

Damned If You Do

William Ollie

Chapter One

They drove through the night, on their way to an unknown destination.

‘Anywhere but here,’ she’d said, and that was where he was taking them, anywhere but the hell hole they had just escaped from.

They had plowed through a driving rain storm that, under any other circumstances—under normal circumstances—would have had them pulling over and seeking shelter: an underpass or a motel, a gas pump canopy; a side street, even. Anywhere they could ride out the storm. But their circumstance was anything but normal, and what they had just gone through kept them moving through the falling rain, beneath flashes of lightning that took Scott Freeman back to the searing hot day that had changed his life forever.

Back to the bullet that had ushered him from one world into another so bizarre as to defy belief, a nightmare landscape of dust and ash and two-legged beasts, where loved ones are ripped away and left bleeding in the middle of the street while scumbag sycophants laugh and cheer and clap each other on the back. Where bands of brutes take over cities, relegating good and decent people to any hole they might think dark enough to hide them, knowing full well there could be no place to hide, not really, and that someday soon someone would drag them out into the cold, grey light of dawn, where they would be carted off to a prison cell by those who had walked out of them the day the world turned upside down. There, the iron bars would be slammed shut, leaving those misfortunate souls wondering if they might ever swing open again, and if they did, would

these good and decent people find themselves nailed to a tree in the town square, or simply shot through the head and left where their bodies dropped, or maybe their roasted flesh would scent the air like so many before them.

The rain had dissipated to a light drizzle that barely necessitated usage of the windshield wipers, and that rain, even the downpour that had nearly driven him from the road last night, put a smile on Scott's face. So long had it been since he'd seen a speck of rain, the mere act of flipping those windshield wipers into action brought to him a normalcy that had been absent from his life for far too long.

The two days he'd spent in this place had seemed like an eternity, and he was ready to leave it behind him, it and everything he'd been through, all the memories he wanted to distance himself from but knew he would never be able to outrun: dust and ash, bullets and blood, the horribly disfigured slithering along the sidewalks, burning bodies and the flesh-eating Neanderthals who had dragged the poor unfortunates kicking and screaming to the pit; midgets and smiling young boys who turned quickly into knife-wielding savages, bringers of death and destruction to anyone foolish enough to have trusted them.

The friends he would never again see: Lila, who had kept the midget from taking his life; Roger, who'd kept him from what waited in the town square; Dennis, the good neighbor who now dwelled in a living nightmare of his own making.

They drove down the Interstate, a light mist drizzling from the sky, Karen beside him, staring out at the highway.

Karen, who had come down the hallway calling out his name, freeing him from that cold, dank cell, and then distracting the outlaw biker long enough to allow Scott to

get the jump on him. His traveling companion now, a stark reminder of what had been left splattered back in front of the jailhouse, of what he had fought so long and hard to recover, only to see it snatched away by a cruel and callous creature who didn't deserve to live, one whose death left behind not a sense of satisfaction, but a sad sense of remorse that things had gone so horribly wrong.

There were many things Scott would never forget, no matter how far he traveled or however many years he lived: the way Sandi looked the day he met her, the way her emerald eyes sparkled when she said 'I do'; all their wonderful nights together, the laughter, the tears—even their fights, would be cherished memories buried deep within him, memories that would never go away. Forever etched into his subconscious the same as the bloodstained hand holding its nickel-plated revolver on that miserably hot August afternoon; fire rushing from the barrel and those black clouds racing across the skyline; Lila and Davey; Rat-boy Warren's spiked teeth clamped around the shotgun barrel, and later, his small hands nailed to the door he hung from; bombs and bikers, blood and sorrow; buildings crumbling to dust while the ground shook and the tanker truck disintegrated in a roaring flash of fire.

The look on Sandi's face right before it blew apart...

"Look at that."

"What?"

"The sky," Karen said. "The color of it. You know how long it's been since I've seen anything but grey up there? Hazy grey and dust and ash? And now what, it's over? Just like that? *Look* at it."

Scott looked up at red streaks of dawn threading their way across the skyline. A stark contrast to the hazy grey mess he had woken to yesterday morning at Rat-boy Warren's stash house.

The sun was rising.

The same sun that hadn't been seen for seven long weeks was dawning upon the land, bringing with it a brand new day, and for Scott and Karen, a hope for a better day than those that had so recently come before it.

"What do you think?" Karen said.

"About what?"

"What do you think caused all this? All the people, where did they go? You do know a whole shit-load of people disappeared off the face of the earth, don't you? Thunder rolled across the sky, lightning flashed and fire rained down from the heavens?"

"Just like that crazy preacher—or whatever the hell he was—said."

"So you *do* know."

"I caught his spiel on the radio, right before that guy shot me. You know the story behind that, don't you? About him?"

"Only that you were shot and you ended up at Park West."

"I was shot, all right. But you know what? I deserved it. Got mad and drug some poor bastard kicking and screaming out of his car, and beat the ever-living shit out of him? And for what, because I thought he'd caused a pileup on the Interstate? And he wasn't even the guy who did it? Pissed off for getting fired and freaked out about having to tell my wife about it, and I took it out on *him*. I deserved it, all right, and I got it."

“I never thought you’d have made it, the way you looked when they brought you in.”

“But here I am.”

“Yep, here you are. A little worse for the wear, maybe, but here, none the less.”

“So what do *you* think?” Scott said.

“About what? *This?*”

“I ran into a neighbor of mine during all of this. He thinks The Rapture occurred, wiping everything good from the land, and now all that’s left are a bunch of evil-doers.”

Karen laughed. “*Evil-doers*,” she said. “Who’s your neighbor? George Bush?”

“Where’d all the people go, the ones who were here one minute and gone the next?”

“I’m supposed to know this?”

“To Heaven, according to my neighbor, vanished in the blink of an eye. Isn’t that what the Bible said would happen?”

“Have you ever *read* the Bible, Scott?”

“Not really.”

“Me either, so I don’t know if what happened is a biblical event or some supernatural happening straight out of a Stephen King novel. What I do know is this: you and I have just survived a living nightmare that just as easily could have taken our lives—if Roger hadn’t come out of that room when he did, it *would’ve* taken our lives. But he did, and it didn’t, and now here we are. Is this the end of days? Who knows? Are we going to run out of gas soon? Yes, I believe we probably are, and when we do we’re going to be up shit-creek. So maybe instead of trying to figure out something we more

than likely won't be able to figure out, we should just keep our eyes peeled for a gas station, and whatever else we need to help keep us alive."

Scott glanced at the dashboard, at the gauge that registered a quarter of a tank of fuel. They weren't at the point of panic yet, but soon they would be. They needed a way to gas this baby up. In the city, they'd kept out of harm's way by hiding in every available nook and cranny. Now they were moving down a highway that just as easily could lead them to their deaths as the better tomorrow they were hoping for. They were out in the open now, exposing themselves to any number of dangerous situations, and even though they felt safe *now*, they weren't safe, not really. Anything could happen between here and wherever they were headed—most of it bad. And running out of gas on this desolate highway would only make things worse. Running out of gas would put them on foot, exposing them to every depraved lunatic who might be out scouring the countryside for some fresh meat to put their boots to.

The sun was up now, the drizzling rain nothing but a slow-falling mist.

Scott looked up at the rearview mirror, at the dimpled indentation at the side of his head, and then back at the road. There were no other cars on the highway—in front or behind them. Nothing but clear sailing ahead. The sun was out, but it held no special meaning for Scott, who up until two days ago had lain unconscious for seven long weeks at Park West Rehabilitation Center. For Scott, from the moment that bullet entered his head until two days ago when his eyes fluttered open, there had been no measurement of time. It was as if he had closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, and then woke up to overcast skies that proceeded to hang around a couple of days longer than they should have.

Karen, on the other hand, looked up at the sky as if Jesus Christ himself were stepping down from it. Her mouth was open, her eyes wide, tears forming at their corners as the sky began to lighten.

“Jesus,” she said, and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Look at that,” Scott said, nodding at the shoulder of the road, at all the dust and ash the rain had turned into a slick field of grey mud.

“It’ll wash away,” Karen said. “Wash away and stuff will grow again: grass, leaves on the trees, food. Everything’ll come back.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself.”

Karen looked over at Scott.

“You’ll see,” she said. “Something’s changed. A page has turned. I feel it.”

“Something’s changed, all right,” Scott said. “I just hope it’s for the better.”

And something *had* changed. He’d felt it last night when the lights flashed on, a tingling at the base of his spine that spread upward and outward as the lunatic prophet (or whatever he had been) appeared on a bullet-riddled television screen that couldn’t have been an operable piece of electronic equipment, and all along the boulevard, street lights that moments before had been dead as doornails sprung suddenly to life.

Scott eased off the gas pedal. There was a bend in the road and he didn’t see any reason to go flying around it at eighty miles per hour. The speedometer read sixty when he rounded the curve and saw the strobing blue and red lights of a police car a mile or two in the distance. A dark blue van sat in front of the police car, and as Scott drew near, he could see somebody moving at the side of the van, at the shoulder of the road that

sloped down toward a ditch that ran alongside a barbwire fence parallel to the expressway.

Scott tapped his brakes, slowing as he approached the vehicles, trying to get a fix on whatever had happened there. By the time he passed the van, his pickup truck had slowed to a crawl, and much like the rubbernecking ghouls he had once despised, he stared out his passenger window at the van's empty front compartment, hoping for a more definitive view.

"What're you doing?" Karen said, as Scott swerved to a stop a few feet in front of the van.

"Stopping."

"Why?" she said, as he grabbed his .9mm from the floorboard.

"To see if anybody needs help."

Scott opened his door, and so did Karen, who stepped out onto the shoulder of the road and followed Scott around the front of the van. They moved quickly but quietly, Scott holding his weapon in front of him, Karen right on his heels.

First came the whimpering.

Then a man's sobbing voice, crying out, "Please!"

Gruff laughter as Scott stepped around the open passenger door to find a woman squirming beneath a guy in a policeman's uniform, screaming and crying and beating at his chest; the guy's pants around his ankles as he pinned her to the ground, ramming himself in and out of her while his partner held a knife to the throat of another guy, who was saying, "Please, don't. Please, stop!"

Karen stopped, but Scott didn't. He raised his weapon, pointing it at the woman's assailant, who barely had time to register his surprise before the gun bucked and half of his face disappeared in an explosion of skin and bone and bright red blood, leaving his twitching body slumped over his victim as the gory mess of him slopped onto her face, her arms and her chest.

Scott turned to the guy's partner, who wore not a policeman's uniform but a grey polo shirt and a soiled pair of jeans, a holstered weapon around his waist. He stood wide-eyed behind his prisoner, a handful of hair in one hand, the knife in the other, still pressed firmly against his captive's neck.

Scott, having trained his weapon on the last remaining policeman—or whatever the hell he was—, said, "Let him go."

"Huh uh," the guy said.

"Let him go and I'll let *you* go."

"You caught *him* with his pants down, *not me*."

"I won't be saying it again."

"Drop your gun, or I'll cut his fucking throat." Smiling now, shielding himself behind his hostage, the guy nodded down at the woman, who lay whimpering beneath her former assailant, whose body, now having stopped twitching, covered her like a blood-soaked shroud. "You really want her to see this?"

Scott stood there, aiming his gun, all the while knowing he wouldn't shoot. He couldn't. He wasn't a marksman, and he couldn't trust his aim to be true.

"Look at your hands," the guy said. "The way they're shaking, you'll hit *him*."

"Let him go and you walk," Scott said. "Anything else, I'll blow your head off."

“We’re walking *now*, both of us, and if you follow I’ll kill him.”

The cop pulled his prisoner away from the van, past the woman, who had pushed and pried herself away from the bloody mess of what she’d been trapped beneath, and was now on hands and knees, watching the man tug her mate around the backside of the van.

Scott, following, pointed his pistol directly at them, waiting for a chance to act, which came swiftly and suddenly when the cop tripped and both he and his hostage fell sprawling to the ground.

Gunfire echoed across the landscape as the cop went for his Glock and Scott stitched three ragged holes across his chest, slamming him backward into the ash-colored mud. He lay on his back by his patrol car, blood spreading out from beneath him, wheezing and gurgling as his captive scrambled up to his feet, and then stood frozen before Scott, who now had his .9mm pointed directly at him.

“Whoa, man. Wait a minute.”

“Scott,” Karen said.

“What’re you gonna do, now, shoot *me*?”

“Just turn around, slowly; completely around, so I know you don’t have any surprises hidden on you.”

“*Surprises?*” the guy said. “Don’t you think I’d already sprung ‘em on that prick if I had ‘em?”

“Do it,” Scott said, still pointing his weapon.

“Just do it, Mitch!” the woman, now on her feet and standing beside Karen, cried out.

Mitch, arms held straight out from his sides, turned slowly around, until once again facing Scott, he said, “Satisfied?”

And Scott lowered his weapon.

“Yeah,” he said, and then slid the .9mm behind his back, snug beneath his waistband.

“I told you not to stop,” the woman said. “I told you not to fucking stop!”

“The hell, Gina. What’d you want me to do, let ‘em run me off the road? They were cops, for chrissakes.”

“*Cops*,” Gina said. “*Look* at me.” Hands shaking, her body trembling, she stood beside Karen in a ripped t-shirt and a soiled pair of sneakers, naked from the waist down. There was blood on her face and blood on her mud-slicked shirt; bruises on her thighs were the guy had assaulted her, bloody chunks of skull in her hair. “Christ, did they *look* like cops to you? Did they *act* like cops?”

Mitch said nothing. He stood before Scott, arms down by his sides. He was taller than Scott, with long brown hair and a couple of week’s worth of beard covering his face and neck; thicker than Scott, who, after all he’d been through these last seven weeks, looked like a refugee from some kind of concentration camp.

Karen took Gina by the hand.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Then, on their way back to the van: “You’ve got some clothes in there?”

Gina, nodding her head, followed Karen, while Scott turned to Mitch.

“What happened?” he said.

“They pulled us over. Fuck... they were cops. How was I supposed to know they were going to... They had the blue lights going and they were right at my window waving their guns at me. The fuck was I gonna do, outrun ‘em in that piece’a shit?”

“What are you doing out here?”

“The same thing you are, looking for someplace safe place to hide out.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“What’s that?”

“Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savoir?”

“The fuck kind of question is that?”

“Never mind,” Scott said.

He looked over at the police cruiser. The engine was still running, the emergency lights still strobing on and off. “C’mon,” he said, and led Mitch around the front of the car, to the driver’s side door, which he snatched open. Leaning in behind the steering wheel, he killed the ignition and pulled the keys from it.

The emergency lights were still flashing when Scott stood back up.

“You know how to turn these things off?” he said.

“The fuck should *I* know?”

“You do know I just saved your life, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Mitch said. “Of course. I’m sorry. I’ve just never, *you* know, ridden up front in one of those things.”

“I heard *that*.”

Scott took the keys, and he and Mitch walked to the rear of the car, where Scott opened the trunk to find a mini arsenal housed within its confines: a rifle and a couple of

shotguns, one whose double barrels had been sawn off down near the stock, the other a single-barreled pump-action; a black nylon gym bag loaded with pistols: .45s, a couple of Glocks, a snub-nose .38 revolver or two, a couple of .9mms like the one nestled in Scott's waistband. A white plastic milk crate stacked half full with boxes of several different kinds of ammunition sat next to another gym bag. This bag, which had been left zippered open, was full to the brim with neat stacks of bundled one-hundred dollar bills.

"Jesus," Mitch said.

"No shit," Scott said, and then picked up the bag of guns and dumped them into the trunk, grabbed a .38 and handed it to Mitch. "You know how to use one of these?"

"Like a mouse, right?" Mitch said. "Point and click."

"That's about it." Scott took a handful of bundled notes from the other bag and stuffed them into the empty, took another handful and stuffed them in as well.

"What happened to your head?" Mitch said.

"Somebody shot me."

"*Shot* you? No shit?"

"No shit," Scott said, then, looking over his shoulder at Mitch, "Pretty bad, huh?"

"It don't look good."

"I got into it with a customer and got fired from my job. Five years, and just like that I was tossed out on my ass. I was on my way home when some guy in a Honda Accord wouldn't get out of the passing lane. So I eased up on his ass and he slammed on his brakes, sending me and damn near everybody else screeching sideways all over the Interstate. By the time I recovered and righted myself, the guy was racing off down the road. Can't believe I made it through that shit—looked like a disaster movie, all those

cars and semis twisted up on the Interstate. I caught up with the prick at a red light at the bottom of an exit, pulled him out of his car and beat him senseless.”

“Served his ass right.”

“Well, yeah, if he’d actually done it,” Scott said. “If I hadn’t chased the wrong car down that exit ramp.”

“No way.”

“Yep, while I was watching the action unfold in my rearview mirror, the guy eased off down the Interstate. I followed a carbon-copy of his car down the exit ramp and beat the shit out of some poor bastard who hadn’t done a damn thing to anybody. Got back in my car and the guy shot me in the head. Woke up two days ago in some rehabilitation center.”

“This was before... ”

“Before that lunatic took over the airways, proclaiming the end of the world? No, I heard *him*, all right, on the radio, right before all this happened.”

Scott grabbed a couple of pistols and put them in the bag, a few cartons of shells. “Here,” he said. “That oughta do you.” Then, handing the bag to Mitch, “I’m taking that sawed-off shotgun, the pump-action and the rest of the pistols.”

He leaned into the trunk to grab the shotgun.

Scott knew he’d made a mistake when Mitch said, “You know what... ”

Knew it for sure when that cold, steel barrel touched the side of his head.

“I think I’ll just take everything, the money, the guns, your truck.”

“Dude,” Scott said. “I just saved your life.”

“Which is why I’m not gonna take yours. Just the swag.”

Scott stepped away from the trunk, the barrel still jammed against his head.

“What,” he said, “you’re gonna leave us out here on our own, with no way to defend ourselves?”

“You’ll be al— ”

“MITCH!” Gina screamed and Scott brought his arm up, forcing the gun away as the hammer clicked on an empty chamber and Mitch was knocked off balance, away from Scott.

“Goddamnit,” Mitch said, and then aimed and pulled the trigger again.

One more empty *Click* and the .9mm was back in Scott’s hand, the hand up as Mitch took a backward step, Gina screaming as Karen said, “No!”

And Scott, who had been taught a valuable lesson by a spike-toothed midget who had twice tried to kill him, and quite possibly would have tried again, pointed the barrel directly at Mitch, who dropped his weapon, and said, “Wait, Scott. Please.”

“Wait? You were gonna blow my brains out and you want me to *wait*? Are you fucking *kidding me*?”

“No, Scott!” Karen cried out. “Don’t do it!”

“Turn around, Karen,” Scott said. “Both of you.”

“She’s pregnant, Scott. They’re married and she’s pregnant. Please... just stop.”

“I’m sorry,” Mitch said. “What I’ve been through, the shit I’ve seen. I’ve lost myself... please.”

“Please, Mister,” Gina said, sobbing now.

“Might as well drop the bag,” Scott said, and Mitch let it fall to the ground.

“On your knees,” Scott said, and Mitch dropped straight down to them.

“Close your eyes.”

“Please,” Mitch said.

“Close your eyes or I’ll blow them the fuck out of your head.”

Mitch closed his eyes and Scott kicked him in the stomach—he fell forward, gasping, and Scott drove his foot into his face, leaving him lying in the mud on his side, the side of his face swelling as he looked up at Scott, who slipped the gun back into his waistband, picked up the bag and returned to the open trunk.

“Karen, come here,” he said.

Karen walked over to Scott, and Gina hurried to Mitch, who was still on his side, sucking in deep breaths of air. She was wearing a pair of jeans now, a blue t-shirt striped with horizontal white lines. The blood was gone from her face. Her brown hair, wet where Karen had tried washing the gore away, still had matted red spots in it.

“Why, Mitch?” she said. “Why?”

She put a hand on his shoulder and he slapped it away.

“The only reason your brains aren’t painting the asphalt, and *that’s* how you treat her?” Scott said. “Nice, pal, real fucking nice.”

“Just give me a minute here,” Mitch said, then, “I’m sorry, Gina. Just... let me... catch my breath.”

He breathed in, breathed out. A couple more deep breaths and he struggled to his knees.

Scott, busy rummaging through the trunk, said, “Don’t stand up ‘til I tell you to.”, and Mitch sat down, crossing his legs as Scott handed the pump action shotgun and one of the gym bags to Karen. He reached back into the trunk and grabbed the sawed-off

shotgun, snapped it open and turned to Mitch. “Should’a grabbed this instead, huh Mitch.”

Mitch said nothing. He sat on the ground, Gina beside him staring up at Scott. She’d stopped crying now, but still had a troubled look on her face. Of course she did. Not only had her idiot husband damn near gotten the both of them killed, he’d ambushed the only person to have come to their aid. Or tried to ambush him. And now look at him, sitting in the mud like a disciplined child, clutching his swollen face.

Scott snapped the barrels shut and picked up the remaining gym bag. He slammed the trunk, and once again turned to Gina and Mitch. “I learned a lesson here today, one you’d think would already be deeply ingrained in my dumb ass. Don’t trust anybody. Don’t turn your back on anybody—even if you did just save their life. Like my old pal Warren said, it’s dog eat dog out here.”

“I’m sorry, Scott,” Gina said. “*He’s* sorry.”

“Sorry that gun wasn’t loaded,” Scott said, then, “You can come with us if you want to, you know, leave this sorry fucker behind.”

“I can’t.”

“Yeah, I guess not,” Scott said. “But you probably should, for all the good he’ll do you.”

Scott stood for a moment, staring down at Mitch, and then said, “You can stand up now.”

Mitch, one hand still clamped to his injured face, struggled up to his feet.

Scott, the shotgun in one hand, the gym bag in the other, sat the bag on the ground and handed the keys to the patrol car to Gina. “Go down to the ditch,” he told her, “and

throw those keys as far over that barbwire fence as you can get them. Make sure I see them leave your hand. Otherwise I'll have to shoot good old Mitch here."

Gina, keys in hand, started down the mud-slicked incline.

Scott, Mitch and Karen, now side by side, watched her go.

"I was going to give you that bag, the guns, the cash and the ammo. I'd already *handed* it to you, and you tried to *kill* me? Now you don't get shit."

"I'm—"

"Yeah, I know. You're sorry. Not as sorry as you're going to be if I ever run into your ass again. You were dead. Make no mistake about it, another second or two and you'd've been gone. You were dead and now you're not. I learned something here today. If you're smart, you did, too."

Scott walked over to the slain policeman. He knelt down and grabbed the Glock off his corpse, stood up and slipped it in the front of his waistband. On his way back to Mitch and Karen, he said, "C'mon, let's go back to the van."

He picked up the gym bag and followed them over to the van, the bag in one hand, the sawed-off shotgun in the other. They were standing beside the rapist when Gina tossed the keys over the barbwire fence running along the far side of the ditch, high into the air like Scott had told her. Then she turned and started back up the incline.

Scott looked down at what was left of the slain policeman's skull, the blood and bone and bits of brain matter splattered all around him. There was a time in his life, not so very long ago, when the sight of something like this would have had him falling to his knees, spewing vomit onto the ground. But not now—not any more. This was what his life had come to, this violent existence of his. This was the life he'd been forced into, two

days ago at a charnel pit on an ash-covered street full of midgets and thugs, and enough horrors to send any sane man screaming for his life.

Like Warren said: 'It's dog eat dog now', and Scott, who against all odds had survived two nightmarish days in this dark and foreboding place, would do whatever he had to do to *keep* surviving.

Chapter Two

The cop's pants were bunched up around his ankles, a small patch of his gun belt visible beneath them. Scott nudged the pants away and bent down to retrieve the guy's weapon. Unsnapping the holster and pulling the gun free, he rose back up and slipped it into his gym bag. Gina had just reached them, when he turned back to Mitch, and said:

“You got any weapons in the van?”

“Huh uh.”

“Well,” Scott said, “there's still some in the trunk of that police car. Might be a good idea to go find those keys, grab up something to defend yourselves with. Unfortunately, this probably won't be the last scrape you run into out here.”

He looked at Gina, standing there with that sullen and gloomy look spread across her face, and saw in her eyes the same lifeless expression he had seen in Sandi back at The Ambassador Hotel, right before she'd planted that needle in her arm—dull and flat, as if whatever hope they'd had left had been torn from them by their scumbag oppressors, and now all that was left was to wait for one final degrading act to fall upon them before their lives were taken.

Scott couldn't help but feel sorry for this woman, who had been forced off the highway and brutally assaulted, and now had nothing to look forward to, except an uncertain future with someone who was certain to fuck it up, one way or another.

“How're you doing?” he asked her, and she just stood there, staring down at her feet.

“It’ll get better,” Karen said, and Gina, tears welling in her eyes, threw her arms around Karen, crying softly as she hugged her. They stood like that for a moment—Gina, sobbing and saying she was sorry, Karen dropping the shotgun and gym bag to the ground and hugging her back, telling her it was okay, that she had nothing to be sorry about, and that, yes, it *would* get better, things would get better—she could *feel* it.

Scott wondered if she wasn’t trying to reassure herself as much or more as she was trying to reassure Gina. Because whether she ‘felt it’ or not, Karen didn’t know what was waiting on that lonely stretch of highway out there. No one could know what the future held in the bizarre world they now found themselves in, where up was down and black was white, where good was bad, and bad was worse than anyone could possibly ever have imagined.

Gina, seeming to have calmed herself a bit, disengaged from Karen. She walked over and stood beside Mitch, and looked up at Scott. The tears had stopped, and even though her smile wasn’t much of one, she was making an effort.

“Thanks,” she said. “For stopping and... well, for everything else you’ve done.”

“You’re welcome,” Scott said.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and even though it wasn’t okay, Scott told her it was. What else was he going to say, your scumbag of a husband just tried to kill my ass and ‘sorry ain’t gonna cut it’? It wasn’t her fault her husband was a lowlife prick, wasn’t her fault he’d lost his head and tried ambushing the one person who’d been decent enough to stop and help them. She’d been through hell this morning, and now she’d have to fight her way back from it. She’d been through enough, and Scott saw no reason to rub her nose in her troubles.

“Why don’t you guys walk back to the truck with us?” Scott said.

“Why?” said Mitch.

“Cause I want you to.”

Mitch sighed.

“All right,” he said, and then he and Gina walked side by side with Scott and Karen, around the front of the van, down the shoulder of the road to the pickup truck Scott had left idling next to the highway.

Karen opened the passenger door. Propping the shotgun against the seat, and then sitting the gym bag down in the floorboard, she opened the bag and grabbed a handful of bundled notes, turned to Gina, and said, “Here, take this. It’ll come in handy, sooner or later.”

Gina took the money and Karen climbed into the truck, shutting the door and staring into the side-view mirror at Mitch and Gina, who turned and started back toward the van. Mitch made a grab for the money but Gina snatched her hand away—he said something and she shouted, “Idiot!”, and then they walked along the roadway, Mitch, shoulders slumped, head down; Gina with a defiant hitch in her step.

Scott, who had walked around the back of the truck, opened his door and handed his gym bag to Karen, who placed it on the floorboard next to the other bag. He laid the sawed-off shotgun on the seat, pulled the Glock out of his front waistband and slid it under the seat. Then he got behind the steering wheel and slammed the door shut, put the truck into gear and sped off down the Interstate.

Karen looked over her shoulder, at the highway stretching out behind them.

“It’s so lonely out here,” she said. “I’d have thought we’d seen... I don’t know, cars, people moving along the road, like us. But we traveled all night and barely saw anybody.”

“Well,” Scott said, “it *was* raining like hell. Besides, people are probably afraid to get *on* the road. They’ll start coming out now. Eventually people will venture further and further away from their homes. Some, to see what’s out there; others like us, who want to put the past few weeks behind them and start over somewhere else.”

“Is that what we’re doing, starting over?”

“I don’t know *what* we’re doing. Surviving, I guess—I hope, anyway. That money’ll go a long way towards helping out with that. The guns, too, I reckon.”

“Where are we?” Karen said.

“Where?” Scott said. “Between here and there and the end of the line.”

“You would’ve killed him, wouldn’t you, if we hadn’t shown up when we did.”

“Probably would have.”

“Shot him in cold blood like that.”

“Karen, I worked for a trucking company before all this happened, the lost and found guy, the guy people called when something was lost or damaged. I hadn’t been in a fight since high school, the day I flipped out on that guy on the exit ramp. I’m not a violent person. My dad was a gun nut, but I’m not. I know about guns but I never kept any. The first thing I ran into after leaving my room in that rehab center was a dead cop in the lobby. The second thing was four of those motorcycle pricks turning a woman on a spit over a roaring fire. Lucky for me I’d taken that cop’s shotgun with me, or I’d have been dead the moment I walked into that mess.

“But I *had* the shotgun, and before those bikers knew what was what, I’d blown them to hell and back. A midget stepped out of the shadows, weird-looking little fucker, sat me down and told me what had been going on while I’d been out these past seven weeks. Told me he had some food stashed in a house someplace. I was starved, so I figured, *sure, why not*, he seemed friendly enough. But when we started to leave, he bashed me in the side of the head and tried to kill me, and would’ve killed me if Lila hadn’t happened along in time to stop him. We let him go, and damned if he didn’t pop up out of nowhere the next day and try to kill my ass again. So yeah, I learned my lesson the hard way... Would I have shot Mitch if you hadn’t stopped me? Damn right, I would have.”

Karen, who had turned back around during Scott’s story, and was now looking out the front window, said, “What about Lila?”

“Huh?” Scott said.

“Lila. What happened to her?”

“Lila’s dead.”

“What, did she turn on you, too?”

“No. She trusted somebody she shouldn’t have trusted, and it damn sure wasn’t me.”

The road stretched on like a lonely black ribbon before them. Behind them were miles and miles of nothing at all. Every once in a while they would pass an exit ramp, and every once in a while, Scott would think about following one of them to see what it would lead them to: a gas station or a diner, maybe, some place to eat and refuel. But the thought of whatever else might be waiting at the end of the line kept him on the

highway—for as much bravado as he had shown by stopping and pulling Gina and Mitch out of their firestorm of danger, Scott knew he was not a brave man, and that whatever might be lying just beyond his field of vision frightened him. He was in no hurry to face danger, nor was he willing to tempt the fates by going someplace he shouldn't.

He was glancing down at the gas gauge, when Karen said, “We probably could've stayed, you know. The lights came back on, the power. Pretty soon the Army or somebody's going to roll into town and restore order. We could've stayed.”

“Not me,” Scott said. “I couldn't stay and I'll never go back. I just... can't. Not after...”

Karen put a hand on Scott's thigh.

“I know,” she said.

And he couldn't go back. Not now, not ever. He had traipsed through a nightmare world of danger and deception to find his wife; killed and maimed and let down the only friend he'd made through all of this madness, only to falter at the end and watch the love of his life fall bleeding to the asphalt. He'd tried his best to reach her, tried his best to save her, but in the end his best hadn't been good enough, and he could never forgive himself for that shortcoming.

“You know all they had to do was lean into the police car and pop the trunk.”

“Huh?”

“Mitch and Gina. You had Gina toss the keys over the fence to keep Mitch away from the weapons, but all he had to do was lean in through the driver's window and pop the trunk from under the dashboard.”

Scott, smiling, said, “Heh, I didn't even think of that. You think *he* did?”

“Unless he’s a dumbass.”

“Oh, well, thanks for *that*,” Scott said, and both he and Karen started to chuckle.

“Sorry,” Karen said, then, “Hell, he’s probably out there right now, sifting through the mud.”

“Better that than the alternative, huh?”

“I’m sure he thinks so.”

Scott glanced up at the rearview mirror, and saw a police car racing up the long stretch of highway behind them. Bubble lights strobing, it was too far away for Scott to tell if the siren was on. But they wouldn’t be out of hearing distance for long. Scott’s speedometer read eighty-five miles per hour, and the police cruiser was gaining ground fast.

“Shit,” he said, and Karen said, “What?”

“Cops.”

Karen turned and looked out the rear window.

“My God,” she said, eyes wide as she turned back to Scott. “What’re we gonna do?”

“What do you think?” Scott said, and then floored the accelerator.

The truck lurched forward and Karen looked back over her shoulder.

“You think it’s Mitch and Gina? Maybe they abandoned the van, and he’s just messing with us.”

“Santa Claus might be waiting around the next bend, too, but I wouldn’t count on seeing him when we get there.”

“Scott,” she said. “They’re gonna *catch* us.”

Scott looked into the mirror, and knew that she was right.

They were going over a hundred miles an hour now, and the cop car was still gaining on them. No matter how fast they went, it was a mathematical certainty that the cruiser would overtake them.

Thirty yards back, and closing fast... twenty yards now.

Soon it would be right on them.

And then it was.

The dark blue police cruiser, roaring up on the truck's bumper, the two guys in the front seat expressionless as they swerved into the left-hand lane, inching ever closer as Karen cried out "Scott!" and Scott said, "Shit!"

He reached down to the seat, thumbing the shotgun's safety to the off position.

"What are you doing?" Karen said, as he grabbed the shotgun and rested its short barrel on the frame of the open window.

The police cruiser, its front bumper even with Scott's window, drew a little closer.

"Scott!" Karen cried out, and Scott said, "What, goddamnit!"

"What if they really are cops?"

"What if they're not, you wanta end up like Gina back there?"

The cruiser pulled even with them, and Scott looked over to see a guy in the passenger seat motioning for him to pull over. He was tall and thick, with short black hair. Scott noticed a coarse layer of whiskers covering his face when he rolled down his window, and shouted, "Pull the fuck over!"

Scott hefted the shotgun and the guy's eyes grew wide; fire roared from the barrel and his head disappeared in a spray of red that washed over the windshield, sending the

car swerving off the road and onto the long, sloping incline, where it flipped sideways end over end, until it came to an earth-shuddering halt in the middle of the ditch.

Scott hit the brakes, slowed and stopped and shifted into reverse. Backing quickly down the deserted highway and stopping where the police cruiser had just left the road, he slipped the truck into Park, and he and Karen jumped onto the roadway, leaving the engine running as they hurried over the embankment and down to the car, which lay like a fallen beast, sideways in the middle of the ditch, steam rising from its crumpled hood while its driver lay in a twisted heap, halfway through the shattered front windshield, the engine humming and the smell of gasoline hanging heavy in the air around them.

“What are we doing, Scott?” Karen said. “Why did we stop?”

“To see if the driver’s still alive.”

“What? *Why?*”

“To find out who he is. To find out what kind of a buzz saw we might be heading into.”

“And you expected him to what, *tell* you this after what you just did?”

Scott knelt down and so did Karen, each of them peering into the twisted, misshapen vehicle, Karen through the passenger window, Scott staring past a shattered section of windshield, at the mangled corpse of the driver hanging halfway out of the window frame. His arms were shredded, his blood-soaked face a bloated and pulpy mess. Glass was embedded in his forehead, his eyes and his cheeks, his arms and the sides of his neck. A thick rope of bloody mucous hung from his open mouth, a thin line of it stretching down to the crumpled hood. Half of the steering wheel was visible, the other half buried deep within his chest. He wasn’t moving, of course, and would never move

again. Nor would his headless companion, who sat slumped forward in his seat like a binge drinking college student holding his aching head between his knees in an effort to keep himself from throwing up. Except Scott knew his head couldn't be between his knees because he'd just splattered it all over the car's interior.

Scott maneuvered closer to the car, to the opening in the windshield. Brushing bits of safety glass off the hood, he braced his hand against it and leaned in through the opening.

“What are you *doing*?” Karen asked him.

“I want to get his wallet.”

“His *wallet*? *Why*, for—”

A *whoosh* and the crackle of flames cut her off as Scott jumped back and Karen turned and ran for the highway, Scott racing behind her as the flames licked their way up the driver's corpse, sending an all too familiar smell wafting through the air for a brief moment before a roaring blast lifted the cruiser a couple of feet off the ground, shaking the driver's battered corpse back and forth like a human rag doll, while a mushroom cloud of oily black smoke rose high into the clear blue sky above him.