

# I Found You

PART TWO

Chapter 8

Alice feels strange in her room at the top of the house. All day yesterday she'd felt strange because that man was sitting on the beach in the rain. Now she is feeling strange because that same man is in her shed. His presence is benign but somehow unnerving. The emptiness of him. All the spaces and gaps. But more than that, the pure maleness of him. Somehow his lack of identity has distilled him down to an essence of raw masculinity. The fact of his gender is irrefutable and Alice . . . well, Alice has not had sex for a long, long time and Alice is a woman who likes to have sex. Her whole life has been shaped - virtually destroyed - by her sexual desires. She pulls on her reading glasses and she positions a map of Saint-Tropez under the anglepoise lamp. She has already sketched out the pieces of the rose petals and she slices through them now, slowly, adeptly, with a scalpel. The thought of Saint-Tropez, of steamer chairs and chilled champagne by an aqua pool, of waiters in white linen and tanned men in swimming trunks, is stirring her. She can almost hear the background murmur of muted conversation, feel the hands of some unknown lover rubbing cream into her shoulders, and soon enough those anonymous hands become the hands of the man in the shed and Alice is thinking of those same hands as they used a knife to saw effortlessly through the thick slab of farmhouse toast she'd made him earlier. Good hands. Good wrists. And then she is thinking of all of him, because clean and dry, in Kai's hoodie, he cuts an impressive figure. Not too tall, probably just an inch or two taller than her, but solid. No weak points in his physiology. And his hazel eyes, soft with need and confusion. Apart from that moment, when she'd suggested taking him to the police station. She'd seen something entirely different pass over him then. A wash of fear and anger, gone before she'd had a chance to analyse it, leaving her wondering if she'd imagined it. She pushes the thought of him from her mind. Men are no longer on her agenda. Her children are her priority now. Her children and her job. She excises the petal-shaped pieces of map from the sheet and places them side by side. Avenue des Canebiers. Chemin de l' Estagnet. Rue Cavailon. Names that talk of palm trees and open-top cars, hotels with striped awnings and valet parking. She shouldn't feel jealous, though. She has so much here. There are even palm trees on the other side of the bay. Two of them. A ringing of the brass bell above her front door below makes her jump slightly. This is followed by the clatter of three sets of dog claws against the wooden stairs and some exuberant barking. She peers over her desk and looks downwards where she sees the distinctive hennaed topknot of Derry Dynes. 'Coming!' she calls out. She has to part the dogs forcefully at the front door to reach the handle and then hold them back to prevent them from knocking Derry down. 'Hello, friend,' she says. 'To what do I owe the pleasure?' Derry is peering over Alice's shoulder with body language that doesn't appear very social. 'I saw Jasmine earlier,' she says. 'She told me that man is in your house.' Alice sighs and pushes some hair behind her ear. She's angry with herself for not briefing the children to keep Frank a secret. She doesn't mind Derry knowing, but if anyone else found out . . . 'He's not in the house,' she snaps. 'He's in the shed.' She holds the door open and the dogs back so that Derry can pass through. 'You're mad,' Derry says, looking this way

and that as she passes through to the living room. 'Jasmine says he has no memory.' She turns, satisfied that 'the man' is not in the living room, and heads for the kitchen. Alice sighs again and follows her. 'It's not as bad as it sounds.' 'I told you not to get involved,' Derry says. 'You said you wouldn't.' She peers through the window in the back door across the courtyard towards the shed. 'Christ, Al, what if the school find out? What if . . . ' She stops and sighs. 'Come on. After last year, Al. You can't just bring strange men into the house.' Alice knows exactly what Derry's talking about, but she's not in the mood to hear it. 'I told you. He's not in the house. He's in the shed. And we kept the back door double-locked last night.' 'That's not the point. It all sounds really dodgy. This whole "memory loss" thing. Sounds like a scam.' Now Alice tuts. 'Oh, for God's sake. It is not a scam. You are such a conspiracy theorist.' 'Is he out there now?' she asks, pulling two of Alice's mugs from a hook and flicking on the kettle. 'As far as I know,' says Alice. 'I haven't heard him leave.' 'Get him in here,' says Derry, dropping a green tea teabag into her mug and an Earl Grey into Alice's. Alice doesn't move for a moment. 'Go on,' says Derry. 'Tell him the kettle's on.' 'You do know I'm supposed to be working, don't you?' 'Later,' she says, 'you can work later. This won't take long.' Alice doesn't argue. The basis of her friendship with Derry is that Derry is always right. She touches her hair before opening the back door, checking that it's in place. She cups her hand to her mouth and breathes into it; she grimaces. Tea breath. The curtains are open in the shed and she knocks gently at the door. 'Frank,' she says, 'it's me. Alice. Just taking a break from work, wondered if you fancied coming in for a cuppa.' There's no reply, so she knocks again. 'Frank?' She pushes open the door and peers through the gap. The bed is made, Kai's hoodie and joggers are folded into a neat pile on the end. The room is empty. 'Well,' she says to Derry a moment later, 'looks like you can stop freaking out. He's gone.' 'Gone, gone?' 'I don't know,' she says. She looks around the kitchen, notices the mug she'd made his tea in earlier, sitting on the draining board, upside down. She scouts for a note of some kind, but there's nothing. Sadness plummets through her; she feels heavy-limbed with disappointment. And then she feels concern, a burn of anxiety and fear. She thinks of his hazel eyes, his woolly schoolboy hair, his utter vulnerability. She cannot imagine him out there, alone. She really cannot. 'Well,' says Derry, 'let's hope so. The last thing you need.' 'Yes,' says Alice, 'he probably was.' He feels as though he's on a conveyor belt, being carried along by external forces. He feels like a sack of dust being dragged down the street. He sees a bench ahead and he veers towards it, almost getting knocked over by a woman on a bike with a pannier full of fruit. She looks at him strangely and he wonders if maybe he looks as mad as he feels. As he lay on the bed in Alice's shed after breakfast this morning he had experienced not memories as such, but strong sensations, much like the one he'd had when Alice had suggested taking him to the police station. Terrible dark waves of doom. A sense that something somewhere was horribly broken and that there was nothing he could do to fix it. But more than that, there were flashes of bright whiteness, like the ricochet of sunlight off a passing car, momentarily blinding and unbalancing, and behind the flashes were pictures, he knew, pieces of the jigsaw, if he could only see them. He needs to keep walking. He needs to find the thing that brought him to this northern seaside town. But as he gets to his feet he has another flash of whiteness and falls back on to the bench. He squeezes his eyes closed tight, desperately trying to find the edges of the hidden image. And then he sees it. A barley-twist pole, a pastel-coloured horse, a girl with brown hair; she goes up, she goes down, she's smiling and waving and then she's gone. He laughs at the power of it, after all these hours of nothing. 'Shit!' he says to himself. 'Shit!' He jumps up from the bench, feeling himself drawn towards the seafront across the road. He looks down at the crescent of the beach, empty on this brisk

April day, and tries to pull something from the view, some essence of the moment he just remembered. But nothing comes and he heads down the steps built into the seawall. He runs his hand down the painted metal handrail; a few flakes of peeling paint come off under his grasp. He fits his feet carefully into each narrow step, breathing in the smell of fish-guts and brine. Has he been here before? Is it possible? And if he has, then why? And when? And who is the girl on the carousel, the smiling, beautiful girl with chestnut hair, lost in her moment, oblivious to his eyes upon her? At the thought of the girl he feels another wave of doom wash over him. His body, no longer his own it seems, reacts by regurgitating the eggs and toast Alice cooked for him earlier on. Afterwards he is shaky and weak. He returns to the position he'd adopted during his first hours in Ridinghouse Bay, on his haunches, on the beach, staring out to sea as though waiting for the ocean to bring him something.