

Sample chapter from Jump Gate I - TIME CHAIR

Gerald is a down-on-his-luck Private Detective who used the Time Chair to break up a human trafficking ring. Altogether, he spent over 38 hours on the case, but 28 hours were in the past. Hours before he signed the contract to find a client's lost daughter. He will only be able to charge for those hours after signing the contract. An appeal has gone out to rescue a boy lost in the desert, and Gerald, often a volunteer for these searches, has spotted the boy, but he is a distance away. Though dark, he has night vision equipment, and a full moon is up. A large cougar has also sensed the lad. The concerns associated with the chair have taken a back seat. Gerald has a boy to rescue.

Chapter 34

The cougar...

...slinked downhill. He was only a couple of levels up the wash. A fast rush would put him on top of the boy in seconds. Luckily, the creature was cautious. The cat smelled man. His encounters with man had not always gone well.

But he was hungry.

Gerald checked his pocket for the .22. He felt the reassuring steel. Instantly, he realized the pistol would be ineffective against such an impressive animal. From this distance, it was doubtful, even with his expertise, he would hit the target.

"Shit!" he whispered to himself and hunkered down to watch.

Gerald wrestled with himself. Would he have time to climb down, cross the wash, and scramble up the other side? Even the terrain between the secondary wash would need to be navigated. The third was still a minor consideration. He knew he didn't want to lose sight of the lad.

It would take twenty minutes to get across the rough land between him and the boy. The cat could be upon the child in five minutes. Less if the beast became less cautious.

If Gerald were going to act, it would have to be soon.

In fact, anything he would do had to start *now*.

Gerald unconsciously adjusted the wrist rocket, digging into his butt. The weapon in his pocket marked a moment of enlightenment. He thought, "*The slingshot can reach that far. With the proper ammunition, I may give the puma an excuse to abandon this hunt.*"

Gerald's mind remained calm and calculating while searching for a solution. The weapon would not kill the creature from this range, but the animal might reconsider what was likely a relatively easy and substantial meal.

Setting the wrist rocket into place, Gerald checked the elastic surgical tubing, its source of propulsion. It stretched well and was as limber as it had been three weeks ago, the last time he practiced. He put the vision equipment over his eyes.

Gerald learned early that the weapon could be a serious deterrent that could cause considerable damage. He recalled his father's warning: "A wrist rocket can easily kill a small animal." He had proven that several times in the past, hunting for dinner.

It would only sting an animal this size.

Loading a heavy nut into the basket, the part that held the ammunition, Gerald drew back his arm and shot in the general direction of the cougar, accounting for the distance and wind. He lost its flight but spotted the landing as a chip flew off a rock very near where he aimed.

Gerald smiled a grim, determined smile. His eyes narrowed. He opened his backpack and retrieved the spotting laser. The instrument wasn't much larger than a laser pointer, but it projected the strong, narrow beam farther than the usual pointer would.

He gripped the laser between his teeth.

Loading the wrist rocket with a specific paintball, Gerald took careful aim. He shot the small paint-filled pellet six feet ahead of the cougar. He saw the mountain lion flinch as it sensed the impact.

Loading quickly, Gerald fired three more of the same at the wall of the wash, a surface offered by a granite boulder standing ten feet high. The first sailed past the rock and disappeared. The remaining two impacted exactly where he planned.

Gerald loaded one of the heavy nuts into the basket and cradled it in his left hand. His right hand held the laser spotter. He checked the bright red light, beaming it onto his palm. Perfect.

He peered through the goggles. The beast crept forward, crouched low, and almost flat against the ground. The laser's path, invisible in the air, was clear in the night vision. Gerald aimed the laser spotter and pushed the button.

It took less than a second for the laser to find and light up the red paint. The splash glowed like the flash of a red floodlight.

The puma jumped back and reared its back as though it had been attacked. The cat peered about, not seeing a threat but confused by the sudden light Gerald had flashed.

Gerald found the splat of red paint farthest from the animal and flashed it twice. He proceeded to flash the next closer bloom of paint and the next. He saw the panther creep backward on the plateau.

It stopped when its tail brushed the steep hillside.

Gerald loaded another nut, drew back the elastic tubing, and released it. He hit his target dead-on, striking the mountain lion high on the rear thigh. The feline jumped and made a loud whining sound, striking at its own rear end to defend itself from its invisible attacker. Mountain lions do not roar but make a collection of hisses and cries, often sounding like humans.

Gerald wondered what the boy's reaction was to the sound. He didn't take his eyes off the lion to check. The cougar was his priority.

He loaded another heavy nut into the sling and shot. Three ounces of silvery brass hit the puma mid-shoulder. The cat jumped high enough to backflip, landing in a protective crouch.

That solid chunk of metal had to hurt.

Gerald grabbed the laser, again found the splashes of paint, and flashed them each twice. He continued from one to the next until the last, near the creature, which still crouched flat, its back now against the side of the wash.

Gerald picked up another paintball and launched it toward the animal, striking the front paw. The beast hardly noticed the light splat, but Gerald saw the animal hiss at its foot. From this distance, he was unable to hear it.

The puma shook its paw. The cougar appeared unhappy and confused. Its head swung back and forth to locate its attacker. It slinked a tentative step forward.

Gerald grabbed the laser spotter and flashed the paint spots again using the same two flash patterns. This time, instead of stopping at the painted wall, he proceeded to the cat's foot. The paw lit up as if on fire, though the animal felt nothing.

The mountain lion leaped to its feet, turned, and jumped up the wash away from the boy. Its rear end exposed, Gerald delivered a heavy nut to its backside. That accelerated its exit, and the cat kicked up a patch of loose sand.

The panther disappeared over a mound and up to the next higher wash. It appeared a few seconds later, fifty feet higher and moving at a rapid pace uphill.

The cat was now beyond a range from which Gerald thought he could successfully hit the exact spot. *"But,"* he shrugged. Pulling the rubber tubing back to his ear, he released a final shot at the beast. The nut smacked the ground just behind the animal.

The cougar responded by increasing its speed and disappearing into the terrain.

Gerald retrieved the radiophone and pressed the button. "I believe I've found Alan. He is a way off, but I'm headed in that direction."

A howl replied, "Oh, sir, thank you, thank you! I'm sorry, I don't remember your name. Thank you, thank you. Please hurry."

Gerald removed the night vision gear and began climbing down the ridge, making all possible speed without sacrificing his safety. The full moon would soon be down. It would do neither him nor the boy any good if he twisted or broke a limb.

Gerald reached the bottom between ridges and skirted the debris washed down during the last storm. He crossed the wash and scrambled up the other side. He began his descent into the third wash, beyond which the youngster should have been. "Alan!" he shouted.

"Here!" A quiet little voice came from uphill.

Gerald turned in that direction, climbed the shelf to the next level, and shouted again, "Alan?"

"Over here!" A louder voice now. Gerald picked up the sound of quiet weeping nearby.

Rounding a bramble of tangled brush, he saw the lad curled up in a corner of the flat. The boy pushed up hard against and almost under the wall of a huge boulder. The far side of the boulder, splattered with blotches of red paint.

Gerald smiled. "Alan?"

The boy's legs tucked in tighter, and his arms hugged his body. Wide-eyed, Alan nodded in response.

The moon behind him, Gerald was but a shadow to the boy. "Your mom sent me."

Alan let out a howl, uncurled, ran to Gerald, and leaped into his arms, sobbing.

"Thank you! Thank you. I'm so scared. I got lost, and I didn't know what to do. I'm in so much trouble. My mom—" He pressed his face against Gerald's chest and wailed again, "I'm so sorry. I thought I might die. I—" Another wail escaped his lips into Gerald's shirt.

"It's alright. We're good. I've got you now." Gerald used his most soothing voice. He held the boy until the worst of the shaking subsided.

"Hey, kid." He put his closed fist under Alan's chin and pulled his eyes to his. He smiled into the boy's eyes. "Let's go home."

Alan's face lit up through the tears. He nodded and said, "Y-yes."

They both stood and walked to the edge of the cliff. There was a three-foot jump to the next level down, but in the shadows, the step would be invisible. Alan would not have known if he were stepping two feet or fifteen feet. Gerald's night vision revealed everything, but he wore them only sporadically.

He was sure they presented a strange and scary picture to the boy.

In minutes, they were talking like old friends, Alan more at ease. They went slowly. Gerald lifted or helped Alan down where necessary. Forty minutes later, they spotted a small crowd of a half-dozen people standing in a knot around a tiny campfire.

Its light extended only a limited distance.

Climbing down to the final long flat, Gerald and Alan skirted a high clump of bushes. They saw the glow of the fire near the road.

"Hey, folks!" Still hidden in shadows, Gerald announced their arrival.

"Mom!"

"Alan!"

Sherri appeared out of the crowd, running as fast as her legs could carry her to her son. "Alan! Alan!" She began a fit of crying, sobbing, and nose-blowing, all while grabbing her child and clutching him tightly.

"Mom! I can't breathe," came a voice, muffled from Sherri's breast where the boy was crushed into her.

Sherri laughed and held him at arm's length. She smiled as she said, "Wait until I get you home."

Alan grimaced, uncertain at his mother's comment.

"Ugggh! You need a bath! And some food!" Alan's sister laughed and joined the hug.

Sherri asked her, "Do you guys want to stop for food on the way home? Where do you want to go? What are you hungry for?"

She peered up at Gerald without awaiting an answer. "How can I ever thank you, Mister, Mister?"

"Powell. Gerald Powell, ma'am. Happy to be of assistance." He was not surprised she had forgotten his name considering the stress she had been under. Gerald smiled. "I'm glad everything turned out alright. He's a brave boy."

He looked down at Alan, still with Sherri's arm around his shoulder. "Take care of your mother, Alan. She loves you very much."

Alan peered shyly at the ground. "Yeah, I know, I..." He shuffled one foot in the sand. He stood for a moment before he looked up at Gerald and self-consciously stepped forward. He appeared to have something to say.

Gerald crouched down. Suddenly, Alan wrapped his short arms around Gerald's neck and hugged him tightly. He said, "Thank you so much for finding me. I was so scared. I think there was a wild animal close by, so..." His voice trailed off.

He let go of Gerald and backed away one step, looking embarrassed.

Gerald stood. "You seemed plenty brave to me, son. You guys go now. You're probably hungry." He reached out and shook the boy's hand. He leaned forward and said in a whisper, "I'll bet if you ask, you might even get ice cream." He said it loud enough for Alan's mother to overhear.

He glanced up at Sherri, winked, and smiled.

Sherri smiled back. "We just might be able to do that tonight. Thank you again for everything, Mister, um, Gerald."

"My pleasure, ma'am. I think it may be time for my own dinner. It's waiting for me at home."

"Oh. I'd be honored to-"

"No, no. That's alright. I'm fine. You take care of your family."

Gerald turned toward the road and his car, noticing Edith walking in his direction. When they were parallel, she stopped and turned to him. "I think I owe you an apology. I'm afraid we made some assumptions-"

Gerald interrupted, holding a palm out. "No problem. You were in a high-stress situation and needed to make some difficult calls. Everything turned out all right."

He retrieved a business card from his shirt pocket and offered it. "If you ever need any help, give me a call. As you can see, I run my own business, so my schedule is whatever I want it to be. Rarely is there anything more important than a missing person."

"Don't hesitate to ask."

Edith smiled. "Thanks. I may do that." She continued past him and went toward her pickup truck, parked in the opposite direction from Gerald's car.

He packed his gear into the trunk, climbed behind the wheel, and inserted his key. He sat for a minute gathering his wits.

The car started, this time at once. "Cool," he thought. "*The perfect end to an excellent day.*" The vehicle pulled away, alone on the road up Banner Grade.

Gerald's thoughts returned to the time chair. He searched for ideas to put the tool to, something different from solving crimes. It seemed the chair would have no useful purpose for a Private

Investigator. He could have a perfect record but only able to charge for a fraction of the time spent investigating.

He still had bills to pay.

He absently drove the route he had taken dozens, hundreds, of times before. The vehicle slowed where required and sped up on any short straightaway. He slowed to round a blind corner, carefully applying gas as he emerged from the curve.

On the far side, the slimy mud under his tires kept the vehicle from finishing the turn. He slid toward the abrupt drop-off into a deep, overgrown canyon. He steered into the slide, feeling the tire grip, then let go again.

Gerald watched the car tip as the rear right tire slid off the edge. He hit the gas, hoping to pull himself and the vehicle onto firmer ground. He breathed a sigh of relief when he sensed the front left tire regrip the road.

Distress returned when the right front tire spun ineffectively on loose gravel, and the rear end refused to respond. The hood tipped up to the cloudless sky and the blanket of stars. *“The stars, they’re so clear,”* he thought abstractly as he watched the hood rise. The car began to slip back down the embankment.

Knowing there was nothing else to do but ride it out, he gripped the steering wheel. He waited for it to start the inevitable roll.

Gerald was upside down during the second roll when his head smacked the headrest hard!

Too hard!

He wanted to rub his head and the back of his neck where it hurt, but seemed unable to control his flailing arms. They lost grip of the wheel as soon as the roll accelerated. The steering wheel hit him in the chest, and the roof crumpled.

His head bounced against the lowered ceiling.

He tasted blood.

Gerald sensed the increase in centripetal pressure as the terrain steepened and the automobile increased its death spin. His body pulled at the seatbelt, then, for a moment, he felt weightless.

A headlight flashed once as it smashed against a hillside boulder. The car, standing on the smashed headlight, slowly spun half a turn on the front quarter before falling sideways in slow motion. As the vehicle turned, the other headlight shone in a wide arc across the hillside and blinked out.

The car slid downhill on its driver's side, trunk first. The land-side wheel ripped off and bounced off the hood, then followed the car downhill in high bounces until abruptly arrested by a dark tangle of cactus.

An invisible world of small boulders and scrub brush slid past the window next to Gerald's shoulder. An embedded rock whizzed past. It bent the glass until it shattered into thousands of pieces, peppering Gerald with the fractured glass.

The hood flew open, hung on by one hinge, then tore loose, spun into the surrounding brush, and disappeared.

The front window burst toward him, and-

His world went black.