in the vehicle.

Right.

Again, it's too small to know if it's Hunter or Charlie, but there is a world where it's not either of them.

And this isn't the only crushing blow to the patents investigation, because in March of 2020, the already slow moving criminal justice system grinds to a halt due to COVID-19. So whatever headway they felt like they were making, that all stops.

But the patents aren't about to let their daughter's case get just tossed to the side.

So their lawyer brings a private investigator on board.

And one of the first things he does is interview the first responders.

And right away, they tell this PI something interesting.

They think that Morgan was actually in the front passenger seat when Hunter crashed, not the back middle seat like everyone had thought, because it looked to them like she had been truly ejected from the front window.

I know asking this is going to create a visual that will haunt me forever, but could she have been ejected from the front window even if she was sitting in the back middle seat? You know, I actually had this same question.

I mean, I have to imagine that she could have been since the truck like rolled over again.

This thing was totaled, but I can't be a hundred percent sure like that's not my expertise.

And honestly, the patents aren't even sure because it doesn't seem like anyone's interested in trying to even answer this question.

Police never even did an official accident reconstruction.

Hunter she was sitting is important, though.

I mean, it is when you take into account that Hunter seems to be the only source of any detail about the crash.

And it's weird because investigators are telling Steve and Renee that his statements are backed up by physical evidence, including that he was the only one wearing a seatbelt. The weird thing is, is they won't say what that physical evidence is.

So if we're just going to go along with Hunter's narrative because that's his narrative and there's nothing to like prove that his narrative is real, like that's a big problem because his narrative keeps changing.

Right.

And the fact that his narratives being backed up by physical evidence makes me feel like he's changing his story to match the unknown physical evidence they have, right?

That might be.

But like, I think it was changing even before anyone knew which way was up.

And also, I don't know that there is physical evidence like here's an example of like some of the changing stuff.

So the PI also talks to Hunter's ex-wife.

She tells him that Hunter called her crying hysterically like immediately after the crash.

So this isn't after he found stuff out.

And he's calling her even though they're separated and he's like telling her he's been drinking.

He says he was driving somewhere with Charlie.

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten

They hit another vehicle head on and he thought that the other driver was dead. But then when they speak in person, him and his ex-wife, Hunter admitted that the so-called other driver, a woman whose name he says he didn't remember was in the truck with him, not in another vehicle.

But he like adds to the story now and he's like, okay, we weren't just like hanging out.

I'm not just giving her a ride somewhere.

He claimed that she was making out with Charlie.

And it sounds like he told some variation of that story to either his father or his grandfather. Because there's this guy who manages the tow company slash body shop where the truck eventually ends up getting like brought in after the accident.

And the PI is told that while Hunter's, again, this is his dad or his granddad, while that person was there signing over the title so they could scrap the car.

The dad or granddad commented to this manager guy that like, oh, Hunter was just doing a good deed for a buddy, but no good deed goes unpunished.

Excuse me, what good deed exactly?

All I'm seeing is drinking and driving.

I mean, I think the implication is that like Charlie and Morgan were hooking up while Hunter drove them.

This is such a mess.

I know.

I know.

But the two facts that everyone can agree on are that Hunter was behind the wheel of the truck and whatever happened that night started at Applebee's.

So in August of 2020, the PI goes and interviews the three restaurant employees who were at Applebee's.

So we knew about Joshua.

He was the bartender who was interviewed by police before.

But the PI also interviews a woman who cashed the guys out that night and another server.

Now the server remembers Morgan as a quote unquote, responsible loner who wasn't interested in drinking heavily or even socializing, which was in complete contrast to the two Cowboys, Hunter and Charlie, who seemed to be like pre-gaming something.

Now she says these two guys were initially sitting somewhere else, but then they moved two bar stools near Morgan when those stools became available.

Now to the server, it didn't seem like Morgan was a big fan of these guys.

It just didn't look like she was vibing with them at all.

And when they offered to buy her a shot, this server person says that at first she actually declined.

But these guys just like were at your on the encouraged her to take it.

And the server says that she, the server ended up pouring them three shots.

Didn't Joshua say he served them the shots?

Yeah.

And the woman who cashed them out backs that up.

So are there more shots than we know about or?



I don't think so.

But what her family wants to know is like, why can't everyone's story get straight?

Like it doesn't sit well with them.

Even if the explanation is innocent to them, it's odd.

Like, why are you saying you did one thing, you're saying you did it, nobody knows where each other is.

And this PI is coming into the mix a while after the night this happened.

That's true.

Actually, you and I know memories are terrible things.

That is true.

But actually, there's something that comes out of these interviews that might help clear up one mystery.

And that is why Morgan left without paying.

So Joshua tells the PI that one of the cowboys offered to pay Morgan's tap.

I don't know why we don't know this sooner or maybe they did and the family didn't know whatever.

But the woman who ended up cashing them out explains that she covered for Joshua at the bar while he stepped out for a cigarette and she didn't even realize Morgan had a separate tap.

She just says that she assumed Morgan was with these two cowboys.

So she gives the guys their checks.

So her unpaid bill was likely just a misunderstanding.

She very well could have left the table thinking that her tab was covered.

Exactly.

And then this goes back to our thing of like that's not in Joshua's original statement or if it is, that part's missing.

So he didn't tell police.

Police didn't write it down.

And so when there is that missing piece or inconsistency, this leaves the patrons with like even more doubts about the accuracy of everyone's statement.

Well, and what I can't get over is among all these memories of serving these three people, who had what, who ordered what for who, who paid for what, none of them saw Morgan or Hunter or Charlie leaves at night.

No, none of them.

Is there any connection between Joshua and the guys by any chance?

No, not that we know of.

So again, like you said, this might just be fallible memory like all this time later.

But I mean, I don't blame the patrons for looking for answers in every inconsistency, even in like these small things.

Now it takes a few more months before anything else significant happens.

But in October, almost a year after Morgan's death, the prosecutor finally gets to interview Charlie.

So he's recovered.

I mean, enough to be interviewed by prosecutors, I guess.

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten

But remember, they don't know this, but he's already been talking to military investigators before.

Right.

The problem is when these prosecutors go talk to him now, he doesn't end up being much help because I mean, he's able to give a little background information like about him and Hunter, he says that they met while working together at Camp Lejeune, duh. And he says Hunter rented a house in Jacksonville with a roommate and then Charlie agreed to move in so that he could leave the base barracks.

And he says that he didn't have a car, so Hunter usually like drove them places and apparently Hunter had a history of speeding.

In fact, Charlie said that he had crashed another pickup truck while driving drunk to or from his own wedding in April of 2019.

But when it comes to the day of the crash, all that background kind of stops.

He tells the prosecutors what he initially told the military, that he can't remember anything about it.

He can't remember what he did.

He doesn't even remember Morgan.

It's all a blank.

And when he thinks back on that time, one moment he's cooking dinner and the next thing he knew it was late November and he's in a medical facility.

He says he's even gone to the crash site and read news articles trying to jog his memory, but none of that has helped.

Now for the prosecutor, Charlie runs down a list of his injuries and it's interesting because there are some differences from what he's telling the prosecutor than like what's reported in the Marine's report when they did their like line of duty investigation.

So this time he says he broke multiple bones like leg, pelvis, hand.

He injured his hip, ruptured his diaphragm, you know, pancreas.

And he says he was in a wheelchair at some point and he's also developed problems with impulse control and has a difficulty with like basic math and reading.

And he says that he needed months of occupational and physical therapy and he also says that he needed months of speech therapy for a TBI, a traumatic brain injury.

So he had a traumatic brain injury, but that can mean a lot of different things, right?

Yeah, so yes, the TBI's can range in severity from a concussion to like comas and people typically get them from hitting their heads really hard or a sudden like jolt to the head and car accidents are the leading cause of them.

And depending on like what you have, like the symptoms obviously will vary a ton, right?

Like in that spectrum, but memory problems are really high on the list.

So are things like what he mentioned, impulse control problems.

So if I remember quickly, this wasn't listed on any of the military investigation.

I guess my question is, does he have a brain injury?

Well, the prosecutor has told the patents that Charlie did have a concussion, but it's not clear how severe it was or if it caused any lasting damage.

But like, again, when it's been this long and we've got so many things happening, so many little tiny holes, like Morgan's loved ones, they're basically worried that

he's faking his memory loss.

And they want to see any injuries that might have caused the memory loss he's claiming.

Like we want to see it in black and white.

Show us the reports that say you have this from a real medical facility.

But to go back to Charlie talking to the prosecutor, again, he's saying he remembers nothing.

And so he's even asking the prosecutor questions, like whether he was wearing a seatbelt and how he was found.

And he told the military officer that he knew he was wearing a seatbelt, despite having no memory of anything else.

And now he's saying he's a little confused because despite what he's heard from authorities about being in the back of the truck, he says Hunter is telling him something different.

Because he's saying that after he got out of the hospital, he went to Hunter's house to try and learn more about what happened.

And when he got there, Hunter was having this big party, like it might have been a going away party for himself since he was being booted from the Marines, which would have made this like February or March of 2020.

So dude was too injured to talk to prosecutors until just now, but he can go to a party.

Yes.

But I also don't know when they first tried to speak with him.

So I don't know who this is completely on.

If I'm being totally honest, like that's not in our records.

But Charlie says at this party, Hunter hugs him and says something like, I saved your life.

You owe me.

And then he says Hunter told him that he, meaning Charlie was hooking up with Morgan that night, but then Hunter also told Charlie that he was in the front passenger seat, not the back seat.

So this is again where we're getting Hunter's like different stories.

Yeah.

Because I thought Hunter told police that Morgan was in the back of the truck.

I mean, both things can't be true.

Charlie and Morgan hooking up while Charlie was in the front seat and Morgan was in the back doesn't to me at least seem physically possible.

Right.

I don't see how it would work, but I've quit looking for logical explanations in this case or from Hunter's version.

But this version he's telling Charlie is a lot like what we heard from that like body shop owner who heard it from his dad, whatever.

So again, this is what I'm saying, like Hunter's got these different stories going around.

Anyway, Charlie says that he hasn't talked to Hunter since that day.

He felt like Hunter was trying to shift the blame onto him and that Hunter didn't feel remorseful at all.

Charlie, meanwhile, says he's deeply remorseful and he feels guilty that Morgan died and he didn't.

Oh, and get this.

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten

He says that he spoke with a detective from the sheriff's office while he was recuperating back with his family in Montana.

And if you remember, after Highway Patrol brought them in, they were supposed to be looking into what led up to the crash to see if there was foul play because Morgan's parents and fiancé think that she was in the truck against her will.

But apparently that interview was conducted over the phone and Charlie says that he mentioned something about a kidnapping.

Like I think that the sheriff's officer or deputy or whatever.

But that was like the extent of it.

Are you kidding me?

I wish.

Then how seriously can they possibly be taking this with what one phone call under the belts?

That's Morgan's family's concern.

You would think that they would want to speak with him in person if they were truly giving that theory the weight that her family thinks it deserves.

And it does deserve some weight when you look at the totality of the circumstances because as the patents soon learn, Hunter isn't the only one telling conflicting stories.

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Charlie agrees to speak with the family's PI in August of 2021.

By then, he has been discharged, but unlike the Onslow County Sheriff's Detective, the PI goes to speak with him in person.

So keep in mind, by this point, we've heard a few stories apparently originating from Hunter, namely that they're going to shoot guns.

He's also got Charlie and Morgan making out while Charlie is somehow in the front seat and or the back seat of the truck like simultaneously.

But Charlie says he doesn't remember anything about that night and he sticks to that when he talks to the PI.

In fact, not only does he tell the PI that he can't remember anything about the crash, now he also can't remember much about the whole month after it.

Or you know, in fact, not even the months before it.

And he says he has lots of trouble remembering names.

It sounds like his memory loss is expanding.

Yes, it does.

And it seems like he forgot all of what he or at least a lot of what he told to the prosecutor because now he's saying that he lived on base while stationed at Camp Lejeune and only stayed at Hunter's house occasionally.

And remember before he said he went and moved in with him.

And in fact, he says he doesn't even remember Hunter very well, but he does recall that he had a questionable character.

Not questionable enough, he says, to drug a woman's drink, but he does believe that he would hit on another guy's fiancee.

And the other thing he remembers is that he said Hunter did speed a lot, which is a specific detail for someone that you don't know very well.

Like, Brett, you're my best friend.

I don't know if I know like you're driving habits or how often you speed.

Yeah, because I just always let you drive.

That's true.

Maybe that's why.

And then the other thing that's interesting is Charlie also tells the PI that he and Hunter haven't discussed the crash like at all.

So him going back to Hunter's place during that party, what just didn't happen?

No, no, no.

He mentions a party.

He just says that him and Hunter talked about, quote, unquote, other stuff, but he doesn't know what other stuff.

And he still says that he heard differing stories about the seating arrangement in the truck, although now he doesn't remember where he heard those stories and.

Okay, listen, I'm willing to say what if for a lot of things, but you're telling me that the first time you see someone after a major crash, you were both in where a young woman died.

**[Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten**

You guys don't have anything to say about it, not even acknowledge it.

Isn't that weird?

Trauma bonding is a real thing that happens.

You just talked about other stuff.

Shut up.

I'm done with you.

You talked about it.

1000%.

Now, the other stuff that he says he can't remember is I think one of the most important things, which is why they were out driving in the first place.

Yeah.

He doesn't know why Morgan was even with them.

All he can do is speculate.

He says, but if he is speculating, he says he has some theories.

One of them is that he and Hunter were bringing her to surprise Phil on the base, which that never crossed my mind, but it would kind of make sense.

Like from what you've told me about her, I would believe that she would go believing that.

Hold your horses because I would agree that, okay, yeah, this is this is a scenario I could get behind except Hunter was literally driving in the opposite direction of Camp Lejeune.

So that was not happening.

So Charlie's second theory is maybe they were going shooting, although he agrees that that seems unlikely since it was nighttime.

Now, Morgan's loved ones don't think he's misremembering or his memory loss is expanding.

They think he's lying, mostly because they can't help but notice that his memory lapses seem to pop up at like very convenient moments.

Any chance Charlie knows anything about smuggling drugs in pizza, you know, that off the wall text that Morgan had texted Phil?

Yeah.

Actually, the PI asks Charlie about that and he says that he remembers a military police officer getting investigated for something like that like a few years ago, but he doesn't think he would have discussed that with Morgan because he says he doesn't talk about work much.

So I still don't know what that means.

And it probably means nothing, but obviously it came up.

She heard it from someone and we know she was with them.

Yeah.

And not only would it's actually like overheard them talking, but we know that they were like engaging in conversation by that point.

They had already bought her the shot, bought her the beer, checked out now at this point.

So when Charlie is being interviewed by the PI all this time later, this is finally when the PI or any of Morgan's family finally learn that Charlie had already participated in that military investigation.

So when they find out about this, they end up submitting a records request.

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten

And when they read the report, they're stunned to see Charlie saying under oath that he's wearing a seatbelt and that the hospital told him there was no alcohol in his system, which might be stuff he said because his literal life and career was on the line and he's like a young dumb kid again, literally underage drinking.

I don't know.

But the shocking part is not that maybe he was trying to cover his own butt.

It's that the officer who made the final conclusion at the end of this investigation decided that Charlie was telling the truth about everything.

How?

Where does it even come from?

The officer just hears all this and was like, cool.

Yeah, I believe this guy.

I'll take his word for it.

What?

I want to have answers for you.

But it, listen, so his report says that he relied on Charlie's interview plus medical records and police reports to make his conclusion.

But it can't.

Exactly.

Because everything that he's saying happened that he concluded was truthful directly contradicts what the prosecutor is saying, which is actually backed by medical records and police reports.

Right.

So it seems like he truly did just like take his word and I don't know if this do was overworked.

I don't know what the story is, but like, you know how I feel about military investigations.

Shady, shady stuff, 90% of the time.

And I'm saying 90% of the time of the time it makes it to me, which is I only do the shady stuff.

Thank you for your service.

I don't know everything.

But shady, shady stuff in this case.

So when the patents contact the Marines, they're told that nothing can be done because Charlie is out of the military now and that the truthfulness of his statements have no bearing on whether his injuries were sustained in the line of duty, which is all that they were trying to figure out.

So they were never investigating Morgan's death or anything.

It was just, did you get this in the line of duty?

Was there like a code of conduct breach, anything like that?

Okay.

But Charlie must have lied, right?

I mean, there's no way that the hospital would have told him that he had no alcohol in his system if he did.

And he can't truthfully say that he knows he wasn't tired or hungry or whatever, while also claiming to have no memory of anything from that day, the months before, the months



after, at the same time, both things can't be true.

They can be, right?

I mean, that's just a fact.

And again, I think the most innocent explanation is what I said earlier, that he was a scared kid who was about to lose everything and that he told the military investigators the thing that he thought wouldn't get him in trouble.

What he thought they wanted to hear.

Yeah.

But I don't know.

I don't know.

And the thing that hurts the patent the most about this, yes, Charlie's lying, but like they don't know Charlie.

It's more like the institution of it because remember Steve was a Marine and he hates thinking that this organization that he would have died for seems more concerned with protecting Charlie than with helping two other Marines get justice for a woman they loved.

So how is Phil holding up through all this?

I mean, not good.

No one is.

I mean, this is an endless nightmare for all of them.

The only silver lining really is that they end up establishing Morgan's Miles to Go Foundation, which is a nonprofit that the patents are working to establish to give young people opportunities through scholarships and other programs.

They also provide resources to victims of violent crime in their families.

And I mean, they're trying to take this and turn it into at least something that can help.

They want to make the world a better place because that is what Morgan always tried to do.

It has been nearly four frustrating, painful years since Morgan died and her loved ones are steadfast in their belief that she was in that truck against her will.

But the DA's office says there's no evidence pointing to that and prosecutors are sticking with what they think they can prove in court.

But all the patents have been asking for is a thorough investigation, the kind that their daughter, the kind that all victims deserve.

And that's what they don't feel like they've ever gotten.

Case in point, a forensic expert that they consulted with thinks that Morgan's real BAC was well under the legal limit.

And considering that was such a sticking point for the sergeant, it's something that should have been checked out more thoroughly.

Now everyone else's lives seem to be moving forward.

Some in good ways, some in bad.

According to the Tyler Starr News, Hunter was arrested in West Virginia in 2022 on an unrelated misdemeanor charge of having a controlled substance without a valid prescription.

And he also recently remarried.

In Anso County, he's been indicted for felony death by vehicle, along with involuntary manslaughter as a backup, plus felony serious injury by a vehicle and DWI.

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten

The patents say he's facing a maximum of six and a half years in prison, but depending on the charge, he may be eligible for probation as a first-time offender.

Now his trial is finally set to begin this November, but that could change at any moment because there are pre-trial hearings being held, and it's not clear if the state is entering a plea deal.

As for Charlie, he is now a sheriff's deputy out in Fergus County, Montana.

What?

So he says he can't remember chunks of his life, and he has trouble with impulse control, and he becomes a cop?

Mm-hmm.

Yep.

Awesome.

I feel great about this.

Yeah, we reached out to Charlie, but we didn't hear back.

We also contacted Hunter's lawyer, but he hadn't commented at the time of this recording.

The patents and Phil are so disappointed with how this case has been handled, and they think that the lackluster attitude is due, at least in part, to the fact that they live hundreds of miles away.

It's hard to put pressure on from so far, but they say that regardless of what happens in court, they're not going to stop looking for answers on their own, and that's where you all come in.

If you know anything about Morgan's death or the circumstances surrounding it, please contact the patents at [morgansmilestogoatgmail.com](mailto:morgansmilestogoatgmail.com).

And to find out other ways to help, check their website [morgansmilestogo.com](http://morgansmilestogo.com) and the Morgan's Miles To Go Facebook page, which we've linked to in our blog post.

You can find all the source material for this episode on our website, [crimejunkiepodcast.com](http://crimejunkiepodcast.com).

And you can follow us on Instagram at [crimejunkiepodcast](https://www.instagram.com/crimejunkiepodcast).

We'll be back next week with a brand new episode.

Thank you.

Bye.

Bye.

Bye.

Bye.

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**[Transcript] Crime Junkie / MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF: Morgan Patten**

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