

# THE RIVER KINGS

by Ryan C. Thomas

Simon woke up in water so cold it made his teeth hurt. It rushed around him in a current of black, gushing over his shoulders, up to his chin. It carried leaves and mud into his mouth.

In front of him he saw a steering wheel, a spider-webbed windshield wobbling in its casing. He looked left, found the driver's side window smashed away. Needling rain blew in, stinging his face. He turned back, saw blood on the cracked rearview mirror.

When he tried to lift his arms he felt almost nothing. Both from the frigid, numbing water and the fact they were pinned under the dashboard, which had crushed into him when the car had gone off the road. He could feel his wedding ring squeezing his ring finger, so he had *some* feeling. That was a good sign.

He wiggled his toes. He felt them move. Another good sign. No broken back. Or something like that. His armchair doctorate degree was only so reliable.

He spit water out of his mouth.

That's right, it was coming back now. The torrential rains, the flood warnings, the orange signs on the road suggesting a detour. But the only detour home would mean an added thirty-minute drive up around Ground Fog Road. Fuck that. Take the road over the mountain instead. Get home fast, dry off, cozy up with Mikha and

the baby. That was the plan. It had worked for a bit, too.

Then the mudslide had come out of nowhere. Next thing he knew . . .

He looked to his right. Mikha wasn't there. Another woman in her place, unconscious, face almost covered by the rushing water of the river. The river that had been so low just last month you could walk across it and not get your socks wet. Now—five feet deep. The product of weeks of torrential El Niño weather.

Who was this woman? He couldn't place her. His head hurt. He tasted blood. Everything was like watching ghosts.

She stirred, flopped her head towards him. Her right cheek was flayed, a wedge of glass jutted from her brow. One eye was already swelling, turning black. Her window, too, had smashed out when the car went off the road.

She moaned and her name came back to him. Kelly. Kelly the nanny. She'd gone with him to town to get food while Mikha dealt with a migraine. Give the wife some peace and quiet, he'd thought. Take the baby and the nanny and get some burgers for dinner and—

The baby!

He twisted in the black, rushing water and looked in the backseat. The baby's car seat was still there, facing the back window. He could see the top of the baby's head, her fine hair blowing in the wind. She wasn't moving. Her head tilted to one side.

"No no no no," he muttered. "Carrie! Carrie, baby girl, look at me!"

The water in the car was up to his chin. He did some

mental math, knew she was lower in the car than he was. Oh dear God was her face under water?

“Carrie!” He struggled against the dashboard. He arched his back, tried to crane his neck. The back seat baby mirror caught his eye. Of course! They’d put it there to keep tabs on the baby while they drove.

He glanced in the cracked rearview mirror, moved his head around until he could make out the other mirror in the back seat. Like looking across dimensions. The cracks distorted her face, but he could see her nose and mouth were above the water. The water line was tilted. No, the car was titled. When he’d gone off the road the front end had sunken into the mud of the river, leaving the back end up higher. Maybe only two feet, but it was enough. Thank fucking Christ!

“Carrie, baby, can you hear me? Can you talk to Daddy?”

She rolled her head to the side. His heart leapt. Yes! She was okay. Well, maybe not okay, but alive, and that was important right now. She might be hurt—*was* probably hurt—but as long as she could breathe he could think without panicking for a minute.

He assessed the situation. The rain coming down hard. The car half submerged. Water up to his chin. Kelly unconscious next to him, bleeding. Carrie strapped into her car seat. Both of them hurt. Maybe a concussion. Not a good thing for a two-year-old. She was wearing some heavy duty clothes though. Thick winter jacket and jeans. She’d had a blanket wrapped around her. Simon didn’t know if that would help too much, but he wanted

to believe it would.

How long did it take for hypothermia to set in? Minutes, right? “Fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

The trunk, he thought. Inside the trunk was the Oh Shit Bag, a large Ziplock bag filled with emergency items such as diapers and baby wipes and formula and band aids and a blanket and a onesie. The Ziplock bag was meant for dirty diapers, but he’d used it to keep everything together. It had been a gift for Carrie’s second birthday just two months ago. He couldn’t remember who’d given it to them but he planned on finding them and hugging them till they passed out.

So the baby would be fine if he could get to it; the clothes and blanket inside would be dry. He and Kelly would have to stay cold and wet, but they’d survive long enough to trudge back down to the detour and flag down help. Unless he couldn’t wake her up, in which case he’d leave her and come back. She’d still be okay as long as the water didn’t rise.

So, despite the hopelessness of this whole shit deal, the odds of surviving were very high.

“Come on,” he said, wiggling like a madman. “C’mon!”

He tried to maneuver an arm to the side of the driver’s seat to find the chair’s incline lever. It was electric, but it might still work in the water. Didn’t matter though, since he couldn’t get his arm around his own leg.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

His teeth were starting to chatter. “Kelly! Kelly, wake up!”

She didn't move.

He shook again, struggled, kicked his feet. He gave it his all. "GNAHHHH!"

The car lurched! The nose sank deeper into the mud, the water rose an inch. It reached his lips. "No no no no."

He looked at Kelly, saw the water was almost going into her mouth. Shit, if the car sank farther in the mud she'd drown. A glance in the mirror showed that Carrie was still okay. His little girl opened and closed her mouth, like she was just sleeping, then she went still again.

"Kelly? Kelly you need to wake up. C'mon, I need you. Kelly!"

She was out cold. Fresh blood flowed steadily out of her wounds.

He felt tears running down his cheeks. Why was this happening?

Something moved in front of the smashed windshield. Up on the bank of the river. Something large. A person?

"Hello! Hello, please help! We're in here! Help!"

It moved again. Grew larger. Coming closer. With all the cracks in the windshield he couldn't make it out, like looking through a sheet of ice, but he did his best to find a clear view. Nothing. Just movement. But he heard panting. At least it sounded like panting. A person struggling to get to the river's edge?

"Hello? Somebody there? Please help us! I've got a baby in the car! I'm stuck and can't get the door open! Please just open the door!"

The rain picked up, became torrential, beat the car so

hard he thought the roof would cave in. But it let up almost as quickly as it started.

There was the sound of something enormous hitting the water, then standing on the submerged hood. The car lurched again. “No! Don’t shake the car!”

It walked toward the windshield, bent low. Now, even through the window’s cracks, he could see what it was. The magnificent face of a massive cat stared back at him.

No, not a cat, a mountain lion.

It let out a screech that was like nails on a chalkboard.

Simon’s pulse went through the roof. Despite the cold water he felt sweat break out on his forehead. “Go away! Get out of here! Don’t even come over here!”

The large cat took a step forward, put a paw on the windshield. A paw so big it could palm Simon’s head. Large black claws as long as human fingers spread out and scratched the glass.

The mountain lion chuffed, almost purred, then stabbed its claws into the broken glass, pushing with all its might.

“Fuck you! Go away!”

A single black claw found its way through a weak spot, right in front of the steering wheel. Then, with a terrific yank, the cat tried to rip out a piece of the glass.

“Stop it! Go away!”

After several unsuccessful yanks the cat retracted its claw and gave up.

Instead, it sat on its haunches and looked in at Simon. Licked its lips. The thing was huge. Maybe three feet tall, ten feet from tail to nose. Even under water, the car’s

hood buckled under its nearly two-hundred pounds of muscle.

Simon searched frantically for a weapon but found nothing. Even if he did find something he still couldn't get his hands free to use it anyway. Jesus, where was his phone? It had been in the center console, hooked up to the radio. But it was gone now. Probably under water in the footwell.

The mountain lion stood up on all fours now, bent its head down and sniffed the windshield.

“Go away! I'm bigger than you! I'll kick you so fucking hard!”

The cat looked back without any sense of concern, turned its head from side to side, sniffing.

“Please go away,” Simon whispered. He realized both front windows were smashed out. Both he and Kelly were bleeding. It would be so easy—

The cat moved toward the passenger side, craned its neck around the front pillar. Its soaking-wet, beige and white face leaned into the car.

“Get out of here! Go away! Fuck! Kelly! Kelly, wake up!”

Simon thrashed and shook but couldn't get free.

The cat purred, leaned toward Kelly's face, sniffed the open gash on her cheek.

“Kelly! Fucking wake up!”

Simon thrust his head sideways, tried to headbutt the cat, but came up short. He tried again. Same thing.

“Kelly!”

The mountain lion opened its mouth. Teeth like ivory

knives. A tongue thick and rough as a punching bag.

It bit her cheek gingerly, got its front fangs into the flap of skin under her open wound.

“No! Stop it!”

With a quick pull, it peeled the skin down and off Kelly’s face, driving her head forward into the dashboard. Her lips and nose stopped just centimeters from the water.

“You fucker! I will kill you!”

The cat retreated back onto the hood and ate the chunk of Kelly’s cheek. Licked its lips. Looked up into the rain and then down into the car again.

“Go away, go away,” Simon said, slamming his head against the horn.

It blared, muffled by the river but still loud. The cat startled, let out a screeching howl as it jumped onto the roof.

Simon took his head off the horn, looked up at the sagging roof. “Shit.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Ow ow ow.” Kelly was waking up. She leaned back, her eyes fluttering, her teeth chattering.

There was nothing left to the side of her face. Nothing but striated muscle and a giant hole into her mouth.

It took a second before the pain hit her. Then she looked at Simon, her eyes going wide. She screamed bloody murder.

“Shh! Kelly, shut up. Please. It’ll hear you.”

Her cries echoed in the smashed car and made Simon’s vision wobble. She started shaking.

“Myfacemyfacemyface,” she muttered.

“Lean over me and put my seat back,” he said. “Hurry.”

She wasn't hearing him. She was in too much pain.

“Kelly! Listen to me. I'm stuck. I need you to put my seat back. And if you don't do it right now we're going to die!”

She stared back, blood gushing down her neck. She'd never look pretty again, but that was moot in the face of being eaten alive. “Kelly! My seat! Now!”

That's when the massive paw came swiping into the window from above. Razor-sharp claws caught Kelly under the chin and stabbed upwards into her mouth, through her tongue.

Her cries cut off abruptly as she went rigid with shock. Blood spit out of her mouth, mixing with the gore dripping off her cheek. She reached up and grabbed the paw, tried to yank it out, but the cat curled its nails inward and snared her.

It pulled her up. Her head hit the roof. Her vertebrae popped like rocks in a tumbler.

“No!” Simon screamed. “Stop stop stop!” He hit his head on the horn again but the cat didn't loosen its grip. Again he thrashed in his seat, trying to get his arms free.

Kelly's body was yanked up and out the window, stopped only by the fact she was wearing her seatbelt. The cat played tug-o-war with her body while she cried in horror.

Then, with a swift tug, the cat ripped its paw right out of her chin, taking a chunk of her tongue with it.

She fell back against the seat, in the water, her chest

heaving, her neck torn to shreds. Simon looked away, realizing she was not going to live long enough to get to a doctor. Not with all the blood that was pumping out of her.

“Please,” she moaned, looking at him for help. Her words were muffled and nearly incomprehensible. But he knew what she was saying. “Please . . . help . . . me.”

“Help me first. Put my seat back. Please, Kelly. Please I swear I will help you just put my seat back.”

Miraculously, she nodded. With shaking hands, she fumbled for her seatbelt buckle, found it in the cold water. The belt loosened over her shoulders and started to slide up to its housing.

“Hurry,” Simon said. He checked the rearview mirror again, catching sight of Carrie in the back. Her lips still quivered. They were turning blue. He was running out of time. He could also see the long tail of the mountain lion dangling over the back window.

Kelly fell towards him.

“The button is on the seat part,” he instructed. “Over here on this side.”

Her bloody, shredded head on his chin, oozing gore onto his face, she reached down into the water and searched for the seat lever.

The cat’s head ducked down from above and stared at them, upside down, through the open passenger window. Simon’s heart leapt, his balls tightened. Jesus Christ, was it going to come inside? Could it get to Carrie?

It reached in with a bloody paw. Upon its black nails strips of Kelly’s face swung like streamers. It grabbed at

Kelly's back, tore her jacket open, pulling away stuffing. Kelly screamed, nothing but glottal noises now that her mouth was destroyed.

The cat swiped again, and this time Simon watched Kelly's blood arc up and hit the roof. Her head snapped up, her eyes rolled white.

It had latched onto her back.

"No no no no," Simon said. "Find the seat lever. Find the lever!"

Just then the car seat moved. A fraction of an inch but he could feel the pressure lessening on his arms.

"Yes! Yes! Just a little more. Press it again!"

In an instant Kelly was yanked back against her door, the cold black water splashing everywhere. The cat started to haul her out the window. She grabbed the side of the car seat, held fast, her pink fingernails digging in for grip. But the cat was stronger, and with a few yanks had her halfway out the window. She kicked her feet wildly, catching Simon in the side of the face. Breaking the gearshift. Knocking the windshield about in its housing. She gripped the edge of the door. Her fingers slipped off. She could not fight the animal.

Simon watched in horror as her body was ripped entirely from the car and carried up into the rain.

Above his head, the car's roof sagged and bonged. The cat screeched and Kelly grunted. Even in the rain Kelly's blood poured down the windshield thick as jelly.

"Leave her alone!" Simon yelled, shaking wildly in his seat. His left arm was sliding up now, his elbow throbbing as he tried to get it free of the dashboard. He was so close!

He screamed as he pulled. “C’mon! Fucking . . . Nhhnhnnh!”

The sounds of Kelly’s struggle stopped. She let out a gurgle, then a final cry, and all was silent.

“Gonna kill you, gonna kill you,” Simon grunted, yanking his arms up. He was so close. Just had to get his elbow up.

Kelly’s body rolled down the shattered windshield with a series of thumps and came to rest half-submerged on the car’s hood. Rain beat down on the ruined face of his former nanny. Her nose was gone, one eye dangling on sinew. The rest was just red, glistening meat.

The massive cat jumped down to the hood as well, sending the car farther into the mud. The water rose up into Simon’s mouth. He tilted his head upwards, fought for breath.

Panic was setting in. He was shivering, shaking, praying. All he could think about was Carrie, in the back seat. If he drowned what would happen to her? Would she drown too? Would the cat get her? What would Mikha do, her husband and baby girl found dead and half-eaten in a ravine just twenty minutes from the house.

On the hood, the mountain lion bent down and sank its teeth into Kelly’s neck and tore a chunk free. As it swallowed it purred, oblivious of the rain, bored by the river.

Weren’t cats supposed to hate water, Simon wondered. He was sure of it. But this one didn’t care.

It placed a paw on Kelly’s head, held her down as it yanked her eye free from her skull. Grey, gelatinous ooze leaked out and ran down the cat’s chin.

“Oh God. Oh God no.” Simon put everything into getting his arm up past the crushed-in dashboard. Just a little more. A little more. Water was filling his mouth.

With the cat still on the hood, the car was slowly sinking farther into the mud.

“Give me a fucking break!” He yanked so hard he felt something in his shoulder pop. White hot pain laced through his back. He howled in agony.

But the next thing he knew he was staring at his own hand. He was free!

As much as he wanted to shout a victory cry he knew there was no time. He found the car seat’s lever and pushed it. The seat slid back an inch and then gave out. But it was enough. His other arm was free.

He undid his seatbelt, his shoulder throbbing, and shifted toward the back seat. Despite his freezing body and the pain in his legs, he pulled himself through the gap. Carrie’s eyes were open, dazed.

“Baby girl. It’s Daddy, baby girl. See me? It’s Daddy. Just hang on. I’m here now. Daddy is going to get you dry.”

He undid the buckle on her chest strap. Which was when he noticed the mountain lion looking in through the shattered windshield at him. It was licking blood off its lips, like it was hungry and waiting for him. He did his best not to stare back, but it was hard to ignore.

There were more pressing matters at hand, however. The car was still sinking into the mud. He had to get Carrie free. He also needed to get the Oh Shit Bag from the trunk.

He pulled down on the back seat’s center arm rest.

Behind this, the car was designed with a snap-on divider that could be disengaged to access the trunk. If he'd opted for a different model he'd probably be shit out of luck.

Shivering, he tore the divider off, reached in and found the Oh Shit Bag.

"Daddy will make you warm, baby girl. Just hang on."

He undid the latch near her crotch, his fingertips trembling, fed each of her arms through the shoulder restraints. She was free now, staring at him with utter confusion and fear.

"Shhh. It's okay. It's okay. It's all okay now."

The mountain lion screeched, and then it suddenly was very much not okay. Because the car was going under the water. The river washed up over his chin, up to his mouth.

Carrie began to cry, to kick and shake.

"I love you!" was all he got out before he slammed his fist over her mouth, used his thumb and forefinger to pinch her nose closed. He spun her to him in a near headlock, holding her tight.

And then they were fully submerged in the freezing blackness of nature's most destructive force.

He couldn't see anything. The icy water hurt his ears, hurt his brain. Panic poked at him from the edge of his sanity. Focus, he thought. Just fucking focus!

He moved against the sinking car, toward the front seat. What he thought was the front seat, at least. Trying to make for the passenger window. In the blackness everything seemed so small, so compact. The seats pushed against him like annoying people in a crowd. The

Oh Shit Bag caught on something. He yanked on it, got it free. Carrie kicked harder, grunted under the water. Was she dying?

He pivoted right, kicking off what felt like the center console. His head hit metal and he wanted to scream. Where was the window!

He juked, pushed off again, extended fully, felt the window frame brush his shoulder. The water pressure suddenly felt different, lighter. Was he out? Where was the surface? Carrie was starting to shake uncontrollably. He kicked upwards, felt his head break the surface, heard the rush of the forest winds around him, heard rain hitting the water.

As soon as he opened his eyes and saw the trees he let go of Carrie's mouth, prayed for her to breathe.

With a wail of utter fear his little girl screamed and cried.

"Baby! Yes, baby! It's okay. You're okay. Daddy's got you. Oh Jesus, I'm right here. Just breathe."

Her weight, combined with the fact he was wearing winter clothes, made treading water nearly impossible. His feet searched frantically for the riverbed. It was there, but his toes barely touched, just enough to allow him to hop away from the car, toward the riverbank. Then the ground fell away and he was doing his best to float, his daughter on his chest, the way lifeguards rescue surfers. Hand under her chin, keeping her head above water. The Oh Shit Bag, sealed and full of air, floated next to him, and he pushed it toward the bank. Then he used his one free hand and his feet to move through the water.

The rain came down hard, threatening to choke him, stinging his eyes.

As he moved, he watched the last of the car go under the water. Just the trunk sticking up now. And sitting atop it, the mountain lion with its bloody mouth, eyeing him.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he whispered.

But the mountain lion knew nothing of pleas. It merely knew there was a meal trying to escape.

It leapt into the water, disappeared under the surface, then reappeared a second later. Swimming. Fast.

“Fuck fucking fuck!” Simon kicked as hard as he could, ignoring Carrie’s cries.

The cat, only its head above water, glided at him like a shark. Its yellow eyes marking him for death.

The riverbed rose up beneath him and Simon stood, waist-high in the water. The bank was just a few feet away. He waded toward it, fighting against the current, like walking through pudding. When he looked back the cat was just an arm’s length out.

With a grunt he threw Carrie onto the bank, saw her roll over and land on her stomach. She wailed and tantrumed, lost and confused. But she’s alive, Simon thought. I got her to land in one piece.

There was a screech behind him and he turned just in time to see the mountain lion finding its own footing in the shallow water.

High ground, Simon thought. Get the high ground. He scrambled up the bank, his feet sinking in mud, his hands slick with wet leaves.

He heard it before he felt it. The rush of air behind

him. The beast leaping. The chuffing of its throat.

The massive cat caught him in a hug and drove him to the ground.

Simon threw up his hands, went for the cat's eyes. He saw nothing but incisors and a thick tongue and a blood-smeared nose. Wet fur blotted out the world. He felt hot coppery breath on his face.

"Gonna kill you!" he screamed, just as his side became an inferno of pain. It had gotten him.

He punched it in the head, in the nose, trying hard to ignore the claws in his ribs. He cried in terror, but the cat didn't care. It lunged for his throat but he rolled away, threw up an elbow, caught it in the jaw.

Another claw found the back of his leg and he threw his head to the sky. When he looked down again he caught sight of Carrie. She was staring back at him, her lips blue, her eyes goopy with tears and mucus.

She was going to watch him die.

"Carrie!" he called, as if a two-year-old could understand the meaning in his voice. A father telling his daughter he loved her. Telling her to run. Telling her to go on living. Telling her that he was sorry.

He rolled onto his back, threw two hands around the cold, wet cat's neck and squeezed. But it did nothing. The cat barely noticed, and in one swift move bent down and bit through his jacket, into the flesh of his shoulder.

He stared in disbelief as the cat tore a chunk of meat from his body. The pain was too much. He was going to pass out. He was going to die. There was no strength left in his body to fight. He prayed to God to

save his little girl.

And then there was a new shadow looming above him, looming above the cat. A black, scaly arm swooped down. A leathery hand tipped with red claws caught the mountain lion in the throat and tore the cat's head clean off. It plopped on the ground next to Simon.

The cat's body went limp, fell on top of him. Nearly 200 pounds of feline muscle knocking the wind out of him. But as quickly as it crushed him it was being lifted away.

The rain fell harder, harder still. Simon could barely see as the massive black thing—vaguely humanoid, covered in scales and spikes, all topped by two glowing red eyes—threw the dead cat's body over its shoulder, then raced up the nearest tree. He watched as it reached the treetop, then leapt to another tree, then another, then another, until it was lost to the rain and foliage.

Carrie, small shivering thing that she was, managed to walk to him. Her body shook as she sat next to him and pointed into the trees. "Doggie," she said, her voice sleepy, an effect of the frigid water and possible head injury.

"Oh my god, baby girl, c'mere. Are you hurt? Oh God." He kissed her head and hugged her tight.

"Doggie."

"Okay, yeah, it was a doggie. C'mere, let me see you."

He sat up, his side and leg warm with blood. His shoulder pumped more blood onto his chest. "C'mere." He picked her up in his good arm, used a tree to right himself. He saw the Oh Shit Bag floating in the water near

the bank and had little choice but to put Carrie down for a minute while he grabbed it. Just that small second of time away from her hurt his heart, and as soon as he had the bag he picked her up again and scanned the forest for signs of the road. It wasn't hard to find; his car had plowed through several small trees and plants, leaving an obvious path. That was the way back to the road.

Before he left, he kicked the mountain lion's head. It didn't make him feel better, but it was something worth doing.



A police cruiser drove by ten minutes later and found a soaking-wet, bloody man in the street holding a small girl. Soon after there was an ambulance and EMTs. Everything felt like a blur.

Later, in the hospital, after the doctors congratulated him for saving his daughter—who was in her own room with Mom expected to make a full recovery—the detectives came. Simon answered their questions as best he could. His wounds confirmed his story. They said they had retrieved Kelly's body, dredged up the car, and found the head of the mountain lion.

"You're a lucky man," they said. "Fish and Game knew there were cougars in the area but they said it's not that common for them to attack humans. Still, they saw the head. Found your nanny's . . . well, they saw her wounds. They were impressed with its size. Larger than average, they said. Probably why it figured it could take on people."

Simon nodded. His head hurt too much to talk.

“Thing is, I suppose we need to thank you in a way. In the last two years we’ve had six hikers go missing in that area. We had no bodies so we couldn’t close the files on them. I mean, people just up and leave sometimes. Go to Miami, start a new life. It happens. Can’t just assume it’s cougars or bears without some kind of remains. But now with this cougar you killed . . . after the unfortunate death of your nanny . . . Kelly . . . well, I think we can safely say we’ve put an end to why people were going missing in the area. I just have a couple final questions . . . A cougar that size, and you with no weapons . . . How’d you rip its head off? And where’d the body go?”

Simon turned toward the window, looked out at the trees in the distance, wondering just what the hell might be hiding in them. Something large, black, and scaly. Something he hoped to never meet again.

“I don’t know,” was all he could say.

The detectives sat silent for a moment, then closed their note pads. “It’s okay. I wouldn’t remember much either in that situation. We’re gonna go and write this up. If we have any questions we’ll call you. And hey, you did right by your little girl. Be proud.”

They left.

Simon continued to stare out the window, watching the trees sway, wondering what was leaping about in them. “I don’t know,” he said.

Eventually, he fell asleep.