



THE

DETERMINED TO SAVE HIS BROTHER.

BEACHED

POWERLESS TO RESCUE HIMSELF.

ONES

Colleen M. Story

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THE BEACHED ONES

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Content Warning: This novel touches upon suicide and may be disturbing to some readers.

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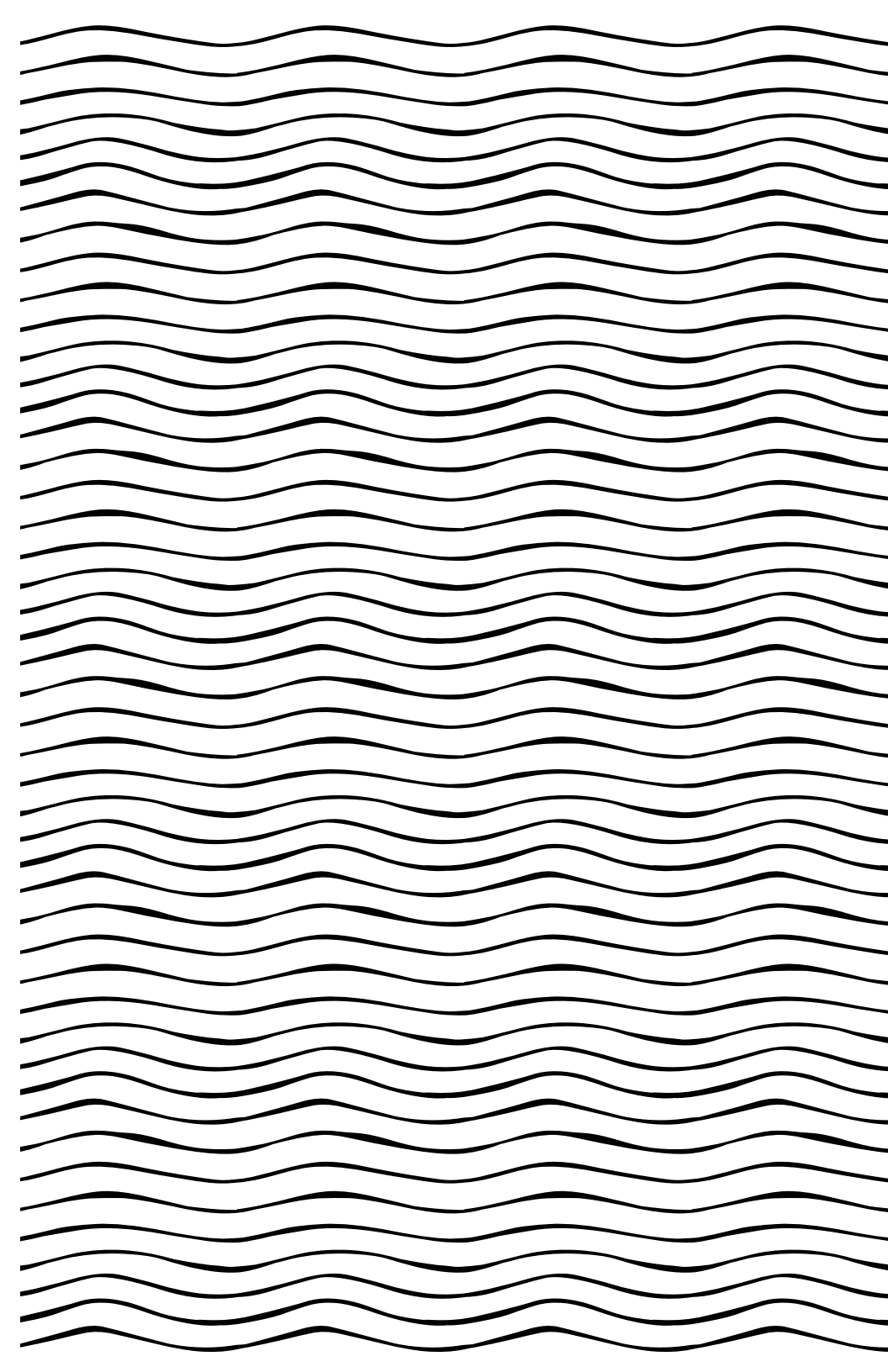


For my brothers, and for Mom.




“There is no despair so absolute as that which comes with the first moments of our first great sorrow, when we have not yet known what it is to have suffered and be healed, to have despaired and have recovered hope.”

—George Eliot, from *Adam Bede*





CHAPTER ONE



Daniel A. Shepard would have been lost forever had not the lighthouse beam brought him back to life. In sweeping strokes it painted the blackness in ribbons of white, awakening his spirit with each pass over his body, gently drawing him out of the blackness into which he had fallen. He dropped his arm over his face, suspecting a crack in the hotel drapes, but the light shone through nevertheless, as if the sleeve of his fleece jacket were no more than a thin cotton sheet. He rolled over on his side. A sharp pain sliced through his thighs, forcing him fully awake. His legs were on fire. He slapped at the flames, but when he looked down, he was fully clothed, his limbs unharmed.

The ceiling twinkled, some sort of spray glitter he'd failed to notice before. But no, the sparkles were too far away. And the air smelled fresh, not the typical hotel air, heavy with the scent of old socks. He'd expected the usual lumpy beds and noisy cooling fans.

It wasn't long before he realized this was no hotel.

He was outside.

His gaze went first to the flashing light, emanating from an airport tower, he thought, until he heard the roar of the ocean below. Having grown up in Montana, he'd never been to either coast, but now long waves gleamed like threads of lace, appearing and then fading into the deep. He stared, half unsure of what he was seeing, and still they danced in and out under a moonlit sky, the lighthouse showing them off about every twenty seconds. A breeze caressed his face, bringing with it the scent of salt and seaweed, and then he noticed the sand cool between his fingers. He lifted one hand and let the soft grains trickle over his palm. The guys had spoken about heading for the beach after the Los Angeles show, but last he remembered, they hadn't made it out of the bar.

The pain returned, biting at his ankles, flames erupting about the hem of his jeans. He recoiled, crab legging through the sand, one hand slapping at the fire until he fell onto his back. The vision faded to reveal his jeans intact, white cotton socks covering his ankles, the fleece jacket unzipped, his favorite high-tops on his feet.

"I didn't drink that much," he said out loud, though his tone was less than convincing. He removed his Kawasaki cap and ran his fingers through his thick, brown hair, resting his hand on the back of his neck. Jay had asked him to join the others. They'd left

the crowd on their feet, an audience of over a thousand shouting for more. They'd deserved a celebration.

"Jay?" Daniel called, "you there?"

The last show was a blur. All he could remember was his hometown of Butte, Montana, the old grandstand at the fairgrounds lit up with stadium lights as he and the six other motorcycle riders flew over the tops of hundreds of heads. But that couldn't be right.

They were in L.A. Their last show had to have been in L.A. Behind him, city lights danced in the distance, casting a hazy orange glow into the night sky. His last run up the ramp, he'd done the dead body and the cliffhanger. Or had it been the double grab and the superman?

The night answered only in waves, the sand whispering *hush*.

He had to pick up Tony in San Francisco. The thought came out of the blue. His little brother was attending the marine camp he'd drooled over for years. He'd be finished on August twenty-ninth. If Daniel weren't there, the kid would be left stranded. He glanced at his wrist, but his watch was gone. They were supposed to spend a couple of weeks together before Tony went back to school, though Daniel wasn't sure he was going to let his little brother return to their mother's house. Tony had been in that hellhole long enough. Daniel had an apartment now. They could both stay there.

He patted his pockets. No keys, no wallet. But something in the front right. He dug in and pulled out the Matchbox F-14 Tomcat. He'd received it as a present when he was young, for Christmas maybe, though he couldn't remember for sure. He'd passed it on to Tony on his fifth birthday, and then Tony had given it back before Daniel had left the hellhole for good. Tony had meant it as

a good-luck charm, something to keep Daniel safe while he was performing his stunts. Daniel turned it over in his hand, puzzled.

A piercing whistle grabbed his attention. He tucked the toy away and stood up. Over the din of the ocean the whistle came again, a high-pitched tone that spiked and then dropped. He held his breath. There, at the shoreline, down and to the right. The waves crested and crashed, and then a distressed, wailing sound of something or someone in pain.

It wasn't easy running in the sand, especially in high-top sneakers. Salty grains poked at his heels. As if wanting to help, the lighthouse intermittently showed the way. *Here. No, over here.*



At the crest of the hill, he looked down on a long stretch of beach, the sand smoothed by the tide. To the right, where the moon's glow frosted the shore, loaf-shaped mounds lay marooned among the ocean's refuse, grounded vessels cast aside as if by a storm.

Daniel approached with caution. The shadows loomed larger with every step; great sea monsters with invisible faces. Ten feet away, he hesitated. Multiple torpedo-shaped bodies, twelve to sixteen feet long, all with aft-facing dorsal fins, lay stranded on the sand. Pilot whales. Tony had taped pictures of them on the walls of his room during his sea-creature phase, which had followed his dinosaur obsession. He'd liked the pilot whales best because they looked so much like dolphins, bulbous heads blunted in front, mouths angled up in permanent smiles. Daniel trudged past five, ten, twelve of them. Some exhaled out their blowholes, spraying weak fountains over their heads. One lifted its tail and then let it fall back with a thud. After fifteen, he stopped.

A new sound drew his ear, something shuffling nearby. He stumbled forward in the darkness and found a baby whale struggling to be near its mother. It was about a third her size, maybe five feet long, the smiling mouth deceptively cheerful. Half crouched, Daniel approached. At its side, he paused, extended his hand, and tentatively touched the skin. Slick and rubbery, it was like raw egg over a soccer ball. Tony would be devastated to see his favorite animals dying. The mother Daniel could do nothing for, but looking again at the baby, he shed his fleece jacket and squatted down. The young ones were only about 150 pounds. Tucking one hand underneath the tail, he raised his chin and slid the other under what he thought was the neck, wriggling his fingers through the sand to get a grip. Once he'd secured a good hold, he took a breath and heaved. The whale felt heavier than he'd expected. He pushed hard, forcing his heels into the sand, his thighs straining. Slowly, he rose, wobbled a bit, and finally stood upright. The weight settled hard and heavy against his chest. The whale squirmed and Daniel thought he might lose him, but then the animal went still. Daniel walked unsteadily toward the water, the whale's skin slick against his own. He went about ten feet until his shoes sank into the wet sand, and then a little farther until the ocean came up to his waist. With the current buffeting his body, he let go.

The baby swam out, turned, and went back to the shore. Flopping like a hooked fish, it called for its mother. The big whale whistled in answer. Daniel trudged back onto the beach, his chest heaving. Water sloshed in his shoes, his jeans heavy, the breeze cold on his arms. He scooped up the whale, balanced himself, and again carried it to the water. He walked farther out the second time, but still, the baby returned.

The dim glow of dawn cast a grey light on the mass suicide before him. He spotted movement in some of the shapes, but only occasionally did a blast of mist escape a blowhole or a low groan overwhelm the ocean's roar. The baby called to its mother in pitiful squeaks and whistles, but she no longer answered back. Daniel knew he should get help, but for most of them, it would be too late.

Orion stood tall in the eastern sky, the Big Dipper angling northwest, both dispassionately observing the scene playing out below. A gust of wind cooled Daniel's skin. He shivered under his wet clothes, retrieved his fleece jacket, and pulled it back on. Arms crossed, he walked up the hill. He would find help or the rest of the guys or something. They couldn't be that far off. The whales were nearly out of sight when the baby cried out again, a wild sound like a child's scream of terror. Daniel's flesh lifted off his bones.

He ran all the way back. In the water a third time, he waded forward until he could no longer feel the sand under his feet, and then did his best to swim even farther, clinging tightly to the rubbery skin. Kicking hard he managed a few more feet before the whale slipped away and disappeared into the ocean. Spent, Daniel waited, treading water, the wet jacket heavy on his shoulders as he scanned the shoreline.

Moments passed, but he didn't detect any new shapes moving. The waves tossed him up and down, playing with him. He blinked saltwater out of his eyes.


Come on. *Come on.*

There! Like a geyser, the spout burst from the water. It sparkled momentarily and then dropped and disappeared into the vastness of the ocean. Three times the whale's back arced into the

night, the moon shaping its glow into a cream-colored cone until at last, everything was quiet and Daniel swam alone.

He leaned back and let the water take him where it would. He would rest for a moment and then swim back, find a phone, call Jay, and regroup. He'd have a hell of a story to tell Tony when he picked him up. A smile creased his lips, and then the pain returned and he doubled over with it, his gaze seeking but not finding the flames. With desperate motions, he swam back to the shore. Hands and knees in the sand, he panted hard until the burning cooled and he could lie down, the great sea monsters surrounding him in a silent embrace.

CHAPTER TWO



His recovery on the shore was short-lived. Just as he started to get up on his hands and knees, the sand collapsed underneath him, tilting him over onto his side. Feeling his hip and shoulder start to sink, he rolled onto his back to see stars dragging streaks of light behind them, the night sky spinning like a Ferris wheel. He was dizzy from fatigue, he thought, but the sensation intensified, the beach wide and then narrow, the night twisting as if wringing itself out. He remembered suffering a fever as a child, when everything appeared distorted and smaller than it should have been, rooms shrinking in size even while he seemed to grow, except this time it was the coastline and the lighthouse and the

city lights expanding and elongating until they were nothing but colored ribbons. Around and around it all went, the vertigo so overpowering he closed his eyes. Gradually, the sensation eased and the world stopped moving, leaving him feeling as if he'd come to the end of an amusement park ride.

His childhood home materialized around him, a ragged trailer house on the outskirts of Butte. He sat crouched low by the living room window. Raindrops spattered the glass, the sky covered in dense gray clouds. Outside, donning a homemade headdress fashioned from a leather belt and taped-on crow feathers, Tony stood in the steady downpour, having taken up a post in the middle of the muddy front yard, if you could call the square of dirt between their trailer and the gravel road beyond a yard. Daniel peered through the part of the window that wasn't covered with brown spray paint. His little brother raised skinny white arms to the sky and started to run in circles. His feet pummeled the ground, shooting out muddy splashes of slop that fell back to stain his jeans. After five times around, he changed to a football shuffle, side to side with his arms pumping in front of him. Rain bombed his feathers and soaked through his black hair. Ten minutes later, he stood like a soldier, sent God a drenched salute, and ran back inside. Dropping the headdress on the TV tray by the door, he stepped out of his mud-covered sneakers and ran across the room to join Daniel. "Did it work? Did the rain stop?"

The memory faded, giving way to the sensation of hard stone poking into his cheek. He was outdoors again, one side of his body warmed by the sun, the other pressed against a mound of dirt that quivered underneath him. A train whistle moaned. Wheels clacked in a steady rhythm, coming, coming, and then a ding-ringing of bells. Under his fingers, a steel track vibrated. The

whistle sounded again, louder this time, bombarding his ears and forcing his eyelids back. The steel monster was no more than fifty feet away. Scrambling to his hands and knees, he glanced with horror at the tracks where his fingers had lain. A gust of wind blasted his face as the engine barreled by, the whistle dropping in pitch with a mournful farewell. Daniel grabbed his cap and stumbled backward, down the incline and away from the tracks. In his rush he lost his balance and fell, rolling twice before coming to rest on level ground.



It was midday, the sun shining brightly above him, green fields covering the area on the other side of the tracks. He got to his feet, dusted off his jeans, placed his cap on his head and looked around. In front of him rested a tank trailer of some sort, several others parked nearby awaiting transport. Magpies croaked their disapproval from a clump of cottonwood trees on the other side of the lot. All around him stretched a country landscape rich with farm fields, a red barn and silver grain silo visible in the distance. He kept turning, surveilling it all, at one point rubbing the back of his head and then dropping his hand to his waist. How had he gone from the ocean to the plains? He checked his jeans, shirt, and jacket. All dry. Completely dry. Even his hair was dry.

On his fourth turn around he paused to study what looked like an eatery across the road, a single-story building painted barn red with white trim, a matching sign hanging from a tall iron post: The Old Biddy. Daniel narrowed his eyes. He didn't know this place. He wished he'd reconsidered Jay's advice about buying a cell phone. "It's 2014 Danny," his friend had teased

numerous times. “You’re acting like an old man.” Still, considering that his wallet and keys were gone, a phone probably would have been stolen too. The café was his best shot at getting in touch with somebody.

He headed toward the place, gravel crunching under his shoes. An antique farm plow sat on the grass in front; two cars, a rusted truck, and a Suzuki motorcycle parked at the curb. On the other street corner rested a mechanic’s shop and, down the way, three single-level houses worn and aged from too many winters without fresh paint.

He was about to open the door when a young couple emerged, both with tattooed arms and pierced noses. They passed him by without comment, an overhead bell announcing their exit. Daniel slipped in behind them, barely clearing the entrance before stiff springs slammed the door closed. An elderly couple sat in a booth by the wall, newspapers partitions between them. At a center table, a man with a buzz cut sliced into his steak, thick biceps framing his ribs. Sizzling sounds emanated from the back, the smell of beef in the air. Daniel looked to his right and jumped, startled. An oversized rooster stood just inside the door, its sharp yellow beak poised over his head.

The waitress, a portly woman with three hens on her apron, walked out in rubber-soled shoes, the kind hospital nurses wore to ease the wear and tear on their feet. Years of skin drooped from her arms, her wide face framed with curly black hair. Daniel waited, but she breezed by him, depositing the smell of cheap hair-spray in her wake. She opened the door, looked left and right, then mumbled something inaudible and retraced her steps.

“Ma’am?” he called, but she didn’t respond. “Ma’am, do you have a phone?”

The woman disappeared into the back. Daniel scanned the place. They had to have an office or break room or something. As he started after her, he sensed he was being watched.

The young woman stood at the side of her booth, intense green eyes focused on him. Thick auburn hair fell in choppy layers about her head, the bangs jagged over graceful eyebrows. Her fair skin was flushed at the cheeks and neck, her body thin and half hidden underneath the brown leather jacket she wore. "Daniel?"

There was something familiar about the eyes, something that made him hold his breath. She was too far away, but he could smell the musky perfume she wore, the spicy zing of it. He knew her silver earrings were shaped like an artist's palette, the circles of paint small indentations in the metal. He felt a moment's pleasure that she was wearing them but couldn't remember why. He took a step toward her.

Her grip tightened on the booth. "Daniel? Is that you?"

He could feel her hair in his hands, the kind of hair you could grab hold of without worrying about breaking it. Her lips tasted like the caramel candies she carried in her pocket. "Jolene."

She blinked rapidly, looked around the café, and then stared at him again. "But you . . . you're . . ."

"Jolene!" They'd walked together through a park where the ducks fanned their feathers in the sun. They'd gazed at paintings on a museum wall while arguing about their worth. She'd waited for him at the edge of the fairgrounds near the exit gate. "Where are we?"

"You don't know where you are?"

"We had a show last night, but . . ." He shook his head. "I can't remember." He could feel her small ear pressed against his chest. They had been standing outside a hotel on a late night. He'd

asked if she had friends waiting, but she'd only stared at him with those startling green eyes, and then she'd stood on her tiptoes and kissed him.

"Daniel?"

"We were touring in L.A., I thought, but since last night . . ." He looked around. The place was covered in chickens, black and white pictures of hen houses on the walls, shelves laden with knick-knacks and ceramic figurines, chicks in bunches peering over the tops of woven baskets. Daniel's vision blurred. Swaying, he sought to steady himself. "I need a phone."

"Here, no . . ." Jolene flew to his side, and then hesitated a moment before touching him. When she did, a look of surprise crossed her face, but he was so unsteady she recovered quickly and with one arm around his waist, walked him to the booth and set him on the bench seat opposite hers. A glass of ice water sat untouched on the table. He drained half of it, the cool liquid dousing the fire that wasn't really there but still made him sweat. Uncomfortable under her intense gaze, he tried to look nonchalant.

"What do you have to do to get service in here? Crow?"



The waitress wouldn't acknowledge his existence, not even after he asked her twice for a cheeseburger with fries and a Dr. Pepper. He might have given her a piece of his mind if Jolene hadn't intervened, slipping in the burger with her request for a strawberry waffle. The waitress scratched the order down and then patted the young woman on her skinny arm as if she pitied her, saying she was glad to see her appetite had improved.

Country music played over speakers in the ceiling corners, the tables covered in red-and-white checkered tablecloths. “I’ve never been here before,” Daniel said half to himself before he realized Jolene had heard him. “I don’t even know how I got here.” He glanced at her face. She was looking at him as if he was the last thing she had ever expected to see. In one hand she clenched a pendant that hung around her neck, a rich purple stone cut in a diamond shape. “Did we plan to meet here?” he asked.

“A long time ago.”

“Not today?”

She reached out and touched his hand. His impulse was to touch her back, but she was studying the limb as if in science class, pressing down on the fleshy part between his thumb and forefinger and then against his wrist to check his pulse. He opened his hand to take hers but she withdrew and tucked both arms under the table. When he looked at her face she turned away as if embarrassed and rubbed her arms against a chill. The earrings were the ones he’d remembered, the artist’s palette. He’d given them to her. Over a pizza dinner.

“Iowa?” he said.

“Harlan.” She glanced at him. “About an hour and a half from Des Moines. You remember Des Moines, don’t you?”

Des Moines.

Yes.

That’s where they had met.

The memories returned like tentative kittens. The team did a show there. She’d come backstage afterwards to have merchandise signed. He’d asked her to stay another day. Then another and another until a week had gone by and the team had to leave for their next tour date.

The waitress brought the second glass of water Jolene had requested, then looked at Daniel's and paused. "Did I get that right?" she asked. "You wanted another one?"

"I'd like some more," Daniel said, pushing his empty glass over.

"It's fine," Jolene said with a forced smile.

"But I'd like—" Daniel started but the waitress was already walking away. Jolene pushed the new glass to his side of the table. "Don't you want it?" he asked.

"I got it for you."

He took it gratefully and drained half of it. When he set it down she was staring at him again. "What?" he asked.

"What *do* you remember?"

The ocean. It would make him sound nuttier than he already did. He took another sip and shifted his weight. "The last show we did," he said. "I think something happened. An accident or something."

"An accident."

"There was a fire. I can't remember . . ." He looked around the café again. How had he ever traveled from L.A. to Iowa with no memory of the time between? "You sure we didn't plan to meet here today?"

She sat stiffly in her seat twisting the edges of her napkin. "You don't know how you got here?"

More water. He felt so hot. Already his second glass was almost empty. "I woke up over there. By the tracks."

"Woke up?"

The waitress brought their meal and set it down in front of Jolene. When she'd gone Jolene pushed the cheeseburger over. It seemed rude to eat now with so many questions between them,

but the aroma was too tempting. He took a bite. The meat was juicy and flavorful, the best he could remember tasting in a long while. It was only when he was nearly done that he paused to see Jolene still watching him, her lips shiny with syrup, most of her waffle intact on her plate.

“I need to pick up my little brother,” he blurted.

She stopped chewing.

“August twenty-ninth,” he continued. “He’s at summer camp. What’s today?”

She swallowed hard and set the fork down on the plate.

“If this is Iowa, I need to get going. I’ve got to get to San Francisco—”

She covered her mouth, a shadow passing over her features.

“What?” Daniel said.

“Is that what this is about?”

He stared at her.

“It’s been over a year and now you want to say something? Is that what this is? You want to say something now?” She dropped her hand to the table. “You’re supposed to be . . . I mean, they said you were . . .” Her mouth hovered open, her breath escaping in uneven gasps. “You know, don’t you? You know. That’s why you’re here.”

“Know what?” He opened his hands in surrender. “What?”

The front door opened and slammed closed. Tendons stood out in Jolene’s neck. Her gaze jumped back and forth between his face and the new customers at the entrance. When the waitress thundered by, Jolene slid out of the booth.

“Hey, where are you going?”

She headed toward the back of the café. He took a few steps after her, but she hurried, soon disappearing under the wooden

sign that read “restrooms.” Daniel hovered in the breezeway. Over a year. It had been that long since what? Since they’d seen each other? It didn’t seem that long, but then everything was turned upside down.

The restroom doors read “roosters” and “hens.” On his right spread the kitchen, the cook busy at the grill. A few more steps and he came to a narrow opening and another door with a sign that read “office.” He slipped inside. The room was about fifteen square feet, a worn leather couch resting against one wall, an L-shaped computer desk against the other. He spotted a cordless telephone behind the monitor. Finally. He dialed Jay’s number. Pressing the cool handset to his ear, he waited. After three rings, Jay’s voice came on with the same message he’d recorded when they’d first made it onto the motocross team. *Hey, I’m either ridin’ or thinking about ridin’, so leave it at the beep.*

“Jay, what the hell? Did I hit my head or something? I’m in fucking Iowa. You need to let me know what’s going on. I’ll try again. Do me a favor and pick up.”

He pressed *end* and replaced the headset. Chewing on a knuckle, he paced back and forth and then eyed the computer. It was on, the screensaver showing chickens pecking at the ground. He sat down and opened a browser. It responded, the machine already connected to the Internet. On the Diamond Xtreme motocross website he found the main number and dialed. Erin’s voice came on and he almost spoke before realizing it was the out-of-office recording. The group’s manager rattled on about office hours. Daniel replaced the handset and checked the upper right corner of the screen. August twenty-fourth. He pulled up the calendar. A Sunday. The motocross office was closed. He glanced ahead to the twenty-ninth. Five days to get to San Francisco.

**If you have thoughts of suicide or self-harm,
or if you have been affected by suicide, contact:**

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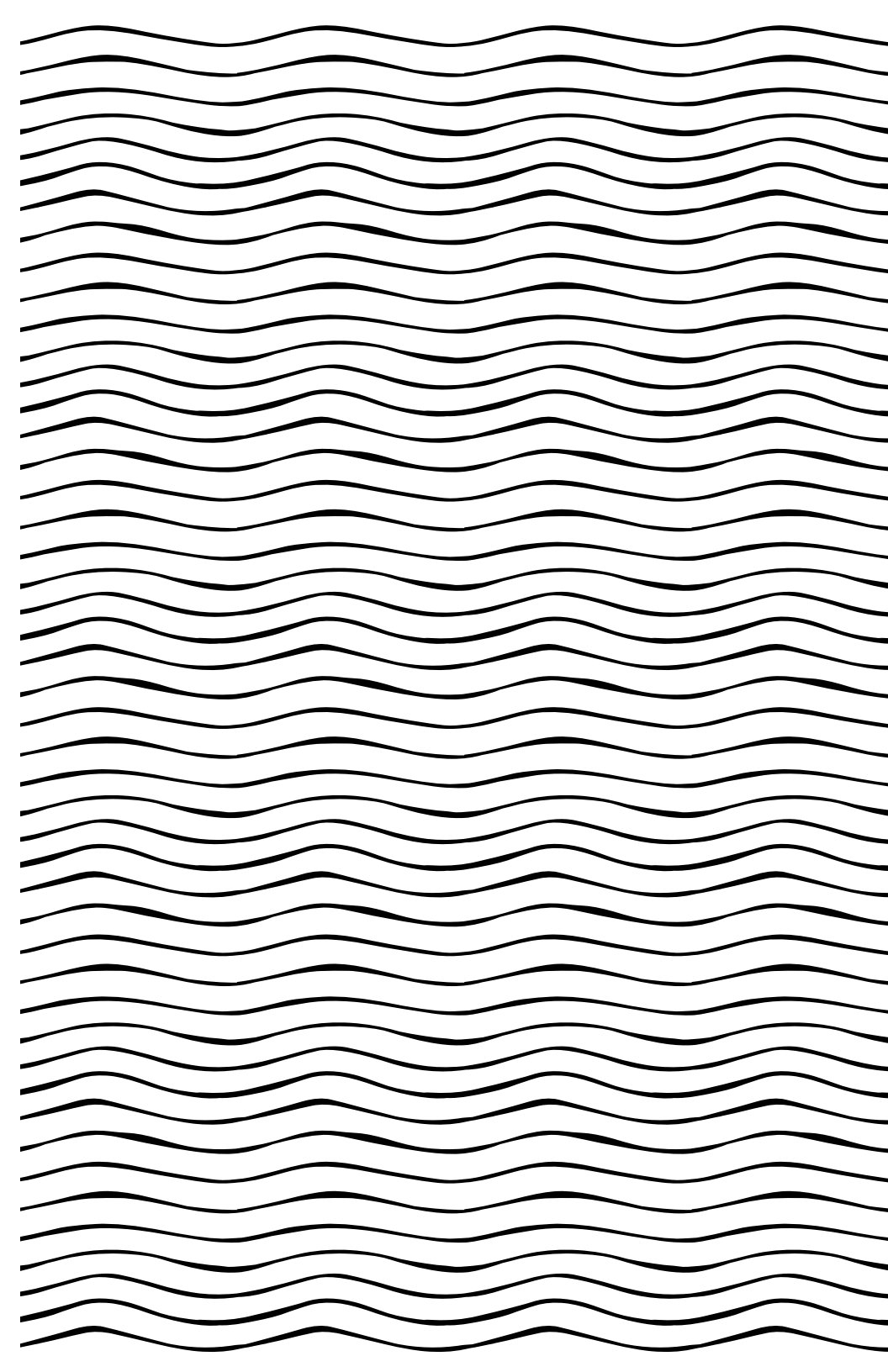
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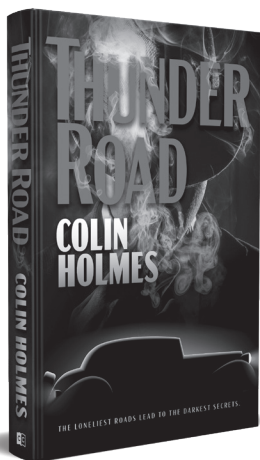
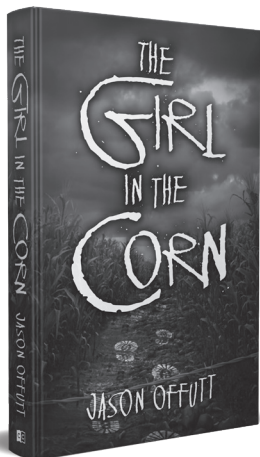
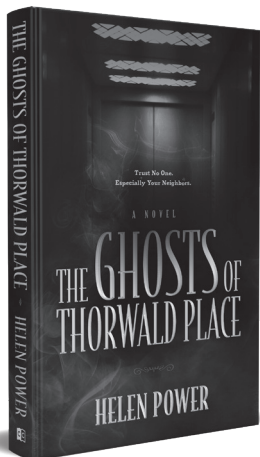
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HE CAME BACK TO RESCUE HIS BROTHER, BUT FIRST HE MUST SAVE HIMSELF.

Daniel and his younger brother grew up in an abusive home, but Daniel was the only one who escaped. Now an established stunt rider, he intends to go back to rescue his younger brother. But then one jump goes horribly wrong . . .

When he wakes up from a nightmare in Iowa, unscathed, with no memory of how he got there, his life falls apart. His team moves on without him. His best friend won't answer his calls. Strangers die in front of him. Even his girlfriend is hiding something. All Daniel knows is that he must pick up his brother in San Francisco. In five days.

From the isolating fields of Iowa to the crowded streets of San Francisco, Daniel must fight his way through a fog of disjointed memories and supernatural encounters to pay a debt he didn't know he owed.

"The night answered only in waves, the sand whispering hush."



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