

Excerpt from *Dam Witherston* (Black Opal Books, 2017) by Betty Jean Craige

## PROLOGUE

Mayor Rich Rather grabbed his cell phone when a beep signaled the arrival of an email. "Excuse me," he said to Trevor Bennington, Jr., President of Bennington Financial Services and member of the Witherston Town Council. "I'm expecting an estimate from Appalachian Landscape Contractors." He opened his email.

From: Donna Dam (donotreply@xxx.com)  
To: Rich Rather

PAYBACK TIME  
Fri 03/10/2017 9:31 AM.

Dear Mayor Rather:

Do you remember what you were doing on the night of November 5-6, 1977? I bet you do. You will pay for it.

There is a wooden shed 1/4 mile upstream from Withers Fork on east bank of Saloli Stream. It's on the Zamora property. Bring \$9,900 in cash at 5:00 pm tomorrow. Leave the money in an envelope inside on the table. If you do not show up on time, I will go public with your secret.

Donna Dam

Sent from my iPhone

"Anything wrong, Rich?"

"No, nothing, nothing at all. Thanks, Trevor." Rich stood up. "But I'm afraid I've got other business to attend to. I'm sorry to be cutting our meeting short. So sorry."

The mayor showed him out of his office and deleted the email.

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Grant Griggs sat down for Friday morning coffee with Patrick Davis, President of Witherston Savings and Loan. As was their custom at the Witherston Inn Cafe they'd taken a back table.

"Looks like Rich will give the contract to Appalachian Lakescape Contractors, Grant," Patrick said. "I lobbied him hard."

"Thanks, Patrick. I promise that will work out for both of us."

Grant's cell phone beeped.  
"Do you mind if I check my email, Patrick? I'm expecting a message from Phyllis Graph."

From: Donna Dam (donotreply@xxx.com)  
To: Grant Griggs

PAYBACK TIME  
Fri 03/10/2017 9:31 AM.

Dear Mr. Griggs:

Do you remember what you were doing on the night of November 5-6, 1977? I bet you do. You will pay for it.

There is a wooden shed 1/4 mile upstream from Withers Fork on east bank of Saloli Stream. It's on the Zamora property. Bring \$9,900 in cash at 5:00 pm tomorrow. Leave the money in an envelope inside on the table. If you do not show up on time, I will go public with your secret.

Donna Dam

Sent from my iPhone

"Shit," Grant muttered. "Patrick, I'm sorry to have to leave you, but I've got to see a client. I must go now." He deleted the email and walked out of the restaurant.

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Red Wilker was vacuuming the stuffed black bear the taxidermist had just delivered to Wilker's Gun Shop when he got the email.

From: Donna Dam (donotreply@xxx.com)  
To: Red Wilker

PAYBACK TIME  
Fri 03/10/2017 9:31 AM.

Dear Mr. Wilker:

Would you like for the people of Witherston to know that you are buying up property in Saloli Valley with inside information about the proposed lake? I bet you wouldn't.

There is a wooden shed 1/4 mile upstream from Withers Fork on east bank of Saloli Stream. It's on the Zamora property. Bring \$5,000 in cash at 5:00 pm tomorrow. Leave the money in an envelope inside on the

table. If you do not show up on time, I will go public with your secret.  
And you could get jail time.

Donna Dam

Sent from my iPhone

"What the duck is this? Look, Grace. Who in creation is Donna Dam?" He handed his cell phone to his wife.

Grace read the email. "Is she referring to your land buy-outs in Saloli Valley?"

"How could she find that out? How could anybody?"

"Rich knows. Grant knows. Phyllis knows. Patrick knows."

"They all have a stake in the lake. They won't be talking."

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't ask. You don't need to know."

Red deleted the email.