

MONSTERS

DAVID A. ROBERTSON

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COLE HARPER is struggling to settle into life in Wounded Sky First Nation. He may have stopped a serial killer, but the trouble is far from over. A creature lurks in the shadows of Blackwood Forest, the health clinic is on lockdown by a mysterious organization, and long-held secrets threaten to bubble to the surface. Can Cole learn the truth about his father's death? Why won't Choch give him a straight answer? Where the heck is Jayne? Oh, and high school sucks.

Monsters is the second novel in The Reckoner trilogy.

MONSTERS

ALSO BY DAVID A. ROBERTSON

THE RECKONER TRILOGY

Strangers

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FOR CHILDREN

When We Were Alone

NOVELS

The Evolution of Alice

THE RECKONER BOOK TWO

MONSTERS

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HIGHWATER
PRESS

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TO ANYBODY LIVING WITH THEIR OWN MONSTERS,
BIG AND SMALL. I HAVE THEM TOO.

PROLOGUE

HOURS AFTER VICTOR HAD ENTERED BLACKWOOD FOREST, he hadn't yet caught any game. Not a moose, not a muskrat. And it wasn't ineptitude—Victor had always been a successful hunter—but he hadn't even seen game. Old tracks led nowhere. New tracks were impossible to locate. He'd meandered through the entire area he'd frequented since he was a child, and stopped only for a bagged lunch.

Crack.

Victor took a quick breath, and peered through the darkness, towards the sound. It was faint, but in the quiet of the woods, unmistakable. He walked silently in the same direction, expertly navigating over twigs and roots and fallen branches. He saw a clearing in the distance.

Crack.

He waded through the black as though he were a part of it. Rifle raised, letting the muzzle guide him. Close to the clearing, he crouched down, squinted his eyes, and tried to make out a mound in the middle of the open space, where the cracking sounds originated. But he couldn't figure out what it was. It just looked like a big pile of blackness.

He moved forward methodically, patiently, inch by inch. It happened this way. The hunt. It had happened this way since he was a little boy.

Crack.

Louder. Crisper—and something else: Breathing. A low, almost indistinguishable growling, coming from behind the mound. An animal that had found better luck than Victor. He repositioned his rifle.

The smell. It thrust into his nostrils. Flesh. Tinny blood. Death. Feet away, Victor saw what the mound really was: a collection of dead animals—carcasses, stacked one on top of the other. Moose. Muskrats. Prairie chickens. No wonder he hadn't seen any game. A pile this wide, this high. He moved around it, inch by inch, methodically, patiently. He tried to think of what animal would do this. What animal would kill all this game? And keep it like this?

Crack. Snap. Rip.

The sound of bones breaking, flesh and tendons tearing. The source: a dark figure, squatting on two legs, working away at a large bone. In front of the figure lay another carcass. Victor could make it out in the clearing, with the northern lights shining overhead. Two legs. Two arms. Well, one and a half arms. The dark thing had the other half in its mouth.

“Upayokwitigo,” Victor breathed out, low enough that the creature didn't hear him, too intent on eating its prey.

He backed away, sliding each foot along the ground. Methodically. Patiently.

Snap!

A small twig under Victor's foot. He gasped.

The thing raised its head.

Victor fell backwards. He scrambled on his elbows and heels until his back hit a bush.

The thing moaned. It moved towards him.

“Awas! Awas!” Victor yelled.

It neared him. Growling. Hissing. It moved like water on its hands and feet.

“Move,” he whispered to himself.

It was at his feet now. He felt its saliva drip against his legs. The creature reached forward.

Victor clutched at the ground and dug his fingers into the dirt.

“Awas,” he whimpered. “Awas.”

The creature’s head jerked backward, then forward, and then it screamed.

Victor pushed back with his heels—into the bush, through the bush. The thing lunged at him and swiped wildly with one of its hands. He felt a rush of wind as it missed him by a hair. Victor scrambled to his feet, turned, and ran. He didn’t look back, even as the awful screams burst his eardrums. He shot his rifle into the air as he ran, again and again, trying to scare it away. He ran hard and fast for what felt like hours until he burst out of Blackwood’s tree line towards the only building that was lighted.

The Fish.

1

X MARKS THE SPOT

COLE COULDN'T REMEMBER A TIME WHEN Wounded Sky First Nation offered this brand of quiet. Not when he was a child, and not since he had returned to the community after ten years away. If he were to believe Choch, it was the calm before the storm. Cole was waiting for the storm, but it hadn't come. Yes, he had used his remaining anti-anxiety pills over the past week, but not because he'd encountered any stormy incidents like murder or a flu epidemic. Rather, he'd taken a pill upon his return to Ashley's trailer, for his friend's wake. The memory of Ashley being shot right in front of him had appeared, thick and fresh. He'd taken his last pill during the gathering for Alex, as guilt reared its head at Cole's inability to save her, and as her brother, Michael, sent a barrage of glares in his direction. Deserved glares, Cole had thought, not only because he was the last person to see her alive, but also because Alex had kissed him, and Michael knew it.

Deserved, but still not easy to take.

Cole hoped the stillness of the community was the quiet *after* the storm, not before. A collective sigh. A long breath out. Choch had been quiet, too. Cole hadn't heard from the spirit being since they'd met at the ruins, when he'd given Cole textbooks instead of a ticket home—and when he'd told Cole that school started Monday in Wounded Sky. This was the first clear direction the spirit being had ever provided. Of course, the calm—the non-spirit-being-related peace—could've simply been that it was early in the morning. Cole shrugged, as though involved in a deep conversation with somebody other than himself. A boy could dream, right?

Cole had a hockey stick resting against his shoulder, and a pair of skates fastened onto the stick, bouncing against his back with every step. He'd borrowed the hockey equipment from Brady, who had become something like his counselor, with Elder Mariah still recovering from the sickness at the clinic, and had remained something like his landlord as Cole continued to sleep at Brady's place. The skates fit about right, although there remained a legitimate concern as to whether they'd remain intact. Brady hadn't worn them for years, long enough that they had trouble finding them in his closet. "This is like an archaeological dig," Cole joked while they searched. The bigger problem? Brady was left-handed and Cole wasn't, never mind the fact that the stick was made of wood.

Cole knew where to find another stick, with the right curve for him, too. And another set of newer skates that may have fit better. But Cole couldn't bring himself to use Ashley's equipment, or to ask Brady if it would be okay, or to go back to the trailer. So, he made his way to the arena with Brady's skates and stick, and he didn't much care if the skates fit or if the stick had the wrong curve.

The sun began to rise over Blackwood Forest and the lights were on in the community hall. Cole felt drawn to it. Over the last week he kept an eye out for anything strange, a clue as to why he'd been told to stay here even though he'd stopped the murder spree and cured the virus. An influx of staff from Mihko Laboratories had definitely caught his attention. They were mostly at the clinic—descending upon it after those afflicted by the illness had become healthy (thanks to Cole's blood). But they were around the community, too—at the Fish, the mall, and the community hall, where they'd been sleeping and where the lights were on right now.

Cole took a slight detour. School didn't start for a while, and he wasn't in a rush. A security guard met him immediately upon his arrival at the community hall's front doors, and not one of Reynold's employees, either. No RMS—Reynold McCabe Security—anywhere on the man's clothing.

"Can I help you?" The man's warm greeting belied his presentation, dressed all in black and his body hard and sharp like he'd just come from working out. Like all he did was guard things and lift weights.

Cole tried to look over the man's considerable shoulders, but each try was thwarted as the guard tilted his body to obscure Cole's view. "I was just..." he started blankly, more concerned with assessing what he saw. But there wasn't much to assess. From his vantage point, all he could see were cots. Some of them were made crisply, and with precision. Others were still occupied: human-shaped mounds under blankets.

"You were just what?" the guard prompted.

"I'm just..." Cole moved Brady's hockey stick to his other shoulder and noticed the guard flinch "...wondering why you need to guard the hall? I can see why there's guards at the clinic and facility, I guess."

The guard looked around as though worried about company, and then he breathed in, and out, deeply. "You're Cole Harper, right?"

"Right." It failed to surprise Cole anymore when a stranger recognized him.

"Right," the guard nodded, "so you know what it's like to..." he searched for the right words "...lack trust."

Cole shrugged. "Sure."

"Yeah, you get it. So, Mihko, they have a history here...I'm sure you know that, Cole."

"You mean that huge lab accident that killed my dad? That history?"

"*That* history, yeah. So, they're not really popular here, and neither are you, right?"

"I'm slightly more popular now, if you haven't heard," Cole grumbled.

"Well, *they* haven't had any public meltdowns or anything since they've come. So, we'll call it even, how about that?"

"I guess there was the clinic..." Cole grimaced at the memory of the community turning on him, turning into an angry shouting mob and blaming him for the deaths and murders only because he'd come back to the community "...and the quarry." *The quarry*. Yet another reason for Michael to glare at him. Cole had knocked Michael out right after he'd found out Cole had walked Alex home and Alex had kissed him.

“They’re trying to build trust,” the guard said, “coming here to help after all that’s happened. The murders, the sickness...”

“Yeah, I’m kind of more popular because I *stopped* those murders.”

“...but until they have that trust, if they need guys like me to make sure they can help without interruption or interference, well...” the guard half-grinned.

“What are they worried about? Somebody’s going to come and do something in their sleep? Do you think we practise, like, guerilla warfare or something?”

“They had pitchforks out for *you*, didn’t they?”

“That was different, and I didn’t cause a huge, like, epidemic chemical leak or whatever the hell happened down there at the facility!”

“That’s kind of my point, bud.”

“Nobody would’ve done anything to me, and nobody’s going to do anything to them, so what’s the deal?”

Cole moved towards the front door, but the guard pushed him back, one hand to Cole’s chest. “Kid, I’m losing my patience.”

“Anybody in *my* community is perfectly entitled to ask questions of our guests,” Reynold McCabe said from behind Cole. “You’d do well to humour the boy.”

Cole’s heart skipped a beat. Choch, the friendly neighbourhood spirit being, typically was the one to appear out of nowhere. The last time Reynold McCabe snuck up like this, he’d held a gun to Cole’s head, accused him of murdering Maggie and, by extension, Alex and Ashley. Reynold had knocked Cole on the back of the head and had him arrested for murder. Cole didn’t turn around, but he watched the guard’s face reluctantly soften. Then, Reynold stepped around Cole and faced him and the guard, shifting glances from one to the other.

“That clear?” Reynold asked.

“Yes,” the guard said through his teeth, “crystal.”

Reynold looked disheveled. Cole had only ever seen him completely put together—slick hair tied back into a braid, ironed shirts, sport coats, and crisp new jeans. *Weird*. Now his hair was loose, uncombed, and falling over his shoulders like broken cobwebs. His

shirt and pants were scrubbed with dirt and covered in grass stains. He smelled, too. Like an old, neglected hockey bag. Sweat and mould. Reynold must've noticed Cole giving him a good inspection because he buttoned up his shirt quickly and tied his hair back into a ponytail.

"You okay, Mr. McCabe?" Cole asked him.

"I'm fine, Cole, although I appreciate your concern. That's how it should be here. We should be concerned for each other." Reynold kept working at his pony tail, smoothing it back as best he could. Cole and the guard waited, and watched, and both of them exchanged curious glances about the acting Chief of Wounded Sky First Nation. Reynold continued: "Anything that happened in the past, happened for the same reason, you understand."

"I understand, sure," Cole said.

"Now," Reynold looked at the guard, and Cole watched as the big hulk of a man seemed to shrink before Cole's eyes, "there won't be any more problems, will there?"

"No, sir," the guard said.

Cole looked back and forth between the guard and Reynold. Each time he looked at Reynold, he looked him over, head to foot, and everything about this exchange made Cole want to leave *now*. Forget whatever weird stuff was going on in the hall. It had nothing on this.

"Good," Reynold said after both men had not said anything for an uncomfortably long silence, just stared at each other. "Cole," Reynold nodded.

"Mr. McCabe," Cole echoed the same goodbye.

Reynold tucked his dress shirt into his pants, then walked away like this had been a typical exchange.

Cole kept standing there, but now it was supremely awkward. No eye contact with the guard either. He almost felt bad for the guy—who'd gone from authoritative to meek in no time. A couple of seconds passed before the guard cleared his throat. "So you're going skating this morning or..."

"Right, yeah." Cole lifted the stick for a moment, and then rested it back against his shoulder.

“Maybe you should do that, then.”

“Yeah, maybe I should.”

Cole tried to shake off the last several minutes as he continued on his way to the X. He felt that if he thought about it too much, Choch might pop into his head. Moments like this were the perfect mental conditions for Choch. *Oh, CB's confused about something? Weirderd out? Let me make that worse.* But Choch remained silent, as he had been. Silent and, well, just plain absent. He hadn't been working at the Fish, being the world's worst and most annoying server and making up food specials that didn't exist. Jayne, his half-burning ghost companion, hadn't been around either. He stopped short of calling either of them and walked alone with only his thoughts to keep him company.

Cole stopped out in front of the rink where he dropped his anxiety medication last week. He crouched down and sifted his fingers through the dirt, as though the pills might still be there. Bits of grass and small pebbles fooled him for a split second, but none were his tiny white tablets. The crisp, cool rain Wounded Sky's autumn season offered had long since dissolved the pills. Cole stood up and hovered over the same spot, looking down, imagining himself from a week ago, kneeling in front of the pills, contemplating whether to gather them up or not. He hadn't been desperate enough then.

The lobby was silent and devoid of the familiar litter. No popcorn kernels. No spilled and sticky soft drinks. No drink lids, straws, or candy wrappers. While the quiet was nice, the cleanliness seemed wrong, like it wasn't a hockey rink lobby without the snacks half in mouths and half on the floor. For the last two Saturdays the hockey game had been cancelled. Cole had heard these were the first Saturdays without a hockey game for as long as anybody could remember.

Snap!

A hockey puck hitting the boards grabbed Cole's attention. He walked across the lobby and pushed the doors open to find Tristan skating by himself on the far side of the ice. Tristan had a bunch of pucks lined up and was shooting them. Cole could hardly see each puck make its way from Tristan's stick to the net.

“Whoa,” Cole whispered to himself. As strong as he was, he’d never be able to shoot a puck that hard. More than just muscles, shooting took balance, skill, and coordination (and also, for Cole, a right-handed stick). He’d been prepared to suck when he decided to go to the X this morning because he didn’t expect anybody to be there. It would be just him and the ice. Now, he had a mind to turn around and leave. Looking like an idiot in front of Tristan had not been in the plan.

But he had run away enough. So he sat down, unnoticed, in the front row of stands and put on skates for the first time in ten years. Cole felt seven years old. He had trouble, as he did then, putting the skates on. He manoeuvred his feet to sneak them inside the boot, jiggled them, and pounded his heel into the rubber mat—all things that his mom and dad used to do. When he finally got them on, he tied the laces tight. His dad used to say, “The skates fit when you can’t feel your toes.” Cole pulled the laces so hard that his knuckles turned white, got them as tight as he could.

Cole stood up. The skates felt like high heels. His ankles bent from side to side, and he couldn’t find his balance. He clutched Brady’s stick in his hands and used it as a cane from the stands to the gate. Tristan still hadn’t noticed him. Cole stood at the gate for a moment, his breath fogging up the glass, and he watched Tristan take a few more shots before unlatching the gate and pulling it open. The clack of the latch thrusting down, and the squeal of the gate opening caused Tristan to stop mid-shot. He turned around just as Cole stepped onto the ice, in time to see him almost fall right on his ass, saved only by a desperate reach for the boards.

Tristan skated over as Cole attempted to steady himself without the help of the boards, and wondered if Brady’s skates were super dull, if he hadn’t tied them tight enough, or if he’d really gotten that bad.

Tristan snowed his pants with an aggressive hockey stop. “What are you doing here?” He tapped Cole’s stick with his own. Judging by Tristan’s face, it wasn’t a playful tap.

“Skating?” Cole tried not to sound sarcastic.

Tristan looked down at Cole’s skates, moving back and forth as he tried to keep his balance. “How’s that working out for you?”

Cole shrugged. "It's not like riding a bike."

"This is the last place I expected to see you, Harper."

"It's probably the last place I thought I'd be, too. But, you know, if I'm going to be here, I figured I might as well do as the Romans do, right?"

"The what?"

"When in Rome?"

Tristan shoved Cole, hand to upper chest. Cole's back slammed against the glass. He barely kept his balance.

"You know where I *thought* I'd see you?"

"No." Cole pushed himself off the boards even as Tristan skated closer to him, the toes of his skates pushed up against the toes of Cole's.

"At Maggie's wake. That's where." Tristan's eyes started to well up. "I know you went to Alex's. I know you went to Ashley's. But Maggie's? AWOL." He wiped at his eyes before any tears could fall.

Cole didn't know what to say. He knew he should've gone. He'd run out of meds by then, and he didn't want to risk having another panic attack. Tristan didn't need to hear that and he wouldn't have wanted to hear it. It was selfish. "It was just, I don't know...one too many. I'm sorry."

Tristan lunged forward, put his forearm against Cole's throat, and pressed him against the glass. The tears were back then, and they fell freely. "That must've been really goddamn inconvenient for you."

Tristan had trouble getting the words out, trying not to sob. Cole could hear little hiccups when he talked. Cole tried to say something, but he had trouble speaking, too. His problem, however, was Tristan's forearm pressed against his neck.

"I can't believe Maggie would go and get murdered like that and make things so hard on you."

Cole tried not to slip into an even worse position. He turned one foot sideways so that the blade was stuck against the ice.

"Not so tough without your friends around, are you?"

Cole tried to choke out some words, but he failed. Finally, he reached his hand around Tristan's forearm and pulled it down, away

from his neck. He caught his breath. "I...just don't want to...hurt anybody else."

"I'm right here. Take a shot."

Cole shook his head in response. He could have knocked Tristan all the way across the ice. But where had hurting Mark got him? Or Michael? More scrutiny, more unwanted attention, suspicion. He slipped out of Tristan's grasp and held himself up against the opened gate to prevent a nasty fall.

"What, you're just going to leave?" Tristan wiped the tears away from his eyes, from his cheeks. He cleared his throat and stiffened his face.

"Yeah, I'm just going to leave." Cole stepped off the ice. "I'm sorry about Maggie. I should've come. You're right."

"Yeah, well..." Tristan sounded unprepared to deal with Cole's admission. A long silence followed before he continued "...just don't bother coming back here when I'm around, okay?"

"Don't worry," Cole said as he sat down on the front row and started to untie Brady's skates, "I won't."

Tristan slammed the gate shut. Cole watched as he skated to the other end of the rink, and took a slapshot in stride. The puck clanged off the post, and the sound reverberated through the rink. Cole was quite certain he wouldn't come back here to skate, even with Tristan absent.

He checked the time on his phone. Time for school. The first day back since classes had been cancelled following all the chaos.

Cole pulled off his skates and slipped them back onto Brady's hockey stick. He stood up and shook his head at the thought he'd had last night, that getting back on the ice would help him fit in. School was the important thing, he decided. Fit in there? Golden. And after his encounter with Tristan, it could only get better from here.

2

MR. 87%

COLE HAD BEEN AT HIS ASSIGNED LOCKER for an uncomfortably long time, fumbling to get the lock open, hitting each of the three numbers as precisely as he could, attempt after attempt. His frustration rose each time he tugged the lock and was met with resistance. Finally, Cole looked around to ensure the coast was clear, and then he broke the lock open. He didn't have anything worth stealing anyway.

"Hey, Cole."

A jolt ran through his body. He still had the broken lock in his hand. He shoved it into his pocket.

"Stuck around in this shithole, hey?" Lucy—Cole was eighty-seven percent certain that was her name—leaned against the locker next to his. "Thought you'd be long gone after what went down."

Cole opened his locker, but he didn't actually put anything inside it. "I didn't really have a choice." He stood there, staring at the empty metal space until the locker began to shut and he had to move out of the way. Lucy closed the locker and leaned a bit closer to him.

"Speak up, boy. I can hardly hear you."

Boy, Cole repeated in his head. At least it didn't have *city* attached to the front. "I said I had to stay." Cole backed away a step. She looked him over, and he did the same. He tried to remember her. He had a certainty about her name now. She'd been almost too perfectly pretty before, and had remained pretty. Soft, like she'd been drawn with pastels. Soft, but somehow hard. In how she carried herself, how she

talked. She'd taken to wearing blue contact lenses now. They looked Photoshopped.

"I would've left if I were you, Cole." She hugged her books against her chest and slid one leg up, resting a heel against the bottom of his locker. "Would've gotten right the hell out of here."

"Like I said, I didn't really have a choice, so..." Cole looked around for help, but all the faces passing by weren't showing the interest that Lucy was. Not a flirty interest, really, although Cole wasn't sure what that would feel like. He'd never engaged that much with kids, girls in particular, back in Winnipeg. He'd stuck mostly to Joe and the rest of his basketball teammates.

"I've gotta tell you, it's pretty goddamn refreshing that you're, like, this awkward, quiet kid. Doing what you did, being a big 'hero' and all," she air-quoted when she said the word *hero*, "you could have the run of the place."

"I'm just trying to stay out of the way," Cole said.

"Do your time, that sort of shit?" Lucy said.

"Yeah."

"Or is it," she pushed off from the locker with her foot, and got close enough to Cole that he had a vision of an anti-anxiety pill, "just me?"

Cole tried to even his breath out. "Wh-why would it be you?"

"Because you're pretty good at shouting at crowds."

"Only when they shout first."

She got closer. He tried to back away farther, but the stream of kids heading to first class was an impenetrable wall. "Can you—"

"It's because of my dad, though, really."

"Your dad?" Cole still had no memories of Lucy.

"You serious right now? *My dad.*"

"Ummm..." Cole was trying to collect his thoughts, but they were like shards of glass scattered across a floor "...I'm serious, it's just that..."

"Oh shit, you *really* don't know." She put her hand on his shoulder. "I just figured since I remember you, that you'd remember me. Or do you think I'm not memorable or something?"

“No, you are,” Cole said, “I just didn’t remember who your dad was...is...”

She squeezed his shoulder, then finally let go. “Well, now you do. Calm down, us McCabes don’t bite. Much.”

“Lucy McCabe,” he breathed.

“Lucy McCabe,” she mimicked with a whisper, like she was telling a ghost story.

“I knew that.”

“Ha, okaaaaay,” she raised a sarcastic thumb. “So, going to math?”

“Math?” Choch had given Cole textbooks, but not a class schedule. But if Lucy had math, would he, too? She’d been a grade behind.

“First class,” she said.

“I uhhh...” he saw Brady and Eva at their lockers, just a few down from his, putting their backpacks in, getting their textbooks out. His nerves calmed instantly. “Excuse me, Lucy. Sorry.” He motioned towards his friends.

“Right, the other members of the Bloodhound Gang, got it.” Lucy backed off. “See you around, Cole.”

When she was gone, Cole took a breath and approached Eva and Brady.

“What was that all about?” Brady asked.

“You saw and you didn’t do anything?” Cole asked. “I was literally on my heels.”

“You’re a big boy, Cole,” Eva said.

“Some of these things, you’re going to have to figure out for yourself, my friend, okay?” Brady said.

“Yeah, I guess,” Cole said, and wanted to drop it. He felt like Eva, and in particular Brady, wanted him to drop it, but added, “She’s just *there*, you know?”

“The point is, if you’re sticking around Wounded Sky,” Brady said, “and both Eva and I are glad to have you, don’t get me wrong, you’re going to have to deal with some things without us.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I feel totally useless sometimes,” Cole said.

EPILOGUE

THE CEMETERY GATE CREAKED AS EVA PUSHED IT OPEN. She walked slowly, procrastinating. She hadn't been there since the funeral, if you could call it that. What would you call a service where seven people show up? Lauren Flett, Pam, Mr. Chochinov, her dad (and an accompanying doctor, which Eva didn't count), Cole's kókom, Cole's auntie, and herself. Everybody else thought he was an arsonist. The last straw had been the X burning down. There'd been no question, to the RCMP, that Cole had done that too. After all, his body had been found in the building's ashes. Jerry and Lauren concluded that the building had burned faster than Cole expected, and he couldn't get out in time.

Bullshit.

Eva knew it was bullshit, but nobody listened to her.

She meandered through the cemetery. Walked by almost every grave she could on the way to Cole's. If she didn't see his grave, she could pretend he was alive. But she knew he was dead. She knew, as well, because of what she'd seen, that he was somehow...not. Not alive, not dead. She didn't need a math tutor, she needed an afterlife tutor.

She wanted him to burn his name onto her forearm.

Getting to his grave was inevitable. When she was there, standing in front of it, she saw that she wasn't the only one who'd been there. There were words spray painted and Sharpied all over it. BURN. GOOD RIDDANCE. MONSTER. She would come back again. She would come back and wash it all away, no matter how long it took. And if they came again, wrote words on Cole's grave again, she would wash it all off.

Again.

She reached into her pocket as she stepped forward, and took out a plastic bag full of tobacco. She pulled out a pinch and spread it on the ground. Then she knelt down, knees against the dirt, and touched the grave. It was cold, hard.

She closed her eyes.

“I miss you.” She clutched the sweetgrass ring dangling from her neck. “I keep imagining that you’re just in Winnipeg again, and you’re not calling me. And it’s okay that you’re not,” she started to cry, “I’m not mad that you’re not. I just want you to come back. Please come back. I need you back.”

“Ahem.”

Eva opened her eyes. There was a coyote sitting next to her, looking at her with its head tilted sadly to the side.

She tried to say something to it. She swore that it had just cleared its throat. She stared at it until it looked away from her, and it nodded towards Cole’s final resting place.

“You know,” the coyote said, “I can help you with that.”

To be concluded...

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SECOND STORIES IN TRILOGIES ARE TOUGH. There's no beginning, and no end. You're asking the reader to have a lot of faith in you, and the story you're trying to tell. In this way, *Monsters* is the scariest book I've written. The title is *apropos*. I hope the story is scary for you as well, but in a different way.

As always, I want to thank my wife and kids for the sacrifices they make that enable me to do my work. My wife is a true superhero. Keeping it in the family, I want to thank my parents: My mom for her unwavering, decades-long support, and my father, for his wisdom, guidance, and for lending me a couple books on the 'W' word, so I could get it right. As much as this is an Indigenous supernatural mystery, it's imperative I am culturally appropriate and sensitive. In that vein, I want to thank Warren Cariou, my mentor and friend, for reading the book and giving me feedback. I listened to you (mostly). Finally, thanks to my editor, Desirae Warkentin, for the work she put in to ensure my story was the best that it could be. And, you know, as a writer, you never think it's done, so thanks Dee for telling me when to stop.

I want to end by acknowledging somebody out there who might be reading this. At its heart, this book is about the monster of anxiety. I live through it, in my body and my mind. Many do. Sometimes, we think we're alone, that nobody could possibly know what we're going through, and there's nothing we can do to get through it. I've been there. I've found that it helps to know that you are not alone, to

share your story, and to hear others' stories. To do things that your anxiety tells you are impossible. Getting out of bed. Writing a book. Even though we might feel weak, we are not.

We are strong.

Ekosani, Dave

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES IN

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PROLOGUE

“LUCY!”

Reynold had managed to open the front door, but he struggled now. He had one hand pressed against his chest, trying to stem the flow of blood from the bullet wound. His other hand was sliding against the wall, keeping him upright.

“Lucy!”

He finally made it to the living room, then fell forward, tumbling onto the couch. He heard footsteps scrambling above, on the second floor. They rushed down the stairs, as Reynold’s vision started to fade.

He gasped for air.

“What the hell happened to the walls?” Lucy ran into the living room just as he felt consciousness slip away. “Dad?”

“UNNNH.”

Reynold tried to sit up, but there was too much pain, and his head collapsed onto the couch’s armrest. His eyes blinked open to find Lucy perched on the edge of the coffee table, as far away from him as she could possibly sit. She stared at him with grave concern, and something else. Fear. He patted around at his chest and felt it bandaged.

“Thanks, my girl.”

She didn’t respond. She had her arms crossed and was furiously chewing at a fingernail.

“Cole Harper shot me in the chest, Lucy. If you’re wondering—”

“No,” Lucy shook her head vigorously, “no, that’s not it. Your goddamn blood is blue!”

“My...” Reynold looked at the bandages, and saw splotches of blue seeping through them “...blood?”

Lucy covered her face with both hands, and her body started to shake. Reynold watched her, unsure what to say, unsure what to think. When she’d calmed enough, she lowered her hands. “And it’s cold. Your blood, it’s...it’s like ice.” She stood up and backed away, until her calves hit a dining room chair, and sat down there. “Why is it like that?”

“Lucy...”

“Are you sick?” she asked. “Tell me!”

Reynold did sit up now, back against the arm of the couch. *Blue, ice-cold blood*, she’d said. But there was something else. “I’m not sick,” he said calmly.

“Then *what?* If I were Cole, I would’ve shot you too!”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re—” Lucy looked ready to vomit, her face drained of colour. Somebody knocked at the front door. She jumped at the sound, almost fell off the chair. Looked at her dad for direction.

She was still his girl, he thought. Even now.

The knock came again.

“Answer it,” Reynold said.

“But...” she started to say.

“Do it.”

She left the room, almost in a trance. The front door opened. Lucy screamed and ran back into the living room.

“What...the...fu—”

A person in a hazmat suit walked into the living room.

“—what is happening! Who the hell are you?!”

Lucy stumbled backwards against a bookshelf. Reynold was unfazed. The man walked around the couch, then dropped a gun onto the coffee table.

“Lucy,” Reynold said, “would you excuse us, please?”

Lucy didn't say a word. She walked away, keeping her eyes on the suited figure. Reynold, staring at the man as well, listened for Lucy's footsteps up the stairs, down the second-floor hallway, and into her bedroom. A door slammed.

Alone now, Reynold's gaze fell to the gun on the coffee table. He picked it up and rested it on his chest.

"Please don't be so dramatic as to damage my furniture," he said.

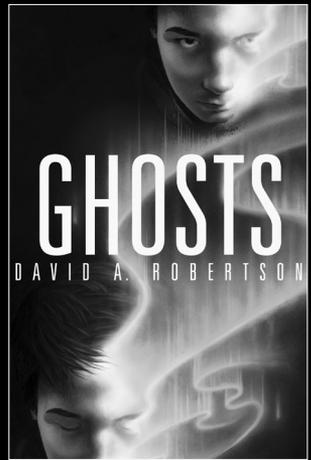
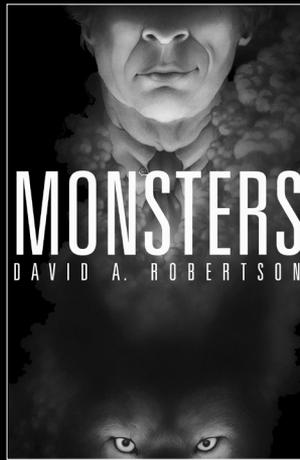
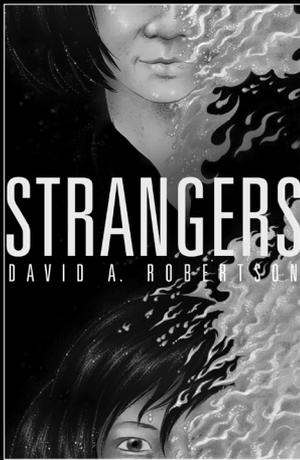
A thick silence fell over them as they stared at each other.

Finally, Reynold asked, "Is it done?"

"Yeah. It's done."

THE RECKONER TRILOGY

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—The Horn Book

...a truly original superhero. Recommended

—School Library Connection

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DAVID A. ROBERTSON is an award-winning writer. His books include *When We Were Alone* (Governor General's Award-winner), *Will I See?* (winner Manuela Dias Book Design and Illustration Award), and the YA novel *Strangers* (Michael

Van Rooy Award). David educates as well as entertains through his writings about Indigenous Peoples in Canada, illuminating their cultures, histories, communities, and relevant contemporary issues. David is a member of Norway House Cree Nation.

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PRESS 

Monsters expands on the world and mystery Robertson established in Strangers, while somehow offering a more intimate, and affecting, portrait of mental health in Cole Harper's origin story. But the real treat here is, once again, Choch, who jumps off the page and is literally the best character ever written in the history of Young Adult Indigenous Supernatural Mystery.

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