

# **A BUNNY HUG FOR KARL**

**BY MIKE RIMAR**

My fingers probe under the brim of my beaten Massey Ferguson cap, the one my dad gave me before he went off to Flin Flon and never came back, and I wonder what the hell Lars Mackenna is doing on the roof of the old Pool elevator.

Lars and me go way back, getting into and out of trouble like only best friends can. When we were in grade ten, his hard-drinking old man got himself cut up fixing their combine. I'd helped Lars work the farm, and afterward, when his old man got back on his feet, he offered me a job. I didn't take it, of course—the last thing I wanted was to be like everyone else at the Liquor Board, sporting a permanent farmer's tan, always looking tired and worried waiting in line to buy beer.

No; we're more than friends, we are bros. So I'm in no way serious when I cup my hands to my mouth and call out, "You gonna jump, or what?"

Despite the great height, I see Lars smile. I barely have time to raise my hand and shout "No!" when the idiot steps off.

A more curious person would have wondered how Lars landed with no greater difficulty than if he'd jumped from the top step off his back porch. A more perceptive person might have wondered just how Lars got on that roof in the first place; grain elevators aren't exactly small or easy to climb. But I'm his best friend and see a bigger picture. Lars, you have to understand, isn't exactly a thinker. Oh, he isn't dumb; he did

graduate high school, but let's just say his focus has always been limited.

I, on the other hand, have the ability to see opportunities where none normally exist, and Lars leaping unharmed from the top of a Pool elevator is a big opportunity. I know that as his friend—his best friend—it's my job to give Lars guidance, first by showing concern.

"You hurt, bro?" I say.

"Nah." Lars has that weird farmer's timbre to his voice, the kind you can barely hear inside an empty barn, yet understand every word over the rumble of a baler running full throttle. "But did you see me up there, Karl? What did I look like? Impressive?"

I squint up at the peaked roof of rusting corrugated steel. "To tell you the truth, I was wondering when they started putting up gargoyles on grain elevators."

"Very funny." Lars shoves me, the same friendly little push we've given each other since grade one, only this time he sends me flying some fifteen feet ass over tea kettle into the honeysuckle lining the dirt parking lot.

I poke my head up over the tall grass. "What the fuck, Lars!"

"Sorry, bro." In a single leap he is beside me, pulling me to my feet like a straw-filled scarecrow and dusting me off. "This stuff is new to me."

"I'm fine. I'm fine." I push him away and look around to make sure no-one sees him patting my body. Porcupine Corners is barely a pimple on the butt cheek of Saskatchewan, and rumours travel faster than cow shit on an autumn wind. "What exactly do you mean by 'stuff'?"

Lars shrugs. "Not sure, really, but it came on kind of gradual, starting around puberty, to tell the truth. It was easier to hide then, but I just got stronger and stronger until..." He holds up his arms as if wanting me to behold his magnificence.

The thing is, he isn't all that magnificent to look at. Sure, he is tall, but not exactly muscular—no more than any farmer who worked the land all his life. Hell, if anything his back has started taking on that bowed look farmers get when too many crops fail and the government threatens to cut back subsidies. But something is different about the guy, that is certain.

"So," I say. "What are you gonna do?"

Lars lowers his arms and shrugs. "Be a superhero, maybe."

For as long as we've been friends, Lars has had only two expressions: a big dopey smile, and an all-encompassing shrug that means anything from "the barn is on fire" to "we're down to our last beer." Did I mention Lars isn't exactly a thinker? He never saw the big picture, which is why we make such good friends. The guy has some crazy luck, I'll give you that, but he never did know what to do with his good fortunes. Thankfully, I've been there to guide him and capitalize on favourable circumstances.

With that sheepish smile threatening to crack his wind-beaten face looking way older than his twenty-five years, I know we've hit the lottery. I just need Lars to see it my way before he sets his stubborn mind on some stupid course of action.

"You should think about this some," I say. "Sure, being a superhero is cool and all. You get into the comics and maybe even have your own television show, but think about it. Is this really what you want?"

That puts a flutter in his smile, and his shoulders rise in a shrug. "Superheroes are the good guys," he says. "They help people and stuff. I think I'd like to do that."

"Yeah, yeah. They help people," I say. "Who doesn't want glamour and excitement? But I see a different reality, one that most overlook. "The thing is Lars, superheroes end up dead."

Lars grins. "Nah."

"Yeah," I say. "They do. Oh sure, they kick ass for years, but in the end they slip up, let the villain get too close. They fight and fight, the bad guy goes to jail, breaks out, gets caught, goes back in—but always there's that one last battle where he finally gets the upper hand."

I pause to let that bit of wisdom ferment. Before my dad fucked off to Manitoba we would watch Wrestling Cavalcade on the CBC out of Prince Albert. Once, the show was interrupted with a bulletin about some RCMP officer getting shot—the third cop that month—and my dad had looked over at me and said, "You should be a cop. There seems to be an opening."

That pearl of parental nurturing stayed with me, not because I wanted to be a cop, but because I knew I'd never want to be one. Cops get shot. They put their asses on the line every day and occasionally they get that ass shot off. Being a superhero is just like being a glorified cop, and I don't want to see my best friend pay the ultimate price—at least, not for nothing.

I continue, “You might be better off taking the other side. Be a villain.” I hold my breath and wait for either that silly shrug or that idiotic smile. Instead, he turns and heads for the old rail line at the edge of town. I hurry to follow in step. “Look, bro, I know it’s a lot to take in—”

Lars suddenly stops. “Want to see what it’s like?”

“What what’s like?”

“Flying.”

That catches me by surprise. “You can fly, too?”

And there is that grin again, slicing across his suntanned face as he wraps his arm around my waist and jumps—just jumps—into the air.

We soar over cornstalks, so close I reach down and brush the silk-topped cobs. Then Lars arches back and we shoot straight for the clouds. At first it is exhilarating, but then I look down. Somewhere I hear a shrill alarm, like a siren and wonder what the hell an ambulance is doing way up in the sky, until Lars whispers in my ear to relax and I realize the siren is me, screaming.

“Don’t you let me go, you bastard.” I take hold of his arm, you know, for balance, and it is then I notice how unnatural his skin feels. It’s not like we touch each other a lot, some play-wrestling when we were younger, high fives and handshaking, that sort of thing, but he definitely has changed. Overnight, practically. His skin is hard, almost like porcelain, and the hair on his arm has completely disappeared. His face, too, now that I really look, is hairless and smooth as a baby’s butt. Along his forehead a bright white stretch of scalp shows where the hairline has begun to recede.

Lars is going bald! If I wasn’t suspended a mile in the sky, I’d laugh my ass off.

But I don’t. And I don’t tell him either, since he probably already knows. Is this some aftereffect of his new powers? I groan inside. People are going to call him Mr. Clean, or Toilet Man, or some such thing. Everyone has a nickname for superheroes, but no-one ever disses the villain.

More than ever I need to get Lars back on track, but I can’t think flying around like a helicopter. “Take me down, Lars.”

“Don’t be afraid. I got you.”

“Screw you, I’m not afraid. I’m just getting a little airsick. You fly like a drunken goose.”

Lars continues in a lazy circle. It's cold, and I have trouble breathing, but the altitude doesn't seem to affect him. "Look at it," he says. "Isn't it beautiful?"

From the air, Saskatchewan looks like an endless checkerboard. Acres and acres of land segmented into different crops, with only roads and the occasional lake to break up the monotony. "Lars, we need to go to Saskatoon, or Prince Albert—hell, even Tisdale. With this gift of yours, we can be rich."

"Rich?"

"Yeah. You know, performing maybe, or working as a bodyguard, that sort of thing. And there's other ways of making money. Hell, I bet you could pick up any ATM and just fly away with it."

We dip a little and something in the movement bothers me. I sense sadness and disappointment and realize Lars just gave an aerial shrug.

"You just don't get it," he says. "I'm not going to be some circus animal, or a thief. I've got to do some good, make a difference in this world. Wouldn't you, if you had the chance?"

I'm not sure what happens. Maybe oxygen deprivation, or the cold from being so high, or maybe it's the plain bullshit Lars is feeding me, but I've had enough. "No. I wouldn't. What is there to change? The world is crap. People, good and bad, have been trying to change the world since we were cavemen, but nothing ever happens. People are born, they live, they die, and the rest move on. Say you save a life. Big deal. Somewhere someone else dies. You can't stop it. You can't change anything. All you or me or anyone can do is do the best for ourselves before some safe falls on our heads and crushes our brains. And I say we start now by getting back on the ground."

Lars smiles at me, and I realize I've made a terrible mistake.

He lets me go.

For the first few seconds I look up at him, unable to believe he just did what he did. His body slowly shrinks in size until wind shear causes me to turn. The grand butt crack that is Saskatchewan rushes at me at terminal velocity. Directly below is the rusted tin roof of the Pool grain elevator. I figure I'll hit it dead on, probably burst through, my body shredding to pieces.

Would anyone care if I died?

Lars might, even if he were the one who'd killed me. He's the type of guy who'd feel enough guilt to turn himself in. Idiot. My

mom died a couple years ago. My dad? I'm pretty much dead to him already.

I'm alone, and strangely I don't care. The world looms larger by the second, and I feel no fear. I don't scream, laugh, or cry. I face death with eyes wide open, daring fate to do its worst. Then everything slows like a bungee cord pulled taut.

Lars says, "I got you, bro," and I turn to look up into that stupid smiling face. Holding me by a fistful of my bunny hug, he lowers me safely to the ground. "There," he says, landing beside me. "I saved you. See? I made a difference."

"You tried to kill me!"

He waves a hand in the air. "Nah. You're my best friend. I'd never let you die. I needed you to see that I don't just want to be a superhero; I have to be. I can do good in this world, save people. Truth, justice, all of it. You can be my sidekick."

"So, you dropped me to teach me a lesson? What kind of idiot superhero does that?"

"A good one, I think," he says in that weird kind of soft voice you can hear over an idling John Deere tractor but barely understand alone in a wheat field. "See ya, Karl." He leaps into the air and, in a blink of an eye, is gone. Gone, and I know he'll never come back. Lars left me, just like everyone else.

I stare at the patch of sky for nearly an hour, not realizing I'm crying until a gust of wind chills my tear-damp bunny hug.

Sidekick. The word lies in my belly like a wad of swallowed gum, unwilling or unable to be digested. Was that all I'd meant to him after all these years? Lars was supposed to be my friend. But what kind of person drops a friend from a mile up? Sure, he saved me from hitting the ground, but I could've died from fright by then.

But I hadn't. In fact, I hadn't been afraid at all. An experience like that changes a person. Being fearless is a big opportunity.

Lars wanted a sidekick. I'll give him something better. A nemesis. An arch villain.

I walk to the main highway and head east, thumb out, away from Porcupine Corners. Flin Flon is a good place to make a name for myself. Not too big, not too small. Plenty of opportunities for a guy like me. First, I might look up my old man, find a nice tall building, and see if he screams before he hits the ground.

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