

THERE'S NOWHERE TO RUN AND NO ONE TO HELP

EYESHOT



TAYLOR ADAMS

EYESHOT

**TAYLOR
ADAMS**

b brio
BOOKS

1

For a killer, William Tapp looked pretty stupid right now.

He cut a shaggy brown silhouette of twigs and crunchy grass. Like the Swamp Thing, dried out and crispy after a trek in the Mojave sun, half-walking and half-climbing over a current of loose rocks skittering downslope. His raw breaths whistled. His kneecaps squealed and popped. His beleaguered heart struggled to keep blood everywhere it needed to be.

The outfit wasn't helping. It was a homemade sniper's ghillie suit – volleyball netting tied with layers of dyed jute threads and desert underbrush for camouflage – but it was like wearing a goddamn greenhouse. Crouching was awkward, running was difficult, and taking a piss had been disastrous the one time he'd tried.

He reached the summit under a hard blue sky, dropped his rucksack (Cheetos, Swedish Fish, a six-pack of grape-flavored energy drinks), and gathered his equipment. From here the view was striking; a vivid panorama of Nevada scrublands and violet mountains that could have scored a Pulitzer. Tapp didn't notice.

He slipped the ghillie hood over his face, felt the prickle of dead grass on his lips, and like a descending shadow, morphed into the prairie.

Now William Tapp looked like nothing at all.

* * *

“Look out!”

James Eversman stomped the brakes and the Rav4 lurched like a cigarette boat dropping anchor. For a second, the world uncoupled. His seatbelt yanked him and he tasted a hot splash of copper. He couldn't tell if he'd banged his mouth on the steering wheel or just bitten his tongue.

His wife Elle fared better, as her reflexes were sharpened by three coffees a day. She caught herself on the dashboard with her palms, her chocolate-brown hair covering her face, and hissed something that sounded to James like “crap-ass.” Sometimes her profanity didn't quite come out right.

It wasn't a crash but it felt like one. The parked cop car – a brown and white Ford with dusty windows – had materialized in the middle of the road on the last bend of a 70 mph S-curve. The highway was carved into the earth here and granite walls crowded the single-lane road like blinders. Had James been a heartbeat slower on the brake pedal, or distracted, or speeding, or . . . He pushed those thoughts out of his mind because they were unproductive. He knew what highway collisions looked like from EMT Basic, wherein a colleague had once described the human body as ‘curiously tomato-like.’ As the blood returned to his head and the acrid odor of burnt brake pads came sweeping in, James stared at the parked Paiute County patrol car not six paces from his front bumper and allowed himself to quietly marvel: *Wow*.

“Huh.” Elle flipped her hair from her eyes. “That almost sucked.”

“Indeed.”

“Why'd he stop in the middle of the road?”

“I don't . . .” James' throat dried up. “Well, here he comes.”

He was a compact little sheriff's deputy approaching at a trot with his sidearm wobbling on his hip and one hand raised to steady a comically oversized campaign hat. It was almost a sombrero. He was coming from the road's beveled gravel shoulder on the right, where James noticed a second vehicle pulled up and parked snugly against the oxidized walls. A newish white truck. It didn't appear damaged, just empty. James had time to wonder: *Where's the driver?*

"I . . ." Elle held in a laugh. "I think Smokey Bear wants his hat back."

"Don't stare."

"*Only you* can prevent car accidents."

"Elle, please don't stare." He thumbed the power window and it felt like depressurizing an airlock. Thick air poured inside and his voice disappeared under mouthfuls of swallowed heat and alkali dust.

The deputy's footsteps sounded sticky, like the blacktop was melting under the sun. James took a weak breath and tried not to cough it out – he was nervous and he hated himself for it. Admittedly, this was a new experience. He had never even been pulled over before, which he had always attributed to his remarkably unremarkable driving. Elle had once compared him to one of those little circular vacuuming robots rich people buy. What were they called again?

"Oh, Christ." The cop caught his breath and rested one palm on the door. "I should've had my lightbar on."

"It's okay," James said without really meaning it. He was startled by how young the deputy was. This guy was fresh out of high school, small-framed, acne-encrusted, and apparently trying to grow a mustache. It was going poorly.

"I was just . . . this road gets three cars a day, tops. Shoot. Sorry." The kid sniffed, straightened, and pointed to the white truck on the

roadside. “There’s a . . . this truck is abandoned all the way out here. Doors unlocked. Engine running. Forty bucks in a money clip in the center console. Like some guy stepped out to take a leak and never came back. Just sitting here, abandoned on the shoulder.”

“Parked on the *shoulder*?” Elle cocked her head. “Maybe he was on to something.”

James inflated his fake smile.

Deputy Doogie Howser didn’t notice. He had a strange way of speaking; he over-inflected the first word of every sentence to deliver every idea like a PowerPoint bullet. Almost like he was hiding an accent. He apologized again (and again) and asked if they had seen anyone hitchhiking or walking along the roadside. Of course, they hadn’t. The nearest town was Mosby, a shit-splat silver mine burg the deputy estimated to be “eleven clicks” east (*Why go by kilometers?* James wondered), so leaving a functioning vehicle behind out here in this Mars-like world of rock and sky was fairly strange. And possibly dangerous.

The deputy said another thing that bothered James: “You a cop?”

“No.” The question hit him between the eyes. “Why?”

“Fire? Rescue? Security?” The kid squinted under the brim of that stupid hat with the solemn importance of a gypsy. “I swear, I can pick out an emergency guy from the regular civvies. It’s in the eyes. You have busy eyes.”

James shrugged politely. “Nope.”

“He took a few medic classes,” Elle said. “A long time ago.”

“Nah.” The deputy sighed. “That doesn’t count.”

Says the cop in the sombrero, James thought. He imagined Elle was thinking something wittier but hoped she would keep it to herself. He let the awkward moment pass and asked as sincerely as he could, “How can I help?”

Deputy Doogie Howser’s eyes thinned. “You see anyone walkin’

alone out here, on the side of the road, elderly, confused, whatever, you call me. This desert eats people. It's a big county and we're a small department."

"How small?"

"You're talkin' to fifty percent of it."

Then with a polite farewell nod, the cop turned and paced back to his patrol car, his size-eight boots slurping on the molten blacktop.

"And he's like, thirty percent hat," Elle whispered.

James nodded absently, watching.

This desert eats people.

The door thumped like a gunshot. Brake lights lit up as the deputy squeezed his car off the road and motioned them through with a circular wave. James rolled up his window and raced on past, again sneaking a sidelong glance at that mysterious white truck. Nothing special about it. Its windows blazed with reflected sunlight, rendering the interior unknown. He caught a flash of a bumper sticker – MPR, stenciled in all caps – and in another flash the truck was behind them, going, going, and gone forever. For a while he idly wondered what MPR stood for – *Mexican Public Radio?*

As the highway curved through more bends, the granite grew sharper and poked through the earth like bone tearing skin. James made a point to check every shadow and scan every stretch of plains for a humanoid walking figure, just in case. He wasn't a paramedic – not even close – but he knew just enough to be useful in a crisis, and to wish he hadn't been a salesman instead.

Elle exhaled. "Good thing you drive like a Roomba, honey."

He nodded. *Roomba. That's what they're called.*

Uncomfortable silence descended, and the tedium of the road took over again. In another few minutes they would revert to the unhappy people they had been before this little distraction, sharing cold pauses under the hum of tires on pavement. That little jolt of

adrenaline had been nice, he realized, and he wished for a little more of it today, if only to appease the elephant in the car awhile longer.

“You want to talk about it?” he asked.

She shook her head.

Good. He didn’t want to talk about *it*, either.

* * *

It was a long drive to Tulsa and it wasn’t half over.

James and Elle Eversman stopped for gas six miles later at the Mojave Fuel-N-Food – a quiet little place with seventies-era fuel pumps and a roller grill of seventies-era hotdogs. Over a pair of concrete picnic tables and a parked jeep, a bone-white signboard welcomed them to Mosby’s city limits (population: 88) and underneath, in blocky motel font: ALIENS CRASHED IN ROSWELL TRYING TO FIND MOSBY!!!!

Five exclamation points, James observed. *Four wasn’t enough*.

He was too easygoing to be a Grammar Nazi but he had the eye for it. Back in California he represented eleven local radio stations as an account executive, although his soft hands made the handshakes awkward. No one trusts a man who doesn’t work with his hands. More than once before a big client meeting, he’d considered callousing his palms with steel wool.

“You think he’s watching us?” Elle asked him furtively as he cranked the gas release and stepped out under the shade of the fueling lane. The heat was more manageable here, but the air was still as thick as gelatin.

“Who?”

“The guy in the jeep.” She pointed with her head. “Black jeep, over there.”

James peered an inch over the Rav4's roof. It was a lifted rig, powdered with dust, pulled parallel to the Fuel-N-Food with a calm disregard for the chalk parking lines. Sunlight on tinted glass painted silhouettes of two headrests and a bulging, asymmetrical head staring directly at them. It was so oddly misshapen (would a hat even fit on it?) that it took two glances to cross the uncanny valley and register it as human. It didn't move or breathe.

James shivered.

"I can feel his eyes on the back of my head." She thumbed the door lock and blocked her face with an elbow. "Crawling up and down. I hate being stared at."

"Two minutes. Then we're gone."

"No wonder they tested A-bombs here. This state blows."

He nodded. "I have no idea why Mexico wanted it back."

He put the gas on credit. The old-fashioned fueling nozzle was canted and stuck. As he tugged it free he caught motion in his far periphery – the Black Jeep Man's head was bobbing behind the sunlit glass now, and the asymmetrical part of the silhouette revealed itself to be a walkie-talkie receiver clamped to his ear with cigar fingers. He lowered the radio and swung his driver door open with a metallic squeal.

Elle sank in her seat.

James pumped gas and tried to look nonchalant. It wasn't working.

Out climbed a bearlike man draped in a trail duster that swished a curtain of oilcloth with each step. He could have been the Marlboro man, except there was also something oddly foreign about him; he looked like the kind of asshole James Bond would garrote on his way into a secret Soviet base. His hair was knotted into a black ponytail and his six-inch beard was streaked with pewter. He kicked his door shut and paced to the Fuel-N-Food,

carrying a silver coffee thermos with a bright circular marking on it, too far away for James to discern.

“Hello Kitty,” Elle whispered.

“What?”

“It’s a Hello Kitty sticker. On his thermos.”

“Oh.” James’ gut squirmed. “Oh, *good*.”

The Soviet Cowboy passed the building’s double doors without entering and instead took a seat at a concrete table under the Mosby signpost, facing them directly. He was less than twenty feet away now with the barren land canvassed behind him, quietly sipping his stupid thermos. His eyes were locked on Elle again.

She peered over the dashboard and sighed.

The fuel pump ticked like a metronome. Something rattled brokenly inside it, so James checked the gray digital screen – only a gallon had gone in. He jostled the pump impatiently. He was waiting for Elle to say something, something like: *Don’t try to confront him, James. Just let it go. Don’t be a hero. It’ll only escalate things*. He waited a few long seconds with his hand on the pump before realizing it wasn’t coming. She knew that he was a pacifist. He couldn’t even ask a waitress to take a burnt steak back to the kitchen without blushing. He hoped she would say it anyway, to be sweet, as she sometimes did.

“I’ve decided,” she said.

He did a double take. She sat on her hands in the passenger seat, eyes down, lips pursed. He knew the topic had boomeranged back to *it* again, and this time there was no avoiding it. “Decided what?” he asked her with one eye on the Soviet.

“I don’t want to get pregnant again.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

James felt his lip burst warmth in his mouth. It hadn’t been

bleeding much before, but suddenly it reminded him of those candies that squirted fruit juice when you chewed them. The metallic taste turned his stomach, but he welcomed the distraction because anything was better than this conversation, right now, about *it*. Hell, he'd punch the Soviet Cowboy in the mouth right now just to buy another few minutes.

"I'm sorry, James." Her jaw quivered. "I can't do it anymore."

He spat in the dirt. Bright red.

The Soviet took a swig from his Hello Kitty thermos, threw open his duster, and slapped a sheet of yellowed paper on the table. He carefully spaced three stubby pencils, feathered a hand over each, and selected the middle one.

"What's he doing?" Elle asked.

"Doesn't matter." He leaned inside to face her with his palms on the Rav4's hot roof. "We're almost back on the road."

A scratching sound underscored his voice. Like snakes coiling in dry brush. It was charcoal on paper, a Morse code rap of long and short scrapes. The Soviet was sketching in big strokes, with his veined tongue hanging over his beard. *He's drawing a picture of us*, James realized. *Or maybe just Elle.*

"It's the hope that's killing me," she said quietly. "I think."

"How?"

She sighed.

"How, Elle?"

"I dread seeing the test come up positive. I *loathe* those two pink lines. Because to be devastated, you have to be happy first, and all I see is another miscarriage in three months. And unlike you, James, I'm having a hell of a hard time seeing every one of them as a human soul."

He ran his hands through his sandy hair, already dulling as his thirties approached. He had made a point of naming every one of

their children and he could recite their names, starting three Januaries ago after they married – first Darby, then Jason, then Adelaide (who almost finished the second trimester and poisoned Elle with hope), then Carrie, then Ross, then . . . well, they'd named *almost* all of them. The last one, six weeks ago, seemed to be the final straw. That was when an exhausted Elle had decided she wanted to start reusing names, which offended James. It felt unconscionably cold. If there's even an outside chance of a human life existing, the least you can do is give it a name. And not reuse it.

"We'll make it happen," he said.

"You don't know that."

He imitated her doctor's Swahili accent: "Eet's not impossible. Eet's just unlikely."

"Yes. Having a baby is unlikely." She rolled her eyes but managed a small smile. "*Unlikely* is our car transforming into a talking robot. Even though it's a Japanese car, I'm not holding my breath for that."

"No. That's *impossible*," James said. "*Unlikely* is winning the lottery."

"Not holding my breath for that, either."

"People win all the time."

"Then prove it. Buy a million tickets."

"Sure." James paused. "Are we talking about the lottery or sex?"

She didn't laugh. The joke hung in the air unacknowledged. Her face was downturned so he kissed her forehead and smelled green apple from whatever bargain bin shampoo she had used back at the motel in Fairview. He saw constellations of freckles by her eyes, and tears perched on her eyelashes like little raindrops.

The fuel pump ticked – ten gallons.

The Soviet switched pencils, twirled one across his knuckles, and his strokes became shorter. He must have been on the fine details now. Every few seconds he paused to rub delicate shadows

with the pad of his thumb. Then he looked up at James with a dark glower, as if to say: *Get out of the way.*

James dug his feet in and spat a glob of syrupy blood. He wanted badly now to confront the man, stupid idea as it was, because it would at least be something. Maybe if he dealt with a small problem here at the gas station, the huge one would feel smaller. He'd once heard that the crisis of modern masculinity was that so many problems existed today which couldn't be solved with a punch to the face. As punching faces wasn't James' strong suit, he had figured this made him well adapted to the modern world. He was sensitive, intelligent, and a terrific listener – but none of this helped Elle or their dead unborn children. Right now, he just wanted to punch a face.

He heard his father's words, utterly dark and alien even inside his own head: *Be polite, be courteous, but have a plan to kill everyone you meet.*

The fuel pump clicked. All done.

Elle's smile evaporated. "Do you really believe all the optimistic crap you say?"

"I do," he lied.

He crumpled the receipt and slammed the door hard enough to rattle the glass. She wiped her eyes with her palm. He gunned his soccer mom Toyota, skidded back onto the highway and floored it. Then he rolled down his window ("James, what are you doing?") tooted the horn, and flipped the Soviet Cowboy a cheery one-finger salute.

"Yep," he said with a lump in his throat. "I just did that."

She gasped. "Please drive fast now."

With a stomach full of swallowed blood, he watched the man shrink into a stick figure in the rearview mirror. He had swiveled around on his seat to watch them leave. The mysterious walkie-talkie (*shit*, James had forgotten about the radio) was back out in

his hand. It was too far to read an expression, but James imagined a smug grin on that weathered face, and he hoped he hadn't just made the biggest mistake of his life, in a county with a police force of two.

Why did I do that?

"Honey . . ."

He saw the speedometer pushing a hundred and tapped the brakes. "And . . . that's the story of how I got us murdered."

"If he follows us," she said, "I'm going to punch you."

The Soviet Cowboy didn't, which was somehow worse. They had blown Mosby's outer limits and were two miles into the badlands when the Toyota's radio, which had caught only electronic slush for the last forty miles, registered a crackle-snap of writhing static. And under it, a human voice.

2

William Tapp's radio hissed, signaling a connection.

He was eating Cheetos, lifting them to his mouth with a pair of medical forceps to avoid contaminating his fingers with orange dust. This one was number eighteen (he couldn't help but count things, by force of habit). Usually the bags contained somewhere in the ballpark of one hundred and thirty Cheetos, but lately the average had dropped to around one hundred and fifteen, and even one hundred and four in one bag last year. He chalked it up to the tough economy.

A verdict on the California couple in the yellow Toyota?

He hadn't decided yet.

Before answering his headset, he let a nineteenth Cheeto sit on his tongue un-chewed, where it would soak and swell into a mushy glob to be swallowed whole.

* * *

James and Elle heard only two fragments of conversation, mid-sentence and stilted, like channel-scanning an old analog television. The first sounded like "four hours left." The second was "black eye," spoken as one word. Then the garble reached a sharp peak and the

anomaly passed like blue-sky lightning, leaving them in stunned silence.

Elle twirled the volume dial. “Was that . . . ?”

“No.” James was certain the voice didn’t belong to the Soviet. It was wrong. It was thin, weedy, produced by scarred vocal chords and a compact chest. The speaker also seemed to have something in his mouth, occupying his tongue, like a piece of candy. He remembered once hearing that Abraham Lincoln had a raspy little voice famously at odds with his grand persona, and for some reason this was exactly what the radio voice sounded like. Yep, Abraham Lincoln. The ghost of history’s favorite Republican just came on 92.7 FM and scared the hell out of them.

“Could be talk radio,” James said weakly.

“Four hours left,” Elle said. “Until what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where will we be in four hours?”

“Arizona.” He checked the GPS unit cradled on the dash. “It’ll be getting dark by then. We’re just a half hour from the interstate and from there it will be a straight shot over the Rockies. We’ll leave this nightmare factory of a place far, far behind. Deal?”

She nodded with colorless cheeks.

He accelerated. “You okay?”

“Who . . . who just leaves a functioning vehicle out here?” Her voice was dull, zombie-like. “With forty bucks in a money clip, ten miles out of town, when it’s a hundred degrees out?”

James had forgotten about that lovely episode. There were plenty of possible explanations, but all of them were only possible and not particularly convincing. He focused on the road instead, which rose and fell in lazy humps. The terrain became rough, like crumpled paper, as they approached the foothills, with odd pillows of plateaued earth jammed together to form stair steps. The only reminders they

weren't on Mars came from the yucca trees dotting the landscape like hunched scarecrows. If you watched them long enough, you'd swear you saw a few walking.

Elle watched the scenery pass. She had slipped into one of her trances; into what he had once called her photographer's thousand-yard stare. The Sacramento Journal had once named her number two on a list of twenty local artists to watch. James had hung that framed page in the dining room back in California, and it was now brown-boxed with everything else they owned, in the back seats, gently rattling. It had been published four years ago. She had since dumped her cameras on Craigslist.

"Don't worry," James said. "I've seen a lot of horror movies. Nothing bad ever happens in deserts."

She chuckled.

He thumbed the radio dial and made sure it was all the way off. Usually when you get a signal bleed, it's a local television affiliate. Maybe that was it. Part of him wanted to keep scanning for more, just in case there were more tantalizing clues, but really it was just a distraction. What mattered now was driving, moving forward, and not stopping until they reached Flagstaff, Arizona as per schedule. They would be there by now, he realized grimly, if they hadn't veered a hundred miles into the nuclear wasteland for Elle's stupid tourist trap Gore Museum.

"Oh, hell," she said.

He saw it, too. A red roadblock appeared at the end of a half mile straightaway, shimmering behind curtains of air and boiling puddles of sky. In another thirty seconds the mirages dissolved and the largest signboard turned legible, flanked by highway barrels: ROCKSLIDE DETOUR. He almost punched the steering wheel but stopped himself; he needed to at least appear calm for Elle's sake. He had put her through enough today.

“It’s official.” She crossed her arms. “I hate this place.”

“At least there’s a detour road,” he said. “So we don’t have to turn around and drive past the guy I just gave the finger.”

“Dare you to.”

“I’ll do you one better.” He whined the brakes and approached the rockslide barricade. “Every town we pass, I’ll find the scariest person there and flip them off. By the time we get to our new house, we’ll have a conga line of murderers following us.”

“Our new house,” she said with a flickering smile. “Honest to God, nothing sounds better.”

He touched her hand.

The house wasn’t theirs yet. Neither were the jobs.

He twirled the wheel and skidded right onto the detour. After hours of buttery asphalt, hitting a dirt road was a teeth-chattering shock. The route itself seemed fine enough – just a winding access road walled off by sandstone faces and scree piles – but he knew he’d feel different if the Toyota broke down all the way out here. Obviously the rockslide on the pass gave them no choice, but he still felt like a character in the first act of a horror movie, pelted with popcorn by an exasperated audience: *Don’t go in there, you idiots!*

He stomped the gas and accelerated.

Elle craned her head to watch the rearview mirror, as if expecting that black jeep to materialize behind them. “Four hours left,” she whispered cryptically, like a fortune-teller. “Black eye.”

He drove faster.

* * *

After ten minutes of serpentine bends, the landscape opened up again and the sightlines suddenly stretched forever. They were on the rim of it – a mile-wide fishbowl of descending plains and

oxidizing rock forming a walled horizon on all sides. It looked like a matte painting of an ancient caldera. Their detour road shot straight in and down like a hairline fracture, bisecting the valley and crossing a darkened riverbed on the bottom. Then it crawled up the opposite side. *Some detour*, he thought. *We'll be in Mexico by the time it loops back.*

Elle jolted forward as if she had been electrocuted, making stabbing motions with a pointed finger, and James punched the brake. “What?”

“See him?”

“See who?”

“Tell me I’m not crazy. Do you not see him?” Her voice pitched.

He squinted in the white-hot sunlight and followed her index finger straight ahead. He had brought the Rav4 to a complete stop, which made him anxious – the Soviet Cowboy could be pursuing them in his ass-ugly black jeep right now. That was the real concern. That walking shadow of a man could appear behind them at any second, his engine bellowing like a monster truck, unencumbered by witnesses out here.

He sighed. “All I see is desert, hon.”

“Just look. You’ll see him.” Her voice was a whisper under the loping motor. He noticed her finger was trembling. Something about the way she said *him* spooked him, too. Like she was talking about the devil or something. The Toyota’s windows creaked and popped around them, shattering the stillness, as if the outside air was depressurizing. That smell was back, too. Over the last hundred miles he had noticed these badlands possessed a unique odor – the gunpowder of cracked rock mixed with the coastal stink of tidewater. He whiffed it again under the recycled air and felt nauseous.

“You need glasses,” she said, which wasn’t untrue.

“I see him.”

He or she (or it) was a tiny humanoid figure several hundred yards downhill in the crater, following the road, back turned. Head hunched, arms straitjacketed forward, dwarfed by the open land. A hitchhiker, maybe, although James couldn't fathom how anyone could be stupid enough to walk alone out here. The sun would suck the moisture from your mouth in an hour. In two hours, your eyelids would be sandpaper. In three: waist-deep in dementia and courting death.

He ran his tongue over his sore and swelling lip. *Could this be the truck guy?*

“Shady Slope Road,” Elle said.

“What?”

She pointed at a piece of driftwood propped beside the road. The letters had been burnt into the bleached grain with a poker or hot iron. The handwriting was strangely childish, with exaggerated loops and crushed spacing as the wood tapered.

She sniffed. “That’s not ominous at all.”

“Nope.”

Well, he decided, we sure as hell can't turn around.

So he hit the gas and continued down the detour path now identified as Shady Slope Road, which was the opposite of shady and barely a road. The man became centered in the windshield and slowly grew as they passed the crater's edge and began their descent. It reminded James of a rollercoaster – that last moment of calm on the summit of the first rise, and then the point of no return. They dropped and the road turned nasty. Broken slogs of earth churned, rocked the suspension, and vibrated the pedal under his foot. Rocks pinged off the chassis. In the back seat, the bookcase settled noisily.

James found himself focusing on the distant man and not

the road. Already he could feel his bleeding heart pumping away. What if the guy really needed help? He could be stranded. It would be morally wrong to just drive past him without offering help. Right? He remembered the deputy's words and choked on a nervous laugh: *That's a long way to walk just to take a leak, buddy.*

"Mount St. Helens-esque," Elle said.

He ignored her.

"You didn't laugh," she said. "You always laugh."

Back in Sacramento, they'd had no idea that their neighbor was a meth cook (meth chef?) until they woke to smoke curling under their bedroom door. The lab had detonated in such a convenient way as to send a lateral fireball directly into their living room, which the fire marshal later likened to Washington state's iconic 1980 volcanic eruption. There was actually nothing funny about it – the mustached old man had simply remarked post-investigation that the triggering blast was "Mount St. Helens-esque" – but for some reason James had giggled until his eyes watered. She had, too. Pitch-black belly laughs. They must have looked crazy; two twenty-somethings laughing their asses off over an accident that had destroyed their home and killed their neighbor. Sometimes *awful* and *hilarious* occupy the same weird space.

He let it in and grinned. "The explosion appears . . . Mount St. Helens-esque."

She snorted.

Another pothole banged under them. The engine made a popping noise, like a steel cable snapping. The boxes and furniture in the back seats shifted and creaked. He feathered the brakes and hoped a tire hadn't been punctured. Not out here, not now.

He rolled to twenty yards behind the guy, still pacing with his back turned. He wore jeans and an ashen yellow jacket – and then

James saw something else, something stenciled on the man's back in white letters, which turned his blood to ice.

"MPR," Elle said. "What does that stand for?"

He swallowed. "I don't know."

She hadn't noticed the bumper sticker back on the truck earlier today. He didn't like withholding information from her, but couldn't bring himself to tell her.

MPR.

Also strange was that Deputy Doogie Howser's mysterious walking man didn't turn around to acknowledge the car idling behind him. He must have heard them approaching. He must have heard the lope of the motor, those gunshot potholes, the crunch of gravel under rubber, *something*. He just kept pacing alongside Shady Slope Road in his lonely stupor, head low, face obscured, holding a small object forward in a slightly quivering hand. James couldn't see it.

"What's he holding?"

"A cell phone." Her angle from the passenger seat was better. "Looks like he's trying to get a signal." She pulled her own phone from her purse, a battered old Samsung relic, and flipped it open.

"No bars?"

She shook her head.

No 911. Great.

Growing impatient, James gave the horn two short bursts and one long one. When the man still didn't react, he felt his stomach flutter in that weightless way it did during airplane takeoffs.

Elle asserted her mastery of the obvious: "This isn't right."

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and exhaled through his teeth. This guy was trying to operate a cell phone but ignoring a car horn? It didn't make sense, but neither did leaving a perfectly functional pickup on the side of the highway, all the way back on the other side of Mosby, Nevada. All he knew was that if he

swerved around this walking mystery and sped on past, it could very well be a death sentence to this man. Back in Sacramento he'd heard of old folks dying in their seats on the bus and going unnoticed all day, traveling the same boulevard loop for hours. He wondered if he'd ever sat next to one.

He cranked the Toyota into park.

Elle's jaw dropped. "James—"

"I have to know he's okay."

"Seriously?"

He unbuckled his seatbelt. "Seriously."

"I'm glad I married the last idealist left on earth," she muttered.

"There were more idealists like me," he said. "They just all died stopping to help stranded motorists who turned out to be serial killers."

"You're not going to flip him off, right?"

"Got your pepper spray?"

She fished it from her purse – a thin, black canister with a red button.

"Okay, Elle. I'm going to talk to him but I'm going to leave the engine running." He studied the man through the bug-splattered windshield and reminded himself, again, that it would be morally wrong not to check. The guy's safety wasn't even on his mind anymore. It was more selfish than that – stubborn curiosity. Too many little hints had been dropped today, and now he just had to know what was going on out here.

He opened the door. "If . . . if anything happens to me, Elle, don't stay. Just drive."

"Wait," she said.

He stood half-in, half-out. "Yeah?"

"I just have to get this off my chest, in case you die."

"What?"

“James, I have had . . . *so many* affairs . . .”

He closed the door.

He'd heard that one before. That was a sure sign Elle was getting anxious – when she started repeating her jokes.

He started walking, and his footsteps on the packed dirt sounded like breaking eggshells. The air was tiring to breathe. It felt strangely dense, over-pressurized, but he was certain this valley couldn't be far below sea level, if it was below sea level at all. His right eardrum popped juicily, and he felt his wife's eyes on his back. A few paces ahead, the man sensed him and halted on crooked legs.

Silence.

James found it oddly chilling that they were both now aware of each other. This was a milestone. There was no turning back. The man bowed his head, showing bristled gray hair around a bald patch the size of a poker chip, burnt lobster red by the sun. He wobbled as if he was turning around to face James, and then didn't.

He just stood there. Like a department store mannequin facing a wall.

Great idea, James.

He noticed a small bulge on the man's right hip and wondered if it was a holstered firearm. With his luck, it would be. James hated guns. He hated everything about them. The mechanical efficiency of their designs, their springs and pistons and calibrated clicks, snicks, and snaps, even their elegant Porsche curves – he hated it all because guns illustrated better than anything else mankind's myopic genius for engineering death. As he saw it, his father had been killed by a gun and nothing else.

Five feet away, the man exhaled through his mouth.

James had lost all momentum now. He knew he could still turn around, climb back into his car with his loving wife and few remaining possessions, and race on past this mystery to a new life in Tulsa.

This would be a distraction, a few lost minutes and nothing more, no worse than that damn pointless Gore Museum that had pulled them off the interstate earlier at Elle's puppy-eyed insistence. That had been . . . well, exactly what the brochure promised. Wax dummies posed in dioramas of medieval agony – racks, swinging blades, an imaginative way to keep rapist recidivism rates at zero – and Elle had lapped it all up like the self-identified “gore hound” that she was. James had spent most of his time in the lobby, reading an old People magazine and sipping a four-dollar Diet Coke.

He wanted badly now to be a worse person so he could walk away and leave this MPR man alone in the crater. Or a less curious one. Either way, he couldn't.

He took a small step forward. Another eggshell crunch punctured the quiet, as sharp as a slamming door. Then the other ambiences came seeping back – the hot air stirring, low grass tensing and flexing, sand hissing in the wind. Crickets that sounded like flies buzzing over bad meat. Elle said something from the Rav4, but it was muffled by glass and congested air.

The man just stood there. Back turned. James noticed with an uncomfortable jolt that the back of the guy's neck was also cooked by the sun, scorched bright red just like his bald patch. It was bad; bad enough to start peeling off in crispy sheets soon. This old man had been walking in the Mojave for some time and had clearly been unprepared for it. *Why did he leave his truck?*

James cleared his throat, dry as paper. “You okay?”

No response.

“You need water?”

Nothing.

“Hello?”

Nope.

James whistled a sharp note. *Maybe he's deaf.*

Then the man moved suddenly, like a puppet on tangled strings. His head rolled on his shoulders, first one way, then the other. His joints popped like firewood. He let out a sigh and his left hand dropped stiffly to his side, and a red smartphone fell into view – the one that had occupied his attention this entire time. The screen was black.

A breeze hit James and felt shockingly, bracingly cold. The sweat on his skin felt like ice.

The old man spoke: “I lost it.”

“What?”

“I lost it.”

James felt his other eardrum pop like a crushed grape.

I lost it?

“I . . . almost had it. But I lost it.” The man drawled his syllables, testing and exploring each one in ponderous monotone. Then finally, he turned around.

James saw his face and tasted raw oysters in the back of his mouth.

* * *

“James!”

She called his name three times as he returned to their car. Her husband said nothing – eyes busy, jaw set, cheeks bloodless. She knew that face. She had only seen it once or twice in nine years, but by God, she remembered it.

He missed a step and stumbled.

“James, what did he say to you?” She looked back at the strange man, who was still standing where her husband had left him down the road. She couldn’t tell how much they had actually spoken. The man was still facing away, staring down at his cell phone. He wavered a bit,

like a scarecrow nailed to a wobbly post. Then her photographer's eye noticed an . . . an odd darkness, a shadow that wasn't quite correct, peering gremlin-like around the crown of his skull.

The driver door screeched open. Her husband leaned inside with sweat beading on his forehead. "We're getting him to a hospital right now. Start the car."

"What happened?"

"Start the goddamn car."

Wasn't the engine running a minute ago?

She scooted into the driver seat and grabbed the chattering keys, but morbid curiosity seized her and she chanced one more peek over the dashboard, through the windshield streaked with insect guts, and by coincidence, the man turned around and looked at her at the same moment.

At first she didn't know what it was that disturbed her. Her stomach knotted up and her spine chilled at the blatant wrongness of what she was seeing, but she couldn't knuckle down on why, exactly, it was wrong. Then she had it. The silhouette of the man's head was incorrect. A small v-shaped pie slice of his skull was gone, torn away from his temple to just above his right ear. There was surprisingly little blood, just a thin peel of scalp hanging off like a loose flap of wallpaper and underneath it an absence of matter, negative space, shadowed black in the sunlight.

Her mouth opened.

"Don't scream," James whispered.

A strangled squeak escaped her lips.

"Don't stare at it."

The man had a grandfatherly face, doughy J. Edgar Hoover jowls, and a dusting of silver stubble. He reminded her of someone she knew; she couldn't recall whom. He read her bug-eyed face – *He's looking right at me* – and his own eyes narrowed into slits. He

glanced over his shoulder, then back to her, and his lips moved, as if to say: “What’s wrong?”

Oh, God.

She nodded politely. Faked a smile.

Oh, God, he doesn't know he's hurt.

“We can’t let him see his reflection. We need to cover the mirrors.” James grabbed her hand, squeezed her fingers, and turned the key. The Rav4 coughed and something twanged loosely under the hood, like a weed-whacker wire slapping a fence. He tried twice more as her slackening fingers slipped from his and the engine made no sound at all, just a dry electric tick.

“Elle,” he said blankly. “We have a huge problem.”

First published in 2014 Joffe Books, London

Copyright © 2021 Taylor Adams

All rights reserved. The author asserts their moral rights in this work throughout the world without waiver. No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher. For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to editions@booktopia.com.au.

ISBN 9781922598547 (print)

Published in Australia and New Zealand by:

Brio Books, an imprint of Booktopia Group Ltd
Unit E1, 3-29 Birnie Avenue,
Lidcombe, NSW 2141, Australia

Printed and bound in Australia



Proudly Printed
In Australia

booktopia.com.au

Stranded in the desert, finding water is the least of their problems ...

James and Elle Eversman are a young couple travelling through the Mojave desert on their way to a new life. When their car mysteriously breaks down they are stranded in the middle of nowhere with little water and no cell-phone reception.

A mile away a deadly sniper has them in his cross-hairs. Pinned down behind their broken-down car and surrounded by open ground in all directions, there's nowhere to run and no one to help them. How can they possibly survive?

With relentless tension, razor-sharp prose, and a surprising dose of dark humor, *Eyeshot* will keep you gripped till its stunning conclusion.



booktopia.com.au

Scan here to
meet the author



Thrillers & Suspense



RRP \$29.99