The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a tunnel entrance. The walls are made of rough, layered rock. In the center, a set of wooden tracks with metal rails leads into the distance, receding into the darkness. The lighting is dim, creating a sense of mystery and foreboding.

WHAT LURKS IN THE DARK WILL COME FOR YOU

WHEN
THE
NIGHT
BELLS
RING

JO KAPLAN

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CamCat
Books

CamCat Publishing, LLC
Brentwood, Tennessee 37027
camcatpublishing.com

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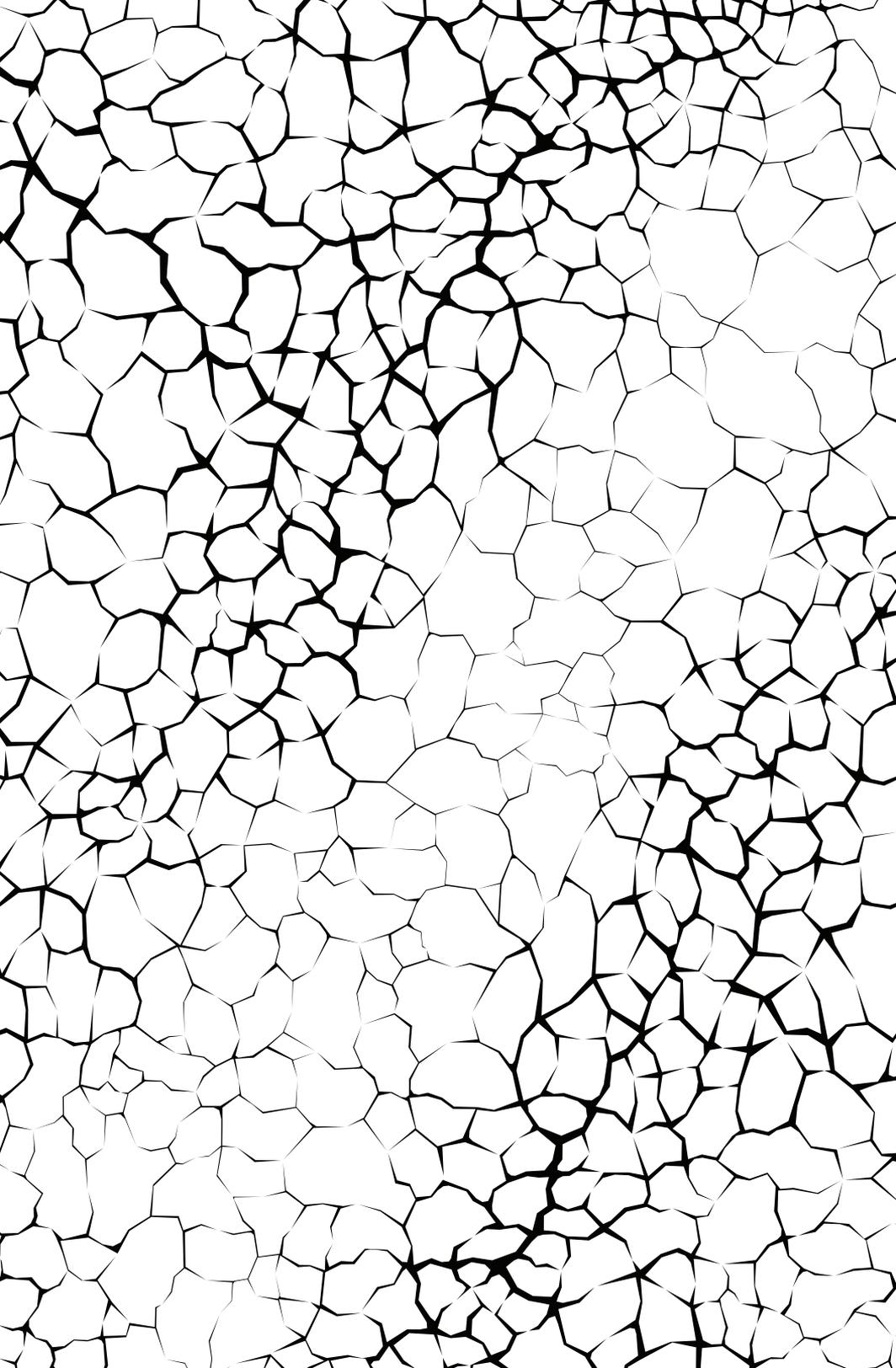
Hardcover ISBN 9780744306118
Paperback ISBN 9780744306101
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744306156
eBook ISBN 9780744306316
Audiobook ISBN 9780744306231

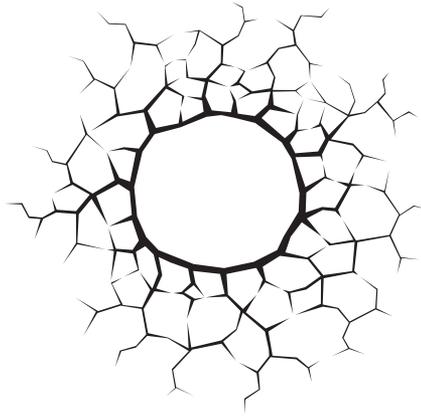
Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available upon request

Book and cover design by Maryann Appel

5 3 1 2 4

FOR JAKE





THE DUST DEVILS

TWO LONG TRACKS MADE snakes in the red dirt, their scales formed by tire tread. From high-enough up, you could almost see them wriggling through the heat-shimmered air. The only sign of their creation in this vast empty desert was a plume of dust whose twin voices grumbled their low warning. *Keep away*, they might say to the birds, if there were any birds in the sky.

But the birds were gone from here now, like most anything alive.

Inside the cloud, or just at its forefront, two motorcycles cut the horizon. A white, relentless sun pummeled the figures who rode them—figures of denim and dust.

One raised an arm, signaled to the other, and they slowed to a stop.

Tugging a red sun-faded bandana from her mouth, Mads called out, “Too hot.” Her voice was like the motorcycle’s: coarse, choked with grime.

Her partner spoke through her own bandana, which had been a dark blue, once, before it turned the vague almost-gray of the sky. “Can’t stop here. No shade.”

“Sun’s been up for hours, though. We can’t keep going.” She propped up the bike, slid off, dropped to one knee. “We can dig to cooler ground.”

Waynoka yanked the bandana from her face. Her lips, chapped and flaking off like old paint, were pulled into a frown. While Mads found a spade in her pack and punched its blade into the dry dirt, Waynoka brushed grime from the wheel spokes and checked their gauges. “Running low,” she said. “Should have taken those bicycles instead. Won’t be any gas to siphon out here.”

Mads barked a laugh as she pulled off her jacket. “Wouldn’t have made it this far. Bicycles mean pedaling. Pedaling means sweat. Sweating means losing water.”

“Like you’re not sweating anyway.”

After half an hour of digging, they lay in the long hole surrounded by mounds of dirt, propped their bags under their heads and opened a solar blanket just big enough to cover them both. The cool dirt at their backs was like a balm on scorched skin. They slept a few restless hours, then rose as twilight fell, from red to blue, and shared a stick of leathery old jerky. Mads tried to shake the dirt from her curly mane, but it was futile.

The dust was unshakable here in the dry, dead desert. Maybe there had been patches of green here, once, but they were long gone now.

They waited until the sun gave up the ghost so they could sit a while and watch the stars come out before they continued on their way. Their voices carried across the desert, but there was no one around to hear them.

“My Very Excellent Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas.”

“Yeah, but Pizza ain’t a planet.”

“Well, that’s how I learned it.”

Mads crumpled up the jerky wrapper and tossed it aside, where it crinkled as it slowly expanded. “How many people you think nine pizzas would serve?”

“A lot.”

“Sounds like your very excellent mother just served you high cholesterol.”

“You don’t even know my mother,” said Waynoka. “And she would never.” They lay in silence while the wrapper finished its crinkling and went still, before a passing wind took it away like a plastic bird. “Is it a planet though, or not?”

“It was, and then it wasn’t. Not big enough or something. It’s all semantics anyway.”

“Guess it doesn’t matter now.”

“No. Guess not.”

Mads stood up and fixed a pair of grimy pool goggles over her eyes, pulling her bandana up over her mouth and nose. Waynoka nodded.

The dust devils took off again.



AND THEN, IN THAT endless nowhere, out of the nothing, there was . . . something.

“You see that?” Waynoka pointed at an angle from their trajectory. Rocky hills hunched black against the night, rising jagged into mountains, like giants creeping. But she wasn’t pointing at the hills. She was pointing at the smaller shapes that stood at the base of the hills.

Mads wiped at her goggles. “What is it?”

“Not sure.”

They changed course. The shapes drew closer, looming out of the dark. The dust devils slowed enough that they had to keep balance with their feet, toeing the ground away.

They passed a sparse series of clapboard houses that whistled as the wind worked its way through gaps in wood, warped and crooked with age. One shack still had a door attached, and the wind swung it open and shut with an arduous groan. Further on, the buildings clustered closer together. They came upon a dozen crumbling structures along a stretch of dirt that might once have been a small town’s Main Street. Waynoka imagined what the buildings had been in their heyday—maybe a quaint general store, a

bank with iron vaults, gambling halls, and saloons. Now they were rotted shells, the bones of long-dead buildings. Some looked burned out, scorched down to their blackened foundations; others stood on the force of stubbornness alone.

“It’s a town,” said Waynoka. “Why don’t we stop here?”

Mads frowned at the sky. “Dawn’s a long way off, still. We could cover a lot more ground if we kept going.”

“Even if we do make it all the way to New York—I don’t think one extra day will make a difference.”

“Don’t be dense. Every day we stay in the desert is another day closer to dying of thirst. At least if we get farther east, we’ll find something to drink.”

“You don’t think there could be any water *here*, do you?”

Mads frowned. She looked around at the ruins lining either side of Main Street. “Doubt it. This place looks dry as a bone.”

“At least we can rest here. There’s shelter—safer than staying out in the open. Under the sun.”

“Always playing it safe,” said Mads, shaking her head. “If we’d played it safe back in LA and gone with that group to the encampment, we’d have had all our shit taken in that police raid like the rest of them. We’d never have left.”

“I’m not playing it safe. I’m playing it *smart*.”

Mads sighed. “All right, fine. We’ll stay here for a day. See if we can find any water. And then we’re gone. New York will only take so many refugees before they start turning people away like they say they’re doing in Chicago.”

“Then we’ll pick somewhere else,” said Waynoka. “I hear Canada’s nice.”

Pulling a flashlight from her pack and winding it up, Mads followed its beam into the nearest building. Shadows crept around the edges of the light as it asked the ceiling how many spiders lived in its corners. The floor was dirt. The walls had buckled under the weight of the roof where jagged holes punched through to the sky. She came out again and shook her head.

It wasn't the first ghost town they'd come across. Some, you couldn't even tell how long they'd been standing. Could have been abandoned for centuries; could have emptied out only last year, when the climate had really started to blister the desert and make it uninhabitable. When the temperature rose, and the water dried up, and it was too late for an apathetic populace to give up any of the luxuries that had brought them all to this point of no return.

Newly abandoned towns wore battle scars from hours in the sun and drifts of sandy dirt, but you could still see the memory of life in their shattered TV sets left in the living rooms, dusty treadmills, and the square holes in the walls where A/C units had been looted.

Not here, though.

"This place is old," said Mads. "Been empty long before the decline started. I'm talking eighteen hundreds, maybe."

Waynoka tipped her bottle carefully against her lips for a small sip of warm water that was mostly backwash. She didn't like the look that crept across Mads's face.

"You know what this is?"

Waynoka raised an eyebrow. "Bunch of decrepit old buildings."

"Boomtown," said Mads. "West was full of them. People coming to mine gold, get rich."

"Great. Let's mine some gold. That'll solve all our problems." Waynoka put away her bottle, pulled her jacket collar over her neck, and crossed her arms. The temperature still dropped at night, even out here, cooling the sweat they had built up in the heat of day.

"Know what that means?" Mads looked excited now. She didn't wait for Waynoka to take a guess. "Means you were right. There probably *is* water here."

"Did you just admit I was right about something?"

"No, listen. Lot of these old mines are flooded."

"You want to drink stagnant mine water."

"Better than piss," said Mads.

A tumbleweed rolled toward them, pausing intermittently in its wandering, until it was close enough for Waynoka to put her foot on it and flatten it. “Don’t mines usually have toxic runoff?”

“Oh please, at this point, toxic runoff is the most common by-product of civilization. Your body is probably, like, seventy-five percent toxic runoff.”

“Huh. I guess you really *are* what you eat.”

“More like, you are where you live.”

Waynoka looked around at the wasteland and could not deny it.

“Look, we’ll check to make sure it’s not toxic. Plus, we’ll boil it.”

Waynoka sighed. “You *sure* there’ll be water down there?” She finished stepping on the tumbleweed and looked up again at her partner, at the gleam in Mads’s eyes, the moonlight on her teeth. “Because if you’re wrong, we *will* be drinking piss again.”

The wind tried to take the misshapen tumbleweed, pushed it feebly, and it tilted though it didn’t give an inch. It wasn’t round enough to roll anymore. The wind gave up and wandered away to howl through the cracks in the buildings, haunting the old dead town. Behind Mads, the moon’s crooked rictus mirrored her own eager grin, the few stars that pierced through the dusty air mimicking her shining eyes.

“Trust me.”



STARS AND PLANETS AND the moon and anything that glowed gave the buildings form and presence, at least enough to know they were there. They walked down the dirt road, trying to find a building that still had an intact roof; most yawned open to the elements. A walkway made of wooden planks ran along the fronts of the buildings, sheltered in places by an overhanging roof held up by splintered posts. A few faded old signs spoke of a time and place that felt utterly foreign to Waynoka: one sign, hanging crooked, boasted a blacksmith; another read, FEED & SEED.

Mads shined her flashlight on one half of a pair of swinging doors, the other long gone. The circle of light crept up the crooked entryway to find letters worn to near illegibility.

“Saloon,” she read. “Think they got any whiskey?”

“Sure,” said Waynoka. “And dancing girls. Gunfights. Ghosts of cowboys.”

Mads pushed the remaining door; it swung inward, and a rotten board at its middle fell away in a cloud of dust. Pulling her bandana over her mouth, she stepped through, let the flashlight rove around the old saloon, revealing it in fractured bits. Against the far wall stood what was left of the bar. The light found a broken bottle, grimed over, dry of whatever substance it had once contained; pink bubble letters painted on the bar, newer graffiti that cheerfully announced “Hell”; a barrel, half-rotted away, bloated out of proportion.

The decay was palpable, apocalyptic; the air smelled like the death of civilization. How many people had once sat in this saloon, drinking the bitter elixir that would take them away, if only for brief respite, from a life of fruitless toil?

They sat against the graffitied words and laid out their bags. Listened to the wind creeping in. Outside dawn was paling the sky, but it was still dark in here, a cool shadow of the past.

Waynoka pulled the rubber band from her hair, shook it out, retied it away from her face. Stray dark wisps clung to her angled jaw. She blew them from her chapped lips. “What are we waiting for?”

“Hmm?”

“Let’s go find the mine. It’ll be easier in daylight.”

Mads didn’t answer for a moment. She eyed her partner. “Chill out, eager beaver. Ever heard of heat stroke?”

“Ever heard of dehydration?” Waynoka snapped. She stood up quickly, stumbled, leaned against the sagging bar.

“Easy,” Mads said without getting up to help her. “Sit down, kid. We need to rest up. It’ll hit one-twenty out there in a few hours.”

Waynoka found her balance, let go of the bar, sucked frustrated breaths through her nostrils. She crossed her arms, stood over Mads. “Don’t call me ‘kid.’ You’re not that much older than me.”

“I’m old enough.” Mads cleared her throat, her voice like gravel—the voice of a woman in her sixties, not forties.

“Well, you don’t need to treat me like a child,” Waynoka continued. “I’m obviously capable of taking care of myself. Or did you forget which one of us snagged all that camping equipment before the REI was picked clean?”

Mads snorted. “Oh, please. If I hadn’t come along, you’d still be sitting around at some evacuation center, waiting for the world to go back to normal.”

Dust spiraled dizzily in the air as the sun started to peek through cracks in the walls, throwing bright lines on the floor like alien code. Waynoka exhaled slowly and sat down. She pulled a paperback from her rucksack, the cover worn to shreds, pages soft and feathered at the bent edges, and angled the book against the bands of light to read. Not that she needed the light. She had read the book a dozen times, practically knew it by heart. But it was the only one that had survived the fire. Eventually she gave up, the light too poor to make out the small type. She closed the book and put it away.

“You know,” said Mads, chewing her words as if they were food, as if they could produce saliva for the desert of her mouth, “I feel like I would fit right in here, back in the old days. Sitting here, drinking themselves insensible. What else was there to do? They were like us. Bored as hell by the damned monotony of survival. Ever think of that? Ever think we have more in common with them than some people who are still alive?”

Waynoka slid down, lay with her head on her bag, shut her eyes. “Don’t talk so much.”

But Mads remained sitting, her arms draped on her knees, staring into the cracks of darkness she could just make out in the rough wood. “At least they had something to drink,” she said. Waynoka turned over, turned her back to Mads. “If there was whiskey here, I’d drink it all. I’d drink till I didn’t care anymore. Then I’d drink some more. I’d drink till I was dead.”

“Why don’t you make like the dead now,” Waynoka’s muffled voice drifted up from where her face was pressed against the canvas of her bag, “and shut up.”



THE SALOON DOOR RATTLED.

Waynoka shot up, pulled her knife and flashlight, watched the door swing slowly inward. Darkness crawled in behind it; the sun had already set. They’d slept a while.

She put the knife handle in her mouth so she could crank the flashlight, then aimed its light at the swinging door, waiting for it to tilt inward enough so she could see behind it. The ghost of a cowboy pushing his way into the abandoned saloon for a drink long dried up. An outlaw looking for an enemy, in death, to kill again. Someone like them, a climate refugee traversing the desert for the promise of the East, the promise of rain.

But there was nothing there. It was only the wind knocking.

She reached over to the lump beside her, shook its shoulder. Wild hair shifted as the body tilted limply onto its back. Mads’s face was like clay in the circle of the flashlight’s glow.

Waynoka leaned in, listening for breath. The face was corpse-still even as the circle of light started to tremble.

She reached out, tentatively, and put her hand on her partner’s cheek.

Mads’s eyes popped open, then immediately squeezed shut again.

“You trying to blind me?”

Waynoka moved the light away. “You sleep like the dead.”

Mads stretched languidly, cat-like. “Narcoleptic tendencies. Sorry to scare you, darling.”

“Come on. Lazy ass.” Waynoka stood up, tucking the knife away.

But Mads only sat up, pulled a plastic package out of her bag, and peeled it open. She offered Waynoka a handful of unsalted peanuts. Though she chewed them to a fine powder, they went down gritty, like swallowing dirt.

It took her longer than Mads to finish chewing; by the time she'd choked down the nuts, Mads was on her feet with her pack hitched up on her back.

"You're bringing everything? Thought we could make this home base while we look."

"Never know."

Waynoka opted to lighten her own load on the assumption they'd be back before daylight. She took out her paperback book, the small pan they used when they had occasion to cook something over a fire (though she kept the pot for boiling water), the solar blanket, a spare pair of jeans rattier than the ones she wore, a roll of duct tape, and her bow saw. She pulled out a bundle of nylon string, then reconsidered and kept it in. There was no telling when you'd need it. The bag seemed deflated now, like a sorry balloon, but the straps didn't cut into her shoulders as much without the extra weight.

Locked and loaded, they crept out of the dilapidated saloon, let the door swing behind them, haunted by their absence. The night was still. A haze of dust haloed the moon.

It was strange to walk through a dead town. A dead town nobody even knew was still here—far from any real roads, and farther still from anywhere livable, after the decline. And still, after hundreds of years, the marks people had made on the earth remained. They'd last longer than their inhabitants, but eventually, one by one, the buildings would crumble, and there would be nothing left.

Waynoka didn't like to say it, but when she had too much time to think, she figured that was the way it ought to be. Hadn't humans done enough damage? Sometimes she felt like a ghost drifting through what remained of her life, following Mads because Mads was the only thing living, alive, like a blazing light.

Compared to the vibrant, grimy, sweaty *aliveness* of Mads, Waynoka felt like a walking corpse. As if she'd died in the fire, then latched onto the first interesting person who came along.

Her spirit haunting Mads.

They passed the fossilized remnant of a dead tree, its limbs like burnt matchsticks.

Waynoka's foot crunched down on a hard protrusion from the earth, and she shined the flashlight at it. Something round, like a polished stone. With her toe she prodded it free from the dried glue of the dirt. Another light kick and it rolled over so that a pair of dark eye sockets stared up at her.

She cried out, nearly tripped in her haste to step away from it.

Mads swiveled around. "What?"

Recovering from the shock, Waynoka aimed her flashlight to get another look. "It's a skull."

"Animal skulls are probably all over the place around here," said Mads. "I wouldn't be surprised if—"

"No." Waynoka bent down. The fleshless grin, the holes where eyes had been, stared stark in the white circle of light. "It's human."

As she moved the light slowly over the ground, she noticed several other suspicious shapes scattered in the dirt. Bones.

"Guess they didn't quite make it to the cemetery." Waynoka looked up as Mads pointed with her own flashlight to a shape in the distance.

A narrow wooden church loomed over a little graveyard with a handful of crude stones standing crooked in the dirt. Leaving the bones behind, they made their way toward the church, whose steeple reared up into the black sky. They shined their flashlights over eroded etchings on the stones in the graveyard, finding names and dates from the 1800s. Nearby a cross stood, crooked, made of old, dried-out wood.

"Why did they include cause of death? Seems cruel, like their lives didn't matter—only the end. Look, this one died of 'ague.'" Waynoka moved her flashlight slowly over the etchings, black dirt caked in the crevices. "What the hell even is that?"

"I don't know. Some kind of sickness."

"Well, I wouldn't want that on my headstone."

"What would you want?"

Waynoka kept wandering. "I don't know. I don't think about it."

“I know what mine would say.” Mads reached to wipe dust away from the headstone before her. “Madelyn ‘Mads’ De La Cruz: Made it East, lived a long fucking life.”

Waynoka didn’t say anything.

Mads stood up quickly, her light trained on the stone she’d been wiping clean. There was something uncertain in her face. Waynoka turned, raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing.” Mads moved her light away, aimed it far from the cemetery, where it dissipated into nothing, swallowed by the vast dark of the desert.

“What is it?”

“There’s a mine here for sure. Good news.”

Following her as she stepped away, Waynoka trained her own light on the headstone. It froze there on the bleak engraving. “Died in mine collapse,” she read.

The words fell like a boulder.

“They probably cleared out the debris,” said Mads as she looked intently at the rocky hills around them, holding up her flashlight as if its beam would go farther from sheer force of will.

“Too dangerous.”

The light whirled, glared in Waynoka’s face, leaving Mads a black blotch. Waynoka put up her hand, watched the light make rays around her fingers. When it was finally lowered, she blinked against a starry miasma, catching only a glimpse of Mads’s face as she turned away.

“Then stay here,” said Mads, her voice scathing. “Find yourself a nice headstone and lie down in front of it.”

Without looking at her or waiting for a reply, Mads marched away. As her form receded into the dark, a thrill of panic rose up Waynoka’s throat and she hurried after, her own light swinging wildly. For a moment she thought she’d lost her—then the light caught on a mane of curly hair, and she breathed quickly through her nose as she caught up.

“It’s not the only way,” Waynoka said when she’d worked up enough saliva to open her mouth. Still not turning or slowing, Mads marched on,

toward the rocky hills that looked like the hunched backs of demons. “Hey.” Waynoka grabbed her by the shoulder.

“*What?*”

Her flashlight beam drifted left, searching for something, anything—and in the edge of its light, Waynoka saw a figure standing there, inching away from the glow, keeping to darkness. Watching them.

She froze, afraid to move the flashlight where it would land on the figure that stood just outside of its beam.

“You see that?”

By the look on her face—the way the muscles froze and her gleaming eyes locked in the far distance—Mads did.

“I’ve been feeling like we’re not alone this whole time,” Waynoka confessed, her voice a bare whisper, the sound of a tumbleweed. She thought of the saloon door swinging back and forth.

“Of course we are. Look around you. Not exactly where I’d want to spend my retirement.”

“There’s someone over there.”

The hollow of Mads’s throat jumped as she swallowed. The figure was too far away to have heard the whisper, but the night was still and carried pin drops in its silence. The figure didn’t move. Was it following them?

“Who else could be here?” Mads whispered back. “*Here?*”

The idea of a person in this forsaken place rattled Waynoka. Like a person standing on their own grave.

“What do we do?”

They waited. Waynoka would have preferred to stumble across an animal. Hell, even a ghost would seem more at home here.

“Fuck it.” Mads shifted her flashlight beam right onto the figure before it could move away.

They both sucked in a sharp breath.

Standing in the dim, dispersed glow was a tall thin cactus, its withered limbs almost in the shape of human arms.

Mads shoved Waynoka, not very gently. “You trying to spook me?”

“I saw it move.”

The light drifted over and around the uncanny cactus—brown, desiccated. Though Waynoka wanted to stay away from it, her partner drew closer, pulling out her knife.

“What are you doing?”

“We can chew the meat.”

“Sure, if you want to puke your guts out.”

Mads lowered her knife and turned, raised her eyebrows.

“Most cacti are toxic. Only a few types are edible.”

“Is this one of them?”

The cactus twisted on itself, bulging in strange places like a malnourished child. Divots near the top gazed out darkly like the hollows of eroded eyes. “I don’t know.”

Gleaming eyes, a mottled green and brown, made wide, round discs in Mads’s ashy face, her freckles like scattered dirt. She ran her tongue over cracked and feathered lips, raised her knife again to the cactus, its tip grazing the fine needles, a desperation in the grip of her hand—but then she lowered it again, and with it released the air from her body in one long exhale of defeat.

She turned her light to the uneven landscape ahead, the sullen rocks that clustered at the base of cruel mountains. This place had a strange, unsettling atmosphere, but maybe that was the nature of ghost towns. They’d bustled with life, once, but now knew nothing of humanity. They were left-over relics reclaimed by the wounded earth. Civilization slowly fossilizing as it faded to antiquity. And someday all of earth’s cities would be hollow tombs decaying slowly over the eons to their final entropic states, unless some other creature intelligent enough to wonder who had built them came upon the earth to possess it and to wonder who or what had ruined it in the first place.

They walked away from the town, toward the mountains. Mads found what looked like an old trail or road, and they kept to it, thinking it might lead them somewhere. The farther they got from the town, the more

Waynoka regretted leaving so many of her things in that saloon, but there was no way she would double back now. Instead she turned every so often to track the vanishing buildings with her flashlight.

“Would’ve been a quicker trek on the bikes,” Waynoka pointed out.

Mads shook her head. “Waste of gas. A walk won’t kill you.”

They climbed up the sloping path, stumbling over the uneven terrain. “Are you sure we’re going in the right direction?”

“If there’s a mine, it’s got to be around here,” said Mads.

The land grew hilly with scrub-choked rock. Waynoka had to walk carefully to avoid tripping. Ahead of them, the moonlight revealed more broken buildings—a tall structure stitched with support beams that looked like a good breeze would send it toppling. “Is that what I think it is?” said Waynoka.

As they passed the building, directing their flashlights to the mountain-side ahead, the entrance to the mine appeared: a rusted rail led into a black mouth in the rock framed by crooked wood supports.

“*Brazo Poderoso, asisteme*,” Mads murmured.

Waynoka stepped closer to the opening, which swallowed her light like a black hole. “I would be surprised if God was listening.”

“Doesn’t hurt to check.”

The mouth of darkness led to a long stone tunnel that echoed their footfalls with vaguely sinister chuckles. Otherwise, it was quiet—the kind of closed-in quiet where you could hear your own heartbeat. At least outside, the open desert had the occasional call of the wind. There was movement out there. In here there was only stillness.

Waynoka reached out to the wall and felt cold, rough stone. The walls were craggy, like the choppy surface of a stormy sea, petrified in place. Rocky edges gleamed in the light. Support beams above splintered where they stood, looking too feeble to hold up the tons of rock crushing down on them.

The deeper they went, the thicker and staler the air. They felt farther and farther away from fresh air, and ever more enclosed. The narrow tunnel

did nothing to assuage this feeling. The ground was uneven around the rusted tracks, rising and falling. At one point, the tracks vanished and a drift of broken rock forced them close to the low ceiling, compelled them to crawl on hands and knees.

Died in mine collapse, thought Waynoka.

“Hey,” said Mads, pausing to shine her light straight up, through the narrow crevice that opened high above them, the two walls of rock stitched together by wooden beams. It went up and up. “This is probably where they found a vein of ore. Look how much of the mountain they took out.”

“How much farther you think the mine goes?”

As it turned out, much farther.

They wound their way through turns in the tunnel, at every moment wondering if it wouldn't be better to go back but unwilling to voice this to the other. The rock shifted from dark granite to light—almost pearlescent—and back again.

“If there's water in here, it's probably farther down,” said Mads. “It would pool on the lowest level. Right?”

“Great,” said Waynoka. She did not relish the idea of descending deeper, and part of her hoped they would find no means of getting to a lower level anyway. Was it cowardly to hope for failure so they could leave this place?

Sometimes she felt like all she was capable of was questioning, worrying, hesitating. She wished she could be more like Mads. Confident. Proactive. Fearless. She hated that sometimes, she *did* feel like a kid next to Mads, even though she liked to think of them as partners, equals in their quest to survive a world turned upside down.

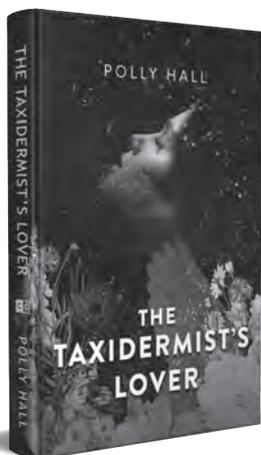
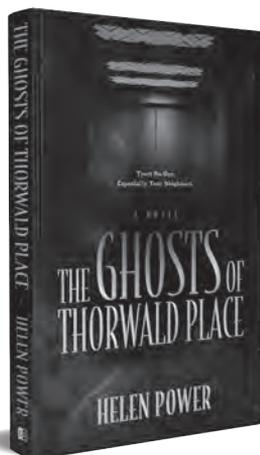
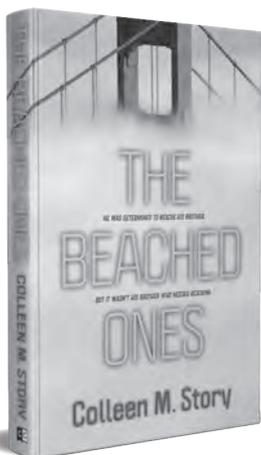
Down the passage, their footfalls echoed and crunched on bits of rock ground near to powder. After a little while, Mads abruptly halted and threw out her arm to stop Waynoka from stepping past her.

“What?”

Without a word, Mads lowered her flashlight so Waynoka could see the square of perfect blackness before their feet.

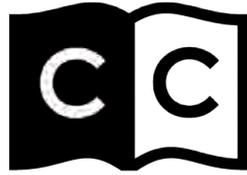
A mineshaft.

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to walk through a dead town.”**


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ISBN 978-0-7443-0610-1
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