

I Found You

PART ONE

Chapter 3

‘Sorry,’ says the woman called Alice, leaning across a small table to open a pair of navy-blue curtains. ‘It’s a bit musty. It’s been weeks since I had anyone in here.’ He looks around. He’s in a small timber room with a Velux window in the roof and a glazed door which opens into Alice’s back garden. It’s furnished spartanly. There’s a camp bed on one side, a sink, a fridge, a Baby Belling, a plug-in heater, the table, two plastic chairs, grimy rush matting on the floor. But the timber walls are painted an elegant shade of green and hung with an assortment of very attractive artworks: flowers and faces and buildings seemingly made from tonal slivers of old maps, skilfully collaged together. And by the camp bed is a pretty beaded lamp. The overall effect is quite pleasant. But she’s right, it does smell: an unhappy blend of must and damp. ‘There’s an outdoor toilet next door. No one else uses it. And you can use our downstairs bathroom during the day; it’s just off the back porch. Come on. I’ll show you.’ Her tone is clipped and slightly scary. As he follows her across the gravelled back yard, he takes in the form of her. A tall woman, slim enough, if a bit heavy around the middle. She’s dressed in narrow-fitting black jeans and an oversized sweater, presumably to camouflage the heavy middle and accentuate the long legs. She’s wearing black boots, slightly in the style of DMs, but not quite. Her hair is a springy mass of caramel and honey and treacle and mud. Bad highlights, he thinks, and then wonders how he has an opinion on such things. Is he a hairdresser? The tiny door at the back of the house sticks as she attempts to open it and she gives it a well-practised kick at the base. Ahead and down three steps is a galley kitchen, to the left is a cheap plywood door leading into a rather sad bathroom. ‘We all use the one upstairs so you’ll pretty much have this one to yourself. Shall I put a bath on for you? Warm you up?’ She turns screeching taps before he has answered either way. She pulls up the sleeves of her oversized jumper to stir the water and he notes her elbows. The wrinkled misshapen pockets of them. Forty, forty-five, he thinks to himself. She turns and smiles. ‘Right,’ she says. ‘Let’s get you something to eat while that’s running. And get these things on the radiator.’ She takes the damp bits and pieces she found in his pockets from him and he follows her again, into the galley kitchen: walls painted magenta, pots hanging from racks overhead, handmade units in soft oak, a sink full of washing up and a corkboard pinned with children’s scribbles. There’s a teenage girl sitting at the tiny table wedged into the corner. She glances up at him and then looks questioningly at the woman. ‘This is Jasmine. My eldest. This’ – she gestures at him – ‘is a strange man I just picked up on the beach. He’s going to sleep in the studio tonight.’ The girl called Jasmine raises a pierced eyebrow at her mother and throws him a withering look. ‘Excellent.’ She looks nothing like her mother. She has dark hair hacked – deliberately, he assumes – into a brutal bob, the fringe too high up her forehead, but somehow framing well her square face, her full vermilion lips and heavy eyes. She looks exotic, like a Mexican actress whose name he cannot possibly recall. Alice throws open a red fridge and says things to him. ‘Ham sandwich? Bread and pâté? I could heat up some cauliflower cheese? Or there’s an old curry. From Saturday. Where are we now? Wednesday. I’m sure it’ll

be OK. It' ll be OK, won' t it? That' s what curry was invented for, wasn' t it? To preserve meat?' He' s finding it hard to assimilate information. To make decisions. This, he suspects, is why he ended up sitting on the beach for more than twelve hours. He was aware that there were options. He just couldn' t put the options into any kind of order. Instead he' d sat stultified, inert. Until this strident woman had come along and made a decision for him.

'I really don' t mind,' he says. 'Anything.' 'Fuck it,' she says, letting the fridge door shut. 'I' ll order in pizzas.' He feels a surge of relief at another decision being made for him. Then discomfort when he remembers that, bar a loose coin or two, he has no money. 'I' m afraid I don' t have any money.' 'Yeah. I know,' says Alice. 'We went through your pockets, remember? It' s fine. My treat. And this one' - she nods her head in the direction of her daughter - 'she lives on fresh air. I always end up throwing hers away anyway. I' ll just order what I' d normally order. If you weren' t here.' The girl rolls her heavily lined eyes and he follows Alice into a tiny sitting room, bowing his head to miss a low beam. Here sits a small girl with whiteblonde curls, nestled into the side of another teenager, this one lanky and of Afro-Caribbean descent. They are watching the television and both turn and look at him with alarm. Alice is rifling through a drawer in a desk. 'This is a man I found on the beach,' she says without turning around. She pulls a leaflet from the drawer, closes the drawer and passes the leaflet to the teenage boy.

'We' re having pizzas,' she says. 'Choose something.' The boy' s face lights up and he sits up straight, unhooking the small girl' s arms from around his middle. 'Romaine,' says Alice, pointing to the small girl, 'and Kai.' She points at the tall teenager. 'And yes, they' re all mine. I' m not a foster parent. Sit down, for goodness' sake.' He lowers himself on to a small floral sofa. It' s a nice room. There' s a fire burning in the grate, comfortable furniture veering towards the shabbier end of shabby chic but generally well chosen, dark beams and dark-grey walls and Vaseline-glass shaded wall lights. There' s a Victorian street light hanging just outside the window, beyond that a necklace of fat white lights, beyond that the silvery shadows of the sea. Atmospheric. But this Alice is clearly no housekeeper. Dust furs everything, cobwebs hang from the beams, surfaces are cluttered with flotsam and jetsam, and the carpet has possibly never been hoovered. Alice begins to arrange the things from his pocket across the top of a radiator. 'Train tickets,' she mutters, peeling them apart. 'Dated yesterday.' She peers closer. 'Can' t make out the time. Kai?' She passes the damp ticket to her son. 'Can you read that?' The boy take the ticket, glances at it, passes it back. 'Seven fifty-eight.' 'Last train,' says Alice.

'You would have changed at Doncaster. Got in really late.' She carries on sorting through the papers. 'Some kind of receipt here. No idea what it says.' She adds it to the top of the radiator. Her face is what he might call handsome. Strong features, a slight dip below each cheekbone, a good mouth. She has the smudged remains of this morning' s eyeliner under her eyes, but no other make-up. She' s almost beautiful. But there' s a hardness to her that sets her jaw at the wrong angle, makes shadows where there should be light. 'Another receipt. Another receipt. A tissue?' She holds it out towards him. He shakes his head and she drops it into the fire. 'Well, that' s kind of it really. No ID. Nothing. You' re a complete mystery.' 'What' s his name?' asks Romaine. 'I don' t know what his name is. And he doesn' t know what his name is. He' s lost his memory.' She says this as if it is normal and the small girl furrows her brow. 'Lost it where?' Alice laughs and says, 'Actually, Romaine, you' re good at naming things. He can' t remember what he' s called and we can' t call him nothing. What shall we call him?' The small girl stares at him for a moment. He assumes she' ll come up with something childish and nonsensical. But she slants her eyes, purses her lips and then very carefully enunciates the word Frank. 'Frank,' says Alice, appraising him thoughtfully. 'Yes. Frank. Perfect. Clever girl.' She touches the girl' s

curls. 'Well, Frank' - she smiles at him - 'I reckon your bath's run. There's a towel on your bed and soap on the side. By the time you're done, the pizzas should be here.' He can't remember choosing a pizza; he's not sure if Frank is his real name. This woman is making him dizzy with her officious certainty about everything. But he does know that his socks are damp, his underwear is damp, his skin is damp, that he is cold from the inside to the outside and that he wants a hot bath more than anything in the world right now. 'Oh.' He remembers something. 'Dry clothes. I mean, I'm happy to put these back on. Or I could . . .'

'Kai can lend you some joggers. And a T-shirt. I'll leave them by the back door for you.'

'Thank you,' he says. 'Thank you so much.'

As he stands to leave the room he sees her exchange a look with her teenage son, sees the mask of crisp nonchalance slip for a moment. The boy looks worried and annoyed; he shakes his head slightly. She responds with a firm nod. But he can see fear in her eyes, too. As if she's starting to doubt her decision. As if she's starting to wonder why he's in her house. After all, he could be anyone.