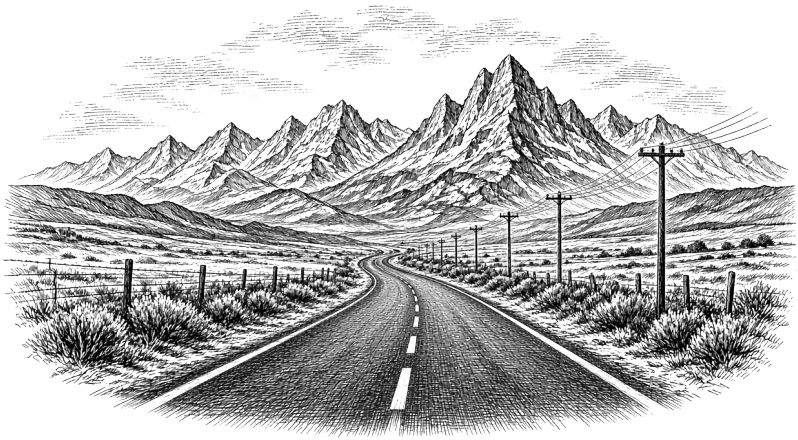
ONE MINUTE REMAINING

A LAST ROAD SOUTH STORY



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One Minute Remaining
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A companion story to The Last Road South.

ONE MINUTE REMAINING

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BY THE LAST week of August the snow was gone from Mount Powell. The mountain stood bare above the valley, gray rock and dark timber, like a man who had taken off his hat and didn't know what to do with his hands.

Cole Harlan watched it from his place along the dayroom wall, between the window and the water fountain. Six-twenty. Ten minutes.

He had paid three soups for the slot. Tuck Ostrander had raised the rate at the start of the month, from two to three, and he'd done it the way he did everything, without looking up from the clipboard.

"Cost of living, Harlan," Tuck had said. "Everything's going up."

Cole had set down the soups. Chili lime, beef, and a shrimp he'd gotten for his Saturday dessert. Tuck had swept them into his lap and written HARLAN 6:30 PH 3 in his small, careful hand, and then he'd looked past Cole's shoulder at the back corner of the room, the way he always did, like a man checking with the bank.

Three soups was a lot of soup. Cole made sixty-five cents an hour in the industries shop. He had done the math one night lying on his bunk, and then he'd stopped doing it,

because the math didn't change anything except how well he slept.

The dayroom was loud. The TV was on a game show where people screamed at a wheel. Somebody had put a burrito in the microwave for too long, and the whole unit smelled like a tire fire with beans in it.

Deacon Booker came up on his left and leaned against the wall. He was peeling the plastic off a honey bun.

"Your sugar," Cole said.

"My sugar's between me and the Lord and the nurse, and two of us are fine with it." Deacon took a bite. "Three soups?"

"Three."

"Lord, Lord." Deacon chewed. "She worth three soups?"

Cole didn't answer. He was looking at the mountain.

"That's what I figured," Deacon said.

In the window, over the bare shoulder of Mount Powell, the dayroom floated like a second room behind the glass. In the back corner of it, Cyrus Pike sat with his back to the wall and a paperback face down on the table, the way he always sat. He wasn't reading. He was looking at nothing in particular, and nothing in particular was the back of Cole's head.

Then Pike lifted two fingers off the table. Not much. A man brushing off a crumb.

Tuck got up from the corner table, stretched, and wandered over to the end of the phone line, where he stood behind a man waiting for phone four. He didn't have a slip in his hand. He didn't look like he was waiting for anything. He just stood there, a narrow yellow-haired kid with a pencil behind his ear, close enough to phone three to read the numbers on the keypad.

"Huh," Deacon said quietly.

"I see it."

"Didn't say you didn't."

At 6:29 the man on phone three hung up and walked off without looking at anybody. Cole stepped up. The steel was warm. He punched in his number and his PIN and ten digits that belonged to a phone in southern Arizona, and he put his forehead almost against the cinder block, and he waited for the flight attendant.

* * *

IN HEREFORD IT was 5:29, and the sky over the Huachucas had gone the color of wet slate.

Stacy Reyes sat behind the wheel of her car in June's gravel driveway with the windows up and the engine off, and she felt ridiculous.

It was a hundred degrees in the car. The seat burned through her shorts. There were pharmacology flash cards on the passenger seat and her phone face up on her knee, and she was sitting in a hot car in a driveway like a sixteen-year-old waiting for a boy to call. She was twenty-three years old. She was doing this anyway.

Hannah was home.

The crew had been pulled off the mountain at noon when the lightning started walking down Miller Canyon, and Hannah had come in at three smelling of bar oil and smoke, with a black line of soot along her jaw like a chin strap. She'd said "hey" and "lightning" and "don't let me sleep past five," and then she'd lain down on the living room couch with her boots still on and gone out like a pilot light.

It was past five. Stacy had let her sleep.

June was at her book club. The house was quiet except for Harold, the swamp cooler, droning on the roof like a jet that

would never take off. The back step was right outside the kitchen, and the kitchen was right next to the living room, and the screen door didn't keep out anything except flies.

So at 5:25 she had picked up her keys and her phone and walked out the front door and gotten into her car, and she hadn't let herself think about why.

She looked at herself in the rearview mirror. The humidity had gotten to her hair, and it stood out around her head in a red frizz like a dandelion gone to seed. Freckles. Green eyes too big for the rest of her face. A girl who looked like she ought to be selling cookies outside a grocery store.

You should go inside, she told the girl in the mirror. *You should go inside and wake her up and hand her the phone.*

The phone buzzed on her knee. A 406 number.

"*Hello. This is a call from… Cole Harlan… an inmate at Montana State Prison…*"

She pressed five.

"Hi," Cole said.

"Hi. Say hi to Gary."

"Gary says hi." A pause. He could always hear things in her voice, even through two fences and a coil of razor wire. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." She looked at the house. "Hannah's home."

The line went quiet. Not dead. She could hear the dayroom behind him, the TV, a man laughing at something that wasn't funny.

"She all right?" he said.

"She's fine. They pulled the crew for lightning. She's asleep on the couch with her boots on." Stacy swallowed. "And I'm in my car. In the driveway. With the windows up. Like a teenager."

He didn't say anything for a second.

"You don't have to do this," he said. "You could go in. Hand her the phone. Or hang up. Either one."

"I know."

"I mean it, Stacy."

"I know you mean it," she said. "I'm still sitting here."

* * *

THE RAIN FOUND her before he could answer.

Cole heard it start. A tick on something metal, then another, then a hundred of them at once, like somebody pouring gravel on a roof. Her breath caught on the line, the way it always did when the weather came.

"That rain?" he said.

"That's rain. It's on the roof of the car. Can you hear it?"

"I can hear it."

"It's coming down off Carr Peak in a sheet. I can't see the mountain anymore. I can barely see the house." A pause. "I can see the window, though. The front window. The lamp's on."

He knew what she was going to say before she said it. He could feel it coming the way you feel a truck coming on a bridge, through your feet.

"She's right there," Stacy said, very quietly. "On the couch. I can see her from here."

Cole stood with his face to the wall. Behind him, at the end of the line, Tuck had his arms folded and his head tipped a little to one side, like a dog listening to a can opener two rooms away.

"Stacy," Cole said. "What's she look like?"

The rain roared on the car roof. He heard her hesitate, and he knew exactly what that hesitation was, because he'd

been living inside it for two months. It was the sound of somebody standing at a door that wasn't theirs.

"I shouldn't," she said.

"I know."

"It's hers."

"I know it is."

Another silence. Then she told him.

"She's on her side, facing the window. She's still got her yellow shirt on, the Forest Service one, and there's soot on her neck, right here, under her ear, in a line. Her boots are on June's couch. June's going to kill her. Her hair's in a braid, and half of it's come out, and it's all over her face. She's got one arm up over her eyes like the lamp's too bright, and her other hand's hanging down off the edge, almost touching the floor." Stacy stopped. Her voice had gone thick. "And she sleeps with her mouth open. A little. I've never told her that. Four years, I've never told her."

Cole closed his eyes.

She had always done that. Since she was a baby, in a crib he had welded himself out of thin-wall tube, because he didn't trust the ones from the store. Her mother used to put one finger under her chin, very lightly, and push it closed, and Hannah would sigh in her sleep and turn over and let it fall open again. Every night. Like a joke the two of them were telling without waking up.

He hadn't seen his daughter's face since the first year, when she stopped making the drive. He had the memory of her on his shoulders at a lake. He had a voice on Sundays that said *fine* and *yeah* and *I gotta go.*

And now he had this. A braid coming loose. Soot under her ear. Her boots on his mother's couch.

"Cole?"

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He pressed the heel of his hand against the cinder block until it hurt. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." Her voice cracked down the middle. "I feel like I'm stealing something."

"You're not stealing anything," he said. "I am."

The line hummed. The rain hammered. Somewhere in Hereford, Arizona, twelve hundred miles south, a girl sat in a hot car in the rain and cried a little for both of them, and she didn't hide it, and something in him turned toward her for good, before he had any word for it.

* * *

THE LIGHTNING HIT close enough that he heard it twice, once through the phone and once in his own chest.

It wasn't a sound so much as a crack in the world. Stacy screamed, a short one, and then laughed, breathless, the way she always laughed after she screamed.

"I'm okay! I'm in the car. Cars are good. Tires. I read that." Then, slower: "Oh. Oh, the power's out."

"Whose?"

"Everybody's. The whole valley. The lamp just went out. All the houses down the road. Harold stopped." She was quiet a moment. "It's so dark, Cole. You can't see anything. There's no lights between here and Mexico. It's like somebody turned the world off."

"Can you see her?"

"No." A breath. "Wait."

The lightning came again. He didn't hear the thunder this time, just the rain, and Stacy's breathing.

"There," she said softly. "For a second. She didn't even move. She's still asleep. She can sleep through anything. She slept through a fire alarm in Coronado Hall freshman year. They had to evacuate the whole building, and I had to go back up and drag her out by the ankle."

"That sounds like her."

"Does it?"

"She slept through a tornado warning in Butte when she was seven. In a bathtub. I put her in the bathtub with a mattress on top, and when I came back to check on her she was snoring."

Stacy laughed. Not the small laugh. The big one, the one that came up out of her all at once like a bird flushed from a ditch. It went down the line and out the earpiece, and it was loud enough that Cole turned his face harder into the wall, as if he could keep it in with his body.

At the end of the line, Tuck smiled.

It was a small smile. He turned his head and looked toward the back corner of the room, where Cyrus Pike sat with his paperback. Pike turned a page. He didn't look up. He didn't need to.

Cole felt the laugh go across the dayroom like something dropped on a hard floor, something that couldn't be picked up again. He kept his voice steady.

"Stacy."

"Yeah?"

"Tell me something. Anything. You talk for a while."

She was quiet for a second. She had learned the shape of his days, the way he'd learned hers. She knew what it meant when he went short.

"Somebody standing close?" she said.

"Little bit."

"Okay," she said. "Then I'll talk."

So she talked. She told him the toads would be out tonight, after this, thousands of them, singing in the flooded ditches like sheep being stepped on. She told him about the old rancher on the third floor with the new hip, who called her Red and asked her to marry him every morning at seven, and how she'd told him today she'd think about it, and he'd said, *Don't think too long, Red, I'm eighty-four.*

She didn't ask him anything. She just put her voice on the line like a blanket over a man in shock, and let him stand inside it.

Behind him, Tuck got bored and drifted off toward the TV. The game show had become the news. Cole didn't look at it. Nobody looked at the TV.

"Better?" Stacy said.

"Better."

"Good. Now you. One thing. What'd you build today?"

"Cattle guard," he said. "For a ranch over by Avon. Pipe on a frame. Cows won't walk over it, because they think they'll fall through. They could walk right across. They just don't know it."

"That's sad."

"It's a cattle guard."

"It's a little sad, Cole. The whole fence is just in their heads." She stopped. "Sorry. That came out wrong. I didn't mean you."

"I know you didn't."

"I meant cows."

"I know." And then, because it was true, and because there was nobody standing close enough to hear it anymore: "It's in mine, too. Some of it."

The rain had softened on her end. He could hear it thinning, the gravel on the roof becoming sand, becoming nothing. Far off, the thunder walked away toward Bisbee.

"Someday," Stacy said, "I'm going to make you stand in one of these. A real one. Outside. No roof."

"Someday's a long way off from here."

"Then I'll save you one," she said. "I'll save you the best one. I'll put it in the freezer."

He laughed. The lawn mower, low and short. He didn't care who heard it.

"*You have one minute remaining,*" said the flight attendant.

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds. They'd gotten good at that. They were spending money on silence, a dollar eighty for fifteen minutes, and neither of them had ever thought it was a waste.

"Cole," she said. "I'm going to tell her. I am."

"I know."

"Not tonight. She's asleep. But soon."

"Okay."

"You believe me?"

He did. That was the hard part. He believed her every time.

"I believe you," he said.

"Same time tomorrow?"

He looked at the clipboard on the corner table. At Tuck's back. At the man in the corner with the paperback and the bleached pale eyes.

"I'll try," he said.

She heard it. Of course she heard it. "That's not a promise."

"No," Cole said. "It's the truth."

"Okay," Stacy said softly. "I'll take the truth. I'll take the truth over a promise any day. I'll take…"

The line clicked.

* * *

SHE SAT IN the car with the phone against her chest until the windows fogged.

When she finally got out, the rain had stopped. The whole valley smelled of creosote, pennies and pine and wet dirt, the desert breathing out. The ditches along the road were running. Somewhere under the mud, a thousand toads were waking up and clearing their throats.

The screen door creaked. A flashlight beam came wobbling across the yard and found her face.

"Stace?" Hannah stood on the porch in her socks, her boots finally off, holding June's big yellow flashlight. Her braid was a ruin. "Power's out. What are you doing out here?"

Stacy's heart stopped and started again. The phone was in her pocket, still warm, like something alive.

"Watching the storm," she said.

It was true. It was not the whole truth. She would remember later that this was the moment she learned the difference.

"You're so weird about rain." Hannah yawned so wide her jaw cracked. "Was that the house? That last one? I thought the house got hit."

"It hit something on the mountain."

"I slept through it?"

"You slept through all of it."

"I can sleep through anything." Hannah came down the steps and stood next to her in the wet gravel, and the two of

them looked out at the black valley where there should have been lights. There was nothing out there at all. No porch lights. No headlights on 92. Only the lightning, far off over Bisbee now, opening the sky for a second at a time like somebody checking on a sleeping child.

Hannah leaned over and put her head down on top of Stacy's, which was the only way she could lean on her, since Stacy came up to her collarbone. She smelled like smoke and bar oil.

"I had a dream about my dad," Hannah said.

Stacy didn't breathe.

"We were at the lake. I was little. He had me up on his shoulders, and I was scared I'd fall, and he said..." She stopped. "I don't remember what he said. It's dumb. It was just a dream."

"It's not dumb."

"It's kind of dumb."

"Hannah," Stacy said. "I..."

"Mm?"

Out in the ditch, the first toad started up. Then another. Then a hundred of them, all at once, a sound like the earth itself had something to say and couldn't find the words.

"Nothing," Stacy said. "Go back to sleep."

Hannah went inside. The flashlight beam went bobbing down the hall and disappeared.

Stacy stood alone in the dark driveway and looked north, toward a place she had never seen, and listened to the toads.

* * *

LIGHTS OUT CAME twenty minutes after the phones shut off. Cole lay on the top bunk a foot from the ceiling, in the dark, with his glasses folded on the shelf and his hands crossed on

his chest like a man laid out for viewing.

Below him, the springs creaked.

"She's got a laugh on her," Deacon said.

"Mind your business, old man."

"Whole unit heard it. Tuck heard it." A pause. "Cyrus heard it."

Cole didn't say anything.

"I'm not telling you anything," Deacon said. "I'm just saying it out loud so the Lord hears too."

The night officer came down the tier, and the flashlight beam crossed the bars and crossed Cole's face. He didn't close his eyes for it.

He was thinking about a window in the rain. A lamp. A girl on a couch with soot under her ear and her mouth a little open, and another girl in a car in the dark, holding a telephone up so he could look through it. He was thinking that he had spent six years learning how not to want anything, and it had taken a stranger about two months to undo all of it, fifteen minutes at a time.

He was thinking about tomorrow, and three soups, and the man in the corner turning a page.

* * *

FAR TO THE north and east, on the other side of the turning world, it was already morning.

In a river town in the south of Norway, near the Swedish border, a man woke up with a fever. It wasn't much of one. He took two aspirin with his coffee and went to work anyway, because it was only a fever, and the sky over the river was clear, and it was going to be a fine day.

In Deer Lodge, Montana, Cole Harlan lay awake in the dark, counting the hours until six-thirty.

In Hereford, Arizona, the power came back on a little after midnight. Harold shuddered awake on the roof. The lamp in the front window came on over an empty couch, and a small redhead lay in June's back bedroom with her phone on the pillow beside her head, facing her, as if he might still be there.

The toads sang in the ditches until morning.

Nobody was in charge of the clock. Nobody ever had been.

ABOUT THE LAST ROAD SOUTH

Their story continues in *The Last Road South*, a post-apocalyptic survival thriller by J. Malner.

Cole Harlan is six years into a manslaughter sentence at Montana State Prison for a single punch outside a Butte bar. Four minutes about the monsoon with his daughter's best friend turned into four months of collect calls that neither of them admits to Hannah. Then the Halden virus arrives, the prison phones go dead in the middle of a sentence, and the only way to reach her is to walk twelve hundred miles south.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Malner spent more than twenty-five years hauling freight across America, the last thirteen as an owner-operator, and knows the interstates of the American West the way most people know their own driveway. He lives in the Ozarks of southwest Missouri. *The Last Road South* is his first novel, written under a pen name. *One Minute Remaining* is a companion story set in its world.