

I Found You

PART TWO

Chapter 7

1993 They rented the same house every year. A higgledy-piggledy coastguard's cottage in the town of Ridinghouse Bay in East Yorkshire. It was, perversely, not as nice as their own actual home in Croydon, which was modern and clean and had shiny white bathrooms and cream carpeting and doubleglazing. Rabbit Cottage was damp and ill-furnished. The kitchen was small and the walls were nicotine-beige. There was a tiny bedroom off the kitchen and two even tinier bedrooms on the top floor; the mattresses were lumpy and all the bedding was worn and holey. Things leaked when it rained and there was a strange odour about the place: briny and mackerely, damp and smoky. But for some reason Gray and Kirsty's parents were entranced by the place. Something to do with the atmosphere, they said, and the people. Not to mention the views and the air and the walks and the fish. They'd loved the place as children, all wellies and crabbing and funfairs and chips. But now Kirsty was fifteen, Gray was seventeen and Rabbit Cottage was virtually the last place on earth either of them wanted to be. They arrived on a damp July afternoon in poor spirits after what felt like a much-longer-than-it-used-to-be journey up the M1, during which Tony, their dad, had refused to let them put on their own music and did the thing he always did of chasing local radio stations in and out of frequency to keep himself abreast of traffic reports. Parking restrictions had changed in the years since they'd first come to Ridinghouse Bay. Back then you could park right outside the house and unload all your stuff in the middle of throngs of holidaymakers. Nowadays you had to park your car in a car park on the edge of town and walk in. So here they were, unloading cardboard boxes packed with breakfast cereals and long-life milk, toilet rolls and Heinz soups, and trudging up the hill into town with suitcases and rolled-up towels and duvets. A light summer drizzle fell upon them as they walked and by the time they'd emptied the car and closed the door of Rabbit Cottage behind them they were steaming like New York pavements and all in rather bad tempers. 'Christ,' said Gray, resting a cardboard box on the Formica-topped table in the kitchen and looking about. 'Is it possible that they have actually painted Rabbit Cottage?' It was true that the walls had lost their tarry patina and there were also 'NO SMOKING' signs attached here and there about the place that had not been present before. He heaved his rucksack up the narrow staircase and dropped it on to the single bed (unmade, sheets and blankets left in a folded pile at the foot of the bare bed). His room overlooked the sea. His parents liked the room at the back because it was quieter; the street below could get quite noisy during these summer months: there were three pubs on this road alone, not to mention the steam fair that came to town every summer with its loud pump organ music, which carried up the coast on the slightest breeze. But Gray didn't mind the noise. It made a nice change to the silence of the quiet street they lived on in Croydon, where the only noises at this time of year were droning lawnmowers and honey bees. He liked the sound of drunk people calling out to each other, the echo and reverb of footsteps on the cobbles in the dark. They were here for two weeks. Gray had tried to persuade his parents to allow him to return home a week early; there was a party he wanted to go to, there was a girl he liked. Plus the weather forecast

for the south was glorious in comparison. But they'd said, 'No.' They'd said: 'Next year. When you're eighteen.' And Kirsty had looked at him with searing, beseeching eyes, a look that said: No, please don't leave me here alone. They were reasonably close, as far as brothers and sisters went. She'd played him well as a small child; gone to him with sore knees and unlaced shoes; left him alone when he asked her to. They looked out for each other in a rather detached way, like well-meaning but somewhat reserved next-door neighbours. So, he'd agreed to the full two weeks and hoped that the girl he liked would still be available when he got back. Downstairs, Gray's dad was building a fire and his mum was unpacking food into cracked Formica-covered kitchen cabinets. Kirsty was on the sofa folded into a pile of gangly limbs and cheap knitwear, reading a magazine. Outside, the rain was still spritzing against the windowpanes but a band of hopeful brightness sat on the horizon forcing a gap between the clouds. 'I'm going out,' said Gray. 'Going where?' asked his dad. 'Just for a walk up the prom.' 'In this?' His dad indicated the rain-spattered windows. 'I've got a waterproof. And anyway, looks like it's brightening.' Kirsty looked up from her magazine. 'Can I come?' 'Yeah, sure.' She raced to the front door, pulled on her trainers and grabbed a cagoule from the coat pegs. 'Don't be long,' Mum called from the kitchen. 'I'm making a pot of tea and there'll be cake.' Away from the claustrophobia of Rabbit Cottage, Gray felt his temples relax, his jaw loosen, the cool rain freshen his travel-worn skin. She was almost as tall as him now, his sister, all legs and hair, not quite grown into herself but almost there. The resemblance between them was startling enough, he hoped, for it to be obvious that the gawky, scruffy girl in a damp cagoule, patterned nylon jumper and faded baggy jeans walking alongside him was not romantically connected to him in any way. She was a slow developer. She'd worn her hair in a plait down her back until only recently and still didn't wear make-up. But she was suddenly quite desirable, he could see that, raw and new like a half-blossomed flower, embarrassingly beautiful in fact. He felt a surge of awful fear rise through him, a strange mix of disgust and tenderness. Disgust at himself for being a man, for every bad thing he'd ever thought about a girl, for his base instincts, his low-level throbbing urges, predatory needs, filthy mind, for all of it. Disgust at the knowledge that now men like him would look at his sister and think things and feel things and then purge themselves over her. And tenderness because she did not know. They walked in silence for a few moments, Gray absorbing and processing, the rain drying, and there, at last, a blade of sunshine at their feet. 'Have you got any money?' asked Kirsty. He felt his pockets for coins, pulled out a pound and some mixed change. 'A couple of quid. Why?' 'Sweets?' He rolled his eyes, but tipped the coins into her upheld palm. She'd had her braces off a few weeks ago and was celebrating by eating as many hard, chewy sweets as she could. He watched her shuffle into a gift shop, one of those with cone-shaped bags of floss hanging by the door, carousels of postcards, garrotted nets of buckets and spades. He turned and watched the sun filter through the striated clouds over the sea, the light changing from gold to silver, the sea glittering in response. Further ahead he saw the steam fair. It was empty; no one came to the fair in the rain - all those damp seats. Kirsty returned, offered him a paper bag of Cola Cubes and some of his coins. He took a sweet. She put her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes from the sharpness of the sun. 'Two weeks,' she said with a sigh. 'Exactly.' 'Shall we go and see if they're showing anything half-decent at the cinema?' Gray nodded and followed her away from the seafront towards the high road. The cinema was housed in a damp, one-storey breeze-block cave just off the main road. It showed one film at a time and seated a hundred people. 'Cliffhanger,' he read from the poster outside. 'Fuck's sake. I've already seen it.' Kirsty shrugged. 'I haven't.' 'Well, I don't want to see it again. It's all about not knowing how it ends.' Gray looked closer to see if the programme was set to change at all over the next two weeks. Behind him

stood his sister, sucking a Cola Cube, one hand in the pocket of her cagoule, entirely oblivious to the young man who'd just stopped on the other side of the street, his eye caught first by her long legs and then by the way her brown hair fell in damp waves around her face, framing high cheekbones and narrow brown eyes, her pretty mouth clamped around a sweet, sucking hard on it, her gaze neutral, placid, soft. He continued to stare at Kirsty as she followed Gray towards the high street. He had inventoried everything about her by the time they turned the corner. Her big feet, slightly turned in. Her bust, larger than expected, cocooned beneath her shapeless jumper. Her face, devoid of make-up, natural, unlike so many girls his age. No earrings. A paper bag of sweets. The awkwardness of her gait as she followed behind that boy (her brother? There was a resemblance and she didn't seem to have any need to be physically close to him). Kirsty and Gray continued on their way and the man thought about following them, but in a town this small their paths would be sure to cross again so he walked on, a small smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, as though enjoying a private joke with himself.