

Chapter Four

I didn't end up needing my phone alarm. My brain snapped me awake after about forty minutes. And I wasn't quite sure where I was.

"We've just passed Kettering," said the young lady who was wheeling a trolley of snacks down the aisle. She handed me a packet of biscuits and a cup of tea. "And we'll be in Leicester in about ten minutes. Milk? Sugar?"

"Both, please," I said. "Thanks."

I felt like I'd tumbled down a rabbit hole. It was surreal. How the hell had I ended up on a train hurtling through the East Midlands? I could barely remember getting up that morning. A taxi ride. A vague recollection of the Lower Arcade at St Pancras and Elton John's piano. And, strangely, a vivid memory of buying a bright green bottle of Radox shower gel.

I still had that slip of paper. The scrawled blue pen note from Marcus Merritt. I read it again.

*Judy
Wensley Manor
Market Street
Newlydale*

I put the note back in my bag, and watched through the window as the train glided past Leicester's outlying neighbourhoods, big box stores, and storage facilities and parking lots, and then, rows of houses.

The station. A one-minute stop while passengers got on and off. And we were away again.

Ten minutes later, Derby.

I picked up my bag, disembarked, and consulted the indicator boards. And then I made my way over to a quiet secondary platform where the regional shuttle would take me up to Matlock.

Emotionally, I was completely at sea.

Physically, I felt like I'd flown halfway around the world and woken up during the afternoon rush while my half-asleep body was screaming that it was still the middle of the night at home.

The little diesel shuttle had two cars and one class of service. I sat down in a group of four seats with a table between them. I put my bag on the seat beside me, but I needn't have worried. There were only about a dozen other passengers on the entire train, and none of them wanted anything to do with me. I hadn't showered when I'd left my flat in London, and I hadn't bothered to shave. I was the poster boy for anti-social.

The little railway ran north from Derby, meandering to and fro over the River Derwent, stopping at stations with lovely imaginative-sounding names...Duffield, Belper, Ambergate. After Whatstandwell, the track ran alongside a stretch of the historic little Cromford Canal. It then disappeared into a series of tunnels, emerging at Matlock Bath (which had a curious aerial tramway going up to the top of a nearby hill), before it reached the end of the line at Matlock itself.

It was a quiet little stone block station, opened during Queen Victoria's reign in 1850, with canopy trim and columns painted in EMR's distinctive cream and dark red livery.

I heard birds as I stood on the platform.
And very little else.
There were no gates. No one checking tickets.
It was a long way from the bustle and noise of London.
I walked through to the parking lot and realized I had no idea how I was going to get to Newlydale.

I got out my phone and found the village website, which informed me there was a bus, adding that the service was “pretty good” (up to five trips a day, though not on Sundays or Bank Holidays) but subject to a “relaxed view of timekeeping” when it came to the published schedule.

The bus wasn’t due for another hour. Give or take forty minutes.

Was there a taxi?

I searched again and rang the first firm that came up.

The rate was a flat £10.75 to Newlydale in a four-seater saloon and my driver’s name was Reggie. He told me he’d meet me in front of the station in ten minutes.

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The drive from Matlock to Newlydale was along a two-lane country road that meandered through rock-walled fields and thickets of trees. Every now and then, the fields gave way to surprising little clusters of cottages plainly-built from square-cut bricks of local limestone.

Newlydale (pop. approx. 600) appeared suddenly, a Victorian primary school with three peaked roofs looming on the left, followed by some modern houses, and then, just as quickly, its historic centre.

“Here you are, mate. Market Street. And Wensley Manor.”

It didn’t look much like a manor. You know the kind of place I’m talking about—*Downton Abbey* being at the very grand end of the scale (along with Highclere Castle, where it was actually filmed)—and then, at the other end, Stoneford Manor, on Hampshire’s south coast, a ramshackle old place notorious for excessive partying in the 1960s, bed-and-breakfasting in the 1980s, and finally, in the 21st century, a rehearsal space. That was where we’d prepped for our 50th Anniversary Tour a couple of months earlier.

That tour felt like a lifetime ago.

A manor, to me, meant a building with an excessive number of bedrooms and drawing rooms, sitting on privately-owned land which was often stocked with pheasants and the occasional deer and sometimes sheep.

Wensley Manor was not that.

In fact, it looked very ordinary.

And I could see, without getting out of the car, that rather than being one house, it was actually five. I counted five front doors, anyway, and none of them had numbers.

“Thanks,” I said, handing over a cash tip—I’d paid the tariff in advance on my credit card. “I don’t suppose you’d have any idea where I could buy lunch.”

“You’ll be lucky,” Reggie replied, humorously. “Nearest Pret’s back in Derby.”

Pret A Manger, for the internationally uninitiated, is a UK-based sandwich chain. Two-thirds of their shops are in London. If you want a quick Chicken Salad Baguette to go, Pret’s your place.

“Try the Village Shop,” he added. “Just up the road.”

“Thanks,” I said again, getting out.

“Enjoy your stay. And your lunch.”

The Village Shop was a two-storey limestone building with a sloping roof. It had large picture windows on either side of its open door, and, providentially, it also had an awning, which was open and providing shelter from the on-and-off-rain.

Under the awning were a small metal table with two chairs and a slightly worse-for-wear wooden bench seat.

I went inside and discovered a selection of breads and buns and some interesting cheeses. Some of the bread was sliced. The Double Gloucester wasn't.

“Hello,” I said, to the lady behind the counter.

She had greyish hair cut into a sort of bowl and she was wearing a black bib apron with a name tag. Mavis.

“Do you sell knives?” I asked.

“We don't,” Mavis replied, taking a step back. I guessed she was alarmed by my appearance, which, by that point, was somewhere between unshaven swarthy rock god and partied-out roadie who'd spent a rough night on the tiles. More the latter than the former.

“For eating,” I said. “Not murdering anyone. Plastic forks? Spoons?”

“I'm terribly sorry, no.”

I gave it one last try. “Tin opener?”

“I'm afraid not.”

What kind of a village shop didn't sell tin openers?

Mavis's hand was hovering near her mobile, which was recharging next to the till. I wondered who looked after policing in Newlydale—the Derbyshire Constabulary?—and where their nearest station was, and whether I was going to meet up with a suspicious constable, intercepting me with, “Who's been making a nuisance of themselves in the Village Shop, then?” the moment I stepped outside.

I went back to hunting down the makings of my lunch. I walked past a small table with a book on display. The book itself was a rather posh-looking hardbound, *Newlydale: A Village History*. I picked it up and had a look at what was inside. Interviews with people whose families had always lived there. Historical photos. Anecdotes about life in the “old days”.

“Newly published,” Mavis supplied. “£14.00.”

I tucked it under my arm, and then picked up a small package of butter and tried to find some Branston pickle. No luck. But there was some tomato chutney in a glass jar that didn't look too difficult to open. That would do. I added a bottle of Fairy washing up liquid to my bread, cheese, butter and chutney, a roll of kitchen foil, a bottle of sparkling water, a tin of Red Bull, a little plastic pot of black cherry yogurt and a packet of chocolate digestives.

“Amex OK?” I checked, holding up my card.

“Yes, of course,” Mavis replied, convinced, I'm sure, that it was stolen.

“Thanks. Have you got a bag I can put this all in?”

“I'm sorry, no.”

I supposed most people in the village brought their own, due to carbon neutral footprints and not wishing to contribute to the floating rubbish island in the middle of the Pacific. They probably kept their reusable bags in the same place as their highly-sought-after limited edition tin openers.

I paid, and carried everything outside balanced on the flat cover of the book. I sat down on the wooden bench under the awning. No sign of the local plod. I tore off a large sheet of the

kitchen foil and made a workspace.

I poured a little of the washing up liquid onto my Amex card and slid it around with my finger. I rinsed it clean with the sparkling water, gave it an extra splash, just to be on the safe side, then used its hard plastic edge to cut the Double Gloucester into manageable, sandwich-sized slices. My card then did double-duty as a butter knife and a spreader for the tomato chutney. I washed it again in the Fairy liquid, rinsed it off with another splash of sparkling water, and set it aside on the bench to dry while I ate my sandwich and drank the tin of Red Bull.

While I ate, I paged through the *Village History*. Nobody named Judy there, although there was an entire page devoted to Wensley Manor which had, in its past, variously been a town hall, a private hotel, and a den of iniquity.

Dessert was the little pot of black cherry yogurt, with half a chocolate digestive making quite a good improvised spoon.

I swigged the last of my sparkling water, wrapped everything up in a very long, fresh sheet of kitchen foil, popped the book into my bag's side pocket and then went back inside the shop.

I could literally feel Mavis cringing, even though she was doing her best not to show it.

"I wonder," I said, "whether you know a woman named Judy who lives at Wensley Manor."

Now I was a stalker as well as a washed-up rock roadie.

"My name's Jason Figgis," I added. "And I'm a private investigator from London."

"Are you," Mavis replied, unimpressed. "You'd better have a look inside the book for her, then, hadn't you?"

"I have," I said. "And she's not there. I'd like to have a chat with her about a case I'm working on."

Stalker, washed-up roadie, and squalid PI.

"And Judy's last name is...?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry."

Squalid PI with completely deficient investigative skills. What was I doing here?

"And I'm terribly sorry, but I have no idea who she might be," Mavis replied.

I usually know when people aren't telling me the truth. Amateurs, anyway. Professional liars are a bit trickier. But people who aren't used to lying give themselves away with their body language, their eyes, often just their voices. Mavis was not being honest with me.

"Thank you," I said.

"Do come again," Mavis replied, definitely not meaning it.

I walked back along Market Street to the five-doored stone manor. A gravel driveway led to a small parking area and a path that went past everyone's back gardens.

There was a vintage brass knocker in the shape of a woodpecker fixed to the first door. I used it.

I heard excited barks from inside, and then the door was opened by a little woman who looked about seventy, with grey-blond hair cut into a short bob and friendly wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. I immediately thought of Helen Mirren.

"Hello," I said. "My name's Jason Figgis. I'm looking for Judy."

"I'm Judy," the woman replied. "And you'd better come in."

The two dogs were called Peter and Gordon (“Yes, of course, after the singers, who else?”) and both of them were elderly and mostly Border Collie. They herded me past a little room containing a washing machine and a dryer and collections of rubber boots, dog leashes and brown cardboard boxes, and rather a lot of plastic bins, and into a very large kitchen.

“Please, sit down,” Judy said, indicating the table, which was also very large and made out of rough-hewn wood. “My last name’s Galpin, by the way. Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I said.

I sat.

Peter and Gordon retired to matching beds beside a sliding glass door which opened onto a paved patio. Beyond the patio was a spacious garden, and a set of stone steps leading up a grassy hill, at the top of which were two sheep, a donkey, and a llama, all happily grazing.

“I’ve been expecting you. Tea? I’m afraid I’ve only got Yorkshire.”

“Perfect,” I said.

“Milk?”

“And two sugars,” I said. “Sorry, but how long, exactly, have you been expecting me? And, more to the point, why?”

“Since last week,” Judy said, from the other side of the immense kitchen, which contained cupboards, drawers, and pantries, and the requisite fridge, cooker, built-in microwave, and dishwasher, and which was bigger than my entire flat in London. “In answer to your first question.”

She filled up an old-fashioned kettle from the tap and set it on the stove and lit the gas. No boiling water on demand.

“And to answer the second, I don’t know. But this came in the post on Friday.” She picked a large brown envelope out of a collection of papers in a wicker tray on the counter, and brought it over to me.

The envelope was open. Inside was a hand-scrawled note in what I recognized as Marcus’s messy printing.

Judy: Please give the enclosed to Jason Davey. Or Figgis. He answers to both. He’s a musician and he’ll be coming to see you. Thanks. Marc.

There were two further envelopes, both sealed and both addressed to me. One of them had a large Alice-in-Wonderland-like invitation scrawled across its front: OPEN ME FIRST.

I did. Inside was another note, and it was much longer.

Hello Jason. The fact that you’re reading this confirms that you took advantage of the ticket I left you in the program. I apologize for not elaborating on the details of the Elgar investigation we discussed on the phone. It was time to go.

I promise you will be paid in full for your services. If you look in the second envelope, you’ll find a cash retainer which will function as a deposit. I trust it meets with your approval.

I opened the second envelope, which contained rather a lot of pound sterling notes in various denominations bundled together with an elastic band.

Please go to Tissington, Marcus continued. Once you arrive, proceed north along Chapel Lane, until you see a red telephone kiosk. Beside it, you’ll see a barrow, which belongs to a friend who crafts pots and bowls. Behind the barrow is a stone wall. One particular stone in the wall is stained black. Remove the stone, and you’ll find further instructions.

“Where’s Tissington?” I said.

“It’s not too far away,” Judy replied. She retrieved a large leather handbag from a chair beside the window. From it, she withdrew a very old, well-thumbed, spiral-bound *Geographers’*

A-Z Road Atlas of Great Britain. The date on the front was 1996.

She put on a pair of spectacles and peered at the Index at the back of the book.

“5F 85.”

She flipped to page eighty-five, found the square where the horizontal row 5 and the vertical row F intersected, and showed me where Tissington was.

It had literally been decades since I’d consulted an actual paperback A-Z of anything...I didn’t even know they still sold the damned things.

“Of course they do,” Judy said, taking off her spectacles. “Collins prints them. Not everyone trusts their phone. And not every phone will actually work when you need it in an emergency. Paper batteries never run down.”

I didn’t disagree. But there was a lot to be said for a map app. I consulted my mobile. Tissington was about twenty minutes away from Newlydale by car. The app showed me the route, outlined in blue.

“Why does he want you to go to Tissington?” Judy asked.

“He wants me to look for a stone in a wall beside a telephone kiosk and a barrow.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “Typical,” she said.

“You sound like you know him well...”

“Once upon a time,” Judy said, “I was married to him.”

She got up to rescue the kettle, which was whistling furiously on the stove.

“Shall we at least enjoy our tea before we go haring off on another one of his insane wild goose chases?”