



# One

Alice Lake lives in a house by the sea. It is a tiny house, a coastguard's cottage, built over three hundred years ago for people much smaller than her. The ceilings slope and bulge and her fourteen-year-old son needs to bow his head to get through the front door. They were all so little when she moved them here from London six years ago. Jasmine was ten. Kai was eight. And Romaine the baby was just four months old. She hadn't imagined that one day she'd have a gangling child of almost six feet. She hadn't imagined that they'd ever outgrow this place.

Alice sits in her tiny room at the top of her tiny house. From here she runs her business. She makes art from old maps, which she sells on the internet for silly money. Silly money for a piece of art made from

old maps, perhaps, but not silly money for a single mother of three. She sells a couple a week. It's enough, just about.

Beyond her window, between Victorian street lights, a string of sun-faded bunting swings back and forth in the boisterous April wind. To the left there is a slipway where small fishing boats form a colourful spine down to a concrete jetty and where the great, dreadful froth of the North Sea hits the rocky shoreline. And beyond that the sea. Black and infinite. Alice still feels awed by the sea, by its vast proximity. In Brixton, where she lived before, she had a view of walls, of other people's gardens, of distant towers and fomy skies. And suddenly, overnight, there was all this sea. When she sits on the sofa on the other side of the room it is all she can see, as though it is a part of the room, as though it is about to seep through the window frames and drown them all.

She brings her gaze back to the screen of her iPad. On it she can see a small square room, a cat sitting on a green sofa licking its haunches, a pot of tea on the coffee table. She can hear voices from elsewhere: her mother talking to the carer; her father talking to her mother. She can't quite hear what they're saying because the microphone on the webcam she set up in their living room last time she visited doesn't pick up sound in other rooms properly. But Alice is reassured that the carer is there, that her parents will be fed and

medicated, washed and dressed, and that for an hour or two she won't need to worry about them.

That's another thing she hadn't imagined when she'd moved north six years ago. That her spry, clever, just-turned-seventy-year-old parents would both develop Alzheimer's within weeks of each other and require constant supervision and care.

On the screen on Alice's laptop is an order form from a man called Max Fitzgibbon. He wants a rose made out of maps of Cumbria, Chelsea and Saint-Tropez for his wife's fiftieth birthday. Alice can picture the man: well preserved, silver-haired, in a heather-coloured Joules zip-neck jumper, still hopelessly in love with his wife after twenty-five years of marriage. She can tell all this from his name, his address, from his choice of gift ('Big blowsy English roses have always been her favourite flower,' he says in the 'Any other comments' box).

Alice looks up from her screen and down through her window. He is still there. The man on the beach.

He's been there all day, since she opened her curtains at seven o'clock this morning: sitting on the damp sand, his arms around his knees, staring and staring out to sea. She's kept an eye on him, concerned that he might be about to top himself. That had happened once before. A young man, deathly pale in the blue-white moonlight, had left his coat on the beach and just disappeared. Alice is still haunted by the thought of him, three years later.

But this man doesn't move. He just sits and stares. The air today is cold and blowing in hard, bringing with it a veil of icy droplets from the surface of the sea. But the man is wearing only a shirt and jeans. No jacket. No bag. No hat or scarf. There's something worrying about him: not quite scruffy enough to be a drifter; not quite strange enough to be a mental health patient from the day-care centre in town. He looks too fit to be a junkie and he hasn't touched a drop of alcohol. He just looks . . . Alice searches her mind for the right word and then it comes to her. He looks *lost*.

An hour later the rain comes down. Alice peers through the spattered windowpanes and down to the beach below. He's still there. His brown hair is stuck to his skull and his shoulders and sleeves are dark with water. In half an hour she needs to collect Romaine from school. She makes a split-second decision.

'Hero!' she calls to the brindle Staffy. 'Sadie!' she calls to the ancient poodle. 'Griff!' she calls to the greyhound. 'Walkies!'

Alice has three dogs. Griff, the greyhound, is the only one she deliberately went out and chose. The poodle is her parents'. She is eighteen years old and should by rights be dead. Half her fur is gone and her legs are bald and thin as a bird's but she still insists on joining the other dogs for a walk. And Hero, the Staffy,

belonged to a previous lodger, Barry. He disappeared one day and left everything behind, including his mental dog. Hero has to wear a muzzle on the street, otherwise she attacks prams and scooters.

Alice clips their leads to their collars as they circle her ankles and notices something else that Barry left behind in his midnight flit, hanging from the coat hooks next to the leads: a shabby old jacket. She automatically wrinkles her nose at the sight of it. She once slept with Barry in a moment of sheer stupidity – and intense loneliness – and regretted it from the moment he lay down on top of her and she realised that he smelled of cheese. That it emanated from every crevice of his slightly lardy body. She'd held her breath and got on with it but ever after she associated him with that smell.

She plucks the jacket gingerly from the peg and drapes it over her arm. Then she takes the dogs and an umbrella and heads towards the beach.

'Here,' she says, passing the coat to the man. 'It's a bit smelly but it's waterproof. And look, it has a hood.'

The man turns slowly and looks at her.

He doesn't seem to have registered her intention, so she babbles.

'It belonged to Barry. Ex-lodger. He was about the same size as you. But you smell better. Well, not that I can tell from here. But you look like you smell nice.'

The man looks at Alice and then down at the jacket. 'Well,' she says, 'do you want it?'

Still no response.

'Look. I'm just going to leave it here with you. I don't need it and I don't want it and you may as well keep it. Even if you just use it to sit on. Shove it in a bin if you like.'

She drops it near his feet and straightens herself up. His eyes follow her.

'Thank you.'

'Ah, so you do talk?'

He looks surprised. 'Of course I talk.'

He has a southern accent. His eyes are the same shade of ginger-brown as his hair and the stubble on his chin. He's handsome. If you like that kind of thing.

'Good,' she says, putting her free hand into her pocket, the other grasping the handle of her umbrella. 'Glad to hear it.'

He smiles and clutches the damp jacket in his fist. 'You sure?'

'About that?' She eyes the jacket. 'You'd be doing me a favour. Seriously.'

He pulls the jacket on over his wet clothes and fiddles with the zip for a while before fastening it. 'Thank you,' he says again. 'Really.'

Alice turns to check the locations of the dogs. Sadie sits thin and damp by her feet; the other two are scampering at the water's edge. Then she turns back

to the man. 'Why don't you get indoors, out of this rain?' she asks. 'Forecast says it's set to rain till tomorrow morning. You're going to make yourself ill.'

'Who are you?' he asks, his eyes narrowed, as though she'd introduced herself already and he'd momentarily forgotten her name.

'I'm Alice. You don't know me.'

'No,' he says. 'I don't.' He appears reassured by this.

'Anyway,' says Alice, 'I'd better get on.'

'Sure.'

Alice takes up the slack in Sadie's lead and the pool gets unsteadily to her feet, like a freshly birthed giraffe.

Alice calls for the other two. They ignore her. She tuts and calls again.

'Bloody idiots,' she mutters under her breath. 'Come on!' she yells, striding towards them. 'Get here now!'

They are both in and out of the sea; Hero is covered in a layer of green-hued mulch. They will stink. And it is nearly time to collect Romaine. She can't be late again. She'd been late yesterday because she'd over-run on a piece of work and forgotten the time, so she'd had to retrieve Romaine from the school office at three fifty where the secretary had looked at her over the top of the desk screen as though she were a stain on the carpet.



'Come on, you shitbags!' She strides across the beach and makes a grab for Griff. Griff thinks a game has been suggested and darts playfully away. She goes after Hero, who runs away from her. Meanwhile, poor Sadie is being dragged about by her scrawny neck, barely able to stand upright, and the rain is coming down and Alice's jeans are sodden and her hands icy cold and the time is ticking away. She lets out a yell of frustration and takes an approach she used with all the children when they were toddlers.

'Fine,' she says, 'fine. You stay here. See how you get on without me. Go and beg for scraps outside the fucking butcher's. *Have a good life.*'

The dogs stop and look at her. She turns and walks away.

'Do you want some dogs?' she calls to the man, who is still sitting in the rain. 'Seriously? Do you want them? You can have them.'

The man starts and looks up at her with his gingerbread eyes. 'I . . . I . . .'

She rolls her eyes. 'I'm not being serious.'

'No,' he says. 'No. I know that.'

She strides towards the slipway, towards the steps carved into the sea wall. It's three thirty. The dogs stop at the shoreline, glance at each other, then back at Alice. Then they run for her, arriving at her feet seconds later, salty and pungent.

Alice starts up the steps and then turns back when the man calls after her.

'Excuse me!' he says. 'Excuse me. Where am I?'

'What?'

'Where am I? What's the name of this place?'

She laughs. 'Really?'

'Yes,' he says. 'Really.'

'This is Ridinghouse Bay.'

He nods. 'Right,' he says. 'Thank you.'

'Get inside, will you?' she says softly to the man. 'Please get out of this rain.'

He smiles apologetically and Alice waves and heads towards the school, hoping he'll be gone by the time she gets back.

Alice knows she's something of an oddball in Ridinghouse Bay. Which, in fairness, was already pretty full of oddballs before she arrived. But even in a town this strange Alice stands out with her Brixton accent and her Benetton family and her slightly brusque ways. Not to mention the dogs. They make a show of her everywhere she goes. They will not walk to heel, they bark and snap, they whine outside shops. She's seen people cross the street to avoid her animals: Hero in particular with her muzzle and her huge muscular shoulders.

Ever since she got here Alice has played the role of the enigmatic, slightly scary loner, though that is not

at all what she is. In London she had friends coming out of her ears. More friends than she knew what to do with. She was a party girl, a come-over-later-with-a-bottle-of-vodka-we'll-put-the-world-to-rights girl. She'd been the kind of mum to stand at the school gates after drop-off and say: Come on then, who's up for a coffee? And she'd be there at the heart of them all, laughing the loudest, talking the most. Until she pushed it too far and blew her life open.

But she has a friend here now. Someone who gets her. Derry Dynes. They met eighteen months ago, on Romaine's first day in reception. Their eyes met and there was a flash of mutual recognition, of shared delight. 'Fancy a coffee?' Derry Dynes had said, seeing the film of tears over Alice's eyes as she watched her baby girl disappear into the classroom. 'Or something stronger?'

Derry is about five years older than Alice and about a foot shorter. She has a son the same age as Romaine and a grown-up daughter who lives in Edinburgh. She loves dogs (she's the type to let them kiss her on her mouth) and she loves Alice. Early on she learned that Alice was prone to making terrible decisions and letting life run away with her and now she acts as Alice's moderator. She sits and counsels Alice for hours about issues she has with the school over their handling of Romaine's learning difficulties but stops her storming into the office to shout at the secretary. She'll share two

bottles of wine with her on a school night but encourage her to stick the cork back into the third. She tells her which hairdresser to go to and what to say: 'Ask for stepped layers, not feathered, and a half-head of highlights *with foils*.' She used to be a hairdresser but now she's a reiki therapist. And she has more of an idea about Alice's finances than Alice herself.

She's standing outside the school now, under a huge red umbrella, her boy Danny and Romaine nestled together underneath.

'Christ. Thank you. Dogs went mental on the beach and I couldn't get them back.'

She leans down to kiss the crown of Romaine's head and takes her lunch box from her.

'What on earth were you doing on the beach in this weather?'

Alice tuts and says, 'You don't want to know.'

'No,' says Derry. 'I do.'

'Are you busy? Got time for a cup of tea?'

Derry looks down at her son and says, 'I was supposed to be taking this one into town for shoes . . .'

'Well, just come via mine then, I'll show you.'

'Look,' she says, standing by the sea wall, peering down through the cascade of rain pouring off her umbrella.

He was still there.

'Him?' says Derry.

'Yeah. Him. I gave him that jacket. One of Barry's.'

Derry gives an involuntary shudder. She remembers Barry, too. Alice gave her a very thorough and evocative description of events at the time.

'Did he not have a coat then? Before?'

'No. Sitting there in a shirt. Soaked. Asked me where he was.'

The two children pull themselves up on to the edge of the wall by their fingertips and peer over.

'Where he was?'

'Yes. He seemed a bit confused.'

'Don't get involved,' says Derry.

'Who said I was getting involved?'

'You gave him a jacket. You're already getting involved.'

'That was just an act of simple human kindness.'

'Yes,' says Derry. 'Exactly.'

Alice tuts at her friend and heads away from the sea wall. 'Are you seriously going shopping?' she asks her. 'In this?'

Derry peers into the dark skies overhead and says, 'No. Maybe not.'

'Come on then,' says Alice. 'Come to mine. I'll light the fire.'

Derry and Danny stay for a couple of hours. The little ones play in the living room while Derry and Alice sit in the kitchen and drink tea. Jasmine returns at four

o'clock, soaked to the skin with a wet rucksack full of GCSE coursework, no coat and no umbrella. Kai comes back at four thirty with two friends from school. Alice makes spaghetti for tea and Derry stops her opening a bottle of wine on account of her having to go home. She and Danny leave at six o'clock. It is still raining. Small rivers of muddy rainwater pour down the slipway to the beach and cascade off rooftops. And now a howling wind has set to, sending the rain onto the perpendicular, driving it into everything.

From the top floor of the house Alice sees that the man is still there. He's no longer in the middle of the beach. He's moved back towards the sea wall and he's sitting on a pile of rope. His face is turned up to the sky and his eyes are closed and something inside Alice aches when she looks at him. Of course he may be mad. He may be dangerous. But she thinks of his sad amber-brown eyes and the softness of his voice when he asked her where he was. And she is here in her home full of people, a pile of logs burning in the fireplace, warm and dry and safe. She can't be here knowing that he is there.

She makes him a cup of tea, pours it into a flask, tells the big ones to keep an eye on Romaine and goes to him.

'Here,' she says, passing him the flask.

He takes it from her and smiles.

'I thought I told you to go indoors.'

'I remember that,' he says.

'Good,' she says. 'But I see you didn't take my advice.'

'I can't go indoors.'

'Are you homeless?'

He nods. Then shakes his head. Then says, 'I think so. I don't know.'

'You don't know?' Alice laughs softly. 'How long have you been sitting out here?'

'I got here last night.'

'Where did you come from?'

He turns and looks at her. His eyes are wide and fearful. 'I have no idea.'

Alice pulls away slightly. Now she's starting to regret coming down here. *Getting involved*, as Derry said. 'Seriously?' she says.

He pushes his damp hair off his forehead and sighs. 'Seriously.' Then he pours himself a cup of tea and holds it aloft. 'Cheers,' he says. 'You're very kind.'

Alice stares out towards the sea. She's not sure how to respond. Half of her wants to get back indoors to the warm; the other feels as though she needs to play this out a bit longer. She asks him another question: 'What's your name?'

'I think', he says, gazing into his tea, 'that I have lost my memory. I mean' – he turns to her suddenly – 'that makes sense, doesn't it? It's the only thing that makes sense. Because I don't know what my name is.'

And I must have a name. Everyone has a name. Don't they?'

Alice nods.

'And I don't know why I'm here or how I got here. And the more I think about it the more I think I've lost my memory.'

'Ah,' says Alice. 'Yes. That makes sense. Do you . . . Are you injured?' She points at his head.

He runs a hand over his skull for a moment and then looks at her. 'No,' he says. 'It doesn't look like it.'

'Have you ever lost your memory before?'

'I don't know,' he says, so ingenuously that they both laugh.

'You know you're in the north, don't you?' she asks.

'No,' he says. 'I didn't know that.'

'And you have a southern accent. Is that where you come from?'

He shrugs. 'I guess so.'

'Jesus,' says Alice, 'this is crazy. I assume you've checked all your pockets.'

'Yeah,' he says. 'I found some stuff. Didn't know what to make of any of it though.'

'Have you still got it?'

'Yes.' He leans to one side. 'It's here.' He pulls a handful of wet paper from his back pocket. 'Oh.'

Alice stares at the mulch and then into the darkening sky. She pulls her hands down her face and exhales. 'Right,' she says. 'I must be mad. Well, actually, I *am*



mad. But I have a studio room in my back yard. I usually rent it out but it's empty right now. Why don't you come and spend a night there? We'll dry out these bits of paper, then maybe tomorrow we can start putting you together? Yes?'

He turns and stares at her disbelievingly. 'Yes,' he says. 'Yes, please.'

'I have to warn you,' she says, getting to her feet, 'I live in chaos. I have three very loud, rude children and three untrained dogs and my house is a mess. So don't come with me expecting a sanctuary. It's far from it.'

He nods. 'Honestly,' he says. 'Whatever. I really don't mind. I'm just so grateful. I can't believe how kind you're being.'

'No,' says Alice, leading the wet stranger up the stone steps and towards her cottage, 'neither can I.'

## Two

Lily's stomach is clenched as hard as a rock. Her heart has been beating so fast for so long that she feels as though she might pass out. She stands and heads for the window as she's done every couple of minutes for the past twenty-three and a half hours. In thirty minutes she'll call the police again. That's how long they said she had to wait before she could report him as officially missing. But she'd known he was missing within an hour of him not coming home from work last night. She felt it like a slick of ice down her spine. They only got back from their honeymoon ten days before. He'd been racing back from work, sometimes early, and certainly never more than a minute late. He'd been coming home with gifts, with 'two-week anniversary' cards, with flowers. He'd spring through

the door and say, 'God, baby, I missed you so much,' and then breathe her in, desperately.

Until last night. He wasn't there at six. He wasn't there at half six. He wasn't there at seven. Each minute felt like an hour. His phone rang and rang for the first hour. And then, suddenly, it stopped ringing, no voicemail, just a flat high-pitched tone. Lily was filled with blind, raging impotence.

The police . . . Well, Lily had not had an opinion either way about the British police before last night. Much in the same way as you wouldn't have an opinion about your local laundrette if you'd never had to use it. But she has an opinion now. A very strong one.

In twenty minutes she can call them again. For what good it will do her. She knows what they think. They think: Stupid young girl, foreign accent, probably a mail-order bride (she is *not* a mail-order bride. She met her husband in a real-life situation, face-to-face). She knows the woman she spoke to thinks her husband is messing about behind her back. Having an affair. Something like that. She could hear it in the slackness of her tone of voice. 'Is it possible that he just got way-laid after work?' she'd said. 'In the pub?' She could tell that the woman was doing something else as she talked to her, flipping through a magazine maybe, or filing her nails.

'No!' she'd said. 'No! He doesn't go to the pub. He just comes home. To me.'

Which had been the wrong thing to say, in retrospect. She'd imagined the sardonic lift of the policewoman's eyebrow.

Lily doesn't know who else to call. She knows Carl has a mother, she's spoken to her on the phone, just once, on their wedding day, but she hasn't met her yet. Her name is Maria or Mary or Marie or something like that and she lives . . . well, God, Lily doesn't know where she lives. Something beginning with S, she thinks. To the west? Or maybe the east. Carl told her once; she can't remember and Carl keeps all his numbers stored in his phone. So what can she do?

She also knows that Carl has a sister. Her name is Suzanne. Susan? She's much older than him and lives near the mother in the place beginning with S. They are estranged. He hasn't told her why. And he has a friend called Russ who calls every few days to talk about football and the weather and a drink they really should have one day soon but it's so hard to organise because he has a new baby.

Lily is sure there are other people in Carl's life but she's only known him since February, only been married for three weeks and only lived with him here for ten days so she's still new to Carl's world. And new to this country. She knows no one here and nobody knows her. Luckily Lily's English is fluent so there's no communication issue to deal with. But still,

everything is so different here. And it's strange to be completely alone.

Finally the time ticks over to 6.01 p.m. and Lily picks up her phone and calls the police.

'Hello,' she says to the man who answers the phone, 'my name is Mrs Lily Monroe. I'd like to report a missing person.'

## Three

'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 sparsely. 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 white-blond 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 takes 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.

## Four

'Tell me a little about your husband,' says the policewoman called Beverly. 'How old is he?'

Lily pushes down the hem of her top, flattening the fabric against her skin. 'He's forty,' she says.

She can see the WPC's eyebrow arch, just a fraction. 'And you're?'

'I'm twenty-one,' she says. It's no big deal, she wants to shout. Nineteen years. In a life of maybe ninety years. So what?

'And his full name?'

'Carl John Robert Monroe.'

'Thank you. And this is the address where he lives?' She indicates the small living room of the purpose-built flat where she and Carl have lived since they got back from their honeymoon on Bali.

'Yes,' she says. 'Of course!' She knows as she says it that she has been rude. She is aware that sometimes her manner can be quite harsh for British people's tastes.

The policewoman gives her a look and then scratches words on to a form with a noisy pen.

'And tell me about yesterday. What time did you last see your husband?'

'He left at seven o'clock. Every morning he leaves at seven o'clock.'

'And he goes to work where?'

'He works in London. For a financial services company.'

'And have you spoken to his company?'

'Yes! It was the first thing I did!' This woman must think she is an idiot, to call the police before calling his office.

'And what did they say?'

'They said he left work at the normal time. Just as I expected they would say. Carl takes the same train home every day. He can't leave work late or he would miss it.'

'OK. And did you speak to him at all? After he left work?'

'No,' she said. 'But he sent me a text. Look.' She switches on her phone and turns it to face the WPC, the text already there, ready to be displayed.

*You know what's crazy? This is crazy: I love you more now than I did this morning! I'll see you in an hour! If I could make the train go faster I would! xxxxx.*

'And look,' she says, scrolling up through their text exchanges. 'This from the day before.'

*How can it be true that I have a wife like you? How did I get so lucky?! I can't wait to be holding you in my arms. Fifty-eight minutes to go!*

'See,' she says. 'This is a man who wants to come home every night more than he wants to do anything else. Do you see now why I know that something bad has happened?'

The WPC passes the phone back to Lily and sighs. 'Sounds like he's got it bad,' she says, laughing.

'It's not a joke,' says Lily.

'No.' Abruptly, the policewoman stops smiling. 'I didn't say it was.'

Lily breathes in hard. She must try harder, she reminds herself, harder to be pleasant. 'Sorry,' she says. 'I'm feeling very stressed. Last night was the first time we've spent a night apart. I didn't sleep. Not one minute.' She waves her hands about, desperately, before bringing them back into her lap.

The WPC softens when she sees the tears filming across Lily's eyes and squeezes her hand gently.

'So.' She takes her hand back. 'You got the text at five last night. Then . . . ?'

'Nothing. Nothing. I rang him first just after six, then again and again and again until his phone ran out of charge.'

The WPC pauses for a moment and Lily gets the feeling that it is finally sinking in, that for the first time since Carl didn't come home last night someone believes that he might actually be missing and not in another woman's bed.

'Where does he catch his train from?'

'Victoria.'

'And always the same one?'

'Yes. The five oh six to East Grinstead.'

'Which arrives in Oxted at?'

'Five forty-four. Then it is a fifteen-minute walk from the station to here. So he is home at five fifty-nine. Every night. Every night.'

'And do you work, Mrs Monroe?'

'No. I study.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Here. It's a correspondence course. Accounting. It's what I was studying at home, in Ukraine. I left college to be here, with Carl. So, now I finish what I started.' She shrugs.

'And how long have you been here? In the UK?'

'One week. And three days.'

'Wow,' says the WPC. 'Not long.'

'No. Not long.'

'Your English is excellent.'

'Thank you. My mother is a translator. She made sure I could speak it as well as she does.'



The WPC puts the lid on her pen and looks at Lily thoughtfully. 'How did you meet?' she says. 'You and your husband?'

'Through my mother. She was translating at a financial services conference in Kiev. They needed people to look after the delegates – you know, show them about, get them taxis, that kind of thing. I needed the cash. I was put in charge of Carl and some of his colleagues. It was obvious from minute one that I would marry him. From minute one.'

The WPC stares at Lily, seemingly mesmerised. 'Wow,' she says. 'Wow.'

'Yes,' says Lily. 'It was very wow.'

'OK.' The policewoman slips the pen into her pocket and folds up her notepad. 'I'll see what I can do. Not sure we've got quite enough yet to open this up as a missing person. But call again if he doesn't show up tonight.'

Lily's heart drops, brick-heavy inside her. 'What?'

'I'm sure it's nothing sinister,' the WPC says. 'Honestly. Nine times out of ten it's just something completely innocuous. I'm sure he'll be home before bedtime.'

'Really?' she says. 'I know you don't believe that. I know you believe me. I know you do.'

The WPC sighs. 'Your husband, he's a grown man. He's not vulnerable. I can't open a case. But I tell you what, I'll check his details against our database, see if

anyone matching his description has been brought in for any reason.'

Lily clutches her heart. 'Brought in?'

'Yes. You know. Brought into the police station. For questioning. And I'll cross-reference with local hospitals. See if they've treated him.'

'Oh God.' Lily has been picturing this all night long. Carl under the wheels of a bus, stabbed and left for dead in an underpass, floating face down in the dark water of the River Thames.

'It's all I can do for now.'

Lily realises that the WPC is doing her a favour and manages a smile. 'Thank you,' she says. 'I really appreciate that.'

'I'll need a photo, though. Do you have a recent one?'

'Yes, yes, of course.' Lily fumbles with her handbag, opens her purse, pulls out the photo-booth snap she has in there: Carl looking serious and handsome. She passes it to the WPC, expecting her to pass some kind of comment on how incredibly good-looking he is. Maybe say something about his resemblance to Ben Affleck. But the policewoman doesn't; she merely tucks it into her notebook and says, 'I'll get it back to you, I promise. In the meantime, speak to his friends and family. His colleagues. Maybe someone there can shed some light.'

After the policewoman leaves, Lily stands for a few minutes and stares out of the window. Below her is a