

ONE KIND MAN

Anna Jacobs

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Lancashire: 1931

Alexander Finlay Carlisle, more often known as Finn these days, picked up the letter that had taken a while to catch up with him and cursed under his breath when he saw the address embossed on the back of the envelope. It showed a firm of lawyers, the ones who usually handled his family's affairs, the few there were these days because he came from the poorer side.

He wasn't sure he wanted to read it because there was only one close family member left who might want to contact him and he didn't want to deal with his cousin. He turned the envelope round and round in his fingers, looking at Sergeant Deemer, who had passed the letter on to him. 'I could wish you'd thrown this in the fire. Couldn't we . . . lose it?'

'I'm afraid not, Finn lad. The District Inspector forwarded it and asked me to make personally sure you received it. Took me a while to find you, though. What were you doing in Edinburgh of all places?'

'I was doing a small job for someone, finding a lost daughter.' Finn sighed as he looked at the letter again. He'd tried to leave his past behind him, and had managed to do that for a few years, but it seemed to be catching up with him again.

The only way to have completely avoided this would have been to emigrate, he supposed, but he could never have done that. He'd been born in Lancashire and kept wanting to come back here, even now. It was *home*: grey skies and rain, soft sweet drinking water, wind across the moors, drystone walls, small mill towns clinging to the sides of valleys and, above all, friendly people who weren't as afraid to chat to their so-

called betters as some rather meeker folk he'd met on his travels in other parts of the country.

'Oh, well.' Taking a deep breath, he slit the envelope neatly along the top with his penknife. He didn't like doing things in messy, clumsy ways, but his fancy paperknife was stored in a friend's barn with the rest of the possessions from his previous life. He was only just beginning to think of retrieving them.

He folded the blade of the penknife back into its case, looking at it with fond approval. He'd used that clever little knife for many purposes while he tramped the roads of England, trying to walk himself into a new life but gradually realising that he'd been running away from the place where his sadness might heal more easily.

He'd stopped running now, so he'd better stop fiddling around and damned well deal with this letter. He pulled it out of the envelope. It was typed on the very best notepaper, which felt silky smooth beneath his fingertips and crackled faintly when he spread it out. It was dated nearly three months ago.

Linton and Galliford

Drake Street

Rochdale

20th May, 1931

Dear Mr Carlisle,

We regret to inform you that your great-uncle, Oscar Dearden, has passed away. He appointed us as his lawyers and executors of his will many years ago.

It's my pleasure to tell you that he has left all he owned to you, which includes a property near Rivenshaw. You are the only nephew he recognises, since he disowned his half-sister's son, Digby Mersham, many years ago.

We have had some difficulty finding you, and I'm afraid the death occurred some months ago, on the 10th of August last year to be precise, with the funeral two weeks later.

You were sighted in Rivenshaw recently and Inspector Utting informs us that you have been returning to the area intermittently to assist your former colleagues in the police force, so we have some hope that this letter will reach you sooner or later.

We respectfully request that you come to see us at our rooms in Rochdale at your earliest convenience. We will then give you full details of the bequest, arrange the transfer of all necessary goods and chattels, and hand over the smaller items, including keys, that were in your uncle's possession when he died.

Yours faithfully,

George Linton,

Senior Partner

Finn reread the letter, but it gave no details of what exactly had been left to him. He vaguely remembered meeting his father's elderly uncle a couple of times when he was a youngster, and remembered that Oscar Dearden owned a house somewhere on the edge of the moors, but had no idea why the man would leave anything to him.

And fancy Uncle Oscar living near Rivenshaw, of all places! Finn had spent a few

weeks there earlier in the year, doing a job for the local police force. It was a nice little town at the lower end of a long, narrow Pennine valley.

He turned to his companion. ‘Do you know somewhere called Heythorpe House, Sergeant Deemer? It’s supposed to be near Rivenshaw.’

‘The name seems familiar, but I can’t quite place it. I mustn’t have had anything to do with its owner because once I’ve visited a place, I never forget it. It’ll be out in the country somewhere.’

It was good that this hadn’t happened until now, Finn thought. He was ready to settle down again, though he didn’t intend to marry – not again, never ever again! But if his great-uncle had left him a little money, it’d come in handy in the peaceful life he was planning to lead.

There couldn’t be very much involved in this bequest or his former father-in-law would have known about it. The man had been very skilled at sniffing out money and had been furious at his daughter for marrying a mere policeman who brought very little of it into the family.

But Ivy hadn’t cared for that. She had fallen in love with Finn as quickly as he had with her.

Deemer cleared his throat and Finn looked up, swallowing the hard lump that came into his throat sometimes still when he thought of his late wife. ‘Sorry. I was daydreaming. It seems I’ve been left a small inheritance.’

At his sigh, Deemer raised one eyebrow in the way he had when questioning something. ‘That’s good news, surely?’

‘I suppose so. It’s taken me by surprise. I’d forgotten my father’s uncle Oscar, because he was a recluse and I hadn’t seen or heard about him since I was a child.’

‘Well, it’s good timing if you’ve just finished a job. This will give you something to

move on to, lad.'

He liked the way Deemer called him 'lad' and acted half the time as if he was an honorary uncle. It was Deemer who had first offered him one of the little jobs that had helped him start to put a decent life together again and stop wandering aimlessly.

He studied the letterhead. 'I'd better go to the Post Office and telephone these lawyers, hadn't I?'

'Use the phone here. Inspector Utting can't object, because he was the one who forwarded the letter and asked me to deal with it.'

Finn took a deep breath and made the phone call. The clerk he spoke to said Mr Linton was with a client, but gave him an appointment for the following morning.

Well, he could wait another day to find out what his great-uncle had left him. He was tired after travelling back from Edinburgh and would go to bed early.

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The following day, Finn made the journey by train, annoyed that he had to go into Manchester and out again to get there, since there was no direct branch line connecting Rivenshaw to Rochdale. Well, this was a small town and Rochdale was much larger.

It would have been much easier to get there by motor car. Once he had a job, he intended to save up and buy himself one, a second-hand Austin Swallow or something like that. Maybe, if he was lucky, his uncle would have left him enough to buy some modest vehicle.

Grey skies made Rochdale look bleak and it was chilly for August, so Finn walked briskly down towards the town centre from the station to warm himself up. It was easy to find the lawyers' rooms because Drake Street was on his way.

George Linton was grey-haired and plump. He greeted Finn briskly and wasted little time in civilities, so Finn decided it must be a small, unimportant bequest.

‘Your uncle has left you a house,’ the lawyer began.

Finn stared at him in shock. ‘A house? What sort of house?’

‘Quite a large one, but it’s been neglected for a good many years because he inherited it from an elderly cousin and never lived there. It’s near Rivenshaw, as I said in my letter, but in fact he preferred to stay in his comfortable lodgings in Rochdale. He enjoyed reading, so visited the library frequently, and went to the theatre both in Rochdale and Manchester.’

‘Was he married?’

‘No. He preferred to remain a bachelor and indeed, his landlady told my clerk he never had a visitor in all the years he was with her. A very solitary type of gentleman, your late uncle.’

‘Where exactly is the house? The police sergeant in Rivenshaw who passed on your letter hadn’t heard of it.’

‘It’s not *in* Rivenshaw but near it. If I understand correctly, there’s a long valley with the town at the lowest point, a large village called Birch End part way up the slope and a small village called Ellindale at the upper end, just about on the moors. Your house is in Ellindale and I gather there’s only one other house further up the valley.’

‘Good heavens! I spent some time in the district earlier this year, so I’ve already seen the house, though only in the distance as it’s half-hidden from the road.’

‘Well, that makes my job easier. I won’t need to explain anything else about the location to you.’

Finn tried to pull himself together. The last thing he’d expected was to inherit a house, and for it to be in Ellindale made him feel good because he liked the village and its people. It was a rather special place.

‘He has left you some money as well. It’s invested and brings in enough to live on if

you're careful.'

'Money too!' Finn shook his head, finding all this unreal, as if he was in a dream. 'I didn't know my great-uncle was well off.'

'In a modest way. You mustn't think you've inherited a large fortune.'

'I didn't expect to inherit anything. Is that all?'

'There are the contents of the house, of course. It's apparently fully furnished still, because when your great-uncle inherited it, he simply locked the house up and walked away. He told me it could stay like that for all he cared, because he preferred to live in the lodgings where he was so comfortable. I believe he had some maintenance work done occasionally on the house to keep it weatherproof, but never went there himself.'

'Good heavens! My father said his uncle Oscar was a strange fellow and always had been. It was known in the family that even as a child, he preferred to be on his own and hated to have his daily routines disturbed. They were relieved that his strangeness wasn't, um, troublesome to other people.'

'That fits with what his landlady told my clerk when he went to collect your uncle's personal belongings. An ideal tenant, she called him, no trouble, never made a noise.'

The lawyer pushed a leather satchel across his desk. 'These are the contents of his pockets and of the desk in his lodgings. We took it upon ourselves to return some library books, but there are quite a few other books and papers, which we have stored here in our cellar. We can send them on to you once you've settled in.'

'Thank you.'

'Do you have any questions?'

'No. Do you think there's anything else I need to know?'

Mr Linton steeped his hands together, wrinkling his brow. 'I can think of nothing else. We only saw your great-uncle twice, once when he came to make his will and once

when he came to sign it and make a statutory declaration that nothing was to go to his other great-nephew. If you had died or weren't found after five years of searching, everything was to go to a children's charity of some sort.'

He pushed a folder of papers towards Finn. 'This contains a copy of the will and a list of what's in the satchel. If you wish to check it before you sign for it, my clerk will find you some desk space in the outer office.' He looked across at the elegant gilt clock on his mantelpiece. 'Unfortunately I have another appointment shortly.'

'No need to check it, I'm sure. Where do I sign?' He didn't really care what was in the satchel, after all.

'Here. Thank you.'

Finn scrawled his signature with the expensive modern fountain pen that was handed to him. He might buy himself one of those. It wrote beautifully.

'There's one more thing we need to do: get your uncle's bank account transferred to you. My chief clerk will take you to the bank now, if you like. It's not far from here.'

As he walked out, Finn felt literally heavier, as if he had walked entered the lawyer's rooms a free spirit and come out loaded with possessions and responsibilities. Which was foolish, really. Because he'd also come out with enough money to live on and a home to live in. It was very timely. Perhaps he felt strange because he wasn't used to being lucky.

But what sort of home would it be if it hadn't been lived in for years? From the way people in Ellindale had talked, the house was in a tumbledown state.

And how would he spend his time if he settled in a small village? The only thing he was certain of was that he didn't want to go back into the police force, even though he'd enjoyed helping out with one or two small jobs.

In fact, he had no idea what to do with the rest of his life, only that he wanted it to be worthwhile.

And he wasn't going to marry again. No one could replace Ivy.