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**Opening Extract from...**

# I Found You

Written by Lisa Jewell

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# I Found You

Lisa Jewell



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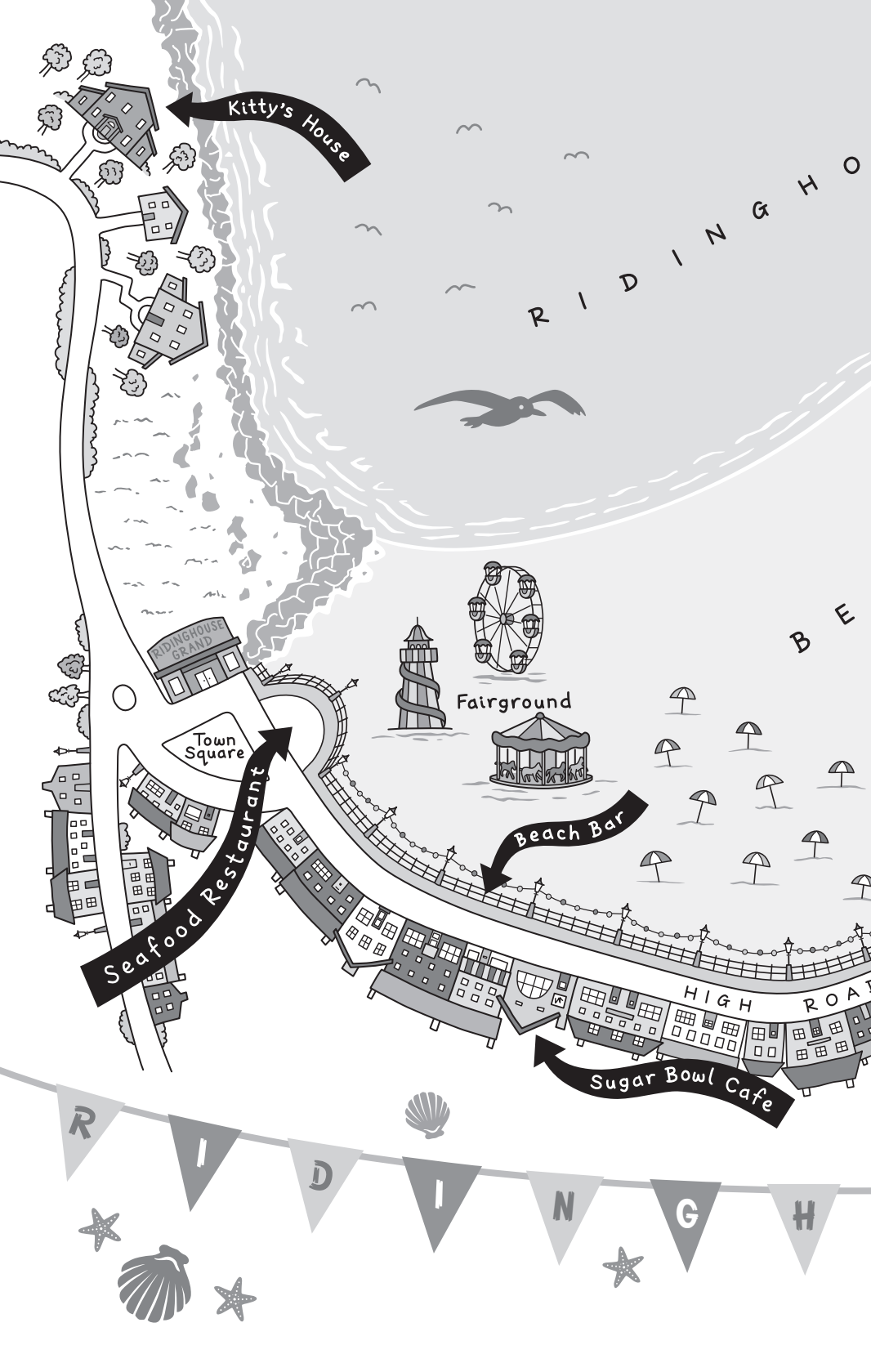
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This book is dedicated to Jascha
(see, I do love you more than I love the dog)


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# PART ONE

# 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 fumy 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 poodle 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 overrun 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.'