

THE PLAN

Clay and Hitch waded resolutely through the two-foot deep snow. Progress was slow as they slipped and slid their way upward. Most of the time the wind moaned softly through the trees, but periodically, with renewed vigor, it would suddenly gust and send sweeps of snow down on them from above, clouding their vision and making both shiver. After a few minutes, Clay held up his hand.

They paused for a moment and listened in the stillness of the twilight. He thought he'd heard a sound, possibly the wail of a child.

"You hear something?" he asked Hitch.

The deputy shook his head. "Just my stomach growling for Martha's cooking."

"Must be the wind," Clay said, moving forward.

As they drew near the house, he carefully looked for tracks in the snow. It was a virgin crust, unblemished by man or beast. Beside him Hitchcock stopped.

The huge, multi-turreted, cedar-shingled house loomed above them in the shadows like some charcoal, medieval castle. It featured a main section, topped by a cupola, and two building wings which angled forward; each crowned at the end with a windowless tower. Though, at first glance the building looked merely fashionably weathered, closer inspection revealed the decay and rot brought on by years of neglect.

The house, built more than one hundred years before, had been purchased and totally renovated by multi-millionaire Jerome Baker into a stately Vermont home complete with in-ground pool and detached garage. Now, it resembled a haunted house from some movie: hardly a downstairs window pane remained intact; broken shutters dangled from windows; the porch had half-fallen in – its roof tilted at a drunken angle; creepers, spouting a few dead, frozen leaves, curled up over windows and walls; and the porch railing was missing dozens of spindles like some gape-toothed Halloween pumpkin. The shingles had grayed, cracked and finally blackened from the harsh weather.

The owner had died half a decade ago and his will had been before the courts for more than four years now as a dozen relatives vied like vultures for the spoils of the estate.

The house was only one of four the man had owned, and from what Clay had heard, there was close to a total of \$25 million at stake in the dispersal of his assets. He knew that people would do some pretty funny things to get their mitts on major portions of that kind of money. The court battle had become a maze of judgments and appeals, suits and counter-suits... each relative hoping to wear the other down for the lion's share of the fortune as the Vermont house slowly went to wrack and ruin.

At first he tried to contact the relatives to let them know that, as they fought, the house was becoming next to worthless, but the one brother whom he'd managed to find and telephone in Boston had sneered that he didn't give a damn about the place and it could drop into its own basement for all he cared. Clay never wasted another taxpayer dollar on long distance calls after that. The property taxes were automatically paid on time and so the authorities had no quarrel with the court-focused heirs.

"Well, looks like there's nobody here," Hitch drawled, casually draping the Winchester in the crook of his left arm as he brushed snow from his face. He looked westward. "Besides, that woman lives more than a mile away on the next ridge. How could she see somebody or spot lights in this weather?" He leaned over, clasped his hands

together and tried to breathe life into frigid fingers while balancing the rifle in his arms. Suddenly he paused and stared off to the right towards a broken limbed, lifeless tree in the front yard.

Clay followed his gaze to a stark and broken upper branch where a dead goat hung upside down, its rear feet tethered and a massive dark stain running from its neck down over its head obliterating all features except for two sightless eyes magnified in a ball of gore. Its throat had been savagely slit and the head hung from its body by a few strands of muscle and skin.

"Charming," Clay said. "It's dripping blood, obviously a fresh kill. Let's check the front door and round back." He trudged towards the front steps.

Hitch shrugged and headed round towards the back of the house.

"It's amazing how fast a place can go downhill," Clay commented, but found he was talking to himself. He avoided a rotted plank on the stairs as he stepped up onto the main porch. He'd been by a few times over the years and had watched its decline as weeds, flaking paint and untreated wood slowly surrendered to the ravages of the weather. His boots sounded hollow on the plank floor of the porch as he clumped up to the front door, stopped and stared.

There were signs of a recent entry.

The screen door had been opened and part of a small drift had been swept back while another drift against the inner door had obviously collapsed inward.

Clay thought: In a wind like this, the drift should have repaired itself in about ten to 20 minutes, so the door must have been opened fairly recently.

He felt an ever-so-slight rise in his adrenaline; a little more caution was warranted. Complacency got more police officers killed in the line of duty than any other single factor. He continued to stare at the broken mounds of snow for a moment longer. If there was anyone inside, his footsteps on the porch would have warned them he was here. That is, if he and his deputy hadn't already been observed approaching the house.

He decided to circle the building and warn Hitch before going inside. Carefully he made his way along the porch extending round the wing to where it ran around the left side of the house. He moved quickly by each window. It's probably kids, he thought, but once again – complacency...!

To his chagrin, the porch didn't continue all the way around the house. It ended against a solid wall that jutted out to form one wing of the building. A head-high fence extended from the porch into the woods with no sign of an opening so Clay retraced his steps to the front door.

To avoid the rotting stairs, he jumped to the ground and proceeded to follow Hitch's tracks around the right side. As he rounded the corner of the house, the northwest wind whirled a cloud of snow about him.

He could feel the temperature dropping as night approached and he hunched his shoulders, shielded his face from the biting cold, and squinted at the ground. Hitchcock's footprints were already filling with snow. If they didn't get back home soon, they'd find it hard going on the roads.

He cursed the kids under his breath. Never-the-less, they needed a lesson after what they'd done to that goat. He trudged on. The footprints near the back of the house had all but vanished, filled with snow. Was Hitch inside or checking the woods?

Clay surveyed the dead tangle of an overgrown garden populated by two-foot high frozen weeds. A half-filled, swimming pool, also frozen and cluttered with dead branches and debris stood empty save for an assortment of Grecian stone statues surrounding it – most with heads and limbs missing. The vandalism confirmed his suspicion that the place was probably a regular haunt for local teenagers.

"Hitch!" Clay called out.

There was no answer.

Clay stopped and narrowed his eyes against stinging bits of snow and ice that swirled about in miniature tornadoes. They had to get back soon or possibly be trapped in this blizzard. It was getting harder to see as the snowstorm increased in intensity further complicated by the fading light.

He called again: "Hitch!"

No response except for the banshee-like howl of the wind. He cursed silently: where the hell had the man gone? He lost Hitch's tracks where they mounted the steps to the patio.

If he stayed round back, whoever was inside could high-tail it out the front door and get halfway down to the highway before they were even aware he'd been there. He tried to remember if he'd locked their patrol car. Probably not.

Clay decided that the deputy could take care of himself and waded through the gathering snow drifts to the front door once again. On the porch, he pulled the screen door wide open. The old spring creaked and moaned and gamely tried to pull the door closed again. Clay used his boot to pile some snow against the bottom. It held.

Carefully he drew his .45 caliber Glock pistol, jacked the slide and tried the rusted handle of the main door. Fashioned of stout-looking oak beams, it would make a formidable barrier if it was locked.

Instead, it swung easily inward. He peered inside letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. The room wasn't quite pitch black but it was dark enough for a quiet man to remain out of sight in the shadows.

Clay took out his flashlight and manhandled it round the doorjamb keeping it well away from his body while he worked it around the inside of a pentagon-shaped foyer. He probed each corner with the beam.

It was empty.

Nothing stirred.

"This is Sheriff Montague. Is there anyone in here?" he demanded in his most authoritative tone. If it were kids, they'd probably speak up rather than risk his wrath when he cornered them. Still no response. He moved quickly into the house with the light held low and to the left.

He was immediately struck by the size of the entrance hall. It was five-sided alright with a complement of ionic pillars around it supporting a second story banister-edged walkway which served the upper floor. Clay could see bedroom doors branching off the upstairs hallway as he played his light almost vertical. The shadows jumped, grew in length and disappeared as the beam cut its swathe through the darkness. If there was any movement up there, it would be hard to pick it up in the dancing shadows.

Moving the beam higher, he realized that the ceiling extended right up to the top of the cupola he had seen from outside. Three stories up, two eight-inch square beams

intersected to form crossbars from which dangled a large, iron chandelier via a formidable length of chain.

On the main floor, an assortment of rooms faced the foyer with a hall to the left of a wide curving staircase bordered by a broken railing sweeping majestically to the main floor. Down the long hallway Clay could also make out twilight peeping through a distant back window. This was quite the house in its day, he thought.

Something crashed behind him and he spun about bringing the pistol up as his heart leapt into his mouth.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered aloud, realizing that the snow he'd piled against the screen door had dislodged and its spring had slammed it shut.

He swallowed, felt foolish at his jumpiness and eased his finger off the trigger. He was grateful Hitchcock hadn't been around to witness his fright. Grinning ruefully, he wondered again where the hell the deputy had disappeared. Perhaps he was waiting for Clay to chase someone out through the back.

He decided to work his way through the lower level towards the back of the house. Once he connected with Hitch, they'd search upstairs together.

Clay walked carefully into the centre of the foyer shivering slightly as his breath steamed into the frosty air in the flashlight's beam. It seemed colder inside the house than outside.

He quickly checked the living room, family room and den off the foyer. They were all paneled in mahogany and walnut, expensive as hell but dark and unfriendly. Not a stick of furniture remained in any of them. Satisfied nobody would be coming at his back unless they came from upstairs, he tip-toed slowly down the hallway.

Other hallways led into the wings off to his left and right but he would have to save them for later. He continued down the main hall reminding himself that, based on the dislodged snow he'd encountered at the front door, someone had been in here fairly recently.

A room opened to his left and he shone his light inside. Bookcase-shelved walls gaped at him with just a few volumes of dust-covered books remaining. At one time it would have been a showcase library, he thought.

Moving further down the hall to the end of the house, he made out a sunroom to his left and a large kitchen off to his right.

The kitchen was bigger than Clay's own living room at home and he noted the long, pine harvest table in the centre surrounded by ladder-back chairs. Why hadn't the movers taken the table, he wondered? He stared around the kitchen; something wasn't quite right.

It didn't take long to figure it out.

In a far corner nestled against a set of pine cupboards stood a shiny new refrigerator. It gleamed white in the light from the window, but more surprising, it was running. Even from ten feet away, Clay could hear the whine of the electric motor despite the fact he was certain there was no power coming into the house.

He looked down the hall behind him. Satisfied that he was alone he entered the kitchen and crossed to the appliance. It was a General Electric and seemed to be the only thing in the house that wasn't covered with a thick layer of dust. He stepped on something, lifted his foot and shone the light down on a plug with an electric cord running under the refrigerator. He reached down and yanked at the cord. The refrigerator

couldn't be running if it wasn't plugged in, he reasoned; the motor continued to purr contentedly in the appliance.

He pulled open the fridge door and jumped slightly as the small lamp inside flooded the kitchen with light casting more shadows about the room. Clay stared fixedly at the contents.

Every nook and cranny of the refrigerator was filled with stacks of plastic sacks of some kind. There were dozens of them piled on top of each other, jammed end-to-end in the milk, meat and vegetable compartments. Some were even squeezed into the juice compartments inside the door.

He pulled out one of the bags and squinted at it in disbelief though he already knew what it contained. Made from a heavy plastic with tubes at one end and filled with a thick, dark brownie-red liquid that moved under his fingers and oozed in a thick flood towards the end of the bag opposite to where he squeezed, he saw he was holding a sample of the river of life – whole blood.

He read the paper label sticking on the side of the bag; he'd handled dozens like them before.

CPDA-1 Anticoagulant...

O...

Rh POS...

Human Whole Blood... .

Blood! Bags of blood much like he'd held high above wounded soldiers' heads as he'd run alongside stretchers towards medivac choppers evacuating wounded during his army days.

The familiar Red Cross symbol stared bleakly up at him. The entire refrigerator was filled with Red Cross blood donor bags! Full ones! And the refrigerator was running without benefit of electricity? What the hell was going on!?

"Hitch..." he yelled, stuffing the bag back into the refrigerator. His voice seemed muted in the confines of the room, almost as though he had hollered into a vacuum. He was about to close the door when he sensed movement behind him.

Clay turned, expecting to find his deputy there. Instead he found himself staring at a small, barefooted girl. Impassively she stared back at him.

Her face was filthy, her hair a disheveled tangle of thick, oily, snake-like strands. She was about eight or nine years old, frail looking, but somehow also exuding an aura of strength which Clay found hard to fathom. What struck him most were her eyes; they were not the eyes of a child! They were old eyes, haunted eyes, eyes that had seen too much for a child; eyes that were dulled by a hard life and ringed with bluish circles from lack of sleep; eyes that mirrored a potpourri of sadness, anger, hurt and despair. There was also a hint of something else. He struggled to put a name to it. All he came up with was the word: madness.

He broke off his gaze and took in the rest of her. The child looked emaciated and he felt immediate anger at whoever was responsible for the neglect. He tried to smile so as not to alarm her. She looked back at him, unblinking, resolute and sullen.

"Hi there," he said, as nonchalantly as possible and extended a hand as he moved forward.

She retreated a few steps.

Clay froze. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. The light from the interior of the refrigerator had fallen fully across the child's face. Her eyes shone like hot coals in the night; a reflective sheen emanating from them like twin phosphorescent beams. They glowed like those of an animal!

He swallowed and tried not to notice as he spoke again.

"Who are you, little girl?"

He looked behind her expecting her parents to appear at any moment; in fact, he found himself hoping they would. For some unfathomable reason he felt distinctively uneasy with this child.

She failed to answer him for the second time. Was she too traumatized to speak? But what was she doing here? How had she gotten here? Could she be part of a family of squatters? If so, they were going to have to do better for this child or lose her to the authorities.

Likely that was it. She was part of a family of squatters who'd camped out in the house, he thought. Perhaps they were hiding, afraid to come out. He listened for sounds of stirring.

Silence.

She didn't move.

Though he found it difficult to believe that she was alone, he'd seen plenty of abandoned children before. Still she seemed too young to be able to survive on her own. Besides, she wasn't dressed for the weather, she must be freezing.

The little girl stared sullenly at him.

He tried again: "Where's your Mommy and Daddy, sweetheart?"

Silence. She watched him with a furtive, almost calculating glare.

Realizing he was still clutching his pistol, and feeling somewhat foolish, he swept back his parka to holster it in a show of good faith. Maybe that's why she was mute.

"I won't hurt you little girl," he said, and moved a foot closer. "I'm a policeman."

She merely stared up at him. He crouched to bring himself to her level and appear less threatening.

He tried to smile again but found it damn difficult when the light from the refrigerator made her eyes light up like twin headlights cutting through a foggy night. His skin crawling, he cursed himself for feeling frightened. He was letting himself be spooked by a child.

Suddenly the little girl began backing up. She was out of the kitchen and heading down the hall, before he realized it. Quickly he followed, using his flashlight to light her way and his own.

"Come here, child... I won't hurt you," he said again, his mind alive with questions. It must be ten below zero in the house and the little girl was barefoot and wearing only a rag and yet she didn't appear to notice the cold. He had on long johns, his uniform and a parka and he was shivering.

She was backing up rapidly now, staring at him with the same calculating but listless look. Together they moved down the hall towards the foyer. If she made it outside, she might make a run for it and escape. If so, she'd freeze to death inside an hour. Clay decided he'd better grab her and worry about scaring her later.

They'd almost reached the foyer. He'd moved quickly forward to clutch her arm but she suddenly stopped. Clay put on the brakes and a thin sheen of frost on the floor

made his feet fly out from under him. He fell back and hit the floor with a grunt. Gasping for breath, he sat up quickly and shone the light on the girl to make sure she was still there.

She was... .

... but something was different now.

Deep in his bones he felt as though the tide had turned, as though their positions had suddenly been reversed and he should be the one looking to escape.

Nonsense, he angrily said to himself as he realized she was now grinning at him. She must think it's funny that I fell on my ass.

He started to grin back to put her at ease. Just as quickly his smile faded and he sobered. The child's grin wasn't the good humored smile of an innocent. It was a malicious grin saying she hoped he'd hurt himself – hurt himself bad!

She shuddered, then spasmed in seeming ecstasy and her eyes rolled back in her head to become white orbs; a low growl came from her wide open mouth.

Quite suddenly Clay felt afraid.

He looked down at a steaming puddle of urine at her feet as another low, nasal, half-growl escaped from her lips. Leaving wet footprints on the tiled floor, she moved towards him.

He tried to scramble to his feet but he didn't make it in time.

The waif reached up and grabbed him by his biceps and squeezed until the pain drove tears from the corners of his eyes and made him cry out. Her grip was like an iron vise, tightening, squeezing his arms until he thought his bones would snap. Paralyzed with pain, he suddenly felt himself being turned sideways. He struggled to escape but now her grip had changed as one hand lifted him from under his arm and the other grabbed him by the flesh of his hip. He was being hoisted horizontally and bodily off the floor, balance maintained by small hands that had become vicious pinchers scissoring into his flesh.

It was impossible!

No child could have this much strength... !

The pain washed over him in red waves and the sound of his heart pounded like thunder in his ears. Her holds shifted, and suddenly one hand was now clutching his neck while the other grabbed his thigh in an iron grip. She seemed to have grown larger.

But his right arm was free!

He stared wildly down at the child, suddenly becoming aware of a putrescent odor, an unforgettable stench he'd only encountered once before... .

... PANAMA!

He'd smelled it the night he'd seen something hunched over the dying soldier in the field. Suddenly he knew he was in more danger than he'd ever been at any time in his life. Jesus help me, he thought, and used his free hand to claw desperately for his holstered weapon.

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