

## Chapter One: A Long, Romantic Weekend

### **US Highway 24, Kansas, 2006**

When Richard and Flora set out from Manhattan Kansas, it was nice. After a week of burying heat, a cool front had dragged across the land, like a bride's white train, dropping temperatures and easing tempers. It only rained at night, and people rose to a rinsed-clean landscape with moist soil that smelled like cut cucumbers.

They drove east in a gorgeous car, Richard's reward to himself. Flora surprised him by having it washed and waxed and professionally detailed Thursday night, the day before they left for a long romantic weekend. The car looked so good that Richard didn't mention what a waste it was to wash the car when there was heavy rain in the forecast and they'd just get covered with highway dust anyway. He thought it, but he didn't say it, the same way Flora didn't say anything when he put the top down without asking. Her hair, which she'd had cut Wednesday and was intended to look wild and carefree and romantic, twisted in the wind to a frizzy, tangled mess. She didn't say anything and even tried to enjoy the sensation of the wind streaming across her. She tried to relax. She tried very, very hard to be footloose and fun-loving.

"She runs like a dream!" Richard said.

"What?" Flora replied, raising her voice over the wind.

"Like a dream!" he bellowed back.

"Oh!" She raised a hand and briefly massaged the front of her throat. "Yes! It's purring like a kitten!"

Florenzia Turner was thirty-five years old. On the leftmost extremity of her lower jaw she had three small craters scars, barely the size of pinheads. When she was ten she'd gotten the chicken pox and she'd popped the pustules there before her grandmother rapped her knuckles so hard with a ruler that Florenzia was able to resist that itching urge with all the rest. The palm of her right hand had an inch-long mark from a shard of broken beer bottle. When she was eight, she'd tripped while playing and, unseeing, had reached down to catch herself. If the shard hadn't been lying in the dust, and the wound hadn't gotten very dirty, and her grandmother hadn't widened the injury scrubbing it vigorously, there might have been no mark at all. As it was, time had faded it to a thin thread. Her last and largest scar was on the back of her right thigh, the memento of a dog bite when she was fourteen and trespassing. The oval of rough white knobs was startling against the smooth

tan curve of her leg. There were a lot of cute little dresses and tennis shorts that were denied her because she always wanted it hidden. Even when swimming, she brought a robe or a sarong to cover it.

They were driving along a stretch of highway that was absolutely flat, absolutely straight, and absolutely empty. Richard decided to floor it and see what his baby could really do, just as a particularly fat mayfly cruised across the road. It was at the level of the windshield's top edge and would have splattered on it spectacularly if it had been just an inch lower. Instead, the cushion of air in front of the speeding car thrust it over the top like a surfer, then down on a fatal collision course with Flora's forehead.

"Oh! Fuck! Fuck, oh, oh," Flora said, then degenerated into Spanish curses. Richard looked over, alarmed.

"What?"

"Pull over!"

"Are you okay?"

"Pull over!"

He complied, with a plume of dust and a growl of shoulder-screed.

"Are you all right?" His seatbelt was off and he was leaning across the gearshift toward her, his ice-blue eyes wrinkled in concern. "What happened?"

"A bug!" Flora was rummaging through her purse and scraping her forehead with a tissue. "A bug smashed my head!" She flipped down the mirror on the sun visor.

Richard's face relaxed into relief, and if he'd stopped there all might have been well, but he relaxed still further and started laughing.

Flora stopped what she was doing and slowly lowered her hands into her

lap. Richard tried to smother his laughter, but when he saw her shoulders sink and understood that she was deliberately trying to calm herself, doing her yoga breathing, he couldn't help but erupt into chortles again.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I'm just..."

"Is this funny to you? Do I look funny?"

"No, it's not, you don't, really it's..."

He swallowed hard and then a fresh peal of giggles bubbled up, blocked by his locked jaws but echoing out his nose. Not pretty. He looked down at his lap.

"You seem awfully damn amused for someone who doesn't see anything funny." She crumpled the soiled tissue and deliberately dropped it on the floor, not in the plastic bag hung from the dash lighter specifically for incidental road garbage.

"Flora, I thought you were hurt! I thought that, I don't know, a piece of gravel got kicked up or that something flew into your eye! I'm relieved you're okay. That's what it is. Honest." He risked a glance at her and that did it. He had to laugh again. "I'm sorry," he gasped. "So sorry..."

"And yet, I think you could be sorrier." When she was upset, her accent got a little more pronounced. She said "And jet, I tink".

"You look so serious."

"Forgive me for wanting to look nice on our romantic getaway."

He turned to her, and he meant his smile to be conciliatory and entreating and wry, but Flora saw coy smugness.

"You're beautiful when you're angry?" he tried.

"You keep laughing and I'll be ravishing," she said. "Put the top up."

"Flor..."

"Which one of these chrome knobs does it?" she asked, reaching across. She started poking the dashboard.

"Hey, quit!"

"What, worried I'll hurt it? Hurt your baby?"

He closed his eyes, pressed his lips together and reached down to push a button. The cover rose behind them with the silent poise of German engineering.

"I'm sorry you're upset, Flora. I apologize for my reaction."

She snorted and looked away, but her posture thawed a little.

All might have been well if he hadn't said, "Still, you have to admit it's kind of funny. The situation, I mean."

"Let's just get to the bed and breakfast," she said.

RICHARD TURNER WAS THIRTY-FOUR AND HAD BEEN MARRIED TO FLORENZIA FOR ELEVEN YEARS. On the left side of the crown of his head, there was a shallow crescent about an inch and a half long, white and hairless but usually hidden. When he was twelve, he hadn't heard his father's warning and failed to duck out of the way of a swinging boom on their sailboat. It hadn't been enough to knock him out, but he'd cried all the way back to the dock. Sometimes when he touched it while combing, he could still picture his father's white knuckles on the tiller. He had an appendectomy scar, and a set of thin straight lines bracketing his left knee. He'd had arthroscopic surgery on it when he was a freshman in college, and then again just two years ago. The surgery mark on his left ankle

was thicker, more like a zipper, and had a powdering of white-dot circles around it. He'd taken a strange misstep while running towards third during his first Little League playoff. He'd stepped on the outside rim of his foot, crunching in the ankle. He thought he might have escaped with just a sprain if his right foot hadn't managed to come down flat on top of it. The round scars were from his spikes.

"This is nice, isn't it?" he said, after about ten miles of wordless driving. "Just the two of us, alone together on the open road?"

"Alone together," Flora echoed, looking out the window.

"With the top up, we can talk, at least. Without shouting."

"Is that why you wanted it down, before?"

Richard tightened his grip on the wheel and ground his teeth together. At that moment, his hands looked just as his father's had, on that boat trip years ago, but he didn't make the connection. He just kept silent.

Another five miles passed and Flora turned on the radio to a squall of static.

"Why isn't 89.5 coming in?" she asked.

"How about," Richard started, then checked himself. Flora looked over. He'd been about to say, 'How about we give NPR a rest?' with the subtext really being 'How about we give your political involvement a rest and try to concentrate on loving each other a little bit instead of dissecting the latest political outrage that no one except the commentators on NPR seem to give a damn about?' But he aborted that phrase, cleared his throat for cover, and said, "How

about some music? If you can't find the station you like."

Flora shrugged and poked buttons. Britney Spears sang out and they both winced, she hit "seek" again. The Rolling Stones. Her lower lip tightened and she moved on. A baseball game. She skipped that one fast and landed on the blaring voice of a morning DJ.

"There are some CDs in the glove compartment," Richard said. "I got one of those George Winston ones."

"You don't like George Winston."

"Yes, but you do."

She looked at him and smiled, just a little. "That's sweet." She reached down to turn off the radio and continued the gesture to put her hand on his knee.

"I'm trying," he said.

"Is it that hard?"

Richard didn't look over, he bit his lip and tried to find an answer that would thread the needle of the acceptable. "No, of course not, it's easy," would be, he figured, a transparent lie. On the other hand, a more honest "It's sure harder than it used to be" might just re-ignite an argument. Tough call.

"Anything worth doing takes work," he finally said.

Flora narrowed her eyes, but was about to let it pass when there was a loud noise and the car lurched right.

WHEN THE TIRE BLEW, RICHARD'S MIND SNAPPED INTO FOCUS. He didn't pause to wonder what had happened, he didn't internally bewail his bad luck. He had no emotional reaction at all.

"What happened? Richard, what...?"

Instead he simply acted, without hesitation or second guesses. He gripped the wheel and turned into the skid, but gently. His muscles were locked in opposition to each other but he didn't panic and oversteer, he clenched for maximum delicacy, and it was the same with the brake, he didn't slam it on but pumped it with a tight sequence of regulated taps. (The ABS would have done it for him, but he didn't give it a chance. He wasn't going to rely on the car for something he could do himself.)

"Richard!"

He kept control.

The car coasted to a stop on the gravel shoulder. For a few moments, Richard just sat, his hands still locked on the wheel, his foot still inflexible over the brake pedal.

"Richard, what happened? Did we blow a tire?"

He relaxed, and slowly reached down to turn on the hazard lights. "I think so. I'll get out and check."

"Sweet Mary mother of God," Florenzia said, pressing a hand to her heart. "I don't believe this! I thought you said this was such a wonderful car!"

"It is a good car," Richard said mildly. He took a deep breath and unbuckled his seatbelt. Florenzia did the same and soon they were peering at their flat tire.

"I hope we didn't damage the rim," Richard said, as the first drop of rain hit the back of his neck. He sighed.

"Pop the trunk already," Flora said. With his keychain remote, Richard did. She started humming as she pulled out her big suitcase, his slightly smaller one, the hanging bag they shared and the little carryon with

toiletries and extras. She asked herself why they needed so much luggage for a long weekend and remembered all the extra clothes she'd packed – casually nice clothes for a good dinner, formal ones if they found (somewhere) a really good restaurant, an extra sweatshirt in case it was unseasonably chilly, a twin set in case it was chilly and they were going somewhere nice... Richard joined her and together they flipped up the trunk lining to reveal the jack and the temporary tire.

"You know, if we'd taken the Jetta we'd have a full-sized spare." Flora said it before she could stop herself. Richard ignored it and started in on the wingnut holding all the gear together. By the time it was off, the rain was a gentle pitter-pat.

"I can get it," he said, as Florenzia reached for the spare.

"I'll help."

"Take these, then," he said. She carried the jack to the front of the car and set it on the ground. Just ten minutes ago it had been dust. In another ten, it would be mud.

"You'll ruin those jeans," she said, as he knelt to push the jack under the axle.

"I packed slacks," he said. "I don't have anything else. Besides, I'd like to change this before it really comes down. Why don't you sit inside? At least one of us can stay dry."

"I'll help," she said. "I'll pack things up again."

Richard almost pointed out that they'd need to unpack them to get the jack put away, but then decided he'd let it go in the tiny backseat – yes, the mud-stained jack would go on the leather backseat she'd had detailed because she insisted on packing the fucking bags up right away. Then he told

himself it could go on the floor, and then he was able to concentrate on turning the jack and raising the car.

The quiet white noise of the rain covered the sound of a zipper. When Flora closed the trunk he half expected the car to come off the jack and crush his hands somehow, but she was careful to do it gently, he had to give her that. He glanced over just in time to see her pull her dress off over her head.

"Flora!"

"What?" Her door was open and she tossed the dress inside, reaching for her freshly unpacked sweatshirt and jeans. For just a moment she was standing by the road in nothing but sandals, a camisole and skimpy white satin panties. Her hair was tossed and wild and he remembered how crazy horny he'd gotten over her once, back before they were married, when his mom hated the whole idea.

"What if someone drives by?" he asked weakly.

She looked up the empty highway, then down it, then shrugged. "He'll see me saving a two-hundred dollar dress from getting ruined." In moments she was dressed, suddenly shapeless and sodden, watching while he fitted the tire iron to a lugnut.

He grunted and there was a crack of thunder as he wished he'd packed some WD-40, even as another part of him realized how ridiculously over-cautious that would have been. If they hadn't needed it. But it was raining and the jack handle was wet and it did not want to turn. He leaned his weight, trying to jolt it loose, and instead his hand slipped off the end, the rough metal scoring his palm with pain.

“Dammit!”

“Let me help,” Flora said.

“I’ve got it.”

She didn’t bother to contradict him, just wrapped her hands around the other end and said, “On three?”

“One... two... three.” She strained up while he jammed down hard, keeping a tighter grip this time, and they got a few degrees’ turn out of it. “One, two, three,” and the thunder pealed again but this time the nut turned more, not all the way around and not loose, but he could move it steadily and soon had it off. He tried to get Flora back in the car again but she refused and the same sort of effort removed the other four nuts, by which time the rain had gone from intermittent spatters to a steady hiss, and then the individual drops merged into thin straight streams coming down at gusting angles. When the tire was off the cords of rain were thick as yarn and rebounding off the ground an inch with each gusting impact.

Both of them were soaked right through.

Richard paused to take a deep, rainy breath, then looked at his wife and said, “Hey, I promised you romance, didn’t I?”

Flora’s hair was now plastered down in waves as its natural wiriness fought the water’s weight. She didn’t wear much makeup, but what she had was running. Her expression was bleak and flat.

Then the corner of her mouth quirked up and one hand rose to fling her hair back out of her face. She reached out for Richard and he gasped a little at how cold her hands felt, she was clammy as she pressed against him. The kiss brought him no fire, just a distant appreciation of the gesture to offset

his impatience to get the damn tire on already, but he kissed her back. He was trying.

The next thunderbolt was close, appallingly bright and deafeningly loud. They both jumped, came apart and reached for the temporary tire.

Each of them was trying to figure out who had accidentally kicked the lug nuts into the tall grass when the siren started up.

### **Manhattan, Kansas, 2002**

“That’s it! I’m out! I had it with you!”

Flora screamed it, and she was upset enough to pronounce ‘you’ as ‘joo’. Even though her face was only about eight inches from Richard’s, she yelled it as loudly as she could.

In response, he gave her a cold, disdainful stare and said, “Your breath reeks of garlic.”

He turned his back and started to stalk away and she grabbed the first thing that came to hand from the mantelpiece, a framed photograph of him with her mother. She came very close to flinging it at the back of his head like a vertical Frisbee. Thinking about it later, she wondered what stopped her. It was a heavy picture frame and, even angry, she’d known it might really hurt if it caught him with a corner. Besides, the symbolism of the gesture was a little too pat, a little too contrived, a little too made-for-the-Oxygen-Network movie. She set it back down and shouted, “This is all your fault.”

“I hardly think it is,” he said mildly, back still turned, walking away at a controlled pace. “You’re the adulteress, don’t expect to get a penny of my money.”

“You’ll never prove it,” she hissed (because there was nothing to prove

beyond two lunches, five dinners, some hesitant kissing on a park bench and a more passionate embrace in a coat closet, which Florenzia had cut short for fear of discovery) “And besides, I don’t give a shit about your money.”

“Oh really?” That got him to turn. She could tell from the look in his eye that he had a good reply and wanted to watch it hurt. “I paid for your pretty new smile and I paid for your philosophy degree but it was never about my money? Come now. Why not admit that you’ve gotten the leg-up you needed and are now too embarrassed to be dependent on me?”

“Me? Dependent on you? You made me answer the phone the first year we were married in case it was your mother on the line, and I’m dependent?”

“How’s it going to look in court, dear? Really, it’s a shame you’re not a better gold-digger. Then you’d have kept me happier in order to stay on the gravy train. But at some point your pride must have overwhelmed your greed.”

“You’re right about the pride,” she said. “I’ll hold my head a lot higher when I’m not pinned to your gloomy, lifeless ass. If I’d married you for money, I’d have earned every cent!”

“Good for you. Pity I didn’t get a better value on my investment.”

“What, like a son?”

He turned white when she said that, and for a moment she thought he was going to hit her. She suspected that if he did she’d hit back and neither one of them would be able to stop. But instead his shoulders dropped and his hands opened and she saw tears fall quietly from one eye.

“Or a daughter,” he said, and then she was crying too.

### **US Highway 24, Kansas, 2006**

When they heard the alarms, Richard and Florenzia looked up at each other’s faces. He almost said, “Is that a tornado siren?” and she almost said, “That’s not a tornado siren, is it?” but it was no use. They knew.

With wordless competence, he fitted the tire on the axel while she squatted and started gathering lug nuts. He didn’t look, just held back his hand and she put one in.

“They’re lost,” she said.

“What?”

“They scattered. I have two more.”

He nodded. “Start them on the two bottom screws,” he said. “Get them as tight as you can with your fingers, then look for the others.”

She obeyed, twisting one with each hand, and he was spinning the tire iron right above her, its arms were inches from her face and it kept batting at her wrists and the backs of her hands, then he had it locked as tight as he could and moved it to one of the remaining nuts while she backed off, beating the high grass with her hands and glaring into the muddy dim.

“Got one!”

“Start it,” he said with a grunt, and as she did he put the last twists on the third. “Four out of five, that’s not bad.” The rain was slowing, but the drops were bigger and coming down at sharper angles, driven hard by increasing winds. They hit like tiny fists.

“Get in and start the car,” he said, and he had to raise his voice now.

“Keys!”

“Front right pocket.” She reached in and ran around the hood, slipping on the muddy gravel, and as she turned the key the roar of the BMW engine made her very, very glad that they weren’t in the Jetta.

He yanked open the passenger door and slammed himself in, throwing the jack handle in the back. “Go.”

She put her foot hard on the gas, and there was a spin of gravel, and the car moved forward another foot into the ditch.

“Reverse!” he said, but she was already shifting gears and this time she patted the gas, little surges but it was no good. She remembered hearing, once, that ground is at its very slipperiest right after being rained on, before any residual oil or material gets a chance to wash off. She thought she’d heard it on NPR.

Hearing the engine struggle, Richard flung the door open and stumbled through the rain. He drove himself into the front grille, low, arms reaching under the bumper.

“Fuuuuckerrrrr...” he growled, digging his feet in against the sandy, shifting roadside. Then it was just a wordless, grunting howl into the wind as he pushed. He felt it in his back, in the spot that always got sore when he weeded the flowerbed, he felt it in his knee, a curious dry grinding inside him amidst the water all around, but he felt it most in the ankle, in the bones and the tendons and the steel pin. It had twinged all day from the pressure drop of impending rain. Now his efforts made pain, deep and hot. He tried to lift and press, then flung himself on the hood to pin the car down, give it traction, and he strained. He felt the car shift, and he was stumbling forward as brief gravel fountains surged near his

shoulders. The ankle gave one parting sting as he stepped heavy and crooked on the drop-off into the ditch.

Flora was shifting to drive as he climbed in, and as soon as his seatbelt was sliding across his chest she hit the gas.

“Easy!” he said. Her jackrabbit start had slammed the door for him. Instead of answering, she reached down to turn up the radio. She’d found a scratchy station.

“...national weather service has issued a...” A burst of static hit with a bright stroke of lightning off to their right, and the thunder was almost on top of it. Close, then. “...Tornadoes have been sighted in the following counties...”

“How much speed can a donut tire take again?” Florenzia asked.

“Forty-five miles an hour, I think.”

“How fast is a cyclone?”

### **Manhattan, Kansas, 2005**

“I’ve been thinking it over,” Richard said, “And... this isn’t working, Flor. I think we should get a divorce. I think we need one.” He said it over after-dinner coffee. He’d worked late, she’d been at a seminar, they’d made eggs with peppers.

“What?” Florenzia said. “Dios mio, I don’t believe this.”

“Flora...”

“I don’t believe this! Two years of marriage counseling and you’re ready to throw in the towel now? You are such a quitter!”

“It’s not...”

“I thought we were okay! I mean, I thought we were finally okay, that you’d forgiven me for all that... stupidity with Duane.”



"This isn't about Duane, it's about us. Look. We're too different. Being married we're not... it's out of balance, Flora."

"Is that the best you can do? 'Out of balance'? What does that even mean?"

"Florenzia..."

"I know my name, you don't need to keep saying it. Come on, what's your real complaint? Am I bad in bed? Going to drag up that whole gold-digger thing again? Don't need me around now that your mommy's dead?"

"Let's try and do this without cheap shots," Richard said.

"Oh, God forbid that anything be unpleasant when you're telling me I'm a failure as a wife and that you want to get rid of me!"

"You're not a failure, Flora, we are. Do you really like who you are around me? Because I feel like I'm a different person when I get home, someone tense and uneasy who doesn't know how to act. I'm more comfortable, more confident, talking to strangers than I am talking with you."

"That hurts."

"I know. It hurts me too. That's why I think we're both better off."

"Look, those strangers don't know you and you don't know them. I love you Richard." He flinched and she grimaced. "It's not pretty love," she said, "It's not all smushy Valentines and curling up by the fire but without you I'd be a smaller person. I'd still be... I'd..."

He held up his hands to keep her from finishing. It was clear she didn't really want to. "I'm glad, Flora. Really. You're an

incredible woman and if I was any part of that I'm proud. But I don't think you want to have to be grateful to me forever, and I don't think I want you to be resentful."

She sat down and sagged. "Have I been? Resentful, I mean."

"It doesn't..."

"No," she said. "It matters."

They sat there for a few minutes, quiet. They'd just redone their kitchen, and it was beautiful. "There isn't anyone else," she said, and it wasn't really a question.

"Of course not."

She nodded, and when she spoke her voice was surprisingly calm. Detached. Rational. "Have you really thought about starting over?"

"What do you mean?"

"Meeting someone else? Finding her? Getting to know her? Trust? Seeing her through bad times, and learning her past, and fitting in with her family? All those things we finally did. How long did it take us, Richard? Do you think that's something you can get again, quickly?"

"If I don't..."

"Richard, we both know you couldn't be alone. Could you?"

"I could try it."

"Do you want to?"

He looked down at his hands. "No."

"You're the rational man. Does it really make sense to try again, from scratch, when your first try took so long, and was so hard, and still wound up 'out of balance'? Or do you think we just might be able to make a go of it? That after patching things up for two years we might be getting close to being finished?"

"Do you think we'll ever be finished?"

“Do you think any marriage really ever is?” She reached across for him. “I want to try, Richard.”

He pulled his hand away.

### **US Highway 24, Kansas, 2006**

The radio warnings were staticky and Richard was fishing around in the glove compartment for a map. “There’s got to be something nearby,” he said, “That siren came from somewhere...”

“My phone has GPS,” Flora said, peering intently through the windshield. The rain had thickened to downpour again, and even at full strength the wipers only provided brief moments of clarity. All there was to see, even through clean glass, were gray curtains of falling water. There was a hint of pavement beneath, yellow smudges of lane markers, a suggestion of plants by the side of the road, but it was like driving through a waterfall.

“Mine too. Tried it. No carrier.” He grimaced as the map stuck, tangled, it tore a little and then it was open. “Okay,” he said. “We’re here on twenty-four, about... no way to see a mile marker, but the town of Clay Center should be coming up...”

“The sky is green,” Flora said, and there was a quiver in her voice. “Tornadoes do that, they turn the sky green...”

“Just keep it steady Flor, you can do this, Clay Center is coming, just keep control...”

She only had a moment’s warning. The road curved left, and without the rain she’d easily have seen it, and without the spare tire the car’s excellent suspension would have taken it, and without the slick sheen of water

on the asphalt she still might have managed the turn. But no. She shrieked, she jerked the wheel and they both felt the car go from driving to skidding. She dropped her right hand to clutch Richard’s knee. They felt a vertiginous movement, Richard could see green sky through his window, and then he was looking up at rain and he made a half-second decision to shift his weight, as if that could keep the car from rolling in midair.

The impact was jarring, deafening even over thunder, and their seatbelts snapped tight like whips on their chests. The jack handle spun out of the backseat, straight into Flora’s arm before cartwheeling over the dashboard and into the windshield, cracking it in a spiderweb an instant before all the glass exploded. The car’s front end was crumpling. The airbags fired in a deafness that seemed like silence, going taut and limp in an instant, slapping their faces faster than a prizefighter’s jab and keeping their heads off the wheel and the dash. The fabric top crumpled and tore. Mud surged up over the hood, nearly reaching the glass stubble where the windshield had been.

They almost rolled.

(If they’d rolled, both Flora and Richard would certainly have died. The convertible had no roll bar. Richard had secretly wanted one, but Flora had made a joke about them. But the same slickness that had sent them skidding kept the car’s nose from catching in the dirt and flipping. If they’d rolled, their heads would simply have disintegrated.)

The car dropped back flat and slewed across the field, and then it stopped and the rain was pouring through the shredded roof. Slowly their hearing recovered. Richard could

hear Flora wailing. Flora could hear Richard saying, “We’ve stopped. We’ve stopped. We’ve stopped,” over and over again.

“My arm,” Flora said, staring dumbly at its new bend. In her shock, she forgot to scream for a moment. The moment passed.

“Shh, looks like a simple fracture, clean break,” Richard mumbled. “You’ll be fine, probably get full use back.”

“Fuck you!” she shrieked, glaring up at him, and then her eyes widened. “Richard, my God, your neck...”

He reached up a hand and felt, distantly, the intense electric pain. It was in his neck. It was also quivering through his head and along his spine, but sharpest at the back near his spine and there was something else. Something was sticking through the skin, something sharp and blood-sticky and a bit larger than a pencil. He thought it might be a piece of strut from the canopy.

That’s a lot of blood, he thought, looking down his right side, but then his rational mind clamped down. It wasn’t a lot of blood, it wasn’t even arterial, just a slow drip and if he didn’t pull the rod out it would probably stay slow. Good thing I was in shock, he thought. Otherwise I’d have yanked that thing out on instinct.

“Flora,” he said, staying perfectly still. “There is a Leatherman in the glove compartment. I need you to get it out.”

Her first instinct was to use her broken right arm, but a twinge and a squeal stopped that. She turned stiffly in her seat but couldn’t stretch her left hand.

“Richard, the belt, it won’t come open.”

“Okay, I’ll get it. No reason I can’t, after all.” His seatbelt latch was still functional,

and when he got the tool out he unfolded the knife blade and cut through her strap. Then he realigned the handles to reveal a wire cutter. He’d always admired the design of these multitools, they reminded him a bit of the transforming robot toys of his childhood.

“Here you go. The thing in my neck – do not pull it out. But cut off the loose ends. I don’t want it to catch on anything.”

“Oh Richard... oh my love...”

“Flora goddammit, cut the fucking pole!”

Her nostrils flared and she bit her lips as, left handed, she fitted the tool over the metal and tightened her grip.

“Aiiiiieee!” Richard couldn’t keep quiet and she flinched back.

“It won’t cut!”

“Okay. Okay, we’ll do it together. Put it in place, all right? It’s there?”

“Yes,” she whimpered.

“Good. Sorry. You’re doing great. I’m going to put my hands over yours. On three.”

The pain was bad enough that he passed out, but only for a moment.

“Richard? Richard! Wake up you coddled little gringo!”

“Sorry, sorry... did it part? Great. Other side. Same drill.”

That one wasn’t as bad, for some reason. He winced and made an ugly whining noise in his throat, but he stayed conscious.

“Great. Hard part done.” He fumbled the first aid kit open. “You did great! I’m going to press this gauze on the ends of the wound while you get out lots of this white tape...”

“I can’t! I can’t move my arm!”

“Right, yeah. Okay, press this here on

the front... shit, no it's good, push back against the headrest." He had trouble getting the tape to tear, and then the first strip he got off tangled and stuck to itself, and he hated himself, but then he got some good long strips and he bound the gauze in place. It was a hash job, it looked like a milk spill behind his ear slowly turning red, but the bleeding was down from a trickle to seeping. The hole in the back, down by the base of his neck, was easier somehow after that.

Huh, he thought, I probably missed total paralysis by about one inch. Lucky.

"Pop the trunk, Flora, please."

She blinked. "Richard we have to go. We have to run to that clay place."

"I know, but I'd like to get my kit bag. After my knee surgery, I kept the Vicodins."

She pushed the trunk release. "I love you Richard."

"I bet you say that to every guy with drugs."

Surprisingly, they both laughed.

FLORENZIA WAS SHUDDERING AS SHE WALKED. She couldn't help it – the cold, the shock, the terror, it was all gripping her like a fist and shaking her, violently. She wished she'd grabbed some more clothes out of the trunk, she was freezing and light headed, but she hadn't. Every twitch sent jolts of pain from her forearm, like shards of glass through elbow and bicep, but she couldn't stop shaking. She was light headed, not even sure the pills were kicking in.

Richard was not shivering, but he was stumbling, dizzy and even less aware than his wife. Instead of his normal purposeful tread he shuffled along, and the slightest rise or dip

in the road could trip him. He fell, catching himself with stiff arms and getting asphalt scrapes on his palms. Flora tried to help him up. Ten feet later, a battering gust of wind knocked him over again, cracking both knees. Again, Florenzia tried to lift him.

When they reached a crossroads, Richard had forgotten the map. He didn't know which way to go, and he could tell from the look Flora gave him that she didn't know either. Rather than admit ignorance, he turned right without any hesitation. It was closest.

They trudged, clumsy and quaking, and at some point Flora put her good arm around Richard's shoulders. Sometimes he held her up and sometimes she held him. They'd meant to run but it was impossible. They just walked and time became strange. Neither could have said if they'd been on the road, in the rain, for minutes or hours or even all their lives. The pain and drugs and cold and fear had erased their minds for a time, reducing them to failing bodies that did nothing more than put one foot forward, then the next.

In time, the body leaning against Flora started to warm her, a little. In time the pills made their bodies as numb as their minds, and then they saw headlights.

It took a few moments before their minds awakened to that fact.

"Help!" shouted Flora, waving her good arm, and she had a moment to remember how poor her visibility had been, a moment to picture the car slamming into them, but instead it swerved a bit, passed them, slowed, and stopped. They turned towards it, painfully, and saw its taillights brighten

as it backed up. It was the most beautiful red thing Richard and Flora had ever seen.

“Jesus Christ!” said the driver as they reached the side of his car. It was a sedan, probably ten years old, not in very good condition. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Crash,” Richard said, fumbling at the door handle.

“Holy shit!” The driver had thick, wavy hair, swarthy skin, and a Midwest American voice. “You okay?”

“No,” Flora said as the two of them crawled in the back.

“So I guess you need a ride, then.”

“Yes,” Richard replied.

“Buckle up then. This weather’s nasty.” He chuckled and as his new passengers groped at the seatbelts he started driving, pushing the pedal down hard.

“I’m Dave,” he said, and they mumbled out their names.

“So what’re you two doing out here?”

Richard sighed. “We were trying to have a romantic getaway weekend.”

Dave laughed out loud this time, just as Flora started to wonder if she’d felt something move against her back, as if something in the trunk had struck the other side of her seat.

“Ever see a twister set down?” Dave asked. “Unbelievable. Just incredible. Just, you know, wreckage everywhere. Lots of people vanish up the funnel, you know, or

they did in the old days. Just hoovered up to who knows where. Oz maybe, huh? Not so many people fly up any more, I guess, better buildings and all, but a good funnel cloud can still do it. Go through any building, anything at all, if it’s the right kind. A mature one.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Richard said. He was feeling something against his back too, a regular thump, and underneath it was a muffled sound like a man’s voice or an animal’s. That regular bumping wasn’t mechanical, either, it felt like the struggles of something alive.

“It’s funny people don’t believe in dragons anymore,” Dave continued, his voice getting louder and his words closer together. “They never went away. Big nasties from the sky, come from nowhere, destroy everything in fire and noise, carry people off... they’re not extinct. We just renamed them, that’s all.”

At that moment, the rain stopped. Stopped dead, as if God’s hand had flicked a switch. Ahead of them they could see a mottled patchwork of green sky and black clouds. The tornado trembled before them, writhing like a snake and shaped like a viper’s tooth.

“This one’s name is ‘Sweetie Pie,’ if you can believe that,” Dave said.

He was driving directly towards it.