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#1 BESTSELLER

STEPHEN KING



DESPERATION

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For Carter Withey

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—S.K.

The landscape of his poetry

was stitt the desert . . .

Salman Rushdie

The Satanic Verses

PART I

**HIGHWAY 50: IN THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF, THE HOUSE OF
THE SCORPION**

CHAPTER 1

1

“Oh! Oh, Jesus! Gross!”

“What, Mary, what?”

“Didn’t you see it?”

“See what?”

She looked at him, and in the harsh desert sunlight he saw that a lot of the color had gone out of her face, leaving just the marks of sunburn on her cheeks and across her brow, where not even a strong sunblock cream would entirely protect her. She was very fair and burned easily.

“On that sign. That speed-limit sign.”

“What about it?”

“There was a dead cat on it, Peter! Nailed there or glued there or some damned thing.” He hit the brake pedal. She grabbed his shoulder at once. “Don’t you even think about going back.”

“But—”

“But what? Did you want to take a picture of it? No way, José. If I have to look at that again, I’ll throw up.”

“Was it a white cat?” He could see the back of a sign in the rearview mirror—the speed-limit sign she was talking about, presumably—but that was all. And when they’d passed it, he had been looking off in the other direction, at some birds flying toward the nearest wedge of mountains. Strictly attending to the highway was not something one had to do every second out here; Nevada called its stretch of U.S. 50 “The Loneliest Highway in America,” and in Peter Jackson’s opinion, it lived up to its billing. Of course he was a

New York boy, and he supposed he might be suffering a cumulative case of the creeps. Desert agoraphobia, Ballroom Syndrome, something like that.

“No, it was a tiger-stripe,” she said. “What difference does it make?”

“I thought maybe Satanists in the desert,” he said. “This place is supposed to be filled with weirdos, isn’t that what Marielle said?”

“‘Intense’ was the word she used,” Mary said. “‘Central Nevada’s full of intense people.’ Quote-unquote. Gary said pretty much the same. But since we haven’t seen *anybody* since we crossed the California state line—”

“Well, in Fallon—”

“Pit-stops don’t count,” she said. “Although even there, the people ...” She gave him a funny, helpless look that he didn’t see often in her face these days, although it had been common enough in the months following her miscarriage. “Why are they here, Pete? I mean, I can understand Vegas and Reno ... even Winnemucca and Wendover...”

“The people who come from Utah to gamble there call Wendover Bend Over,” Peter said, grinning. “Gary told me that.”

She ignored him. “But the rest of the state ... the people who *are* here, why do they come and why do they stay? I know I was born and raised in New York, so probably I can’t understand, but—”

“You’re sure that wasn’t a white cat? Or a black one?” He glanced back into the rearview, but at just under seventy miles an hour, the speed-limit sign had already faded into a mottled background of sand, mesquite, and dull brown foothills. There was finally another vehicle behind them, though; he could see a hot sunstar reflection pricking off its windshield. Maybe a mile back. Maybe two.

“No, tiger-stripe, I told you. Answer my question. Who are the central Nevada taxpayers, and what’s in it for them?”

He shrugged. “There *aren’t* many taxpayers out here. Fallon’s the biggest town on Highway 50, and that’s mostly farming. It says in the guidebook that they dammed their lake and made irrigation possible. Cantaloupes is what they grow, mostly. And I think there’s a military base nearby. Fallon was a Pony Express stop, did you know that?”

“I’d leave,” she said. “Just pick up my cantaloupes and go.”

. He touched her left breast briefly with his right hand. “That’s a nice set of cantaloupes, ma’am.”

“Thanks. Not just Fallon, either. Any state where you can’t see a house or even a tree, in any direction, and they nail cats to speed-limit signs, I’d leave.”

“Well, it’s a zone-of-perception thing,” he said, speaking carefully. Sometimes he couldn’t tell when Mary was serious and when she was just gassing, and this was one of those times. “As someone who was raised in an urban environment, a place like the Great Basin is just outside your zone, that’s all. Mine too, for that matter. The sky alone is enough to freak me out. Ever since we left this morning, I’ve felt it up there, pressing down on me.”

“Me, too. There’s too goddam much of it.”

“Are you sorry we came this way?” He glanced up into the rearview and saw the vehicle behind them was closer now. Not a truck, which was just about all they’d seen since leaving Fallon (and all headed the other way, west), but a car. Really burning up the road, too.

She thought about it, then shook her head. “No. It was good to see Gary and Marielle, and Lake Tahoe—”

“Beautiful, wasn’t it?”

“Incredible. Even this ...” Mary looked out the window. “It’s not without beauty, I’m not saying that. And I suppose I’ll remember it the rest of my life. But it’s ...”

“. . . creepy,” he finished for her. “If you’re from New York, at least.”

“Damned right,” she said. “Urban Zone of Perception. And even if we’d taken 1-80, it’s all desert.”

“Yep. Tumbling tumbleweeds.” He looked into the mirror again, the lenses of the glasses he wore for driving glinting in the sun. The oncomer was a police-car, doing at least ninety. He squeezed over toward the shoulder until the righthand wheels began to rumble on the hardpan and spume up dust.

“Pete? What are you doing?”

Another look into the mirror. Big chrome grille, coming up fast and reflecting such a savage oblong of sun that he had to squint . . . but he thought the car was white, which meant it wasn’t the State Police.

“Making myself small,” Peter said. “Wee sleekit cowrin beastie. There’s a cop behind us and he’s in a hurry. Maybe he’s got a line on—”

The police-car blasted by, making the Acura which belonged to Peter’s sister rock in its backwash. It was indeed white, and dusty from the doorhandles down. There was a decal on the side, but the car was gone before Pete caught more than a glimpse of it. DES-something. Destry, maybe. That was a good name for a Nevada town out here in the big lonely.

“—on the guy who nailed the cat to the speed-limit sign,” Peter finished.

“Why’s he going so fast with his flashers off?”

“Who’s there to run them for out here?”

“Well,” she said, giving him that odd-funny look again, “there’s us.”

He opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. She was right. The cop must have been seeing them for at least as long as they’d been seeing him, maybe longer, so why *hadn’t* he flipped on his lights and flashers, just to be safe? Of course Peter had known enough to get over on his own, give the cop as much of the road as he possibly could, but still—

The police car's taillights suddenly came on. Peter hit his own brake without even thinking of it, although he had already slowed to sixty and the cruiser was far enough ahead so there was no chance of a collision. Then the cruiser swerved over into the westbound lane.

"What's he doing?" Mary asked.

"I don't know, exactly."

But of course he knew: he was slowing down. From his cut-em-off-at-the-pass eighty-five or ninety he had dropped to fifty. Frowning, not wanting to catch up and not knowing why, Peter slowed even more himself. The speedometer of Deirdre's car dropped down toward forty.

"Peter?" Mary sounded alarmed. "Peter, I don't like this."

"It's all right," he said, but was it? He stared at the cop-car, now tooling slowly up the westbound lane to his left, and wondered. He tried to get a look at the person behind the wheel and couldn't. The cruiser's rear window was caked with desert dust.

Its taillights, also caked with dust, flickered briefly as the car slowed even more. Now it was doing barely thirty. A tumbleweed bounced into the road, and the cruiser's radial tires crushed it under. It came out the back looking to Peter Jackson like a nestle of broken fingers. All at once he was frightened, very close to terror, in fact, and he hadn't the slightest idea why.

Because Nevada's full of intense people, Marielle said so and Gary *agreed*, and this is how intense people act. In a word, weird.

Of course that was bullshit, this really wasn't weird, not very weird, anyhow, although—

The cop-car taillights flickered some more. Peter pressed his own brake in response, not even thinking about what he was doing for a second, then looking at the speedometer and seeing he was down to twenty-five.

"What does he want, Pete?"