

# I Found You

PART TWO

Chapter 9

1993 After the damp start to their holiday, there followed three days of warm sunshine. And sunshine meant days on the beach. Beneath Rabbit Cottage, the beach was narrow and gravelly, full of glittering rock pools and fishing boats. As children they'd spent their days down there, picking their way across the slimy rocks in plastic boots and sou' westers. But now they were older they preferred to take towels and sun cream, a windbreak and folding chairs and walk a quarter of a mile across town to the wider sandy beach below the high street. Here there was a café hewn from the cliff face serving fast food and ice creams and beer in plastic cups. There was a shower and a lifeguard and various rides for small children. It wasn't exactly Blackpool Pleasure Beach but it was fine for a small town like Ridinghouse Bay. So here they were, Tuesday morning, not yet warm enough for swimwear, Tony wearing a short-sleeved shirt unbuttoned over denim shorts, Pam in cycling shorts and a baggy T-shirt with a cartoon dog on the front, Gray in Hawaiianprint surfer shorts and Kirsty in a black halter-neck bikini top and a denim skirt. And there he was. That guy. Gray couldn't quite think of him as a 'man'. He looked around eighteen, Gray supposed. But unlike himself, he was not shackled to a family. He'd been there on Sunday, and yesterday too: alone, stretched out on a white towel in black swimming trunks, black sunglasses, a paperback novel, a Walkman. Every now and then he would sit up, wrap his arms around his legs and stare out into the sea, moodily. He was sitting close enough for Gray to be able to see the towelling indents in the skin of his back, close enough to catch the smell of aftershave on every breeze, to hear the tinny beat of Cypress Hill through his earphones. It was a matter of a few inches, his infringement of their personal space, but Gray could feel it in every fibre of his being, like a Chinese burn. The man stood up now, his back facing them, and stretched ostentatiously, letting each set of well-formed muscles ripple in turn. Then, feigning nonchalance, he rubbed at the stubble on his chin as if he alone possessed sufficient testosterone to produce such rough facial hair. Slowly he walked past them, and headed for the beachfront café where he bought himself a small beer and drank it standing up, his elbow against the bar, his legs crossed at an angle, his gaze fixed unabashedly on Kirsty. 'I see your admirer's back,' said Tony, talking over the top of a Daily Express. Kirsty shrugged and looked at the sand. 'He's not my admirer,' she said unconvincingly. Tony just smirked and went back to his newspaper. 'He's very good-looking, Kirsty,' said Pam, and Kirsty shushed furiously at her. 'He can't hear,' said Pam. 'He's way over at the bar.' 'Looks like a creep to me,' said Gray. Pam looked at him admonishingly. 'No need to take everything so seriously, Graham.' 'I'm not "taking things seriously". I'm just expressing an opinion. I just think he looks like a creep. That's all.' Gray saw him from the corner of his eye, crumpling up his empty beer cup inside his fist, letting it drop into a bin, as though demonstrating again his superior levels of male hormone. He was good-looking, Gray could concede that. Good-looking and fit. Only a year or so older than Gray but far removed in degrees of physical maturity. But Gray had to question his motives. Why Kirsty? There were girls scattered across the beach, girls matching this man's levels of preened attractiveness, girls in proper

bikinis, girls with highlights and big earrings and pink lipstick. Girls not sitting with their mum and dad and big brother eating cockles out of a plastic cup with a toothpick. The man returned slowly to his white towel, passing within inches of Kirsty as he did so, and Gray had to control an impulse to stick out his foot and trip him over. In fact he extracted a few moments' pleasure from picturing the scenario and replaying it in his mind over and over until he found himself stifling a chuckle. 'What?' said Kirsty. 'Oh, nothing.' And no, Gray wasn't jealous. What would Gray have to be jealous of? Gray was tall, reasonably good-looking in a boyish kind of way, somewhere between slim and average. Girls told him he was cute. Girls told him all sorts of things in fact. Mainly about other boys, but that wasn't the point. The point was that he had their confidences. Girls liked Gray and he liked girls. Sometimes probably not in the way that the girls thought he liked them. Sometimes probably in a slightly darker way, under his covers, alone at night. But still, this guy, he reckoned, this guy wouldn't know how to talk to a girl if his life depended on it. Gray wasn't sure he could talk, full stop. He looked like the kind of guy who could grunt. Beat his chest. At a push. And it was at the very moment that this thought passed through Gray's head that the guy turned, looked at him, looked at Kirsty, looked at their parents and said in a voice straight from a James Bond movie: 'Lovely when the sun's out, isn't it?' Every member of the family turned like startled animals at this unexpected conversational opening. His mother put her hand to her collarbone and said, in a voice that Gray had never heard her use before, 'Why, yes, it is.' He saw Kirsty flash his mum a terrible look and then cast her gaze downwards, her face burning red. 'You here on your holidays?' he asked, somewhat superfluously. Tony nodded. 'Up from Surrey,' he said, which was Dad's posh way of not saying Croydon. 'How about you?' 'Harrogate. I'm here to keep my aunt company. Her husband just died and she couldn't face coming alone.' 'Oh,' said Pam, her hand moving to her heart, 'your poor aunt. And good for you. Not many young boys would sacrifice their summer holidays for a relative.' 'Well, she's a good person. She's been there for me a lot. Plus, well, her house is kind of amazing.' He smiled then and pointed across the bay towards the other side of town where the houses got bigger and bigger the further you went until his finger came to rest upon what looked like a stately home: pale walls and tall windows, surrounded by poplars and yew trees. 'Oh!' said Pam. 'We always wondered who lived in that one, didn't we, Tony?' Tony nodded. 'Thought it might be royalty.' 'Not quite. My uncle made his fortune out of pig farming. Bacon, basically.' He smiled. 'And that's just their summer home. You should see their place in the country.' Gray's parents nodded reverentially. 'Oh,' said the man, moving towards them, his hand outstretched. 'My name's Mark, by the way. Mark Tate.' 'Nice to meet you, Mark.' Tony wheezed slightly as he leaned forwards in his deckchair to reach Mark's hand. 'I'm Antony Ross - Tony. This is Pam, my wife; Graham, my son; and Kirsty, my daughter.' 'Gray,' muttered Gray. 'Not Graham. Gray.' But the man called Mark wasn't listening. He was holding Kirsty in his gaze, a smile on his face of what looked to Gray suspiciously like triumph. As though this 'spontaneous' conversation with his family was not just a passing moment of friendly human interaction but the first brilliant stroke of a much bigger master plan. He watched his parents chatting animatedly to the young man as though he was in fact Prince Charles on an official visit rather than just a plummyvoiced stranger with absolutely no reason whatsoever to be talking to them. And then he looked at Kirsty. She was - and it really was the only word Gray could find to describe it - blooming. Before his very eyes. It was as though attention from this man was somehow pushing her out from within, everything about her becoming plumped up and fully extended. Her eyes seemed dewy and more heavy-lidded. She was glowing. 'You know,' said Mark, 'you should come up to the house. Have a look. My aunt will make a cake.' 'Oh, we can't intrude on your aunt like that, not when she's

grieving,' said Pam. 'Oh no, she'll love it. Honestly. She's such a sociable person and she gets lonely up there. In fact, why don't you come today? Come at four.' What? thought Gray. What? His parents were smiling and saying things like: Well, if you really don't think your aunt will mind and Is there anything we can bring? And then there it was, a plan. Gray couldn't believe it. Mark pulled on a pristine T-shirt and chino shorts; then he rolled up his towel with military precision and tucked it into a cloth bag. Before he left he turned to them, bowed slightly and said, 'Four p.m.? Yes?' to which his family nodded furiously and said, 'Yes, yes, thank you.' And then he left. 'Well,' said Pam, 'that was a strange turn of events.' 'Certainly was,' said Tony. 'But looks like we've got ourselves a free tea.' Gray sat, his jaw clenched, thinking that there was no such thing as a free tea, that there was bound to be some price to be paid and his family were too stupid to see it.