A movie poster for the film 'Ghosts'. The background is a dark, moody image of a young man's face, split horizontally. The top half shows his eyes open and looking intensely forward, while the bottom half shows his eyes closed. A vibrant green, ethereal energy flows across the scene, appearing as glowing, wavy lines and a bright, circular aura around the man's head. The title 'GHOSTS' is written in large, bold, yellow-orange capital letters across the center. Below the title, the name 'DAVID A. ROBERTSON' is written in smaller, white, spaced-out capital letters.

GHOSTS

DAVID A. ROBERTSON

GHOSTS

Mysterious murders, shadowy figures, and high school. Life can be hard; death can be harder.

COLE HARPER is dead. Reynold McCabe is alive and free. Mihko Laboratories has reopened the research facility and is working to manufacture and weaponize the illness that previously plagued Wounded Sky. People are missing. The community has been quarantined. What deal did Eva strike with Choch? Who will defeat Reynold and Mihko? Time is running out.

Ghosts is the final novel in The Reckoner trilogy.

GHOSTS

ALSO BY DAVID A. ROBERTSON

THE RECKONER TRILOGY

Strangers

Monsters

Ghosts

GRAPHIC NOVELS

Will I See?

Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story

7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga

Tales from Big Spirit series

Sugar Falls

FOR CHILDREN

When We Were Alone

NOVELS

The Evolution of Alice

THE RECKONER BOOK THREE

GHOSTS

DAVID A. ROBERTSON



HIGHWATER
PRESS

The logo for Highwater Press features a stylized, cursive lowercase 'h' with a wavy, horizontal line extending from its base, resembling a wave or a signature. Below this graphic, the words 'HIGHWATER' and 'PRESS' are stacked in a clean, uppercase, sans-serif font.

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Canada Council
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Conseil des Arts
du Canada

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien.

HighWater Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Province of Manitoba through the Department of Sport, Culture and Heritage and the Manitoba Book Publishing Tax Credit, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF), for our publishing activities.

HighWater Press is an imprint of Portage & Main Press.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Design by Relish New Brand Experience

Cover Art by Peter Diamond

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Robertson, David, 1977-, author

Ghosts / David A. Robertson.

(The reckoner)

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55379-762-3 (softcover).--ISBN 978-1-55379-763-0

(EPUB).--ISBN 978-1-55379-808-8 (MOBI).--ISBN 978-1-55379-764-7 (PDF)

I. Title.

PS8585.O32115G56 2019

jC813'.6

C2018-906644-X

C2018-906643-1

22 21 20 19

1 2 3 4 5



www.highwaterpress.com

Winnipeg, Manitoba

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FOR ANYONE WHO NEEDS TO SEE THEMSELVES IN A BOOK,
AND ANYONE WHO NEEDS TO SEE SOMEBODY ELSE.

PROLOGUE

“LUCY!”

Reynold fumbled with the door. His hand was so weak and slippery from blood that he couldn't grip the handle, and he ended up having to use both hands to turn it. The latch bolt released, the door swung open, and he stumbled inside, bracing himself against the wall to stay upright. He inched forward, sliding his feet against the floor, sliding his hand against the wall, pressing his other hand against his chest to stem the flow of blood from the bullet wound.

“Lucy!”

Reynold made it to the living room, but then fell forward onto the couch. Footsteps scrambled above, on the second floor. They rushed down the stairs, as Reynold began to see black spots through already blurred vision. His chest was on fire, and each breath was shorter than the last, like his lungs were too full of blood to take in any 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 possible. She watched 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 shook. Reynold watched her, unsure what to say to his daughter. What could he say? How would she ever understand what he'd become? The hunger. The rage. He said nothing. When she calmed down, 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. “Why is it like that? Are you cold? You feel cold to me. You feel cold like your blood. I—”

“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. Someone knocked on the front door. She jumped at the sound, almost fell off the chair. She looked at her dad for direction.

You're still my 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. Reynold listened. Lucy opened the front door. There was a moment, a split second, of silence.

Then Lucy screamed. She ran back into the living room.

“What...the...fu—” Lucy stumbled back against a bookshelf.

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

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

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 listened for her 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.

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

“Is it done?” Reynold asked.

“Yeah. It’s done.”

1

INVOCATION

FIVE EMPTY TIN CANS WERE LINED UP BIGGEST to smallest, easiest to hardest, across two large rocks. Just the way Eva liked them—when she was a kid and now. She pictured Cole standing in front of the rocks, looking at her, making sure that he'd lined them up perfectly. She pictured Cole looking at her the way that he used to look at her, no matter what emotion was running through his body, no matter how panicked he was, no matter how tired, no matter how lost. It made her feel, then and now, that she was the one place of calm for him. Standing twenty feet away from the cans, rolling the sweetgrass ring he had made for her between her fingertips, she could picture him just the way he was the last time she had seen him alive.

“Are you paying attention?” Eva asked.

Cole was standing beside her, watching intently. “Yeah.”

“This is called the Fighting Stance.” She aimed her dad’s gun at the first, largest tin can, and positioned her body just like her dad had taught her.

“That’s exactly how I was aiming,” Cole said.

“No,” she laughed, “it’s not.”

She took aim. Squeezed her index finger against the trigger. Pop. The can flipped into the air, end over end like a punted football, and landed on the ground.

“Okay, maybe that’s not exactly how I was aiming,” Cole said.

“Not exactly.” Eva aimed at the second can. Breathed out slowly. Squeezed her index finger against the trigger.

“Eva!” Cole shouted from a distance.

Too far away. He was running towards her from the gravel road, from the cemetery. The gate to the cemetery was open. He was running so fast that his body blurred.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “I’m standing here, you don’t have to run!”

“Shoot!”

She saw it. The monster chasing him. Towering over him. Emaciated, but powerful. Faster. Its red eyes burning into hers. It gained on Cole with each step.

Eva turned her body and aimed at the monster. She got into the Fighting Stance and squeezed the trigger, but her hands were shaking. The bullet missed. Missed such a big target. Right there in front of her. Right behind Cole. The monster reached out, grabbed Cole, and picked him up.

She took another shot, but only grazed its shoulder.

Cole screamed. “Eva!”

He screamed again, in pain, while the monster tore him apart.

“No!” A coffee mug—half empty, ice cold—plummeted from the nightstand onto the cold floor, erupting into shards of ceramic and black liquid. Eva almost fell off the bed too, but ended up half on and half off, staring at the mess.

“Shit.”

The same dream. The same nightmare. And still, she wasn’t used to it. Would she ever get used to it? No. She shook her head. She hadn’t stopped missing Cole when he moved to Winnipeg. Now, he was gone. Not like in the dream, but no less horrific. Trapped in a fire he set at the X. That’s what Mihko had said anyway. That’s what Wounded Sky First Nation believed, too, except for a handful of people who knew Cole wasn’t the monster Mihko made him out to be, as though the real monster wasn’t quite as bad as a seventeen-year-old kid. Of course, nobody had seen the real monster since Cole had died. Nobody knew that the monster was gone—that Reynold was gone—because of

Cole. And Cole had to have been right about Reynold being the monster; they didn't both go missing at the same time coincidentally. Eva might've needed tutoring in math, but that was a simple equation.

"Chief Reynold McCabe." Eva looked away from the broken mug and spilled coffee, and stared at the ceiling. The same people who believed Cole was an arsonist, that he'd died, ironically, in a fire he started? They believed Reynold was still alive and running Wounded Sky from the reserve's own Fort Knox: the McCabe residence. It was all *actual* fake news.

Eva rolled the sweetgrass ring between her fingertips, dizzy with memories. She took a deep breath and got out of bed. She wiped up the coffee and picked every last piece of broken ceramic off the floor. She found herself taking her time with this last task. It reminded her of the night she and Cole had almost kissed. She had picked shards of glass off the floor that night, too. She could easily picture Cole standing in the kitchen while she dumped the broken glass into the garbage, both of them still flustered. She'd told him the kiss would have been a mistake, but now she wished they had made that mistake. Ignored the rock crashing into her living room. She would have placed her hands firmly against his cheeks, and pressed her lips against his. If she had known then what she knew now.

That he'd be dead, and she'd be left waiting for a miracle.

Eva finished picking up the broken pieces of ceramic, tossed them into the garbage. She made herself a fresh cup of strong, black coffee. She sipped at it furiously while trying, over and over, to text Brady, like each time she tried, the text might go through. But she knew it wouldn't. Mihko and the absent Chief McCabe had cut off Wounded Sky's cell service two weeks ago.

She had no idea what was going on with Brady, if he was still okay. And the outside world had no idea what was going on in Wounded Sky First Nation. Cole had told her that according to his friend Joe, the murder spree and the flu epidemic had never made the news, and certainly the monster and the string of fires hadn't either. Not to mention the full-on quarantine. Eva wanted to check on Brady, to make the trek to Elder Mariah's cabin deep in Blackwood Forest, but she couldn't.

Mihko's hired security force, which included some of Reynold's people, had a perimeter around the community, stationed at strategic points within the forest to keep people from coming into Wounded Sky and, more importantly, to keep anyone from leaving. It made the curfew irrelevant.

Where would anybody go?

Eva finished her coffee and left the house. She wanted to try to see her father at the clinic again. Lately, her days had become as familiar to her as the nightmare. She would wake up alone, eat alone, try to visit her father at the clinic and get turned away, check on Cole's grandmother and auntie, and then, when the day was almost over, visit Cole. Visit Cole, and hope that there was nobody there to visit at all. But he was always there, his headstone always defaced, and she was always left with a sunken feeling in her chest. More than once over the last month, she'd reminded herself of what it was to do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result. But still, she was unwavering. And why? Because a little talking coyote had promised her that he'd help her out.

Since then, he'd gone AWOL.

She kept replaying that moment, almost a month ago now, to see if she'd missed something.

"Please come back. I need you back," she said, standing in front of Cole's headstone.

"You know." A coyote appeared out of nowhere by her side. "I can help you with that."

"Did you just—"

"Yes, yes, yes." He sounded exasperated, but also amused. "I just talked, so can we please skip over all the stunned disbelief nonsense? After all, you'll come to the same conclusion: you are not dreaming, I am really here, and, come on, is this the strangest thing that's happened in Wounded Sky over the last few weeks?"

"It's up there." Eva reached forward to poke the coyote.

"If you're going to touch me to see if I'm a figment of your imagination," the coyote said, "could you at least scratch behind my ear? That's

my most favourite spot. My leg starts to kick involuntarily from the sensation. It's just so fun. And pleasurable."

"Never mind." She withdrew her hand.

"Sooooooooo..."

Eva stared at the headstone. "Can you really bring him back...?"

"Oh, I can, dear one," the coyote said quickly. "Absotively. Positutely. Hmm...I'm trying to combine absolutely and positively, but it's not quite working. Also, it's probably redundant."

"The novelty of a talking coyote is quickly wearing off."

"It's just, if you want something from me, well, tit for tat, you know? I scratch your back, you scratch mine. Quid pro quo. A favour for a—"

"Okay! Yes. Just tell me what I have to do." She glanced at Cole's name chiselled into stone, and tried not to read all the vitriol community members had written about him. "Please. I want him back."

"Sigh...puppy love. I've always loved you two. You're so very Jack and Kate. (You watch Lost right?) People are just dying to see you together, you know?"

"People are what?"

"Never mind," the coyote said. "But, as for the whole reciprocity talk, let's just say you owe me one. TBD. To Be Determined. Deal?"

"Deal."

Deal. The word echoed in Eva's mind as she walked through the brisk chill of Wounded Sky's autumn morning, the frosted grass crunching underfoot. As the weeks passed, she'd started to believe that even though the coyote had said she wasn't dreaming, she actually had been. So desperately sad about losing Cole, she'd imagined a way that he might come back, just to make her feel better for a little while. The anxiety Cole had told her about, how it ravaged his body with horrible sensations, made her realize just how powerful the mind could be. Why couldn't she have concocted a talking coyote, a trickster spirit? Maybe not the one she'd been taught about in her community, but a trickster spirit nonetheless.

Each night, when she went to the cemetery to visit Cole's grave, she recited the same invocation, hoping to bring the coyote back, so she

could be sure that she hadn't been imagining it, so she could believe Cole would return from the dead, that he wasn't gone, that he could finish the job he'd always talked about having here.

Because Creator knew just how bad things had gotten.

"Please be real," she whispered, staring at the headstone, glancing to her side every few moments to see if the spirit being had returned. "Please bring him home, make him live. Please. I'll do anything."

But, tonight, just like every other night, there was no response.

2

LIVE WITH THIS

“EVA!”

Despite the urgency in Michael's voice, Eva did not break stride. She kept walking towards the clinic, and now she couldn't get there fast enough.

“Wait up!”

“I'm busy!” Eva spat back, without turning around. Eyes forward, towards the clinic, which was now visible against the backdrop of Blackwood Forest.

“Can't I just walk with you?” Michael asked.

She could hear him coming closer, jogging towards her, even though she'd picked up the pace. She considered running away, but it seemed too emotional, like she still had feelings for him. So she stopped and let him catch up to her.

“What is it, Mike?”

“I just...” But he couldn't find the words and ended up just looking at the frosted grass, shimmering in the morning sun, as though he'd dropped what he wanted to say somewhere. Like his words were a lost contact lens.

“You haven't talked to me for a month, and now you, what, wait for me to leave the house and run after me? Were you standing outside my place spying on me or something? How creepy is that?”

“I just...”

“*You just?*” Eva crossed her arms. “You came up with this elaborate plan to talk to me, and you've got two words to say?”

“Eva, please.”

“Were you hoping that I’d still have glass splinters in my feet, so I’d be easy to catch? Were you waiting for me in the same spot as when you were watching Cole and me?”

“We were dating! Of course, I was jealous. You were...” He stopped and sighed. Closed his eyes and rubbed them furiously. Scolding himself. “I’m sorry, okay? This isn’t about that. I can’t believe I even did that. I was angry. I...”

“So what’s it about then?” She tried to sound less confrontational. He looked meek. Sad. Like he hadn’t slept for days. There were bags under his eyes and he was pale and disheveled. Not the Michael she’d known her whole life. “Are you okay?”

He chuckled weakly. “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

Eva ran her hands through her hair and tied it back into a ponytail. She didn’t want to look as bad as him, even if she felt it, even if it was for different reasons. “I’m fine, Michael,” she said. “I’m doing fine.”

“I keep thinking...” Michael stared off into the forest for a minute before he cleared his throat, tried to look at her, but didn’t really. “Cole died thinking I hated him, that everybody hated him. I keep thinking about how he died like that.”

“So are you asking how I am, or how he was?” She glanced at the clinic. Wanted to be there, not here. “It’s a little late for that.”

“I don’t know, Eva. I’m confused. I just...” He shoved his hands in his pockets and a tear slid down his cheek. Eva pretended not to notice. “I wish things were different. I wish things had happened differently. That’s all.”

“Mike, if you’re looking for absolution because of how you treated him, because of throwing a stupid rock through my—”

“No, it’s not that. I swear it’s not.”

“Good, because if this is about some stupid love triangle, I’m going to lose my shit.” She straightened, looked him in the eyes, even though he would not look into hers. “If you’re looking for absolution, for whatever reason, I don’t think it matters anymore. Cole had more important things on his mind. More important than you,” she pushed her

index finger gently into Michael's chest, then pointed it back at herself, "and more important than me."

"I wish things were different." He met her eyes, tight-lipped, and nodded. He looked even more tired now than he had before.

"Well, they aren't," she said. "There's no such thing as a time machine. There's no DeLorean hidden behind, you know, the 'Wounded Sky' sign ready to take us back a month, so we can save him. There's no bargain to be made with Creator. We're going to have to live with that."

Michael smiled through tight lips. "I don't know if I can." He walked away.

Eva wanted to call him back, to talk to him, to make him feel better. She still cared about him, even if it wasn't like before. They'd been friends since they were kids. She wanted to convince him that throwing a rock through a window meant nothing, that there was so much more going on that he didn't know about. But, in the end, she just watched him until he was out of sight.

"And here I thought that you weren't going to show."

Mark stepped sideways to stand directly in front of the doors to the clinic, as Eva approached the building. Unfazed by his body language, by the gun at his hip, by his cocky and sour demeanour, she stopped just a few feet away from him.

Two could play at this game.

"Morning, Mark."

"Are we going to do the thing where you ask to see your daddy, and I tell you that you can't, and then you get all upset, and then I—"

"I just want to know he's okay. I haven't seen him in a month. I haven't heard from him either." Eva took out her cell phone and waved it in the air. No signal. She wondered if Mark got a signal, if Mihko employees were granted that luxury. The luxury of texting with a loved one—something she'd always taken for granted. "Get him to wave at me from the window, *something*, I don't care. Just let me see his face."

"So we *are* going to do this. Okay. The answer is no."

Eva took one angry step forward. “You asshole!”

A gust of wind pushed across their bodies timed with Eva’s aggression. Mark’s hat blew off his head and scuttled across the grass into the forest to his left, but he kept his feet firmly in place. And instinctively, slightly rattled, he put his hand on his gun.

“Seriously?” Eva nodded at the gun.

“Just back off, Eva, alright? God, I thought I’d like you better now that City’s dead.”

“*Cole*. His name was Cole.”

“Whatever.” Mark eased his hand off the gun, and placed both hands on his hips. Tilted his head to the side. “Look, Eva, if I could let you in, I would.” He *tsked*. “Thing is, there’s some top-secret shit going on inside, and it’s my job to keep people out of Mihko’s business.”

“My dad is *my* business!”

“Your dad wouldn’t want you in here! Trust me. It’s a safety precaution.”

“Oh! And you think *I’m* predictable. You say the same thing every day! Do you enjoy this? What if it was your dad was in there, hey?”

“What am I, supposed to empathize with you now?”

“Wounded Sky is quarantined. People are going missing like every other day. What could possibly be—”

“Yeah, the curfew is a safety precaution, too, genius, speaking of people going missing.”

“What could possibly be the safety precaution in keeping people away from the clinic, if all the bad shit is happening out here? Are people sick again? Is my dad sick?”

“And this is where I tell you that it’s classified, Eva.” He zipped his mouth shut, and doubled down on the gesture just to piss her off, pretending to lock a lock and throw away an invisible key.

“Enjoying yourself, Mark, you dick?”

In response, Mark pointed at his lips, shrugged, and waved goodbye with all the sarcasm he could muster.

Eva shook her head, shot Mark a disgusted look. “You should be ashamed of yourself, doing what you’re doing, being where you’re

from. You're the only Wounded Sky band member who's working for them. This is your home, too."

"And how do you feel, Eva, being friends with that arsonist murderer? Defending him even now, after he died in a fire that *he* started. Arsonist, murderer, *and* idiot. The trifecta."

"I—" she shouted, but stopped. Not worth it. He didn't even deserve her anger. Didn't deserve her disgust. Didn't deserve one more word from her mouth.

She walked away.

"Can we do it again tomorrow?" Mark called after her.

After she'd been walking for a minute, she turned around, to see Mark jogging off into the forest. He must've been sure, she figured, that she was far enough away not to make a dash for the clinic while he left his post. She found the window to her dad's hospital room on the second floor and looked into it, willing him to get up and just pass by, so she could see him for a second. But he didn't. She looked for as long as she could, until anticipation turned to heartache.

The best cure for heartache wasn't more heartache, but Eva had made it a point, after Cole's death, to visit his grandmother and Auntie Joan every day. Having one of Cole's friends around so often, she thought, made his loss hurt a little bit less for them. And it must've hurt even more having to stay here where he had died, and where so many people despised him for what they believed he had done. They'd tried to leave after his funeral, a service attended only by Eva, her dad (the last time she'd seen him), Lauren, and Dr. Captain. They'd tried to leave right after it had ended, right after his body had been lowered into the ground, but they had been stopped at the community perimeter, on the road that led to the ferry.

"Nobody in, nobody out," the Mihko's security guard at the road had told them. "Besides, that little bastard burned down the ferry, too."

Bullshit. It was all bullshit. It was bullshit that, everywhere she went, she had to listen to people talking shit about Cole, ignoring all the good he'd done. It was bullshit that they forgot he had stopped a

murderer. It was bullshit that they didn't know he'd given his own blood to stop the illness that killed Chief Crate and the others. It was bullshit that Brady had to leave the community and hide with his kókom and estranged parents. It was bullshit that Cole's grandmother and auntie were forced to stay in a community that hated Cole.

They hardly left their house anymore.

Eva visited them there each day, and once a week, she brought them their rations. Eva had to bring a letter from Cole's grandmother to prove that she wasn't trying to get more food for herself. The truth was, she gave them some of her rations, too.

She didn't want more. She couldn't stomach more.

A hot cup of coffee was waiting for Eva when she arrived at their place. And a plate of food she wouldn't touch, food that she hadn't intended to eat herself when she'd brought it to them last week. When Cole's grandmother saw Eva's reaction to the food—a Klik sandwich and mixed vegetables—a deflated look, like air being let out of a balloon, she said, "Eva, you have to eat, too. You look so thin."

"I eat." She sat down at the table, across from Cole's grandmother and auntie, and picked up the cup of coffee, ignoring the food.

"You don't eat enough," Auntie Joan said.

"I'm never hungry."

"Cole used to say the same thing, back in the city," Cole's grandmother said. "There were times when he said he couldn't eat, that he was never hungry. Sometimes, he got so thin I thought he might waste away into nothing."

"He told me that. But he had anxiety. I don't." She took a long sip of coffee. This was her fuel. Morning, afternoon, night. This was how she tried to avoid sleep, so that she could avoid the nightmare. But it chased her down anyway, just like the monster chased down Cole, while she helplessly tried to kill it.

And failed.

"Do you think depression is that much different from anxiety, Eva?"

"Do you know that you and Elder Mariah could be best friends?"

"Mom has a point," Auntie Joan said, sliding the plate closer to Eva,

close enough that the edge of the plate touched her elbow. “Just a few bites. Make us happy.”

“No fair.” Any mention of any of them being happy felt like cheating. She picked up the sandwich and took a small bite, then put it back down beside the mixed vegetables, which nobody could make her eat for all the happiness in the world. “There, happy?”

But they didn’t answer. What was there left to talk about? She’d been here every day, and nothing new had happened, so there was nothing else to say. They’d try to get her to eat, she’d nibble at something they’d made to appease them, and there would be small talk. Most days, Cole wasn’t mentioned. Too hard to talk about. Eva was surprised that his grandmother had brought him up this morning. It still felt nice, though, to hear his name, said lovingly. Said sadly. Bringing his name up, to Eva, opened the door for her to ask what she rarely asked of them anymore.

“You should come with me today, to see him.”

“I don’t...” His grandmother started, but that was as far as she got.

“We don’t like seeing...” Auntie Joan cleared her throat, and took her mother’s hand, and Eva saw her hand tense as she squeezed the Elder’s hand. “...it’s too hard still.”

“Do you think it’s easy for me?” She’d never snapped at them before. She cupped her mouth and apologized, whispering, “Sorry,” through her fingers.

“It’s okay, dear,” Cole’s grandmother said.

“We don’t like seeing all those things people write about him,” Auntie Joan said. “We want to believe, imagine, that people here think of him differently.”

“Well, they don’t.” Eva caught a tear before it fell, rubbed it away. “And I’m the one who wipes those words off his tombstone every day. I’m the one who has to read them.”

“You’re right.” Cole’s grandmother reached across the table and touched Eva’s arm. “This isn’t fair to you.”

“It’s just,” her voice cracked, and the tears weren’t easily caught now, they weren’t easily rubbed away. She tried, and failed, and stopped try-

ing altogether. She buried her face into her hands. “It’s just that maybe if you came to visit him, maybe something would change. Maybe somehow, he would know you came, and something would change.”

“What would change, Eva?” Auntie Joan asked. “What do you mean? What do you think is going to change if we go?”

“I don’t know.” It was so hard to talk through the tears, to push words out when she could hardly catch her breath. “Maybe nothing. Maybe everything.”

“When do you go? We’ll go,” Cole’s grandmother said. “We’ll meet you there.”

“Tonight.” She could hardly speak. After a few seconds, after a few breaths, calming herself as best she could, she repeated, “Tonight. I go every night.”

The northern lights were bright over Wounded Sky when Eva came to the cemetery’s entrance, so brightly lit that it didn’t feel like night at all. She stopped where she was, her hand on the gate, which was already partially open. She took time to stare up at the lights, at the swirling ribbons of cool colours, the greens and blues, and wondered if Cole had just decided to stay there, rather than come back. How could she blame him for that? It was true. It wasn’t a legend. Cole had shown her that when he’d asked Jayne to burn her name into his arm. It was true that those beautiful colours overhead were spirits dancing. All the kids that had died ten years earlier, all their friends that had died this autumn, were up there.

And Cole.

Down here, straight ahead was just a body. Not really Cole. What she had told Michael this morning, that they just had to live with it, maybe it was okay, maybe it *had* to be okay, that everything happening in the community wasn’t Cole’s responsibility anymore. It was theirs, the people who had blamed everything on him. It was her responsibility, too. And she needed to stop waiting for a miracle that might never come. The gate creaked as Eva pushed it open, and she took a step inside. But before she could take another, she heard Tristan calling her name, frantically, repeatedly.

“Eva!” Tristan skidded to a stop on the gravel pathway.

“What the hell, Tristan?”

“I saw it.”

“You what? You ‘saw it’? Saw what?”

He hunched over, hands to knees, trying to catch his breath, and held up one finger.

“You come here shouting my name like you’re running a 100-meter dash, and now you want a minute?” She put her hands on his shoulders and made him stand up straight. “What. Is. Going. On.”

“I saw that monster, the one that everybody was seeing before.”

“The monster?” Eva’s mind raced. Nobody had seen the monster since the night Cole had died. He’d killed Reynold, and had died in the process. He died saving Wounded Sky, not setting the X on fire. “No, that can’t be right.”

“I did. I just saw it. I saw it, then I saw you.”

“You couldn’t have, Tristan. You didn’t.” Her hands remained on Tristan’s shoulders, and his eyes searched the area, all the trees around them, searching for what he’d just seen. His eyes were a mix of curiosity and fear.

“Tristan!” She slapped him in the face.

“I know what I saw!” He snapped to attention.

“You saw shadows, a bear in the forest, something. You didn’t...that monster, Tristan. It’s huge. It has red eyes. Is that what you saw?”

If the monster was still alive then Cole had died for nothing.

“No,” Tristan said quietly, distantly. “No, no, no. It wasn’t that. It was like...” he trailed off.

“Tristan! It was like what?”

“*The Walking Dead.*”

“The what?”

“It was like *that*. Like a zombie. A monster.”

“A zombie? Like...a dead person? Walking?”

“Yeah, Eva, that’s what I said. Like *The Walking Dead*. You’ve seen it right? That’s what I saw. Wouldn’t you call that a goddamn monster?”

He couldn't catch his breath. Eva could see his heart beating through his sweater. Rapid. Hard.

But Eva was calm. Calmer than she'd felt in a month.

She smiled.

"What the hell is wrong with you? I saw a fricking monster, Eva. We need to get out of here. *Now*. Didn't you just hear what I said?"

"Yeah," Eva said. "I heard you."

"And you're just going to stay outside? You're just going to walk into a cemetery when I literally just told you I saw a dead body walking around?"

Eva just nodded.

"Suit yourself, crazy."

Tristan kept running.

Eva stayed where she was, outside the cemetery gates, for a long time. She looked up at the northern lights, suddenly furiously bright, moving fast like a river. Then she looked into the cemetery, and listened to the quiet that only the dead could bring. When she shut the gate, the shrill sound disrupted the quiet.

The time on her phone, the only thing her phone was good for anymore, read 7:50 pm. Cole's grandmother and auntie were supposed to be there in ten minutes. Good. There was still time to go to their house, and convince them not to come.

There was no reason to be at the cemetery.

Cole wasn't there.

3

WALKER

MARK SPOTTED ANOTHER WOUNDED SKY resident heading to the woods, across the field in front of the clinic. It was the third runner this week, but most had tried a little harder not to be seen. With the reserve quarantined, people, on occasion, had made a break for it. It was just, most runners actually ran. They didn't try to escape by walking slowly, and clumsily, in plain view of Mihko's security force. The lights from the clinic were showering over them like a spotlight.

Mark got on his two-way. "Cover me for a sec, okay?"

"What's up?" Another voice asked through Mark's two-way.

"You're not gonna believe this."

"Try me."

"Some idiot's trying to get to the woods, but they're, like, *walking*. Look drunk or something."

"*Oh my God.*" There was laughter on the other end. "Alright, go get 'em. Mihko always needs more lab rats."

"On it." Mark left his post with a spring in his step.

He caught up to the runner, slowed down, then followed behind at a comfortable distance for as long as he could, enjoying the hilariously slow pursuit. Runner. More like walker. This extremely low-speed chase continued until the shadowy, hobbling figure was at the treeline, about to enter Blackwood Forest.

Only then, did Mark say, "Hey, buddy."

EPILOGUE

COLE AND EVA WERE SPEEDING DOWN THE HIGHWAY, away from Wounded Sky First Nation. They were in the Mustang. Cole had spent the last few weeks fixing it up, with help from Michael, Eva, and Brady. He'd started work on it right after Pam had gotten the cell towers working again, and all their phones had lit up with weeks' worth of messages. Most of Cole's texts had been from his one friend back in Winnipeg, Joe. Cole had left without saying goodbye, and now was, in Joe's words, "Ghosting him." Joe's last text had read: **Dude. Are you seriously ghosting me right now? WTF?**

"You can leave you know," Eva had said. "It's going to be okay here." She'd been right. He could leave. It was his choice now.

"But I don't want to leave you," he'd said.

"Oh, I'm coming," she'd said. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

So, they'd set to work fixing up the car, and as soon as it was ready, they drove it out of the community, over the winter road, and onto the highway. Speeding to Winnipeg, and then, wherever they wanted to go after that.

"Oh shit," Cole said.

"What?" Eva asked.

Cole looked in the rear-view mirror and saw an RCMP truck chasing after them, lights and sirens. They'd not gone more than fifty kilometres. Cole pulled over and put the car into park. The truck pulled up behind them. The officer stayed in the car for an uncomfortably long

period of time, just staring at Cole as Cole stared back. The officer got out of the car and walked over to the driver side door. Cole rolled down the window.

“Can I help you, Officer?” Cole asked.

“Do you know how fast you were going?” the officer asked.

“Fast?”

Eva punched Cole in the arm.

“You going to get smart with me, kid?” the officer asked, and leaned over, pretty much sticking his head into the car.

Cole tried to move his seat back subtly.

“No, sir. Sorry.”

The officer was wearing a motorcycle helmet, even though he had not been driving a motorcycle, and aviator sunglasses. He was dressed like a movie cop, not a real cop.

“Don’t get smart with me again, meow,” the officer said.

“I won’t,” Cole said.

“Meow, who’s your friend?”

“Are you saying ‘meow’?”

“I told you not to get smart with me, meow!”

“You’re...” Cole sighed. “I’ve seen *Super Troopers*.”

“Oh.” The officer cleared his throat awkwardly. “Right. Sorry. You see, I don’t usually do the pop culture references. That’s the job of the author, historically speaking. Well, I guess I have done a few, come to think of it, but...”

“What’s he talking about?” Eva whispered to Cole.

Cole couldn’t help but smile. “This is not a book,” he said to the officer with mock frustration.

“Well, I suppose this time I can let you off with a warning,” the officer said.

“Thanks, Officer.”

“But drive carefully, you hear? You’ve got precious cargo.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’ll be following behind for a bit,” the officer stood up, “just to keep an eye on you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything different.”

“Oh!” the officer stuck his head back into the car, and this time, looked directly at Eva. He paused for an extremely long time. “You.”

“Yes?” Eva sounded more than a little confused.

“I do apologize for being rude,” the officer said. “It’s just that I haven’t thought of a good nickname for you yet. EK? Even Steven? Captain Kirk because Kirkness? It’s just, Eva doesn’t lend itself well to...it’s already short you know?”

“Okay...”

“Anyway, don’t go too far, Captain Kirk.” The officer winked. “You never know when I might need you.”

The Reckoner will return.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ALTHOUGH THE RECKONER TRILOGY has been my newest work, the story has been with me for well over a decade. Cole's story will continue, but this does feel like the end of a journey. There are many people to thank and acknowledge; too many, I'm afraid, to address in this small space. However, I don't think it's cheating to defer to the acknowledgments in the previous two instalments in the trilogy, *Strangers* and *Monsters*, in order to hit a few birds with one stone. To those people, I continue to be grateful.

Ghosts was the funnest, and most difficult book to write in the series. I'd say that it was bittersweet, and it was, but I'm glad to be continuing the story in a different literary form. Thanks to Jay Nickerson for giving an early draft of *Ghosts* a read. It helped shape what this story became. Thanks, as well, to Liz Culotti, for reading that same infant version. The one person I have mentioned previously, and will acknowledge here again, is my editor Desirae Warkentin. Dee, your keen eye for story and structure, passion for this story, and blunt, thoughtful feedback, helped make every instalment of this series what it was. Thanks, partner.

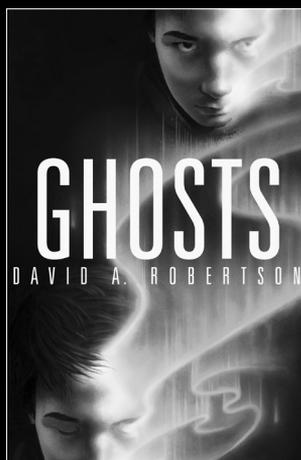
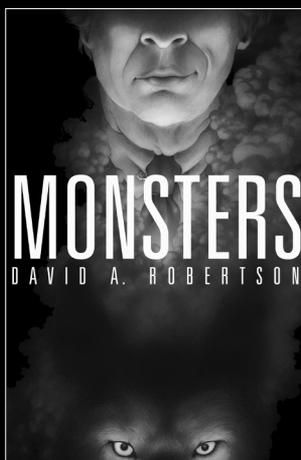
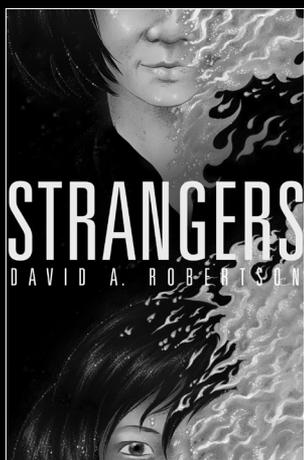
I'd like to thank my agent, Jackie Kaiser, and my publisher, HighWater Press, for helping to make this book, and series, a reality. Catherine Gerbasi, Annalee Greenberg, and the entire team have put their hearts into ensuring that HighWater Press provides opportunities to Indigenous writers to tell their stories. I am forever grateful for the platform and trust they have given me.

The Reckoner Trilogy has always been about one thing: representation. Accurate portrayals of Indigenous People and those living with mental health problems. It is empowering to see yourself reflected in literature. It is vitally important that others are exposed to stories of truth, through lived experiences.

Ekosani.

THE RECKONER TRILOGY

by award-winning author David A. Robertson



...the tantalizing mystery pulls readers on.

—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* (winner Governor General's Literary Award), *Will I See?* (winner Manuela Dias Book Design and Illustration Award), *Betty: The Helen*

Betty Osborne Story (listed In The Margins), and the YA novels *Strangers* (winner of The Michael Van Rooy Award for Genre Fiction) and *Monsters*. David educates as well as entertains through his writings about Indigenous Peoples in Canada, reflecting their cultures, histories, communities, as well as illuminating many contemporary issues. David is a member of Norway House Cree Nation. He lives in Winnipeg.

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Robertson's final instalment in this excellent trilogy does not disappoint. He manages to take on important and timely themes while always keeping the reader engaged, engrossed, and entertained. Fans will root for this believable cast of characters as they finally get to the truth of the mysterious goings-on at Wounded Sky. I can't wait to see more from this fine author!

— SUSIN NIELSEN, Governor General's Award-winning author

Bold. Breathless. And total bullpoo! Like, are you serious? FML (as the kids say).

— C. CHOCHINOV, literary expert/canonically clipped

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This unflinching quality of Robertson's writing leaves one both exhilarated and unsettled. Readers will find themselves eagerly anticipating the next book in what Robertson is calling the Reckoner series. It can't come soon enough.

— Quill & Quire

A truly original superhero. Recommended.

— School Library Connection

Refreshing ironic humor, the story's tantalizing mystery pulls readers on.

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