

VOID

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Note to the reader:

In this story songs play an important role: an aspect that will become clear when you read on. I would like to encourage you to listen to the songs that are mentioned when they appear at certain points in the narrative. They can all be found by searching Youtube. I believe listening to them will enhance the journey you take with the principle character. If you'd prefer not to do so, I have hopefully written in such a way that the atmosphere bleeds from the text regardless.

These words now belong to you; I hope you enjoy them.

C H A P T E R

1

The sense of being in the wrong place, with absolutely no idea where the right place might be, is an unnerving feeling that destroys any chance of rational thought. Amid this confusion, my body refuses to hold onto the gasps of air that my lungs are desperately crying out for. My head swims through a lack of oxygen, and even as the suffocating voice in my head says *calm down, breathe deeper, breathe more slowly*, panic continues to rule for at least five minutes.

Eventually, feeling like a man who came close to drowning before being cast upon a foreign shore, I do manage to calm somewhat. I've literally just woken from sleep, and I'm sitting in the driver's seat of a car. It's freezing, and I fumble the keys from where they sit on the central console into the ignition. Start the engine. Turn the heat up to max and ramp the fan to full blast.

A coating of frost on the inside of the windscreen has not yet begun to clear, and the cold air blowing through the vents sends a shudder through my bones as it stirs the resident aroma of night-breath and flatulence. I realise at that moment the bigger question is not, *where am I?* It's, *who am I?* Eventually the heat from the ticking engine kicks in and begins to lick the bottom of the ice-coated screen.

It's punishingly cold. As yet, the engine's heat is barely penetrating my skin, but I don't believe any rise in temperature would remove the chill of fear that kicks my heart into a fresh flutter of renewed anxiety.

Why would I sleep in a car when it's so cold? To the silent question I have no answer. Perhaps not the most salient question I could have asked myself, but it is what comes to my mind as I desperately try to remain calm. *Wearing...?* A quick glance down reveals a suit.

The material is dark, somewhat crumpled – no surprise, being as I’ve slept in it – and hardly suitable for such conditions.

Whoever I am, it would appear I’m the kind of person who owns and wears a suit. A quick exploration of the pockets reveals nothing other than a thick wad of twenties that are held together with a large clip. I have nothing else on me. Nothing up my sleeve, nothing in my pockets, and nothing in my damn head that gives even the slightest clue to who I might be.

The frost on the outside of the glass has reacted to the heat of the blower, and is now crazed with half-melt shapes that the wipers clear with ease. Dribbles of moisture follow the returning blade and trickle down the glass, distorting a view that’s fogged with a haze of condensation on the inside. *As tears go by*, I think, and a mournful tune strums in my mind. Other words accompany the imagined music. The words may or may not be lyrics to an actual song. They come with an easy rhythm, so I guess they probably are genuine lyrics. *As tears go by*. That’s just what they look like, and they reflect my emotion. I feel like crying for real but hold the flood back with a tremulous breath that shudders down the aching length of my spine.

The car is parked on a hill. Not quite the top, I realise, glancing over my shoulder to look out of the rear window, through wide bands that have cleared much more quickly than the front. On the rear seat is a leather coat. I drag it into the front, my attention snared by an elderly guy sauntering down the opposite pavement with a Yorkshire terrier in tow. Forgetting the guy for the moment I check the pockets of the coat. The fragrance of the leather is comforting, but it wouldn’t really sit well with the suit, and I wonder if it actually belongs to me. Putting the jacket on the passenger seat, I look out to see the guy and his dog have diverted along a side street named Sycamore Avenue, where rows of naked trees overhang a string of parked cars, their crystalline white roofs sparkling and silent. Before me, through glass still partially obscured with mist, I see that the road drops steeply and disappears around a bend. The hill bottoms out to a wide flat vista that stretches towards an ice-fogged horizon. A motorway flyover with two decks carries early morning traffic past a large shopping mall, a mall that stands on a steelwork’s grave.

Steelworks?

A memory?

Possibly.

Invented?

Maybe.

Is it a conjured figment? Is it the invention of a mind that's desperately clutching for a grasp of reality? Invention is a high likelihood, because the clumsy grasp of thought attracts nothing else.

I'm reminded of those cranes in arcades on the coast.

If only I could remember something meaningful, something personal. "ANYTHING!" I yell, bashing my fist against the side window. The old guy jumps back a step and glares at me for a moment before pulling his dog into a yapping tumble. From twenty paces into the side street he pauses to look back and glares some more. A distinct air of tension fills the void between us.

Maybe he's trying to memorise the registration number of the car. *Good*, I try to transmit. *If you find out who I am, come back and let me know.*

Unless it's not my car. With that thought my mind and my eyes switch to the glove compartment. Maybe that will house a clue: paperwork, registration documents, a name. The car's interior is now toasty warm. My fingers feel numb from the temperature transition as they curl with some unexplainable trepidation into the catch. The compartment door flops open to reveal a book, a journal. It's quite large, the size of a large envelope. *A4*, I think, *or is it A3?* Whichever, the journal is lilac in colour and over an inch thick, weighty, with a cover that's deeply embossed with a repeated flower symbol. Judging by the crumpled dark-grey suit and plain black shoes, I'm guessing it's not mine. The journal is held shut by a wide strip of elastic, also lilac and attached to the back cover by silver rivets. Trapped under the elastic is a slip of white paper. There's a message written on it in rather elegant writing – big and loopy and most definitely feminine. *Tom, please read this*, the inky-blue swirls entreat.

Tom?

Am I Tom? As the 'T' flicks my tongue to the roof of my mouth, as my lips softly close and then part around the 'm', the clumsy claws of my mind slip over the sound it makes. The name means nothing. I try, desperately, to make it mean something – try to push levers that offer no control. *Hi, I'm Tom...* There's no flood of memory accompanying the name. Absolutely nothing.

The use of the word *please* suggests that whoever wrote on the slip of paper is not entirely convinced that Tom will read it, be that me or someone else. To my mind, right now, the word suggests a measure of desperation.

Loosely gripping the journal, tapping the cover with my thumb, I lean over the passenger seat and, while inhaling the fragrance of leather, look into the depth of the glove

compartment. A pen. Nothing else. It glints with a metallic purple sheen. Whoever placed the journal in there likely placed the pen in there too, likely placed it in there after writing the note of pleading and slipping it under the elastic strap.

Please read this.

Please...

An overwhelming sense of foreboding surges into my mind and I swallow dryly as I stretch the binding-elastic aside and prepare to open the cover.

C H A P T E R

2

An envelope has been inserted between the cover and the first page. Pink in colour, it is the kind that would likely be purchased with a birthday card. Embossed on the flap is the logo of the manufacturer. On the verge of breaking into the sealed envelope, the nail of the thumb on my right hand distracts me. The nail is long for a man and manicured to the point of femininity, as are the nails on my fingers. *Maybe the lilac journal is mine after all. Perhaps the pink envelope is for me too.* This thought is partially erased when I notice all of the nails on my left hand have been bitten to extreme shortness. A small personal detail, it shows complete polarity but offers no explanation that I can think of.

The yap of a small dog pulls me from contemplating this unusual discovery any further and I look up to see the same guy that passed by earlier. He's heading back in my direction, along the side street with a certain manner in his walk that looks somewhat like fear cloaked in bravery. His shoulders are elevated, his chest puffed, elbows out to the side, but his pace is slow and hesitant. A cloud of icy-breath partially masks his face. The dog's lead is taut with canine eagerness. When he's almost level with me, only the road's width separating us, I open the window. The whine of the motor seems incredibly loud, the window opens with impossible slowness, and I imagine him taking off before I have a chance to speak. No doubt hearing the window, he halts with a flinch, glances my way, and there he stands – his little dog yip-yip-yapping – hovering between maintaining his bravado and scampering back down Sycamore Avenue to his rear.

“Sorry about before... banging the window.”

He rolls his lower jaw, and yanks the lead as the dog yaps with an extra measure of vigour. “S'alright,” he finally says, his accent thick with Northern brusqueness, the blend of words more of a sound, a grunt; it's a masculine-nod to the fact that we can move on without the need for further niceties.

“Can you tell me—?”

“SHURRUP!” he snaps, cutting short my question, giving the dog’s leash a firm tug that makes very little impression on its constant yap.

I wait while he glares at the still-yapping dog a moment, before trying again when he looks up at me. “Can you please tell me where I am?”

He frowns a little and looks around, almost as if unsure himself. “Wincobank, mate.”

Again, empty claws grasp at a meaningless word. As if it’s been engineered that way, no prize is forthcoming from this arcade-crane. The name means nothing to me.

“Where is, Wincobank?”

The frown folds into the deeper creases of a scowl. “Yer takin’ the piss?”

No need for words, I shake my head. Sorrow or some other expression that elicits empathy must show on my face, for his scowl softens.

“Lost are yer?”

“Yep,” I state, trying my utmost to sound chummy while swallowing the bubbling sensation of upset that tries to steal into my voice as I take a quick glance towards the motorway beyond the skirt of the hill.

“Yer in Sheffield. Gerroff the motorway too early, did yer?”

Sheffield I’ve heard of. Birthplace of steel, I think. Maybe that earlier recollection of steelworks was a memory. “Yeh, something like that.” With a nod of thanks, I close the window, shutting out the biting cold, and watch through the side mirror as he makes his way back up the hill.

Turning my attention to the envelope, keen to open it, I discover that curiosity works in mysterious ways. Curiosity stops me from opening it straight away and forces me to first see if a name has been written on the flipside. There is no name, but there is a mass of hastily scribbled text. Despite the rushed appearance, it looks to be in the same hand as the looped writing that was trapped under the elastic.

I only just thought to put this in here at the last minute, when I realised what day tomorrow was. Thought these pictures might help. Hope so. Sorry! I know that might not make any sense. Hope you’re OK? Hope we’re OK? Please read the book.

Love Penny X

My hands are shaking as I break the seal and lift the envelope’s flap. I’m somewhat fearful. The dread of it not being meant for me, I guess. *Penny?* The name means as little to me as Tom, but I hope that Penny is someone I know. Three uses of *hope* in such a short message screams of concern. If it is meant for me, that concern is surely justified.

From the envelope I draw a photograph. It's a picture of a woman who looks to be in her early-twenties. She's sitting on a wall and behind her is a sea that glistens with an aqua hue. She has vibrant blue eyes and dark copper hair that runs down to and frames a cleavage my eye struggles to pull away from. A few strands of her hair appear to be caught on a breeze: gentle, I'm guessing, and warm, if the thin-strapped summer dress is anything to go by. On the reverse is written: *Penny – Lanzarote, 2012.*

Sadly, the picture of her has not resurrected a memory. If I were not so panicked it may have implanted desire; it has raised my curiosity, but it hasn't aroused a memory. I reach inside the envelope again, hoping more than ever that Penny is someone I know.

Another photo stares back at me. This one holds a picture of a man. At a guess, he looks a couple of years older than Penny. He has sandy coloured hair that is almost down to his shoulders, and dark eyes. In this picture they're too dark to truly identify the colour. He's standing thigh deep in a wide hole in the ground, leaning against a spade. My mind instantly turns to a sinister reason and decides it's a grave. He's smiling though, so I guess it's not. He's bare-chested, sun-kissed, and toned with muscles that look to have been earned through hard graft, from work done outside of a gym. On the reverse, in the same big loopy writing, someone, presumably Penny, has written: *Tom, digging pond for Kaitlyn's mum.*

Tom looks a good match for Penny, and I figuratively cross every finger and toe as I tilt the rear-view mirror in my direction.