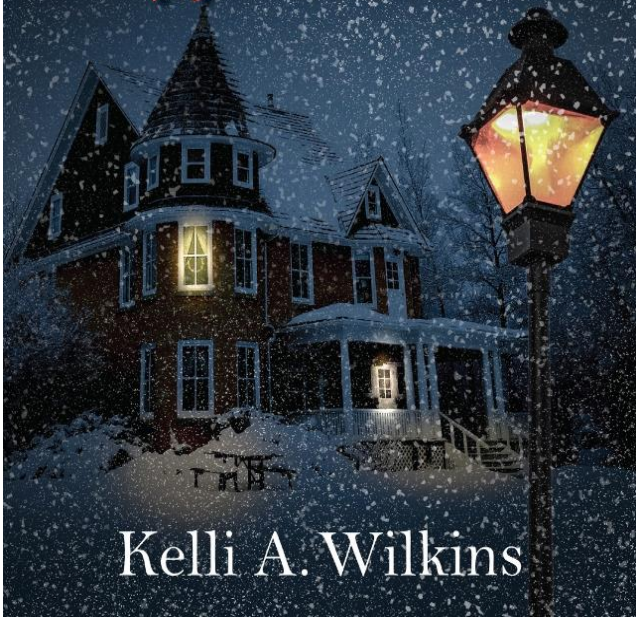


NIGHTMARE in the NORTH



Kelli A. Wilkins

*Nightmare in the
North*

By Kelli A. Wilkins

Free Sample Preview

Nightmare in the North

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Cover designed by Eve Grinnell

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DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to all the friends, family, and readers who have supported my writings over the years. I hope you enjoy this story. Writers never know where their imaginations will take them!

Special thanks to Eve Grinnell for designing this and many of my other fantastic covers. Visit her site (www.grinnellgraphics.com) to learn more about her work.

“You have reached Great Bear Lodge. In three hundred feet, turn right into the parking—”

“Are you kidding me?” Mark jabbed the power button on the navigation system, silencing it. The useless piece of shit had done nothing but get him lost.

For the last half hour he’d been listening to the robotic voice lead him deeper into the wilderness. He’d followed the GPS from one secondary road to another, and now he was lost in the backwoods of Nowhere, Vermont.

At least he *thought* he was still in Vermont. For all he knew, he could be in Canada. Then again, if he was at the border, at least there would be a sign and he could get directions from a Mountie.

He peered through the windshield, squinting into the wall of white. Fat snowflakes coated the car, and he couldn’t tell where the Camry’s hood ended and where the snow began. Who the hell rented a white car in winter? Nobody except him, obviously. He cursed and punched the steering wheel. This trip had turned into a disaster the second he’d crossed the Vermont state line.

The storm had started about four hours ago. At first it was only a few flakes, then more, and more. Then the wind kicked up, and before he knew it there was at least six inches of snow on the road. He had watched the outside thermometer drop from a balmy eight degrees to four, then two, until finally, it had settled at minus four.

There was nothing on either side of the snow-packed two lane road except more snow and a few scatterings of pine trees. He grumbled and kept driving at a whopping 10 miles an hour. He had no choice but to keep going. There was nowhere to turn around.

He probably should have stopped when he passed that house a few minutes ago. The driveway wasn't plowed, but there was a light on, and he could have asked for directions. But the house might be empty. It was the middle of February. Didn't most people up here spend the winter in Florida, or—

BAM! The loud bang snapped him from his thoughts and he yelped as the car started spinning.

“Shitshitshit!” He took his foot off the gas and steered, twisting and turning the wheel as the car slid left, then right, then spun all the way around.

Everything happened in slow motion. A cluster of pine trees went past on the left, then the car rotated again and slid sideways on the road, spinning out of control. He spotted a pine tree three feet from the front end and jerked the wheel hard, shooting the car across the street toward a ditch. “Shit!” He hit the gas and cranked the wheel again.

After a few more spins and slides, the car finally stopped. He threw the gearshift into park and slumped over the steering wheel, listening to his heart hammering in his chest. Jesus, that was close. “I hate this state. I hate winter. I swear to God I’m never coming back here,” he whispered.

He took a deep breath and straightened up. It could have been worse, much worse. He could have slammed up against a tree or went flying sideways into the ditch. If he’d gone off the road there wouldn’t be help for hours, maybe even days. He’d freeze to death. Nobody would ever find a white car out here. And if another car had been coming down the road while he’d been slipping and sliding... “Nah, nobody else is dumb enough to be out in this shit.”

But what the hell happened? He’d heard a loud bang before he spun out. Did he hit something? He unhooked his seat belt and got out of the car. Icy air

blasted him in the face as he pulled on his gloves and checked the driver's side front tire. Great, just great. It was flat.

No, not flat. He leaned closer. The tire was... shredded. "What the hell?" He walked around to the passenger side and groaned. That tire was shredded too, right down to the rim. "Beautiful. What the frig did I hit?"

He backtracked, kicking the snow in front of him. About fifty feet from the car, his boot hit something, and he heard a metallic clank. He bent down and wiped the snow away. A chain was lying in the road. Had it fallen off someone's truck?

He picked it up and scowled. This was no ordinary chain. Two-inch metal spikes jutted out from every other link, like fangs. "Shit. No wonder my tires are shot." He tried to carry the chain out of the road, then stopped as it pulled taut. "Now what?"

Careful to avoid the spikes, he lifted it higher and saw that the ends were fastened to two pine trees. "Son of a bitch." Someone had strung this chain across the road on purpose. Why? Was the road supposed to be closed for the winter?

He checked his watch. Almost 3:30. It would be dark soon. He hated to abandon the car, but he didn't like the idea of freezing to death out here. That house was only a mile or two back. If he hustled, he could make it in half an hour. He cautiously stepped over the chain and headed back the way he'd come. "Looks like I'm walking."

* * *

"Finally," Mark said, as he glimpsed the yellow glow in the distance. The light at the end of the winding driveway called to him like a lighthouse beacon. As soon as he'd left the car, the storm had intensified, and now the snow was nearly up to his knees. It was hard to walk, and the road seemed to go on forever.

A two-mile walk should have been a piece of cake, but not in this weather. The howling wind cut him to the bone, and snow had drifted in over the tops of his boots. His feet were soaked and numb. How long did it take for frostbite to set in?

He kept his gaze focused on the light and trudged on. If he got lost out here in the dark, he was screwed. Who knew what lurked in these woods? Bears? Wolves? Coyotes? What would happen if he got to the house and nobody was

home? What if the people who lived there had gone to Florida and the light was on a timer? Tough. If nobody answered the door, he'd break in. This was a matter of life and death.

Fifteen minutes later, he reached the driveway. He leaned against the mailbox to catch his breath. The large stone house had a snow-covered porch and lots of lit windows facing the road. He prayed someone was home.

He climbed the porch steps, found the doorbell, and leaned on it hard. "Come on, come on..." He rang the bell again, then went to one of the windows and looked inside. There was a light on in the living room and—

He jumped back as a woman gazed out at him. She had an oval-shaped face and straight brown hair. "Let me in," he yelled above the howling wind. "I need help!"

The young woman bolted from the room. He ran back to the door and rang the bell again. "Hey! Open up!" He pounded on the door and winced as sharp pains zapped through his hand. He half-collapsed against the door and practically toppled inside when it opened.

“Oh my God! Come in,” a man said.

He stumbled into the house and fell to his knees on a blue area rug. The heat of the house hit him in the face and he closed his eyes. *Thank God. I'm safe.*

“What happened? What are you doing out there in this storm?” the man asked from behind him. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I'm frozen. My car...” He gestured toward the door. “I had to walk.”

“Get those wet clothes off you before you get hypothermia. Stay here.”

He removed his ice-coated hat, scarf, and gloves. As he kicked off his boots, he watched snow spill out all over the rug. His socks were soaked. His feet were numb.

The man was back in less than three minutes. “Come this way.”

He forced himself to his frozen feet and shuffled down a hallway.

“Here's the bathroom. Take a hot shower. I'll get you some dry clothes.”

“Thanks.” He stripped and got into the shower, turning it up as hot as he could bear. After about ten minutes, he felt his body thawing out.

He finished the shower, then wrapped a towel around his waist and wiped the steam off the mirror. He stared at himself, not surprised to see that he looked like a drowned rat. His light brown hair was matted to his head, he needed a shave, and his brown eyes had a haunted, worried look to them. “Never again. No more trips to the woods.”

As he dried off, he saw that the man had left a set of clothes folded on a cabinet near the sink. He pulled on the sweatpants, thick socks, turtleneck, and wool sweater.

The man was waiting for him outside the door. “Feel better?”

“Yeah. I was frozen.” He studied the man for a second. He appeared to be in his mid-fifties or early sixties, six-foot-two, average build, with short brown hair, a slightly wrinkled face, brown eyes, and a square chin. He wore a green sweater and jeans.

“Come this way.”

He followed the man into a small den filled with bookcases. A fireplace roared in front of two blue wing chairs. The man extended his right hand. "I'm George Grayson. Have a seat. I'll get you a cup of hot chocolate."

"Thanks. I'm Mark Hollister. Sorry to drop in on you like this. The cocoa sounds great."

"Good. Make yourself at home. I'll be right back."

He plopped down in the nearest chair and closed his eyes. Thank God he was warm and somewhere safe.

George returned a few minutes later, carrying a mug of cocoa and a plate. "I made you a sandwich. I figured you'd be hungry."

He sipped the hot chocolate. "Wow! This is good."

George sat in the wing chair next to him. "Glad you like it. It's real hot chocolate. Homemade. None of that powdered stuff from an envelope. Some people think it's too bitter."

“No, it’s delicious. Thanks.” He took another sip. There was a faint bitter taste, but that was probably the dark chocolate.

“So, Mark, what are you doing way out here?”

“I’m having the worst day of my life. I was on my way to Jeffersonville to go skiing and I got lost. Then I ran over a chain in the middle of the road and got two flats. I’m supposed to meet my friends,” he said, then bit into the sandwich. “Can I use your phone? I should call them and tell them where I am. Maybe they can pick me up.” He paused. “Where exactly am I, anyway?”

“Outside of Greensboro. You’re an hour east of Jeffersonville, in good weather.” George shook his head. “I’m sorry, but my land line is out. The wind knocks it out every time there’s a storm. And cell coverage up here is spotty at best. Don’t worry about your friends. They’ll probably think you stopped at a motel to ride out the storm. That’s what everyone usually does.”

“Oh.” So much for being rescued tonight.
“There’s no way I could get out of here?”

“Are you kidding? You’re lucky you made it here when you did. This is the start of a Nor’easter.

Last I heard, they were predicting over a foot of snow tonight, and more tomorrow. How far did you walk? Do you know where your car is?"

"I guess about two miles or so down the road. It's hard to tell with all the snow blowing around." He sipped the cocoa and relaxed as the warmth spread to his stomach. George was right. Rick and the rest of the guys probably figured he'd bunked down somewhere once it had started snowing.

He settled into the chair and took another bite of the roast beef sandwich. It was a little rare and had a hint of spice, but it tasted pretty good.

"So, where are you from? What do you do for a living?" George asked. "Sorry to be nosy, but I get a bit lonely here by myself. It's nice to have someone to talk to."

"I'm from Jersey. I'm a customer service manager for a pharmaceutical company. Wait, you're alone here? What about the woman?"

"Woman?" George tilted his head to the side. "What woman?"

"When I came up on the porch I saw a woman looking out the window. Red sweater, long brown hair."

“You must have been mistaken. Excuse me for a minute.” George stood and left the room.

“Okay...” Had he imagined the woman? Nah. He could still see her face. He stifled a yawn. Maybe George had a secret girlfriend or he was seeing a married woman on the side. Whoever she was, he wouldn’t mention her again. What George did was none of his business. Why make trouble after George had saved his life?

He finished his sandwich, and the next thing he knew, George was standing over him. Had he dozed off?

“Would you like to lie down for a while? You must be tired. I have spare rooms upstairs.”

“Yeah, that would be great. I’m exhausted. I’ve been up since six and drove all day.” He finished his cocoa and set the cup down on the table. “What about my wet clothes?”

“I’ll take care of them, and I’ll leave your coat and boots by the fire to dry. Not that you’ll need them. You won’t be going anywhere for a while,” George said, grinning.

* * *

ALSO AVAILABLE...

Dead 'Til Dawn

Disturbing the dead doesn't prove you're brave – it proves you're stupid.

After touring Gettysburg battlefield, Jessica, Tim, and Steve decide to sneak out to the Devil's Den for some late-night fun. Jessica's friend Kathy objects, and warns them about trespassing where they're not wanted.

Undaunted by ghost stories and fueled by his own arrogance, Tim races toward the Devil's Den. When the group drives through mysterious battlefield fog, they find themselves surrounded by Civil War soldiers looking for a little fun of their own.

Kathy leaves the others to fend for themselves and flees to Little Round Top. Although she's rescued by a kindhearted Union soldier named Charlie, she refuses to believe that what she's experiencing is real. As the nighttime battle rages on, Charlie introduces Kathy to other weary soldiers, and she quickly realizes she's trapped in the land of the dead... until dawn.

Kropsy's Curse

Late one Halloween night, two young boys venture into a secluded graveyard in the hopes of conjuring up a spirit. Although Kyle is skeptical and would rather be home eating candy and watching horror movies, he reluctantly goes along with Jerry's plan. He doesn't believe Ouija boards work—until this one starts spelling out a message...

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Mistresses of the Macabre

Moon Shadows

Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine #14

What If...

Wrapped in White

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelli A. Wilkins is an award-winning author who has published more than 100 short stories, 19 romance novels, and 5 non-fiction books. Although she writes steamy romance, she's also been known to scare readers with her horror stories.

Kelli's horror fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies, including *The Big Bad Anthology of Evil*, *Dark Things II: Cat Crimes*, *Haunted: An Anthology of the Supernatural*, *What If...*, *Wrapped in White*, and *Mistresses of the Macabre*. She has also published two horror ebooks: *Kropsy's Curse* and *Dead 'Til Dawn*.

Her writing book, *You Can Write—Really! A Beginner's Guide to Writing Fiction* is a fun and informative guide filled with writing exercises and helpful tips all authors can use.

Kelli posts on her Facebook author page: <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorKelliWilkins> and Twitter: www.Twitter.com/KWilkinsauthor. She also writes a weekly blog: <http://kelliwilkinsauthor.blogspot.com/>.

Visit her website, www.KelliWilkins.com to learn more about all of her writings, read book excerpts,

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