



WILLIAM J. DAVIS

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A NOVEL BY

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Into the Dark

The seed bags fell heavily in the bed of Katie's old truck as Nathan, a slender seventeen-year-old, pitched them off the dock at Sutter's Farm & Feed. Katie, a short, rugged blond, wrestled each one into place, then twisted aside before the next one fell.

"You sure you'll be able to unload all of this on your own?" Nathan asked as he reached for another bag.

"She'll manage just fine," a raspy voice replied from behind, and Art Sutter stepped out of the shadows onto the dock. "She's a damn sight tougher than she looks." Katie grinned and wiped the sweat from her face. "You see which one of you is wearing gloves," Art added, then shook her hand. "Sorry I couldn't help you myself, but we're right in the middle of inventory, and this fancy new computer the boy talked me into just caught a cold or some damn thing, so it's back to paper and pencil till Nathan gets it fixed."

“No apology necessary,” Katie replied. “Nathan got me all fixed up except for the pumpkin seeds, which he assures me will be here tomorrow. He even offered to deliver them on Thursday. How’s that for service?”

“You doin’ that on your time or mine?” Art asked his son. He gave Katie a wink.

“Your time, Dad . . . Always on your time,” Nathan replied, then threw the last of the bags into the bed. “That’s all of it, Miss Winston. I’ll see you on Thursday with the rest sometime after lunch.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Art added as he picked a rock from the tread of his boot, “you can eat your lunch on the way. That way she won’t have to wait for you to show up, and I won’t have to wait all afternoon for you to get back.” Nathan grinned, grabbed the empty pallet, and tossed it on the pile along the wall. “Can I offer you a cup of coffee before you go?”

“Thanks, but it’ll be dark before I get home as it is, so I better pass,” Katie said. She slammed the tailgate closed.

“Next time then.”

With her last errand run, she gave them a wave and was on her way.

Storm clouds had been growing all day, and thunderheads grasped at the sun. The grain below bent in

the changing wind, as if fighting for the remnants of the dying day.

Katie pulled onto the highway and turned west toward Travis Glenn. From the top of the ridge east of town, she could see the whole valley, thick with trees, neatly carved into cubes and curves by the roads below. Leaves concealed most of the rooftops, and only the tallest structures escaped the limbs. Two steeples and the roof of a bank, however, could always see the sky—one old, two new, but all competing equally for faith and trust.

Lesser leaves of summers past chased each other across the open road and between the passing tread of Katie's truck as she wound her way into town.

Washington Boulevard split the town in two. The Bradford pears within the median had lost their bloom, but the Women's League made sure each trunk was always ringed in color. Parking was angular and free along the storefronts. Rusty rings of meters remained where they had been cut off at the base.

The only grocery store left downtown was Peterson's, an independent owned by Charlie and Thelma Peterson, the same odd little couple who bought it in '47. Charlie posted weekly specials in the windows,

and every passerby slowed down to look. Katie was no exception.

She crept along and read the first two signs but noticed a ragged middle-aged man step out of the liquor store next door. It was Lloyd Harper, a hunting guide and trapper who also played handyman when he wasn't too drunk to hit a nail. He made his way along Peterson's storefront and straightened his dirty red cap, then opened a bottle wrapped in a small paper sack.

Katie's usually sunny mood turned on sight, and the steering wheel followed. She jerked the truck into the first space she came to and jumped the curb. The truck barreled across the sidewalk and skidded to a stop a few inches from the wall.

Lloyd jumped back, but when he realized who it was, he made for her door. Katie unbuckled, laid back across the bench seat, and just as the door latch clicked, she kicked it open. The steel door struck Lloyd in the arm and head and sent him back against the glass. A dizzying moment later, he pushed himself off the pavement and sat up under an ad for Excedrin. As he clutched his forehead, Katie stepped out of the truck.

"You bitch!" Lloyd screamed, but Katie was focused on pulling something from behind the seat. She yanked once more, and six steel traps complete with stakes

and chains slipped free. “Nobody tells me where I can hunt!” Lloyd screamed as Katie slammed the door. “I’ll trap wherever the hell I want. And I’ll be damned if you—”

Just then she let the traps swing down from behind her back and rattle against her leg, where Lloyd could see.

“I told you to stay off my land!” Katie shouted as she stepped toward him. “And I meant it!”

She swung the traps down on him, and he covered his face with his arm. The jagged metal cut his skin, and Lloyd screamed, as did the crowd that gathered. Katie reared back to strike again but stopped.

Her hands trembled, and for a moment she could imagine beating him to death. A few seconds later, she loosened her grip, and the chains clattered to the ground between Lloyd’s outstretched legs.

He cradled his arm and tried to suck back his tears and snot. Katie bent down so that only he could hear. “I warned you before, but the next time you come on my land, you’re going to get hurt. And I don’t mean this kind of hurt,” she growled as she pressed her finger against the cut on his head. Lloyd screamed and turned away, but Katie grabbed him by the neck and pulled him back. “I mean *hurt*.”

A siren wailed as the sheriff rolled up in his white Chevy Blazer, and Katie shoved Lloyd over on his side. Bernard Peasley and his deputy, Sharon Wilcox, jumped out and met Katie at the curb.

“Katie?” the sheriff asked, relieved to see Lloyd was still alive. “What the hell’s going on?”

“I want that woman thrown in jail!” Lloyd screamed as he dried his face with the back of his hand. “She tried to kill me!” He pressed the bottle to his split lip and took a shot. A little blood in his whiskey was a familiar taste for Lloyd, and even though the alcohol set the wound aflame, he had one more just for spite. “I said arrest her!”

“Sheriff,” Katie finally said, “all I did was return a few traps that . . . that . . . creature left on my property, that’s all.”

“Yeah!” Lloyd yelled. “Look at this shit! Look what she did to my traps.” He kicked the pile of barely recognizable metal toward Bernie. Every trap had been pounded flat.

“Katie, did you do this to all of his traps?”

“Not to all of ’em,” Katie replied as she reached into the bed of her truck. “This one still works.” She tossed the trap at Lloyd with its jaws wide open. He caught it without thinking, and the teeth slammed shut on his hand. Lloyd screamed and curled into a ball as he tried

to pry it off, but the release was bent; he was stuck. Bernie rushed to his side, dropped to his knees, and looked back at Katie.

“For God’s sake, don’t you have any pity?”

Sharon took Katie by the arm.

“I’ve got no more pity for that miserable son of a bitch than he has for the animals that die in his traps! Let him try wearing one for a while!”

The sheriff forced the jaws open with the end of his flashlight, and Lloyd pulled his hand free.

“Sharon, put Miss Winston in the car, then call an ambulance for Mr. Harper.” Bernie collected the tangle of the traps from the sidewalk and stood up.

“I don’t need an ambulance!” Lloyd yelled as he tried to get up. “But she will when I get through with her.”

“That’s enough out of you!” Bernie replied as he forced Lloyd back to the ground. “I don’t care whether you go to the hospital or not, but you will let a paramedic take a look at those cuts before I let you leave.”

Lloyd protested but eventually settled back against the wall and nursed the pain with a little more booze.

“What about her?” Lloyd yelled. “I want to press charges, and I want her ass thrown in jail!”

“You sure about that?” Bernie asked.

“You’re damn right I’m sure. Just look at me!”

“If that’s the way you want it, I’ll have to arrest you too.”

“Me? What the hell did I do?”

“These traps belong to you, don’t they?” Bernie asked as he held them up.

“Yeah. So?”

“They were on her property?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, where I can certainly arrest Miss Winston for her part, you’re looking at trespassing, use of banned traps, poaching, and public drunkenness. To tell you the truth, I’d love to throw the both of you in jail, but you know as well as I do that Miss Winston will end up going home, and you’ll be riding a cot in county for more days than you’d care to count.” Lloyd leaned back against the wall and folded his arms.

“That bitch,” Lloyd finally muttered, and took another drink in defeat.

“That’s what I thought,” Bernie replied, and walked back to the patrol car as the ambulance made its way down the street.

Katie sat quietly in the back seat of the patrol car and focused her frustration on the unraveling seam of upholstery along the back of the passenger seat.

“Katie, I know how protective you are of your property and your privacy,” Bernie said as he leaned down to look her in the eye. “But I can’t have you come into town like some kind of maniac, driving on the sidewalks and beating people in the streets. I convinced Mr. Harper not to press charges, and I’m asking you to do the same. I know you think he’s a sorry excuse for a human being, and he may be, but I’d appreciate a little cooperation on this. From the looks of him, I think he got the message, so how about you leave it at that?” Katie raised her hand to argue but stopped short and took a breath. “Good. Now, you best get home. It looks like that storm’s moving this way, and I don’t want you to get caught out in it.”

Bernie stepped out of the way so Katie could get out and shook his head as he watched her walk back to her truck.

“Bitch!” Lloyd yelled, then yelled again as a paramedic wiped iodine over the cut on his head.

Katie climbed into the cab as Sharon moved the patrol car so Katie could back out. Bernie leaned on Katie’s door.

“You take care of yourself,” Bernie said, and sighed as Katie started the engine.

Lloyd took another drink, still sitting a few feet from the front bumper, and Katie slid her hand to the center

of the wheel and honked the horn. Alcohol spewed from Lloyd's nose. The bottle slipped from his hands and shattered on the ground. Bernie shook his head, and Katie gave him a crooked grin. She backed off the sidewalk, put the truck in drive, and headed home.

At the top of the hill west of town, fields soft and green stretched for miles into the distance and disappeared into the foothills. Clouds had settled atop the jagged mountains, but the occasional shaft of amber light pushed its way through. Dust scurried out of the corn, crossed the road, and disappeared among the stalks on the other side.

A cool wind blew through Katie's hair. The weather was about to change. It would take her forty minutes to get home, and the sun was about to set. She took a breath. The air was dusty, but she could smell the rain.

She'd never make it home before dark, and with her aging eyes, she accepted her fate. The paved road had lines she could follow, but the last ten miles were dirt and in places barely a road at all. Despite the challenge, she settled in for the long drive home.

It was well past dark when she turned off the pavement onto the dirt road that separated her land from her neighbor's. His land was mostly pasture, wrapped in wire with small islands of trees to give his cattle

some shade. Time and inattention meant that none of the fence posts stood as straight as the day they were set, but together they remained upright even under the strain of itchy necks.

Forest covered Katie's side of the road. Aged oak, maple, and walnut grew thick and tall, while ferns, shrubs, and saplings made the most of the shade.

The tires slapped a rhythm over roots and rock, and the taillights left behind a ruby glow in the dust. The radio added static to the music as the truck rumbled along the edge of the woods, but Katie left it on anyway.

Farther on, branches reached over the road, longing to feel the freedom of the open field on the other side. Sunlight gone, the moon sparkled over thistle thick along the fence and flickered through the trees, while shadows raced for cover as far as the headlights could see.

Credence silenced the static on the radio, and Katie turned it up. Her left foot tapped the downbeat, and she drummed the wheel with her thumbs. Never one to sing in earshot of others, she loved to sing alone. By the time she started the second chorus, though, she reached her turn, and the road got worse.

Katie never graded this part of the road, since it was rarely used, which meant it was barely a road at all, just

two dirty ruts with grass struggling to grow between. She turned the radio down and gripped the wheel.

The forest consumed her. Limbs replaced the sky, and even with her high beams on she could only see a short stretch of road. A brilliant flash of light pierced the forest, and the mirrors shook at the instant clap of thunder; the storm was nearly on her.

A few minutes later, she rolled into a clearing along the river, where a small red light flickered on both shores. Another flash split the sky, and in its pulse the bones of a rusty bridge appeared.

Katie pulled up beside a gray box at the entrance and stopped. The red bulb encased on top offered just enough light to see, and she unsnapped two keys from the ring still dangling in the ignition. She unlocked the outer door with one, opened it, and used the other to turn a lever from LOCKED to OPEN.

The light turned green, and a large metal gate marked HIGH VOLTAGE rattled up along a track into the air. Katie removed the key, closed the door, and drove onto the bridge.

She stopped midspan and watched the gate come down behind her. As soon as it did, the gate on the far side opened. Once across, she stopped and made sure the second gate closed and both turned red.

Almost home, she'd beaten the rain. The road on this side of the river was more of a road than the one she left behind. It was wider, graded, and neatly kept, with rock-filled ditches along either side to keep it from washing out. Even the soldierly trees seemed to keep their distance, but the weather had filled this side of the river with a low, dense fog.

Katie reached over to turn the radio up, hoping to catch the top-of-the-hour news, but just as her fingers touched the knob, two dark shapes raced across the road. She slammed on the brakes, jerked the wheel to the left, and skidded to a violent stop.

"Damn deer!" she barked, then straightened back up in the seat and looked out the driver's-side window.

The front left tire was dangling over the ditch, and Katie threw the truck in reverse to back out. One tire spun freely while the other three shouldered the load, but as the truck rolled back, the tread hit ground and flung stones into the darkness.

She backed up a few feet, shifted into park, and bent down to retrieve her purse from the floor.

Suddenly, there was an earsplitting crash of metal and glass and the whole truck shook.

Katie instinctively covered her head, but when she opened her eyes, she could see the windshield was

shattered and smeared with blood. She pushed herself back behind the wheel and turned off the engine so she could hear. There was something on the hood. She leaned forward for a better look but froze when she heard footsteps creeping slowly through the woods to her right.

A moment later, she saw something move. It was no more than a shadow crouched next to a tree, but it turned its head to look at the object on the hood, then back again in her direction.

Only the pale-white crescents of catchlights in its eyes glistened through the darkness as it stared; then it tilted its head.

They watched each other for a long uncomfortable moment until it blinked and darted across the road. The fog swirled where it had crossed and it was gone.

Katie looked out the driver's-side window and listened a bit longer, then opened the door. Her legs all but disappeared, and after a quick look over each shoulder she pulled a flashlight out from under the seat. Certain the creature on the hood was dead, she peered off into the woods.

The single white beam of light made little sense of the tangled limbs around her, and even less when it bounced off the fog. So, without a sign or sound of the

creature she felt certain was still out there, she turned her attention to the animal on the hood.

It was a deer, and by the size of it a young adult. She stepped around the door and stopped along the fender. The animal's stomach had been opened, and its intestines stretched all the way over the end of the hood. She sighed, looked into the trees once more, then grabbed the deer's leg.

Lightning struck much closer than before, and the sky exploded with thunder. Raindrops turned into a downpour. Katie looked up just as a shadow fell. Another animal crashed onto the hood of the truck, but unlike the deer, this one was very much alive.

Katie stumbled back as it turned and hissed. Then in a single motion it grabbed the deer and leaped over her head. The carcass struck her in the chest, and she fell backward into the ditch. Her head met a jagged stone, and in an instant she was gone.

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