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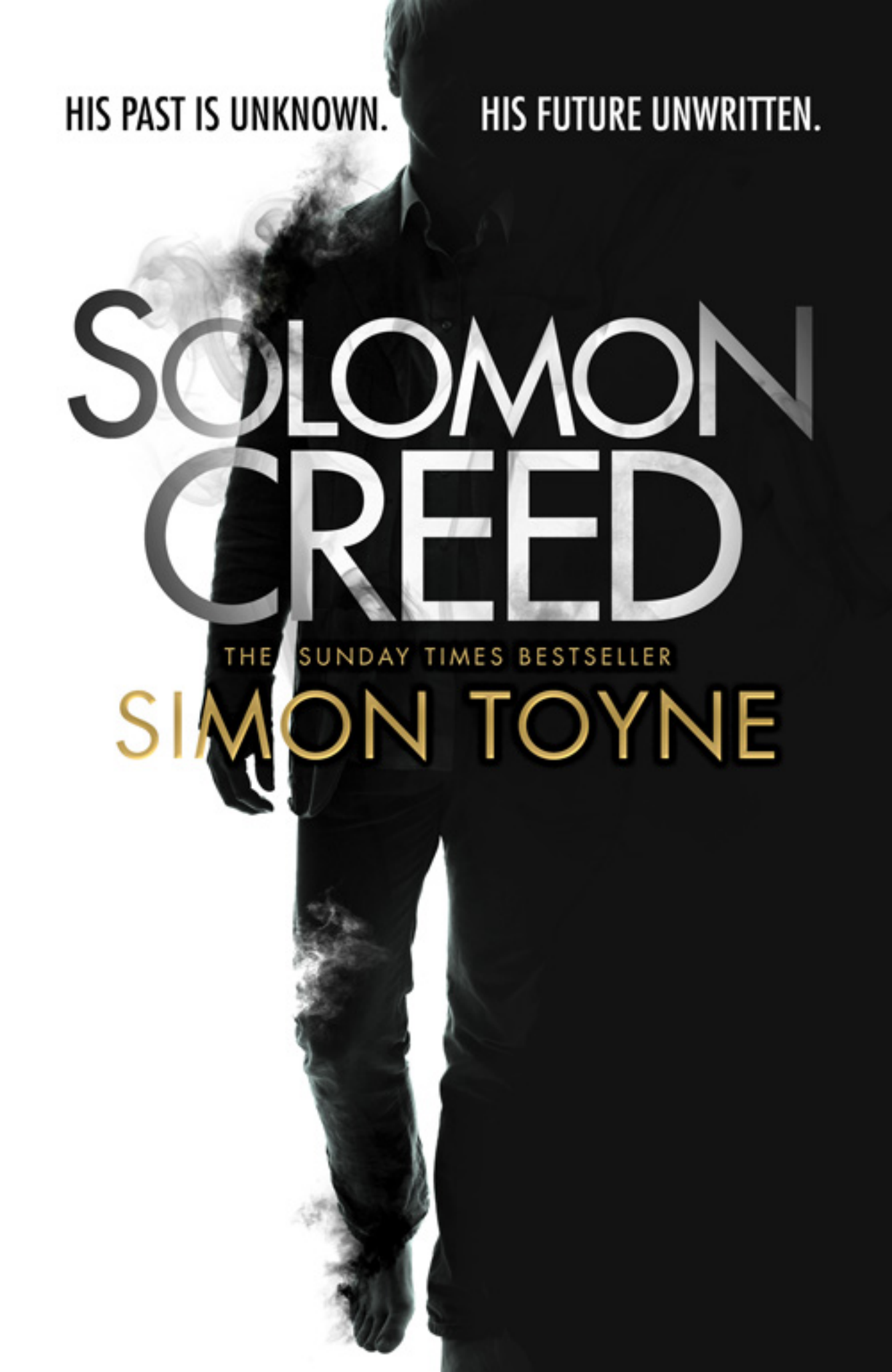
Book One

Written by Simon Toyne

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HIS PAST IS UNKNOWN.
HIS FUTURE UNWRITTEN.
SOLOMON CREED
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER
SIMON TOYNE

SOLOMON CREED

Book One

SIMON TOYNE



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I

'… all I know
is that I know nothing.'

Socrates

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 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 each 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 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 glance behind. 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 does not. I recognize it and say it again – *James Coronado*, *James Coronado* – over and over, hoping the name might be mine and might drag more about who I am 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 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 I 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. A few of the heads bowed in prayer turned 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 moving 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. The sound had 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 the 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.

4

I stare into the heart of the fire and feel as if it's staring back at me. But that can't be right. I know that. The air swirls and wails and roars around me like the world is in pain.

The first fire truck stops at the edge of the blaze and people run out, pulling hose from its belly like they are drawing innards from some beast in sacrifice to a burning god. They seem so tiny and the fire so big. The wind stirs the flames and the fire roars forward, up the road, towards the men, towards me. Fear flares inside me and I turn to run and almost collide with a woman wearing a dark blue uniform, walking up the road behind me.

'Are you OK, sir?' she says, her eyes soft with concern. I want to hold her and have her hold me but my fear of the fire is too great and so is my desire to get away from it. I duck past her and keep on running, straight into a man wearing the same uniform. He grabs my arm and I try to pull free but I cannot. He is too strong and this surprises me, as if I am not used to being weak.

'I need to get away,' I say in my soft, unfamiliar voice, and glance back over my shoulder at the flames being blown closer by the wind.

'You're safe now, sir,' he says with a professional calm that only makes me more anxious. How can he know I am safe, how can he possibly know?

I look back and past him towards the town and the sign, but there is a parked ambulance blocking my view and this makes me anxious too.

'I need to get away from it,' I say, pulling my arm away, trying to make him understand. 'I think the fire is here because of me.'

He nods as if he understands, but I see his other hand reaching out to grab me and I seize it and pull hard, sweeping his feet from beneath him with my leg at the same time and twisting away so he falls to the ground. The movement is as natural as breathing and as smooth as a well-practised dance step. My muscles still have memory it seems. I look down into his shocked face. 'Sorry, Lawrence,' I say, using the name on his badge, then I turn to run – back to the town and away from the fire. I manage one step before his hand grabs my leg, his strong fingers closing round my ankle like a manacle.

I stumble, regain my balance, turn back and raise my foot. I don't want to kick him but I will, I will kick him right in his face if that's what it takes to make him let go. The thought of the solid heel of my foot crashing into his nose, splitting his skin and spilling blood, brings a sensation like warm air rushing through me. It's a nice feeling, and it disturbs me as much as my earlier familiarity with the smell of death. I try to focus on something else, try to smother my instinct and stop my foot from lashing out, and in this pause something big and solid hits me hard, ripping my leg from the man's grip.

I hit the ground and a flash of white explodes inside my skull as my head bangs against the road. Rage erupts in me. I fight to wriggle free from whoever tackled me. Hot breath blows on my cheek and I smell sour coffee and the beginnings of tooth decay. I twist my head round and see the face of the policeman who nearly ran me down. 'Take it easy,' he says, pinning me down with his weight, 'they're only trying to help you here.'

But they're not. If they wanted to help, they'd let me go.

In a detached part of my mind I know that I could use my teeth to tear at his cheek or his nose, attack him with such ferocity he would want to be free of me more than I do from him. I am simultaneously fascinated, appalled and excited by this notion, this realization that I have the power to free myself but that something is holding me back, something inside me.

More hands grab me and press me hard to the ground. I feel a sting in my arm like a large insect has bitten me. The female medic is crouching beside me now, her attention fixed on the syringe sticking into my arm.

'Unfair fight,' I try to say, but am already slurring by the time I get to the last word.

The world starts turning to liquid and I feel myself going limp. A hand cradles my head and gently lowers it to the ground. I try to fight it, willing my eyes to stay open. I can see the distant town, framed by the road and sky. I want to tell them all to hurry, that the fire is coming and they need to get away, but my mouth no longer works. My vision starts to tunnel, black around the edges, a diminishing circle of light in the centre, as if I am falling backwards down a deep well. I can see the sign now past the edge of the ambulance, the words on it visible too. I read them in the clarifying air, the last thing I see before my eyes close and the world goes dark:

WELCOME TO THE
CITY OF REDEMPTION