

I Found You

PART ONE

Chapter 5

The rain finally stops at five in the morning. The sun's gentle ascent turns the sky silver-grey and the insolent clamour of birdsong and rasp of boats being heaved down the slipway brings Alice to consciousness. It's a rough awakening. She fell asleep only an hour ago, having spent the preceding five hours in a state of heightened alertness, aware of every tonal shift in the background hum, every creak of the old house, every flicker of moonlight ricocheting off the surface of the sea beyond her window. It isn't the first time there's been a strange man sleeping in the studio. She's rented it out to many strangers over the years. And to strangers much stranger than Frank. But at least she knew who they were, where they came from, why they were there. They had a context. But this man, 'Frank', he'd entered stage left, silently, without a script. Charming as he is - and he is, actually - it's unnerving. The bits and pieces in his pockets revealed nothing other than that he'd travelled to Ridinghouse Bay from King's Cross on Tuesday night and that at some other point in his recent history he'd spent twenty-three pounds in Robert Dyas and bought a bagel and a can of Coke from Sainsbury's. He'd appeared in the kitchen after his bath, in Kai's clothes, looking pink and raw and deeply embarrassed. His thick hazel hair was damp and wavy and he was barefoot. Lovely feet, Alice had noted. For the record. She'd watched him eating his pizza, seen him trying to control the impulse to stuff it down his throat with pure, wild hunger. She'd offered him beer and he'd looked confused for a moment, possibly trying to decide whether he was a beer-drinker or not. 'Go on,' she'd said. 'At least we'll know that about you then.' So, he'd had a beer and it had been a tiny bit awkward, the four of them standing around eating pizza with a big scared man in a teenager's hoodie. Hard to know what to say, really. When he'd gone to bed her children had all turned and looked at her with cold disapproval. 'What', Jasmine had managed eventually, 'are you doing? Mum?' 'Where's your compassion?' she'd said. 'Poor man. No jacket. No money.' She'd gestured at the kitchen window, at the fat, angry rain pounding off the glass. 'In this.' 'There's other places he could have gone,' Kai had added. 'Yeah,' she'd said. 'Like where?' 'I dunno. A B and B.' 'He's got no money, Kai. That's the whole point.' 'Yeah, well, I don't see why that's our problem.' 'Jesus,' Alice had groaned, despite knowing that her children were right, 'you kids. You've got no human decency, have you? What do they teach you at school these days?' 'Er, about paedophiles and conmen and voyeurs and rapists and—' 'They do not,' she'd interjected. 'The media teaches you all that and I've told you all a million times: people are fundamentally good. He's a lost soul. I'm the Good Samaritan. He'll be gone this time tomorrow.' 'Lock the back door,' Kai had said. 'Double-lock it.' She'd pooh-poohed his concern at the time but later, after calling out goodnight into the dark space between the back door and the studio, she'd locked the door behind her. Bolted it too. And then barely slept. She'd imagined, at intervals, a big man-hand held tight across the soft jaw of her sleeping baby girl, her green eyes stretched wide with terror. Or the pad pad pad of a strange man in her living room, silently opening drawers in search of gold and iPads. Or her older daughter being watched in silhouette as

she absent-mindedly undressed in front of the window. Even though her window faced the wrong way. And she would never do that anyway because the ridiculous child thought she was fat. But still. Alice gives up on the notion of sleep and decides to capitalise on the early start. She crosses the room and unplugs the iPad from the charger, switches it to the webcam app, watches her parents' empty living room for a while. Since they both became . . . well, ill, is how she prefers to refer to it, rather than demented, loop-the-loop, bat-shit nuts, they have started to rise later and later. Their morning carer comes at ten and has to lure them out of bed like a pair of sleep-starved teenagers. She turns off the iPad and pulls open her curtains. The sea is blanket-flat after the rain, pink and yellow as the sun rises over it, as lush as the Caribbean. The fairy lights are still lit, as are the street lights. The pavement below is petrol-black and gleaming. It couldn't be any prettier. Alice showers, moving quietly around the house, not wanting to rouse anyone any earlier than necessary. In her room she appraises herself. She never normally has time to appraise herself. Normally she rises too late to do any appraising, rises with just enough time to make sure she doesn't leave the house naked. Her hair, she realises, is verging on bizarre. Her last set of highlights were quite bold, or, as Jasmine said at the time, stripy. And now the roots are coming through in vivid salt and pepper. And being out in the rain a lot the day before has done it even fewer favours. She wipes away the shadows of yesterday's quickly applied eyeliner and starts hunting through the top drawer of her dressing table for her make-up bag, the one she usually gets out only on special occasions. She tells herself that she is doing this because she has the time to do it. That it has nothing to do with the handsome man in her studio room. She pulls the crazy badger hair up into a bun, finds clean jeans, a checked shirt that skims her tummy but clings lightly to the outline of her breasts, a favourite pair of earrings with greeny-blue stones that echo the colour of her eyes. Alice is a woman often described by men as sexy. Dirty, too. She's never traded on being pretty. Never thought she'd do better in a tight dress and high heels (although when she does make the effort it doesn't seem to hurt). Generally Alice lets it all hang out. But not this morning, for some strange reason. Romaine appears at her bedroom door, blonde ringlets in a disaster, drooping jersey pyjamas sagging at the crotch. Together with Griff, they tiptoe down the narrow, open-tread staircase that leads to the hallway. The other dogs greet them silently with mouths stretched into black-lipped smiles and tails beating against the flagstones. Alice holds her breath vaguely as they enter the kitchen, aware of what lies beyond the back door, nervous of the unknowingness of the day ahead. She loads the dogs' bowls with meat, makes Romaine a toasted bagel with peanut butter, herself an oversized mug of tea and a bowl of All Bran. All the while she has half an eye on the back door. Wondering. Unsettled. But by eight thirty Kai and Jasmine are on the school bus and she is gone from the house with the dogs and Romaine and there is no sign of him. The studio is still and silent, as though there is no one in there at all. Derry looks at her curiously at the school gates, which are only just being unlocked by the caretaker. 'You're early,' she says. 'And . . . ' She peers more closely at her, '. . . you're wearing make-up.' 'Whatevs,' says Alice. 'What's going on?' 'The man came in,' says Romaine. 'The wet man from the beach.' Alice rolls her eyes. 'He didn't come in,' she corrects. 'I asked him in. To dry off. To have a bath, something to eat. I'm pretty sure he's already gone.' But when she gets home forty minutes later the curtains are pulled open in the studio and she can see movement inside. She rubs the dirty puddle speckles from the dogs with an old towel, checks her reflection briefly and switches on the kettle. * His dreams were remarkable last night. After so many hours of blankness, of a head full of nothing, to be plunged suddenly into this ethereal world of people and experiences and places was quite exhilarating. He clutches on to the fading fragments as he comes to, knowing that there might be something

there, a clue to tie him back to himself. But they float away, hopelessly, intangibly. He sits up in bed and rubs his face hard. The curtains in this room are gossamer thin and the light outside is the particular acid-blue of a morning after rain. He can hear scuffling at his door and peers through the curtains into the earth-dark eyes of a dog. The dog looks as if it is about to smile, but then the mouth stretches further until its teeth are revealed and then its gums and the dog snarls and he lets the curtain drop. At least he can remember where he is now, he thinks. At least he can remember tea in a thermos and pizza in a kitchen and a leggy woman with thick blonde hair and a hot bath in a mouldy, echoing bathroom. And he remembers the name Frank, bestowed on him last night by the little girl with the golden ringlets. He wants to go to the toilet, he wants to brush his teeth, but the dog is going mental outside the door and he has no idea if it's the kind of dog that just barks for fun. It's a . . . He searches for the name of the breed, but it's gone. Assuming he ever knew. But it's the sort of dog that thugs have. Muscly and square with a huge jaw. He opens the curtains and stares at the dog. The dog barks louder. And then, from the tiny door at the back of the house, Alice appears. She looks cross and shouts something at the dog, and grabs it by its collar; then she sees his face and she walks towards him. 'Have you remembered who you are yet?' she asks, handing him a mug of tea with one hand, keeping hold of the dog with the other. He takes the mug and says, 'No. Still no idea. Had lots of weird dreams but I can't remember any of them.' He shrugs and rests the mug on the table by the door. 'Well,' she says, 'come inside when you're ready. I'll leave the door open. I can make you some breakfast if you're hungry. I've got fresh eggs.' It's quiet in the cottage when he bows his head down to pass through the back door a while later. No children. Alice is looking at something on an iPad and sighing a lot. 'Where is everyone?' he asks. She looks at him as though he's simple and says, 'School.' 'Ah, yes. Of course.' She switches off the iPad and folds over its case. 'Do you reckon you've got any children?' 'Christ.' The thought had not occurred to him. 'I don't know. Maybe. Maybe I've got loads. I don't even know how old I am. How old do you reckon I am?' She examines his face with her grimy, green-blue eyes. 'Somewhere between thirty-five and forty-five, I reckon.' He nods. 'How old are you?' 'You're not supposed to ask a lady that.' 'Sorry.' 'It's OK. I'm not really a lady. And I'm forty-one.' 'And your children,' he says. 'Their father?' 'Ers,' she says. 'Fathers. I've totally failed in the providing-aconventional-family-unit-for-my-children department. Jasmine's dad was a holiday romance. Brazil. Didn't know I was pregnant until I'd been home for two weeks and had no way of tracking him down. Kai's dad was my nextdoor neighbour in Brixton. We were - excuse the expression - fuck buddies. He just disappeared one day, when Kai was about five. A new family moved in. That was that. And Romaine's dad was the love of my life but . . .' She pauses. 'He went mental. Did a bad thing. He lives in Australia now. So.' She sighs. He pauses, trying to find something to say that won't sound like he's insulting her. 'Have you never been married, then?' She laughed drily. 'No. Never managed to snare a man.' He pauses again, looks down at his hands. 'I'm not wearing a wedding ring.' 'No, you're not. Doesn't mean you're not married though. You might be one of those bastards who refuses to wear one.' 'Yes,' he says vaguely. 'I guess.' She sighs and pushes the sleeves of her checked shirt up her arms. She has a long dip between her radius and the flesh of her forearm, which reminds him of someone. And there! Immediately, overpoweringly. His mother. His mother has that dip. She also has that little pouch of crinkled flesh at the nib of her elbow that he noticed yesterday on Alice. He has a mother. A mother with arms! He smiles and says, 'I just remembered something! I just remembered my mother's arms.' 'Oh,' she says, brightening. 'That's good. Can you remember any other bits of her?' He shakes his head sadly. 'Listen,' she says. 'I went on to Google last night, to look

up your symptoms. Apparently, unless this is all a massive wind-up, you are in something called a "fugue state" . 'Right.' 'Does that mean anything to you?' 'No.' 'OK.' She runs her hand over her forehead. 'Well. It's a kind of amnesia, but it's not brought on by head trauma or alcohol or drugs or anything like that. It's usually caused by an emotional trauma. Or a shock to the system. Often it can be caused by seeing or remembering something from your past that you might have been repressing. And the brain kind of shuts down, like a self-protection mechanism, and people do just what you've done. Turn up in random places with no memory of who they are or where they come from or what the fuck they're doing there. It's pretty fascinating actually.' 'What happens to these other people? I mean, will I get better?' 'Well, that's the excellent news. Well, sort of excellent. They all recover. Sometimes within hours, usually days, occasionally a few weeks. But it is temporary. You will get your memory back.' 'Wow,' he says, nodding slowly. He feels numb. He knows he should be pleased. But the concept of remembering who he is is hard to grasp when he can't remember who he is. 'And look,' she continues, 'you just remembered your mother's arm. I mean, it's not exactly a revelation. But it shows it's all still there, just waiting to be unlocked. So, the big question is: What now?' 'What do you mean?' What now. It's a phrase that holds no meaning for him. 'I mean, we should probably take you to the police, shouldn't we?' His response to this suggestion is visceral. All his muscles contract, his fists curl tightly inwards, his breathing quickens, his pulse speeds up. It's the strongest onslaught of sensation he's had since he found himself on the beach two nights ago. 'No,' he says, as softly as he can, but he can hear the . . . what is it? Anger? Terror? He can hear it in the bass of his voice. He has a sensation of pushing someone, pushing them hard against a wall. He feels hot breath against his cheek. 'No,' he says again, even more softly. 'I don't think I want to do that. I think . . . Can I just stay here for one more night? See if I get my memory back first. Maybe we can go another time. If . . .'

Alice nods, but he senses that she is unconvinced. 'Sure,' she says after a short pause. 'One more night. Sure. But after that, if you still don't know who the hell you are, you know. Because that room, I usually rent it out, extra income, so . . .'

'I understand. One more night.' She smiles uncertainly. 'Good. But in the meantime, keep 'em coming. The memories, I mean.' She stands up and reaches for a box of eggs so fresh that there are feathers stuck to the cardboard. 'Fried?' she says. 'Scrambled?' 'I have no idea,' he says. 'You decide.'