

The Man

Day 1

The bright glare of light as the soft skin of two eyelids part.

A body sprawled on the sand.

The fast flutter of the eyelashes as awareness blossoms within and, just like that, he's awake. Consciousness floods through him, he feels the skin of his cheek pressed against the brittle cold of the beach. Confusion.

Sounds of the sea. Waves crash and pull back, the pop and *shhh*.

It's early morning in January. A British beach in the depths of winter. Miles of golden-white Norfolk shore sand with the crisp dawn light throwing everything into high definition.

Windborne sand grains blow in architectural ripples across the

flats straight into the man's unprotected face. He squeezes his eyes tight shut against the sting of it.

A hot throb of pain crests deep inside his skull, and the papery skin around his eyes creases deeper, his forehead puckering, as he flinches from it. The unanticipated pang lengthens, stretching itself inside his head, almost too much to take. A sharp gasp of breath and the pain stabs back, harder. His hot exhalation of breath drifting away in the cold sea wind.

He tries to relax into the pain; letting the wave of agony wash through him, over him. And it seems to work; the feeling begins to still within him. He lies there limp on the sand for what seems like an eternity, letting the restless throb slowly quiet.

He hurts everywhere and the ghost of a thought drifts through his mind.

Where am I? It floats gossamer thin in the air, fluttering just beyond his reach.

He takes another cautious breath and tentatively tries to raise his head, careful not to stir the lurking pain nestling inside his skull. Damp sand, like candied sugar crystals, sticks to his stubbled cheek as he shifts his weight up onto his aching forearms, cautiously testing the limit of their strength. He squints out into the morning light.

How did I get here?

Gulls skip along the sand as he searches the landscape for an answer – but nothing *here* looks familiar.

Did something happen?

He takes in the silent forest that backs the beach, its dark canopy beyond unreadable. No clues. No hook to hang understanding on.

Okay. Where was I before I was here?

He looks up at the haunting grey vault of winter sky hanging overhead and wonders if he might be dreaming. If he might be in bed, safe back at home, wherever that might be. But the clouds look back, heavy and full of rain. He shivers.

It is only now that he notices his clothes are wet, their sodden

fabric clammy against his skin. He shudders, cold to his damp bones. He must move, he knows that much, he must get warm, or risk hypothermia in this weather.

He looks back towards the trees that skirt the beach. The wind whips sharp needles of sand into his skin, tiny pin pricks against his numbed flesh. He needs shelter.

Struggling clumsily to his feet, he begins to process the extent of his injuries as each muscle is asked to move.

Upright, he hesitates. He turns in a small circle, checking the sand around where he lay. A natural instinct telling him to look, nothing more. To look for things he may have lost, belongings left behind, although what those would be he does not know. But then he must have *some* belongings, mustn't he?

He pats his clothes for a second before jabbing his numb hands into his wet pockets.

There must be something.

His pockets are empty. He is momentarily flummoxed into inaction.

What the hell is going on?

He runs a quick hand through his damp hair, trying to grapple back control of the situation, trying to wrangle the logic of it. He must remember surely? His hand skims the back of his head and the throb of agony at the base of his skull washes over him again, pinching tight. He sucks in a sharp breath and whips away his hand to see the dark smear on his fingers.

Blood.

He squeezes his eyes shut, the throb rolling deep inside his skull.

He breathes through the pain as it slowly subsides. When he opens his eyes he notices something else, on the other side of his hand. He turns his palm over and there on the back in blue ink – writing. A faint ink mark faded from the seawater, a word. He stares down at it, perplexed.

Strange. What does it mean?

Deep in his mind, the word dances on the tip of recollection, the

answer, so close, he could almost reach out and grasp it. But it rolls away, out of reach, evasive, mercurial. Like the bright filaments that play on the inside of his eyelids each time he closes them.

He shudders; the cold snaps him back to the immediate situation.

It will come back, he tells himself. He gives himself a brisk shake and starts to walk inland purposefully.

Wet sand squelches up, between his bare toes as he walks, cold and thick like poured concrete. All the while the tendrils of his brain search, delicately, for something to cling on to.

What is the last thing you remember?

Silence. The sound of sea foam bubbling and popping as it dries in the wind.

How did I end up here?

Did something happen to me?

Suddenly the realization hits him. He stops abruptly.

Wait. Who am I? What's my name?

He stands frozen, his short brown hair tousled by the wind. His mind races.

Where am I from?

He can't remember. He looks down at the blood smear across his hand. The word on the other side. The panic starts to rise now with incredible speed.

Why can't I remember? Why can't I remember my name?

The weight of what this means bears down on him with each cold snatched breath he takes. Fear pumping through him, primal and quickening.

Oh God. It's all gone.

His world shrinks to a pinhead and then dilates so wide, suddenly terrifyingly borderless. He has no edges anymore. Who is he? He has no self. He feels the panic roaring inside him, escalating, his heart tripping faster. His mind frantically searches for something – anything – to grab a hold of, his eyes wildly scanning the landscape around him. But there is no escape from it, the void. He is here and there is no before. There are no answers.

Thoughts thrumming, he fumbles to check his empty pockets again. Nothing. No ID, no phone, no wallet, no keys, nothing with a name on it. No way to find out.

He tries to slow his breathing, to stay calm. He tries to think clearly.

If something has happened someone will find me. Someone will find me and take me back to where I was before. Then I'll remember. Someone will know me. And everything will come back. It will be okay. I just need to find someone.

He looks up, eyes finding the forest again, and the indent of a path. He sets off, his pace frenetic. In search of someone.

Wait.

He stops abruptly again. A jolt of self-preservation.

Maybe you're out here alone for a reason.

He studies the word written on his hand. It is all he has to go on but it is not enough.

Is it a reminder? A warning?

Perhaps something very bad has happened? He thinks of his head wound. If he was attacked, being found wouldn't be the best idea, at least until he knows what happened, or who he is. He could still be in danger. It's impossible to tell yet.

He commits the word on his hand to memory and then he rubs the ink away against his wet trousers until the mark is gone. He'll remember it. Best to cover the evidence in case he's found.

A thought flexes itself deep inside his head, awakening. Something creeping on the edge of recollection, a memory, or the ghost of one. Just out of reach. Someone saying something to him. If he could only remember. Someone telling him something important. Something he needed to remember. Something he had to do. Suddenly it comes to him.

Don't fuck it up.

A memory. That's what they told him, but who exactly he can't recall. He grasps at the memory. Its warning, the threat, so strong and clear.

Don't fuck it up.

Don't fuck what up? Think. Think.

He chases the thought but it disappears out of sight. He notices his own bare feet beneath him on the sand. A thought surfaces, he remembers reading once that suicides often remove their shoes before killing themselves. Is he a suicide? How he knows the fact about the shoes he does not know. Did he take off his shoes, did he leave them, and his things, and his life, in a tidy pile somewhere? Abandoned. But why would he do that? He doesn't feel sad. He doesn't feel like the kind of person who would kill himself. But then maybe nobody ever does?

Don't fuck it up is all he has to go on. But what if he already has?

Another memory flashes out of the darkness. A burst of someone telling him something.

You need to find her.

Find her? He straightens. It's a crystal-clear directive. A purpose.

Is that why I'm here? To find someone? Who is she to me?

He thinks of the word he removed from the back of his hand.

Why do I need to find her?

The memory is what it is. There is no more. Whoever she is he needs to find her.

They must have said more.

He tries to force the memory but the throb awakens deep at the base of his skull. He lets the thought go.

All he knows is he was told by someone, instructed by someone . . . he can't remember who told him, or what they sounded like, or their face. But he trusted them, he knows that much.

How can he find her – this woman – if he doesn't know who or what he's looking for?

A sound in the distance breaks the man's concentration. A voice calling out. Instinctively he turns towards the forest, his heart pounding. There is no one there. The wind perhaps, though it sounded more like someone calling a name. It came from the forest,

a voice carrying over the wind. He stares long after the sound has gone. Certain he heard it. Someone.

But there is no one.

He turns back to the water.

The sound comes again. This time right behind him. It's a voice. He freezes. There is someone standing right behind him.

He turns slowly on the wet sand. Someone *is* there. A young woman. She wasn't there before.

Where did she come from?

He blinks, trying desperately to make sense of what is happening. His thoughts racing.

She wasn't there before, was she? Is this her? Is she the one I need to find?

But in the same instance he knows.

It isn't her.

He studies her as she stares at him. She is talking to him. Her expression confused, she looks concerned, as if she may have been speaking for a while. She's saying something, words he can't quite understand; her language garbled, the sense not apparent.

His head throbs deeply.

There is a look in her eyes and everything he needs to know is in that look. He's safe for now. That's as clear to him as the sand, and the cold, and the bright hi-vis yellow of the woman's coat.

And suddenly, for a heartbeat, he understands *exactly* what is happening to him. That this has happened so many times before, this exact scene, that this is a loop that he can never escape. He briefly understands a tiny part of what he needs to do next. And with that knowledge panic crests in a giant wave over him. The bright pinch of pain in his skull exploding to life as he crumples onto the sand.