

1

In the beginning is the road – and me walking along it.

I have no memory of who I am, or where I have come from, or how I came to be here. There is only the road and the desert stretching away to a burnt sky in every direction and there is me.

Anxiety bubbles within me and my legs scissor, pushing me forward through hot air as if they know something I don't. I feel like telling them to slow down, but even in my confused state I know you don't talk to your legs, not unless you're crazy, and I don't think I'm crazy – I don't think so.

I stare down the shimmering ribbon of tarmac, rising and falling over the undulating land, its straight edges made wavy by the intense desert heat. It makes the road seem insubstantial and the way ahead uncertain and my anxiety burns bright because of it. I feel there's something important to do here, and that I am here to do it, but I cannot remember what.

I try to breathe slowly, dredging a recollection from some deep place that this is meant to be calming, and catch different scents in the dry desert air – the coal-tar sap of a broken creosote bush branch, the sweet sugar rot of fallen saguaro fruit, the arid perfume of agave pollen – each thing so clear to me, so absolutely itself and correct and known. And from the

solid seed of each named thing more information grows – Latin names, medicinal properties, common names, whether it is edible or poisonous. The same happens when I glance to my left or right, each glimpsed thing sparking new names and fresh torrents of facts until my head hums with it all. I know the world entirely it seems and yet I know nothing of myself. I don't know where I am. I don't know why I'm here. I don't even know my own name.

The wind gusts at my back, pushing me forward and bringing a new smell that makes my anxiety flare into blind fear. It is smoke, oily and acrid, and a half-formed memory slides in with it that there is something awful lying on the road behind me, something I need to get away from.

I break into a run, staring forward, not daring to check behind me. The blacktop feels hard and hot against the soles of my feet. I look down to discover that I'm not wearing shoes. My feet flash as they pound the road, my skin pure white in the bright sunshine. I hold my hand up and it's the same, so white I have to narrow my eyes against the glare of it. I can feel my skin starting to redden in the fierce sun and know that I need to get out of this desert, away from this sun and the thing on the road behind me. I fix on a rise in the road, feeling if I can reach it then I will be safe, that the way ahead will be clearer.

The wind blows hard, bringing the smell of smoke again and smothering all other scents like a poisonous blanket. Sweat starts to soak my shirt and the dark grey material of my jacket. I should take it off, cool myself down a little, but the thicker material is giving me protection from the burning sun so I turn the collar up instead and keep on running. One step then another – forward and away, forward and away – asking myself questions between each step – Who am I? Where am I? Why am I here? – repeating each one until something starts to take shape in the blankness of my empty mind. An answer. A name.

'James Coronado.' I say it aloud in a gasp of breath before it is lost again and pain sears into my left shoulder.

My voice comes as a surprise to me, soft and strange and unfamiliar, but the name is not. I recognize it and say it again – James Coronado, James Coronado – over and over, hoping the name might be mine and it might drag more about who I am up from my silent memory. But the more I say it, the more distant it becomes until I'm certain the name is not mine. It feels apart from me though still connected in some way, as if I have made a promise to this man, one that I am bound to keep.

I reach the crest of the road and a new section of desert comes into view. In the distance I see a road sign, and beyond that, a town, spreading like a dark stain across the lower slopes of a range of red mountains.

I raise my hand to shield my eyes so I might read the name of the place on the sign, but it is too far away and heat blurs the words. There is movement on the road, way off at the edge of town.

Vehicles.

Heading this way. Red and blue lights flashing on their roofs.

The wail of sirens mingles with the roar of the smoke-filled wind and I feel trapped between the two. I look to my right and consider leaving the road and heading out into the desert. A new smell reaches me, drifting from somewhere out in the sunbaked wilderness, something that seems more familiar to me than all the other things. It is the smell of something dead and rotting, lying somewhere out of sight, sunbaked and fetid and caramel-sweet, like a premonition of what will befall me if I stray from the road.

Sirens in front of me, death either side, and behind me, what?

I have to know.

I turn to gaze upon what I have been running from and the whole world is on fire.

An aircraft lies broken and blazing in the centre of the road, its wings sticking up from the ground like the folded wings of some huge burning beast. A wide circle of flame surrounds it, spreading rapidly as flames leap from plant to plant and lick up the sides of giant saguaro, their burning arms raised in surrender, their flesh splitting and hissing as the water inside boils and explodes in puffs of steam.

It is magnificent. Majestic. Terrifying.

The sirens grow louder and the flames roar. One of the wings starts to fall, trailing flame as it topples and filling the air with the tortured sound of twisting metal. It lands with a whump, and a wave of fire rolls up into the air, curling like a tentacle that seems to reach down the road for me, reaching out, wanting me back.

I stagger backwards, turn on my heels, and run.

2

Mayor Ernest Cassidy looked up from the dry grave and out across the crowded heads of the mourners. He had felt the rumble as much as heard it, like thunder rolling in from the desert. Others must have felt it too. He saw a few of the heads bowed in prayer turn to glance back at the desert stretching away below them.

The cemetery was high up, scooped into the side of the Chinchuca Mountains that encircled the town like a horseshoe. A hot wind blew up from the valley, ruffling the black clothes of the mourners and blowing grit against the wind-scoured boards marking the older graves that recorded the town's violent birth with quiet and brutal economy:

Teamster. Killed by Apaches. 1881

China Mae Ling. Suicide. 1880

Susan Goater. Murdered. 1884

Boy. Age 11 months. Died of Neglect. 1882

A new name was being added to this roll call of death today and almost the whole town was present to see it, their businesses closed for the morning so they could attend the first funeral to take place in this historic cemetery for over sixty years. It was the least they could do in the circumstances – the very least. The future of their town was being secured this day, as surely as it had been at the ragged end of the nineteenth century when the murdered, the hanged, the scalped and the damned had first been planted here.

The crowd settled as the memory of the thunder faded and Mayor Cassidy, wearing his preacher hat today, dropped a handful of dust down into the dry grave. It pattered down on the lid of the simple, old-fashioned pine box at the bottom – a nice touch, considering – then continued with the solemn service.

‘For dust thou art,’ he said in a low and respectful voice he kept specially for situations like this, ‘and unto dust shalt thou return. Amen.’

There was a murmur of ‘Amens’ then a wind-shushed minute of silence. He stole a glance at the widow, standing very close to the edge of her husband’s grave like a suicide at the edge of a cliff. Her hair and eyes shone in the sunlight, a deeper black than any of the clothes flapping in the wind around her. She appeared so beautiful in her grief – beautiful and young. She had loved her husband deeply, he knew that, and there was a particular tragedy in the knowledge of it. But her youth meant she had time enough ahead of her to move on from this, and that leavened it some. She would leave the town and start again somewhere else. And there were no children; there was a mercy in that too, no physical ties to bind her, no face that carried traces of his and would remind her of her lost love whenever she caught it in a certain light. Sometimes the absence of children was a blessing. Sometimes.

Movement rippled through the crowd and he glanced up to see a police chief’s hat being jammed back on to a close-cropped salt-and-pepper head as it moved quickly away towards the exit. Mayor Cassidy looked beyond him to the desert, and saw why.

A column of black smoke was rising up on the main road out of town. It wasn’t thunder he had heard or rain that was coming, it was more trouble.

3

Chief Morgan pulled away from the cemetery as fast as he could without sending a cloud of grit over the other mourners hurrying to their cars behind him.

He had heard the rumble too and had known straight away it wasn't thunder. It was a sound that transported him back to a time when he had worn a different uniform and watched flashes of artillery fire in the night as shells pounded a foreign city in a different desert. It was the sound of something big hitting the ground and his mouth felt dry because of it.

He picked up speed as he headed downhill and pushed the comms button on the steering wheel to activate the radio. 'This is Morgan. I'm heading north on Eldridge en route to a suspected fire about three miles out of town, anyone else call it in?'

There was a bump and a squeal of rubber as his truck bottomed out and joined the main road, then the voice of Rollins the duty dispatcher crackled back. 'Copy that, Chief, we got a call from Ellie over at the Tucker ranch, said she heard an explosion to the southwest. We got five units responding: two fire trucks, a highway patrol unit, an ambulance out of County and another heading out of the King. Six units, including you.'

Morgan glanced in his rear-view mirror, saw flashing lights behind him on the road. He stared ahead to where the column of smoke was growing much faster than his speed could account for. 'We're going to need more,' he said.

'What is it, Chief?'

Morgan studied the wall of smoke. 'Well, I ain't there yet but the smoke is rising fast and high, so there's got to be some heat in the fire, burning fuel most probably. There was an explosion too.'

'Yeah, I heard it.'

'You heard it in the office?'

'Yessir. Felt it too.'

Rollins was a mile or so further away than he had been. Some explosion. 'Can you see it yet?' Morgan listened to dead air and pictured Rollins leaning back in his chair to catch a view out of the narrow window of the dispatch room.

'Yeah, I got it.'

'Well, it's coming your way so you better get busy. Call up the airfield, get the tanker in the air. We need to step on this thing before it gets out of hand.'

'I'm on it, Chief.'

Morgan clicked off the comms and leaned forward. The top of the smokestack was several hundred feet high and still rising. He was closer now, close enough that he could see something burning at the centre of the fire each time he crested a rise in the road. He was so fixated on it, wanting to see it and confirm what he already knew it must be, that he didn't notice the figure running down the middle of the road until he was almost upon him.

His reaction was all instinct and panic. He threw the wheel hard right and braced himself for a thump that didn't come, then jerked the wheel left again. The rear wheels caught the soft dirt of the verge and he started to slide. He stamped on the brakes to stop the wheels then back on the gas to give him some traction. He was in a full sideways skid now, wheels spinning and throwing grit into the air. He hit the brakes again and clung to the wheel, steering into the slide until he slammed into a bush or something that stopped the truck dead and made him bang his head against the window.

He sat perfectly still for a moment, hands on the wheel, heart pounding in his chest, so loud he could hear it above the roar of the burning desert and the patter of grit on the windshield. The first fire truck roared past, throwing more grit over him and a crackle of static flooded the car. 'Chief? You there, Chief?'

He took a breath, pressed the comms button. 'Yeah, Rollins, I'm here.'

'How's it lookin'?'

The second fire truck thundered by and he followed its path towards the wall of flame, the burning plane twisted at its centre. 'Like the end of the world,' he murmured.

He glanced back to the road and was half-surprised to see the running man still there, rising from the ground where he had thrown himself. He looked strange, extraordinary, his hair as white as his skin.

Morgan had heard all the stories about how this road was built on the old wagon trail and was supposed to be haunted. People had seen plenty of things out here, especially at night

when the cold hit the ground like a hammer, releasing wisps of vapour that drifted through the headlights and imaginations of people who had heard the same stories he had. He'd had reports of everything from ghost horses to wagons floating a foot above the ground. But he had never seen anything himself until now.

'Chief? You still there, Chief?'

Morgan snapped to attention, his eyes fixed on the stranger. 'Yeah, I'm here. What's the word on those tankers?'

'You got the unit from the airfield on its way and two more possibles inbound from Tucson. They're dragging their asses a little, but I'm working on it. If they get the go-ahead they should be with you in twenty.'

Morgan nodded but said nothing. In twenty minutes the fire would have doubled in size, tripled even. More sirens wailed closer, everything the town had to send but not nearly enough.

'Call everyone you can,' he said. 'We're going to need roadblocks on all routes in and out of town. I don't want anybody riding out into this mess, and we're going to need to set firebreaks too. Anyone with a truck and a shovel they can swing needs to report for duty at the city-limit billboard if they want this town to still be here by sundown.'

He disconnected and fumbled in his pocket for his phone. He found a contact and opened a new message. His fingers shook as he typed: 'Clear out now. Funeral finished early. Find anything?'

He sent the message and looked back at the stranger. He was gazing up at the fire with an odd expression on his face. Morgan held up his phone, snapped a photo and studied it. The man seemed to glow in the midst of all the grit. It reminded him of the pictures he'd seen in the books and on the websites devoted to the town's ghosts. Only those all seemed fake to him. There was nothing fake about this. He was there, large as life, staring back at the crashed plane with pale grey eyes the colour of stone. Staring into the fire.

The phone beeped in his hand. A reply: 'Nothing. Leaving now.'

Goddammit. Nothing was going right today. Not a damned thing.

He grabbed his hat and opened the door to the roar of fire and the heat of the desert just as the pale man turned and started to run.