



LONE JACK

THE AUTHOR OF "CASHING IN"
LARRY SAGER



A three-year-old girl is abducted by two thieves.

A call is made and her sister is more than happy to take this young bundle in, but the 'cretin' brothers require a trade. It was hot and that has nothing to do with the weather, because there is a raging blizzard outside.

Will any of them survive the storm or will it end in a gunfight for possession of the child? So be fair, read from the front to the back cover and no peeking.

Lone Jack

by Larry Sager

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Larry Sager

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Chapter 1

There she was, sitting in the lap of a big hairy dude named Homer on the passenger side of a rusty, beat up, old pickup truck. His equally hairy and ugly twin brother, Clyde, was driving and this was the second vehicle they'd stolen since she'd been revived. They were caught up in evening traffic and moving at a snail's pace, but that was probably all this old rust-bucket could do anyway. She was wearing a winter coat and it was colder than a well digger's lunch box, so she knew the season, if not the month and the year.

Zerelda had awakened, thoroughly disoriented, to find herself imprisoned in a three-year old child's body and with a small child's speech impediment to boot! And sitting in this smelly, bad breathed, gap-toothed, idiot's lap was no joy either. She did know whose body she was occupying now, but she'd had every intention of taking one hell of a siesta until the child was grown. Something had gone awry, but that had always been the case when she was called up.

In real life, if there was such a thing, Zerelda had been the mother of Frank and Jesse James. After the civil war, both of her boys had gone into the banking business. But, at the point of a gun, all they'd made was withdrawals. She'd buried Jesse beside their old farmhouse just east of Kearney, Missouri, after that coward over in St. Joe killed him. Then she had gone to her deathbed seeking eternal peace, but that wasn't to be. Hell no! Every time one of her female descendants got into trouble, she was called to their rescue.

One of her most recent resurrections had occurred when her great granddaughter's husband had come dragging home a suitcase full of money belonging to a Kansas City drug-lord. Maggie was one hell of a woman. All of the James women were. But only Zerelda had the experience necessary to get them out of the tub of hot water that Hugh Spencer had baptized them in that day. And she'd done it pretty-up-and-walking too, if she did say so herself.

Hugh was no mental slouch, by any means. He'd figured out who she was, even though she was in Maggie's body. That damned Pinkerton raid on their farm had left her without a right arm and whenever she was in control, she couldn't get Maggie's right hand to function. That's what tipped him off. When she migrated, it wasn't always that way and she attempted to wiggle the fingers on the little girl's right hand to test her theory. Well, for what it was worth, it worked, but that hand wasn't even big enough to grab a doorknob, let alone handle a scattergun.

Maggie's husband had left a trail behind him the day he found the money. Running from the law, the drug dealers had hidden it in the brush at a radio repeater site that Hugh's company rented space in. Hugh had signed the radio station's logbook when he'd picked up the key, and one look at that page was all the thugs needed. And that's when the fun began. Before it was over, Zerelda, Hugh and Maggie's brother, Gil, had half of the drug-lord's soldiers buried in the pasture behind Hugh and Maggie's home and the drug-lord, his nasty and corpulent self, was now behind bars at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Maggie had to turn the money over to the law, but what the hell...her and Hugh made many times over that by selling the movie rights. And right about that time Zerelda had migrated to Maggie's daughter, Audrey.

Always before, Zerelda had never known the why of it until she arrived at her destination. She had no control over it, it just happened. Then, staring at the world through someone else's eyes and probing her host's mind for answers, she'd discover her purpose for being there. She'd jumped from horse and buggy days to shiny new automobiles in the flick of an eye, and that had been one hell of a shock. But this time she knew where she was bound and Audrey's body was just a stopping off place for her.

Thinking back, Zerelda recalled her last conversation with Hugh. They were out on the deck behind Hugh and Maggie's house and it was Thanksgiving. He had been talking with Audrey just before she'd taken control.

"Hugh?"

"Zerelda?" Hearing his given name on Audrey's lips had tipped him off.

"You dimwit! Who the hell did you think it was, Mother Theresa? "

The insult clinched it. "So, how's life been treating you?"

"It's been boring since I straightened out their marriage."

Hugh did not want any of the gory details. "So, what's on your agenda, now that you've solved their marriage problems?"

"It's more complicated than I had anticipated."

Hugh had been instantly concerned; it was his daughter's life they were discussing. "She's healthy...I mean, is she in any danger?"

"No, she's pregnant, Hugh!" As if child bearing wasn't the equivalent of major surgery, but Zerelda didn't expect a man to understand that...and she was quite correct.

"So, what's the big deal, she's been pregnant before?"

"I'll tell you what the big deal is, you lummo! She's having a baby girl and I'm migrating to an undeveloped blob of humanity. That's what!

"And I'm going to take a long snooze when she's born, cause it's going to be awfully damned frustrating...for a very long time. Even if I took control, I couldn't talk, because her vocal cords won't be developed enough and when she starts walking, it'll be even more exasperating. You don't remember what it's like having the floor tip up and smack you in the face every other step, do you?"

Changing the subject, Hugh asked, “Audrey doesn’t know she has a hitchhiker does she?”

“No, and there’s no point in telling her. And when I migrate to her baby, I don’t want her thinking that her newborn daughter is anything but a normal child.”

Before she’d migrated to the “*unborn blob of humanity*,” and slipped into dormant mode, Zerelda had injected a very strong suggestion into Audrey’s mind. The child would be named Jessica Clay Rodgers. If she was going to cohabit that child’s body, the kid was going to have a descent name, and Zerelda felt that she had earned the right to name her. If she hadn’t intervened, the child would never have been conceived. Talk about a fairy godmother...this one took the cake.

Well, so much for the twenty-year siesta. Jessica wasn’t supposed to need her until she was grown, she’d known that much. Zerelda wasn’t even privy to the so-called, *grand scheme* yet and here she was tooling down the highway with Homer and Jethro, or whatever his damned name was. Clyde...it was Clyde, and she’d best get tuned into their conversation if she wanted to find out what Jessica was doing in the company of a couple of dorks. All she could dredge from Jessica’s childish perceptions were an odd assortment of distorted images that made no sense whatsoever.

“Can’t you drive any faster?” Homer asked, holding onto her with one hand and reaming his ear with a matchstick with the other.

“No I can’t,” his brother answered. “But we’re doing fine. The cops are looking for the car we ditched and they’ll never find us in this traffic. Homer...we’re as close to *invisible* as we can get,” he stated, turning to give his brother a toothy grin...that instantly turned sour. “What the hell are you doing...got ear mites or something? You know what the school nurse told us. She said never...”

“Stick anything smaller than your elbow in your ear,” Homer repeated, finishing the quote. “I know! How could I forget with you around to remind me...but it’s my goddamned ear and she can stick her elbow up her ass!” He was pissed. Clyde was always remembering that crap and throwing it in his face, like he was a little kid with only half his marbles.

A dim memory floated to the surface of his mind, and Homer blurted out, “Hey, Clyde, you don’t even floss...and she told us to do that.” He knew he had him with that one and he turned to look out the passenger window to keep him from seeing the look of triumph that was written all over his face. His body was shaking and his cheeks were swelling with suppressed laughter. Unable to contain it any longer, it began squirting through his pursed lips in bursts, like a series of small farts.

“Well, Homer...it’s like this,” his twin drawled. “It’s my damned teeth and she can floss her ass with her skinny arm, just before she jams her elbow up there where the sun don’t shine! And hey, dude,” he yelped, laughing and pounding the steering wheel with his meaty palms, “don’t forget to dry between your toes!”

Now that really frosted him! Clyde was only twenty minutes older. How come he always got the best of an argument? Defeated and angry, Homer looked down at the little girl sitting in his lap. Her face looked as bland as white bread, but he was sure that he saw laughter dancing in her eyes. "*I'll fix her!*" he thought...and he pinched her butt.

"OUCH!" the child cried out in pain, her small voice shrill in the pickup cab. Seething with anger and fire in her eyes, Zerelda looked up at him, smiled wickedly and peed in his lap.

It took a moment for him to realize what was happening and after the deed was done, his face turned as red as a beet.

"Piss in my lap, willya...I'm tossing your butt out the window," Homer growled, grabbing a handful of her coat and lifting her high into the air.

"Put me down you idiot!" Zerelda squealed in anger.

Homer was too fired up to notice her lapsed baby talk. He was getting that look on his face, and once committed, he'd do it. Just as sure as god made little green apples. Even doing thirty-five, the traffic was bumper to bumper and the kid would be squashed flatter than a fritter. Not that he really gave a hoot, but someone with a cellular would get a copy on their tag, call the cops and the chase would be on again.

With no thought to the consequences, Zerelda gave Homer her best *I dare you* look...and he started rolling the window down. She was kicking and squealing and he was doing his best to stuff her out headfirst when his brother reached over and grabbed his coat, yanking them both away from the window.

"NO!" Clyde shouted. "Leave the kid alone! She was our ticket out of the bank and we still need her. She's our insurance, Homer. Wait till we get home, OK?"

"Well...alright, but if she opens that sassy mouth again, I'm going to bust her right in the chops!" He'd heard what she'd said, but the lapse hadn't registered.

Zerelda was beginning to piece it together now. Jessica had been taken hostage during a bank robbery. Jessica certainly wouldn't have wandered into that bank alone. Just whom had the little girl had been with at the time and how had they fared? Jessica's parents lived in St. Louis, and Zerelda had seen a sign identifying this town as Kansas City. So, it was quite possible that Maggie had been there with Jessica and her mother, and neither would have given the child up without a fight.

Testing Homer's promise of a fat lip, Zerelda wailed, "Where's my mommy? I want my mommy!" Sympathy or torment, maybe there was information to be had.

"The last I saw of her, she was under her desk with her big butt sticking out," Clyde cheerfully replied. "She probably went home to change her knickers and forgot all about you."

He was disappointed when his answer didn't wring a deluge of tears from the kid. *"Well, hell, maybe she's retarded?"*

Actually, Zerelda was deep in thought and had missed her cue. The person he'd described couldn't have been Audrey or Maggie. Either would have fought tooth and nail for the child. There had to be more to the story, but she knew that she wouldn't be hearing it from Homer or Clyde.

Logic told her that it had been Clyde that had grabbed Jessica to use as a shield. Homer didn't have enough sense to come in out of the rain. He had picked her out because she was lightweight and the cops would think twice before endangering a child.

Meanwhile, Homer just sat there in silence, with a confused look on his face. Finally the puzzled look changed to one of anger and he asked, "Just what the hell are knickers?"

"Her underwear, you dimwit!" Clyde shot back. Having said it, he regretted it. He knew he pissed his brother off a lot with his insults, but he couldn't resist the impulse. His twin was dumber than dirt, and it wasn't his fault that he'd inherited all the brains.

No one else could insult Homer like that and get away with it. Clyde wasn't sure that he could take his brother on when he was in a rage, but they were pretty evenly matched otherwise. It was a known fact that when Homer flipped his lid, you'd best make yourself scarce. Some hadn't heeded the warning and they'd paid for that mistake. That old cistern behind their uncle's house had more than one body parked in it, and that was where the kid would probably wind up too, he surmised. His brother had some weird love affair that old hole in the ground.

With the exception of an occasional belch out of Homer, silence ruled until Clyde took an exit off highway 71. They were south of Belton, Missouri, and Zerelda was memorizing as much of their route as possible. Zerelda knew that the morons would never suspect that a three-year old could read, so there she was, balanced on Homers well-padded, damp knees, gawking around at everything, as any child might. However, this toddler was making note of every landmark they passed. When they arrived at their destination, she'd figure out a way to get word to Maggie and Hugh.

From what she'd picked up during their more coherent moments of conversation, they were on their way to their uncle Sherman's house. He lived on the outskirts of a small Missouri town named Peculiar. *"Peculiar? Now isn't that appropriate?"* she thought. *"Actually, it's an understatement...but then, they couldn't find one named Stupid, could they?"*

One thing that Zerelda knew for sure was that Jessica's value as a hostage was going to end very shortly...and then she'd become a liability. Jessica's picture would be plastered on TV screens across the nation. Kidnapping carried the death penalty, and they'd have nothing to lose by disposing of her. The thought of her own death didn't frighten her, she'd passed through the pearly gates before, but poor little Jesse hadn't even begun to

live. And then there was that *grand scheme*, whatever to hell it was. But, whatever the girl was to accomplish as an adult was down the tubes if she was snuffed at such a young and tender age.

Zerelda closed her eyes for a moment and swept all the negative thoughts from her mind, telling herself, *"It isn't over until Gabriel blows his horn...and by god that hasn't happened yet!"*

Physically, she hadn't been this vulnerable since her own childhood days, but she had well over a century's worth of experience at beck and call. She'd deal with these boneheads, and god help them, because they were going to regret crossing her path.

"Clyde, how are we going to explain the girl to old Sherm?" Homer asked, reaming his ear with a pencil. He'd broken the matchstick off inside the canal and he was trying to remove the splinters. So far, he'd only pushed them deeper. Zerelda was beginning to suspect that his plan of action was to push them out the other side.

"We'll tell him we're just baby sitting for a friend. Nothing permanent, mind you," he answered, glancing sideways and giving his brother a sly wink.

The child's face hadn't shown any response, but Zerelda's suspicions had just been confirmed by Clyde's vague, but ominous statement.

"Little girl...what's your name?" Homer asked, tapping her on the shoulder to get her attention.

"Jessica!" the child snapped out, her lower lip still curled into a pout.

"Well, Jessica...when we get to uncle Sherm's house, I'm going to show you the cistern in his back yard. Do you know what a cistern is?" Homer asked.

"There it is," Clyde thought. *"Oh, what the hell?"* Homer would get his kicks and they'd be rid of the little darling.

"Huh-uh," she answered, shaking her curly blonde head.

"It's a big hole in the ground where they store rainwater," he announced.

His counterfeit smile looked downright evil, but she decided to play along. Hostility had gotten her nowhere and as her mother had been wont to remind her, *"Girl, you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar."*

"Tan I see it...weally?"

"You bet!" Homer replied. "Now, I only show it to my special friends, Jessica. And if you don't pee in my lap any more, you can be my special friend." He was being so sly that he could scarcely contain himself, and he had to turn away from her. His cheeks were ballooning and he was making obscene noises again.

“Oh, doody!” Zerelda replied, trying her best to sound like a three-year old. Her first impulse was to open the floodgates and send another gusher into his lap, but that had been a mistake. One way or the other they would have to dispose of Jessica, and peeing in the imbecile's lap wasn't going to buy her the time she so desperately needed. Homer was still pissed, from being pissed on, and he wanted revenge, at his earliest opportunity. Perhaps if she were nice to him, he'd forget about it. “Dream on,” she thought, but that was her best strategy for the moment.

When they pulled off the highway, they were on a dirt road for a short distance and then Clyde cranked the wheel over, fishtailing into a gravel driveway. The house was of a twenty-year vintage, but it was freshly painted and the yard was as neat as a pin. Zerelda had been expecting something more fitting to the company she was keeping and this certainly didn't fit that expectation.

Clyde pulled the dilapidated old pickup around behind the house. Zerelda was sure it was to conceal it from passing traffic.

Homer opened the door and got out with Jessica clutched under one arm like a sack of potatoes. With his free hand he plucked the wet fabric of his trousers away from his legs and loudly inquired of his brother, “Can I show her the cistern now?”

“Not yet,” his brother replied. “Sherm might be looking out the window. You know how that old coot is.”

The back porch was enclosed. Lap siding extended up from the foundation a few feet and it was screened from there to the roof.

“Be sure to take off your shoes before we go in, or Sherm will piss and moan,” Clyde reminded his twin.

“How come we have to put up with his shit?” Homer asked, complaining. “We can plunk him down the cistern too.”

“Aunt Lila's dead, but he was married to her. She was family, and that makes him family. You don't mess with family, Homer. You know that.”

“Yeah, but he's a pain in the ass,” Homer whined.

“It makes no difference...he's family! You're a pain in the ass too...do you think Pa would throw your ass down that cistern?” Clyde asked, as if he were reasoning with a child. But then, for all practical purposes, that was what his brother was, an overgrown child.

“He might...if he was pissed enough,” Homer answered, reflectively. “He knocked me cold with a tire iron once...and remember when he kicked me in the head that

Christmas?” Physical abuse had been so common that Homer could only remember the extreme instances.

“Well, in the long run, it didn’t hurt you none, did it?” Clyde asked. “And you’d die if he threw you down that hole and left you there...wouldn’t you? You’re family and we don’t do that to family...unless they cross us. Got that?”

“OK...but I’d sure love to see Old Sherm down in that hole, and I’d feed him the whole time,” Homer promised, and then he started laughing. “I’d shovel beans at him...like he does us, and he’d gas himself to death!” Clyde was laughing too, as they entered the house through the kitchen.

Chapter 2

Bobbing up and down under Homer's arm, Zerelda got an unsteady view of the kitchen as they passed through it. But what she saw was as immaculate as the outside of the house. When they passed through the kitchen and into the living room, she found it the same. In addition, there was a little gray-haired man ensconced in a La-Z-Boy recliner, beneath a floor lamp, reading a book and he looked up as they entered the room.

"Homer, if you'd hold the little girl upright, it would do wonders for her complexion," the little old man exclaimed, placing a marker, and folding the book closed.

"She peed on me," Homer answered.

"So, you're a perfect target...now sit her down. She's not a bag of feed, you know?"

Homer stood her on the floor and recognizing her cue, Zerelda ran to the old man. The old man pulled her onto his lap, and with an honest smile, he announced, "My name is Sherman...what's your name, sugar?"

"Jessica," Zerelda replied, hugging his neck.

"Well, Jesse... can I call you Jesse?" He asked, pulling her away, to look in her big gray eyes. When she nodded her approval, he continued, "My name is Sherman, but you can call me uncle Sherm if you want."

"She'll pee on you," Homer warned.

"Pee...schmee! I'd pee on you too if I could get up a healthy stream," the old man stated, vehemently. "You and your brother pushed your way into my house...with out an invitation. If I were a younger man I'd kick both of your carcasses out!" he shouted. Calming himself, he patted Jessica on the back, as she hugged him around the neck. "It's OK honey," he crooned, reassuringly, pulling her even more tightly against him.

"What's she doing here?" the old man asked, looking up at his two nephews. "Where are her parents?"

"We're babysitting," Clyde answered, tersely.

"She's a lawyer's daughter," Homer added, proud of his imaginative input.

"Since when have you two become that close to lawyers?" the old man demanded to know. "The only lawyer's you two see are county appointed defense attorneys."

Clyde gave Homer the *evil eye* and answered, "We'll be taking her home soon, and it's no concern of yours."

The old man knew that he could handle Homer, but Clyde was another thing. It was his observation that when Clyde got his back bowed, the only thing that could stop him was a well-placed axe handle. Clyde considered himself the more intelligent of the two, but in his assessment Clyde was still a fathom or two below whale shit in the intelligence chain. Rebecca had been the most stable of the family, but if he had known what he was getting himself into, he might have reconsidered marrying her. After she passed away these bozos had moved in. That family had been the bane of his existence since day one.

“Clyde, your father called a moment before you arrived and left a message. You’re to call him back immediately,” Sherman recited, relaying the message, feeling more like a pawn than a player.

Clyde frowned, as he made his way to the phone. He knew what this was about. His father wanted his share of the bank loot before he and Homer could spend it.

His mother answered the phone. “This is Clyde. Put Pa on.”

The conversation was short and sweet. “Yeah, Pa. We are on our way.”

“Homer!” Clyde called from across the room. “Pa says to get our butts over there, pronto!”

“What about the girl?” his brother inquired. He had his heart set on dunking her in the cistern.

“We’ll take care of that matter when we get back,” Clyde replied. The family abode was on the other side of town and he didn’t want to chance having her spotted along the way. Her picture was bound to be all over television by now.

“Sherm, you watch the rug rat while we’re gone, and don’t let her out of your sight. We’re taking your car,” he stated, without asking permission. The old truck had probably been reported stolen by now and he knew better than to parade it through town.

As the two tromped out through the kitchen, Zerelda smelled a pot of opportunity simmering on the fire. She watched as the two drove past the window in an old blue Chevy. She also noticed that it was beginning to snow, and that might present another problem.

Deciding it was safe; Zerelda looked up into the old man’s faded blue eyes, and asked, “Serm, wood ou ton on TB?”

“Sure, honey. Do you want to watch cartoons?” he asked, setting her feet on the floor.

“I wanna see da news an da weder,” she answered, beaming at him with her brightest smile.

“The news and the weather?” the old man repeated, not sure he had heard her correctly. His old ears played tricks on him now and then, and the little girl’s speech was a lot less than fully developed.

“Yeth!” she, replied, clapping her little hands in glee, and jumping up and down. Zerelda felt like a fool, but she knew what was expected of a three-year old, and it sure as hell wasn’t explaining her plight over a game of chess.

The old man turned on the television set, and returned to his recliner. Then he helped Zerelda climb back onto his lap.

They sat there watching as the news anchorman droned on and on about the new tax legislature that was coming up for a vote. Just as Zerelda was dozing off, Jessica’s picture popped up on the screen and old Sherm shot straight up out of the chair. “Shit!” he bellowed, almost spilling Zerelda to the floor. Pulling her to him, with one eye still glued to the TV, he shouted, “Those goddamned cretins robbed a bank and kidnapped a child!”

Hugging the girl tightly to his chest, he paced back and forth before the television set, listening to the account of the robbery spill from the lips of the news reporter. What in the hell was he going to do? If he called the cops, they might get Clyde and Homer, but the rest of the family would get him. No doubt about it!

“Jessica, we’re in deep doodoo!” Sherman proclaimed, not expecting her to understand.

“I know,” she replied, sympathizing with him.

“Well, you don’t know the half of it,” he said, patting her on the back, her head resting on his shoulder, as he paced the floor. “If I call the police, the family will kill me. If I don’t, they’ll kill you. I can’t stand by and allow that to happened,” he stated, with conviction.

“Call my grandpa,” she whispered in his ear. Zerelda had never been comfortable with the law since her boys began running from it. She had more faith in Hugh and Maggie.

“Now honey, how can I do that when I don’t even know his name?” the old man asked, not really taking her suggestion seriously.

“Please put me down, Sherm,” she pleaded, dispensing with baby-talk.

The old man set her on her feet and watched as the little girl ran over to the telephone stand. She picked up a note pad and a pencil, lying next to the phone, and then she stretched out on the rug and begun scribbling on the pad. Obviously, she was drawing him a picture of her grandpa, which was sweet, but it wasn’t going to do them one hell of a lot of good. Time was running out. If they hadn’t taken his car they could have run for it, but here they were, out away from town with no transportation and it was snowing.

He was standing there watching a repeat of the robbery report on TV, when he felt a tug on his sleeve. The little tyke had brought him her picture. She held it up to him and he glanced at it, smiled and then he turned his attention back to the news. All of the sudden

his jaw dropped and his eyes flashed back to the note. "I'll be damned!" he blurted out in wonder, staring down at a written message. The writing was a bit shaky but it was quite legible, and in shock, he read it aloud, "*Sherman, call 628-1789 and ask for Hugh Spencer. Tell him that Zerelda says to get his butt over here. ASAP! Give him directions. He can handle the family with no cops.*"

The old man shuffled over to the phone, reading and rereading the short note along the way. "*She must be one of those child prodigies or something.*" He picked up the phone, dialed the number, and after a slight hesitation, he asked, "Is Hugh Spencer available?" There was a short discussion, and then Zerelda heard the old man giving directions over the phone. Then he hung up.

"He's on his way, sweetheart," the old man cheerfully announced. "Clyde, Homer and that whole accursed family will be celebrating tonight. They'll get drunker than skunks and beat each other half to death before the night is over. Clyde and Homer won't be dragging back here until sunrise tomorrow, if I know that clan, and I'm sorry to say that I know them all too well. Even with the snow, I figure that it won't take your grandfather more than an hour or two to get here."

The old man changed TV stations until he hit upon the Disney channel. And then, taking the child's hand, he led her back to the recliner. He sat there with Zerelda perched on one wobbly old knee, as they watched Yosemite Sam blasting away at a *long eared varmint*. That *varmint* looked more like a nutty rabbit to Zerelda, but if that was what uncle Sherm enjoyed watching, she could stomach it until Hugh arrived.

As the time for Hugh's arrival drew near, both Zerelda and Sherm were alternately watching television and looking out into the snow to see if their salvation was had made the scene. The snow was coming down more heavily, and Sherm's mailbox, at the end of drive, was just a dim outline now.

Sherm was getting worried. The old man got up and changed the TV back to the weather channel. The weatherman was excitedly bouncing around in front of a large map of Missouri and the surrounding states. He was pointing to a huge cloud mass, saying, "Folks, it appears that we're really in for it. We're looking at, at least, eighteen inches of snow and the wind velocity is going to be picking up to about thirty-five miles per hour, with gusts up to forty-five and fifty miles per hour. This will amount to severe blizzard conditions for the western half of the state. Don't be going out into this unless it's an absolute Emergency. And stay tuned to this station for more current *severe weather updates.*"

As the meteorologist faded into a Caribbean vacation commercial, Zerelda's young ears picked up the sound of an automobile engine laboring up the drive. She rushed to the window in time to see Sherm's old blue Chevy wallow past the house on the snow-covered driveway. "Oh, shit...it's Homer and Clyde," she squealed, in her child's shrill voice, and Sherm's jaw dropped to his chest and froze.

Chapter 3

Hugh's body language told Maggie that something was up as he talked on the phone and she watched over his shoulder as he scribbled notations on a piece of paper. At the top of the page was the name, Sherman Lawler. Below that was what looked like directions to his home south of Kansas City. This had to be in regards to Jessica and Maggie was on pins and needles waiting for the conversation to end.

Before the receiver had even hit the cradle, Maggie's question was out of her mouth. "Hugh, was that about Jessica?"

"Yes, and she's fine...but we have to roll. Wake Gil up, he's going with us...I'll explain everything in the car," he said, urging her towards the stairs. Hugh had taken the call down in his office and once he had Maggie moving, he all but ran down the hall to the recreation room at the opposite end of the basement.

He dug his key ring out on the move and when he arrived, he hastily speared one of them into the lock securing the double-doors of the large metal cabinet just inside the door. Inside it were weapons of all shapes and sizes that he and his family had inherited from their fallen enemies during their skirmishes with the Kansas City drug lord. The Feds had taken the money he'd found, but they been unaware of this small armory.

Time was too short to be picky, so he grabbed a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun for Maggie, Gil's old M1 carbine and his 9mm Glock, which he jammed into his waistband. He threw shells for each into a duffle bag and took off at a lope for the stairs.

He met Maggie and his sleepy-eyed, mammoth of a brother-in-law in the kitchen. Gil preferred to sleep days, and his version of morning was still two hours away. Gil's shirttail was hanging out and his belt was yet to be buckled.

Gil was six-foot-five and weighed in at three hundred pounds. He was a Vietnam Veteran and he was deadly with that carbine, but his size alone was enough to make his enemies freeze in their tracks. He limped from an old war wound in his leg and he suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Nothing had set him off lately, but loud unexpected noises could put Gil back into his *kill suit* in the blink of an eye.

On the move, Hugh passed out the weapons and Maggie handed him his coat. They passed through the utility room and out into the garage. It was snowing like hell, so the Durango was their only logical choice. Climbing in, Hugh checked to see if all were buckled up. Then he punched the button on the garage door remote and fired up the engine. He flipped the switch on the dash to four-wheel drive and they were backing out before the garage door had reached its upper limit.

Glancing at the clock in the dash, Hugh was pleased to note that barely four minutes had expired since he'd hung up the phone. The wind hadn't picked up yet, but it was expected

to before nightfall. With any kind of luck they'd make it to Peculiar before the blizzard brought highway travel to a standstill.

As he drove, he repeated the part of the telephone conversation that Maggie had yet to hear. She was elated to know that Jessica was OK, and she understood the urgency of getting to their destination as soon as possible. She still felt that she had failed the child, even though Hugh had assured her that *"that is bull shit!"*

Audrey and her husband were on vacation, touring Australia. They'd taken their son, Jerry, with them. Jerry was seven, but they were afraid that it would be too much of a strain for a three-year old. So, Jessica had been left in her and Hugh's care. *"Some responsible Grandmother I turned out to be!"* she thought, chastising herself.

Maggie had taken Jessica with her to the bank. She had some important legal papers to store in their safety deposit box. When she arrived, she was told that she couldn't take Jessica into the vault with her. *"What the hell did they think the child was going to do...crack open the safe?"*

One of the female loan officers volunteered to watch Jessica. The last time that Maggie saw the little doll, she was sitting on a big chair next to the lady's desk with a big red lollypop held tight in one pudgy little fist and she waved goodbye to her *"gwanny"* as she stepped into the vault.

When Maggie returned, the damned lobby was in turmoil and Jessica was gone. The *watchful lady* was jammed under her desk with only her big butt sticking out. Maggie tried to coax her out, but when that failed, she grabbed one of the woman's ankles and dragged her ass out. The woman was hysterical and all Maggie could get out of her was that a couple of armed hooligans had taken her granddaughter.

Maggie cornered one of the security guards and from him she learned that one of the banks officers had tripped the alarm during a robbery attempt. When the police showed up, one of the thieves had grabbed Jessica and they had used her as a shield in making their getaway.

Maggie gave the police Jessica's name and they told her to go home, they'd call her when they had any news. She and Hugh had been waiting to hear from the police when the man at Peculiar had called. The man had been adamant that the police weren't to be involved, and when they learned that Zerelda had resurfaced, they were hopeful that she'd find a way to preserve the child until they arrived.

I-35 was still open as they headed south out of Kearney. The visibility wasn't all that bad yet and the heavy traffic was sweeping the snow from the road. Hugh would pick up the 435 bypass just south of Liberty and skirt out around the eastern edge of Kansas City until they reached the highway 71 turnoff. Then they'd head south to Peculiar.

They had all developed a good measure of self-control during their clashes with the drug lord's goons, which was a good thing, Hugh concluded. He and Maggie were anxious to reclaim their granddaughter, but they both knew they'd be of no help to her, wracked with anxiety and worry. Still, the tension was so thick inside the Durango that Hugh felt he could cut it with a knife.

He could see Gil in the back seat. The big guy had a grim look on his face as he turned Jessica's doll over and over in his big hands. He could almost pity Jessica's two abductors when his brother-in-law got his hands on them. And the same went for Maggie.

Maggie had been a very gentle soul until Zerelda had popped up out of the blue to share her body. Zerelda had told Hugh that each time she migrated a certain amount of her host's personality and knowledge was duplicated within herself, but she had failed to mention that the reverse was also true. A certain amount of Zerelda remained within Maggie and it had taken him a while to adapt to that discovery. That same old gentle nature was still within her, but it was now tempered with Zerelda's intense determination and iron will. That made her an extreme force to be reckoned with.

Once off highway, the road to Peculiar was snow covered and they were forced to an even slower pace. Hugh knew that four-wheel drive could get you into trouble if you became overconfident. You had better traction, but that had its limitations and all vehicles had four-wheel braking, so you couldn't stop any faster with four-wheel drive than you could with two.

"Maggie, according to the old man the house is close to the main road. If the snowfall isn't too heavy, we should be able see the yard light over his driveway," Hugh said. "I've got to keep my eyes on the road, so you and Gil keep yours peeled for that light."

Just as Hugh was beginning to fear that they'd overshot their mark, Maggie exclaimed, "There it is!" It was just a dim glow through the snow, but it was a welcome sight.

Before making his turn, Hugh switched off the headlights. A short ways from the corner, he pulled to the right-hand side of the road. They'd go the rest of the way on foot, using the yard light as a homing beacon. The wind was starting to pick up and the snow swirled around that illuminated globe like a glittering halo.

As they checked their weapons, Hugh gave his instructions. "Gil...Maggie and I will come in through the back door. You take the front. Give us fifteen seconds to get there...and kick the damned door down! Got it?" Gil nodded. He wasn't much for words and when he became angry, you'd best stay out of his way.

So far, no more than four or five inches of snow had fallen. But, because of the low temperature, it remained a powder and the wind was already piling it into small drifts.

At mid-afternoon, there was still enough light to see where they were walking, but the house was only visible between gusts. It would be there for a moment, and then

disappear, as if it were a mirage. The only relative constant was the yard light and it seemed to flicker like a candle in a draft.

Three ghostly figures crossed the road through the swirling snow, gliding silently up the drive. When the trio reached the corner of the house, the larger phantom split off and the other two continued on down the driveway.

Gil crouched low as he passed below the one and only window between him and the front entrance. Once past, he turned and carefully peered around the window frame to see if he could spot Jessica. The lights were on in the house, but there were no signs of activity from within, so he walked over to the small concrete porch and sat down. By his calculations, he had ten seconds left and he fished a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup out of his coat pocket, peeled off the wrapper and began nibbling on it. Sometimes Gil seemed to have the demeanor of a Buddhist monk, taking his pleasures in whatever time was afforded.

The back door was unlocked when Maggie and Hugh quietly passed through it from the porch. Hugh could hear the weatherman on TV expressing his concern over the impending blizzard. But, other than that, the house was silent. Maggie and he crouched silently in the kitchen for a few seconds, until they heard the front door burst open with a thundering crash. They rushed in to find Gil hovering over an inert form lying face down on the carpet.

Gil looked up and shrugged, as if to say, "*I didn't do it.*" The man looked to be in his late sixties or early seventies, and Hugh had no doubt that it was Sherman Lawler. A quick search of the rest of the house proved it void of any other occupants.

Returning to the old man's side, they eased him over on his back. Blood was trickling from a bruised left temple, but he was still breathing strongly. Maggie went back into the kitchen looking for a cold washcloth. When she returned, she placed it on the man's forehead and he began to moan. His eyes blinked several times before they remained open, and when he was able to focus on his company, he softly asked, "Who are you?"

"Hugh Spencer. I talked to you on the phone."

"Oh, yeah. Kind of hazy right now, but I remember. Can you help me up?" the old man asked.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Maggie queried.

"I'm Ok," he answered. "That bastard conked me with my own damned shotgun," he said, gesturing weakly towards the old double barrel lying close by.

Hugh picked up the shotgun. Then, breaking it open, he looked into the chambers and announced, "It's empty!"

"Yeah, I found that out after I drew down on them," he commented, as Maggie and Gil helped him to his feet. Finding him too weak and unsteady to stand on his own, they lowered him into his recliner.

The man was in sad shape, but time was wasting. "Where's Jessica?" Hugh inquired.

"I don't know for sure. All Clyde said was that they were taking her back to her family. I was holding the shotgun on them, but he just laughed. Homer was scared shitless, but not Clyde...he knew! When I told him to back off, he kept coming at me. I drew back both hammers and pulled the trigger. That son-of-a-bitch knew it wouldn't fire, because he'd peeled the shells out of it earlier," the old man said, angrily. "He yanked it out of my hands and whacked me upside the head with it. And that's the last I was aware of...until you folks arrived."

The trail couldn't end here! Maggie was certain that the old man could put them back on track, if she asked the right questions. "Sherman, do you know where they were before they returned?"

"Over at their pa's house," he answered, gingerly probing his temple. He was obviously still in a world of *hurt*.

"How do we find them?" she asked.

"You don't want to go there," he stated, with conviction. "They're all nuttier than a regiment of squirrels!"

"We can take care of ourselves," Maggie replied. "And we can fix it so they'll never bother you again."

One glance at the trio and their armament, and Sherman was convinced...enough, at least, to give them directions.

When he was through, Maggie asked, "Do you want us to call an ambulance?"

The old man slowly shook his head. "I'll be OK. Do what you've got to do...and give them one for me."

Maggie picked up the old man's shotgun, hooked her arm around it and broke it open. She pulled two shells out of her coat pocket and held them up for the old man to see.

"These are loaded with buckshot," she stated, and then she popped them into the twin chambers.

“If they return, one of these will blow Clyde all the way to Denver and the other will take his brother along for company.” She snapped the barrels back in place and laid the weapon across the arms of the recliner, just above his thighs.

“Nothing would please me more,” Sherm stated, simply and with a wicked smile on his lips.

Convinced that the old man wasn’t seriously injured, Hugh propped a chair against the front door to hold it closed, and they went back out through the kitchen. Then the three waded out into the snow, even more determined to find the child.



A three-year-old girl is abducted by two thieves.

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