

Scooby Doo-ing the Job

By Sheila Paulson

"You know, Doctor Jon, you're really a Scooby Doo kind of guy."

Jonathan MacKensie felt a surge of relief that the door to Doctor Moorhouse's office had closed behind him and Edgar Benedek before Benny made that particular utterance. The Department Chairman had a tendency to find annoyance in some of the tabloid journalist's off-the-wall remarks—all right, in most of his off-the-wall remarks. This one, while perplexing—at least until Benny turned loose his peculiar brand of reasoning on it—would simply prove to Doctor Moorhouse that Benedek had a screw loose. As it was, her secretary, Liz, arched a knowing and skeptical eyebrow and tried to hide a smile as Jonathan grabbed Benedek by the arm and dragged him hastily into the corridor. There was also something faintly maternal in the gaze she let linger over the battered Benedek. But, battered or not, the journalist was on his feet, gloating over the skirmish with Moorhouse, convinced, as he always was, that he had won that encounter. What secretly amused MacKensie was his own certainty that Doctor Moorhouse always felt that *she* had won.

The Paranormal Investigation Unit of Georgetown Institute, namely MacKensie and Benedek, had just returned from checking out the case of a woman in Southern Illinois who could supposedly levitate. The religious fanatics in the little farming hamlet where she lived had been convinced her actions were a sign from God, but Jonathan was doubtful—and suspicious. Benedek, of course, had been thrilled at the sight of the slight, fair-haired woman soaring above the hay bales in the barn, but Jonathan, who didn't believe for a second that natives of Harlan, Illinois could fly, had quickly noticed that she never once levitated without an overhanging roof to attach the near-invisible wires she used for her performance. It turned out that she wanted publicity so she could sell the farm before the word came through that the land was to be bought up for a new freeway that would cut the property in half and radically decrease its value.

For once, there had been no shred of the unresolved about the case, just a bit of major risk when she tried to prevent the truth from coming out. Although Jonathan hated to admit it, chasing shadows often left one or two minor points unexplained—and sometimes unexplainable. He didn't like thinking about those particular instances, but they were almost never the main points on a case. Jonathan often tried to reassure himself that they might have answers, too, if he or Benedek should put as much effort into researching them as they did the main factors of their inquiries. He didn't really like thinking about what would happen if they were real. The world would change too much, would spiral out beyond his control. No, there were reasonable explanations for everything. There had to be.

Yet Benedek plunged into each new case as if it stood at the doorway to fairyland, a wonderful, unique place full of miracles and delights. Benny believed and reveled in the occult and paranormal. The thought of vampires and ghosts charmed him. UFOs had him racing off in hot pursuit. Even more, he appeared to pity the doubters. No one could ever say that Benedek, in spite of his determined quest for the weird, lacked the absolute confidence of his convictions.

But...Scooby Doo?

He hustled Benedek down the hall and into his office before he replied. It wouldn't do for another faculty member—or student—to hear him likened to a cartoon canine. At least—and he paused briefly to reflect—that was what Scooby Doo was. He thought.

"Okay, Benedek, I know I'm not going to enjoy this—or likely understand it, either—but why am I 'a Scooby Doo kind of guy'?" In general, it really didn't do to allow Benedek an opening like that. He was sure to go off into a weird diatribe about cartoons or dogs or the realms of the paranormal that would only make sense in his particularly distorted brain. The

trouble with Benedek—one of the troubles—was that he threw in just enough of a temptation to provide a hook. Sometimes, greatly against his better judgment, Jonathan couldn't resist a nibble.

"Well, you've seen old Scoob, haven't you?" Benny scrutinized Jonathan thoroughly in about half a second and shook his head, then he tugged at the collar of his zebra-striped shirt. The wound across his forehead was nearly healed. He didn't even look as if he were aware of it. "What am I saying? Of course you haven't."

"I've *heard* of it," Jonathan admitted warily. Even that much of a confession seemed like surrender.

"Yeah, but I forgot. It's not on PBS. Anyway, it's this great 'toon about a group of kids and a dog that's probably smarter than most of them. And they do what we do. Chase shadows."

Oh, God, it was worse than he thought. Bad enough he was pulled away from his own research; now he was going to be called on to emulate a cartoon character. Surely Scooby Doo wasn't a program about the occult. Benedek had to be making it up. "That's their misfortune," he said hastily.

Benedek didn't take that wrong. That was the trouble. He *never* took things wrong. He just pitied the poor, ignorant fools who didn't understand the unique mystery of the Benedek mind. Or was the term 'Benedek mind' an oxymoron? No, that was unkind. Well, slightly unkind.

"Are you kidding? They have a great time. Chased by mummies and zombies and ghouls."

"If that's their idea of a great time, it wouldn't be mine. I don't remember being chased by any ghouls, if it comes to that. And your zombies were merely helpless victims who had been drugged so their organs could be harvested. As for mummies—" No, he didn't really want to remember the trip to St. Louis.

"That's why you'd fit in. At the end of every episode, they prove it was a bad guy in a disguise. Every single time," he added in tones of great disgust. "It's never real; always some crook in costume. Sets a bad example for the viewing public."

Jonathan attempted to see the logic of that statement and failed. "How could it? It evidently shows the, er, bad guys being brought to justice. Should they escape?"

Benedek eyed him pityingly. "Jack, Jack, Jack," he said with reproach. He fingered his forehead, then yanked his hand away when he saw Jonathan notice and wince. Instead of mentioning his injury, he plunged on. "Here we are, battling the mysterious for a whole year now and you *still* don't get it. You're a *professor*. You're supposed to be *smart*. I offer you the benefit of my vast experience and you babble about bad guys and justice. What about the imagination? What about wonder? Don't you *get* it? Scooby Doo teaches the kids what a plebeian world we live in. Takes away all those special, unique moments when mankind realizes it *doesn't* have all the answers. Kids *need* fantasy. They hafta learn soon enough that the real world is—real." He grimaced. "'Sides, it lies to those kids. No UFOs? What do you think we saw up there in Minnesota? Swamp gas? How did I know about all those murders in the Hooperville Hospital if I didn't run into Grace in the tunnel when I had my out-of-body extravaganza? You were there when Hortense did her séance number. Think I primed her what to say?"

Jonathan had wondered about that. Bad enough he'd been provoked into arguing with a ventriloquist's dummy; worse to think that Hortense might somehow be a medium, a conduit to the 'other side'. He *didn't* want to contemplate those parts of it. Not those moments when things had gotten out of hand, had progressed beyond explanations. Who blew the train whistle in Santa Maria? How did Benedek communicate with the wolves? No, there had to be logical reasons for it all.

The worst part was that he understood—and agreed with—Benedek's argument. As a teacher, he knew that crushing the wonder out of students turned them into 'zombies' of another kind, programmed little mannequins who spit out formula answers in class instead of taking the trouble to reason it out. Education was a necessity, but sometimes Jonathan wished there was another way to do it, one that encouraged and stimulated the imagination, not one that forced the students into little boxes, each and every one the same. Although he had never taught young children, he had once dated a kindergarten teacher and she had brought him in once for Show and Tell, to talk about ancient bones. He had brought some for his display, and the children had been fascinated and had crowded around him trustingly, asking questions that his undergrad students in Anthro 101 never would have thought of. Was Benedek *right*, that it shut the door on wonder to give everything the stock, formula explanation? Or was it wrong to teach the students that things existed that couldn't be proven? An educator's dilemma. Every now and then, Jonathan had a student who had never lost his excitement in the world around him. Students like that made teaching a joy. And he remembered his own father reading him the adventures of Robin Hood and other stirring tales of derring-do, and the way his schoolboy heart had been stirred with the thought that, someday, he might emulate his fictional heroes.

Benny eyed him narrowly and suddenly crowed with delight. "Aha!"

"What do you mean, aha?" Jonathan ventured warily.

"You agree with me!"

"I simply agree that it's wrong to crush the wonder out of children. Teach them how to function in the real world, yes, but not to crush their dreams." Even as he said it, he took a fresh look at Benedek. Here was a man who hadn't had it crushed out of him, a man who marched to an extremely different drummer. Half the time, it almost embarrassed Jonathan. What had happened to the small boy who had dreamed of adventuring in Sherwood Forest? He had simply grown up, learned to function in the 'real world'. "But they have to face reality, too, Benedek. The world isn't a playground."

"Sez who?" Benny demanded inelegantly. He grinned. "Come on, Jonny, you really want to jump in and get your feet wet. Who says you have to stay tidily on the beach?"

"Levitating in *Illinois*?" He raked his hands through his hair. He wasn't going to capitulate at this point in time. It would ruin their relationship if he threw in the towel, and he wasn't really inclined to do so. The only way to approach shadow-chasing properly was to maintain a scientific attitude, to research it. If he went into it seeking to prove the occult, he lost all objectivity. He and Benedek functioned best with one a skeptic and the other a believer.

Benedek's eyes flashed. "Yeah, and I've gotta say, Marshall Dillon, you've gotta learn to duck faster. You about gave me a coronary when she had you targeted with that 12-gauge shotgun."

That hadn't been one of Jonathan's favorite parts of the case, either. Who would have thought 'Levitating Lucy' would fight so hard to keep her secret? He hadn't for one second suspected she would actually attack them. The moment when she had whirled, the shotgun leveled at his midsection, was one of the worst of his life. He was too close to duck; he'd have been hit whichever way he moved. All he could do was stand, frozen like a deer in the headlights. It was one of the first times he could remember when he'd actually wished Benedek had been correct.

"You had no *right* to check me out!" the blonde woman wailed. "Why did you interfere? I was so close. So close." Her knuckles were white as she gripped the weapon. It was almost too heavy for her, but not so heavy that she would fail.

Benedek, where are you? Jonathan thought futilely. *Watch out, Benny.*

She'll take me down and then come for you.

The confrontation had come upon him so fast that he hadn't expected it. A woman who would stage a fake paranormal event to get her way shouldn't be the type to kill to hide the evidence. "If I could find out about the new interstate highway, anyone could," he said in as calming a voice as he could manage. "My friend will get the police if I disappear."

"Not if he's dead," Lucy insisted in a voice rich with satisfaction. Jonathan had lost track of Benedek hours ago; they'd split up for their investigations. Benedek might be dead already. Jonathan's stomach lurched and he was momentarily astonished to realize his panic over that supposition was greater than his fear of the shotgun. *Damn it, Benedek, if you're dead, I'm going to follow you into the hereafter and drag you back. Bad enough you nearly died in Hooperville. Bad enough when I went to your funeral. I don't want to have to go again—to a real one. Don't you do this to me.*

"He isn't dead," said Jonathan with a confidence driven by his need for his words to be real rather than out of any proof of the fact. Yet, wasn't there a substantiation he couldn't explain, couldn't even rationalize? Surely he would know if his pet nemesis was no longer in the world? There was no logic whatever in his sudden certainty, but his mind grasped it and so did his heart. Benedek wasn't dead. The world would be a different, and sadder, place if he were not in it. Therefore, he was not dead.

"You just arrived. You can't know that." She sounded smug, but there was a faint element of doubt in her voice. Whether she was simply reacting to Jonathan's determined conviction or whether she was trying to fake him out, he didn't know. But it gave him courage.

He moderated his voice, willing the panic out of it. "Don't do this, Lucy. You don't want to do this. Yes, the freeway will mean change for you. But not as much change as the taking of a human life will. Even if you should get away with it, it will change you forever. You'll never be able to view yourself in the same way. It will eat at you and end up destroying you. Is money so important to you that you would kill to keep it? Once you take another life, you cut yourself off from the rest of humanity. Can you do that and live with yourself?"

"Shut up," she snarled. "Shut up, shut up. I'm not giving up everything four generations of Endicotts worked for. I'm going to take the money and run. It'll look like you gave up and went away. I'll drive your rental car into the next county and abandon it in a parking lot. No one will ever suspect."

He put out a cautious hand. "Lucy, any reasonable person will question the levitation. You can't prove it, and a determined investigation will realize what I did, that you only levitate where there's something overhead for the wires. You might make a hit with the tabloids, and you might have the religious fanatics eating out of your hand—but that's because they *want* to believe. Others like me, the skeptics, will come. And besides, anyone with common sense will check everything out before they buy your property. They'll find out about the proposed freeway. You can't win anything by killing me. You'll only destroy what you've already got."

"I don't care. I could have done it if you hadn't come here and ruined it. So I don't care what happens. You have to die." The quiet, reasonable tones chilled him down to his socks. "Your friend's up there, dead already." She jerked up her chin to indicate the barn loft, but the shotgun barrel never wavered.

Jonathan's eyes lifted instantly, but the day was dying and he could see

nothing overhead but shadows. *Are you there, Benedek? Give me a sign.* Nothing. The entire Georgetown Fencing Team could have gathered up there emulating D'Artagnan and he wouldn't have seen them. But one last slant of the dying sunlight from the open door outlined Lucy Endicott, forcing Jonathan to squint. Of course he couldn't see Benedek up there, not with that light in his face.

"Enough." Lucy's voice was dead calm. She brought the shotgun tight against her shoulder and Jonathan could tell from the way she held it that she was familiar with the weapon and knew exactly what she was doing. There was no expression in her eyes, none whatsoever. No trace of fear or remorse or doubt. Another second and Jonathan would die. His stomach shriveled into a tight knot. *I'm sorry, Benedek*, he thought vainly. *I couldn't stop her.*

His focus narrowed down to the trigger and the way her finger curled around it. She started to tighten it. He braced himself to jump to one side, even though he knew it wouldn't be enough to save him.

"Yeee-haaaaa!" A vast, soaring shadow dove off the edge of the barn loft and swooped down at the woman with the gun. She jerked in horror and tried to bring the weapon around, but a pair of Nikes caught the gun and kicked it away before striking her hard in the middle of the chest. Her breath went out in a whoosh as her attacker drove her to the hay-strewn floor, his Mondrian-like shirt of colored squares untucked and unbuttoned, soaring out behind him like Superman's cape.

Jonathan screeched, "Benedek!" in a voice that caught in his throat.

"Don't just stand there, Doctor J, get the gun." Benedek picked himself up, dusted himself off, and revealed a face that was half-covered with blood.

"Benedek!"

"Yeah, I know. Red's not my color," Benedek said, off-hand. He shucked off the shirt and unbuckled the leather harness that he wore around his torso. "How'd ya like my act? Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey are waiting to sign me up. The Flying Benedek. I'd clean up."

Shotgun in one hand, Jonathan bent and retrieved the vivid shirt. He passed it to Benedek before he turned away abruptly to move the weapon well out of Lucy's reach. She didn't take any interest. Still winded from the impact, she lay trying to catch her breath, her mouth opening and closing like a beached fish.

Benny grinned. "Thought she'd lose it before I got this on," he said as he tossed away the harness. "Nothing I could use for a weapon up there. But you were on a roll, and I figured maybe you'd get to her. Guess she was too far gone for the MacKensie charm to save the day. Least you stalled her while I strapped on the harness."

Jonathan grasped his friend's chin and tilted his face into the dying sunlight. "What did she do to you, Benedek? Are you all right?"

"Whacked me with a pitchfork handle," he admitted in tones of great disgust. "I had her cut off from the shotgun, but the wires for her act were under the straw and I tripped. Nimble-toes Benedek, and I tripped." He made a disgusted face. "Guess I was trying to do a MacKensie."

"Thank you," said Jonathan wryly. He whipped out his handkerchief and mopped at the dried blood. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Well, if I can get through Excedrin Headache #47, yeah. Let's get Annie Oakley here to the sheriff."

I knew you weren't dead, Benedek. Jonathan flung his arms around his friend in an exuberant and relieved hug. Benedek only tolerated it for two seconds before he eeled his way out of it, embarrassed, denying any gratification he might feel. Jonathan found a length of rope and tied up Lucy, who had caught enough of her breath to fling a string of inventive profanity at him the entire time. Then he led her out to the rental car and parked her in the back seat while he cleaned the cut on Benedek's forehead and bandaged it.

"Shadow chasing," he muttered as he worked. "Paranormal investigations. When did we turn into Starsky and Hutch? Guns. I've had it with guns, Benedek. I've had it with people who inject air into people's IVs, with Wyatt Earp trying to blast us because he thinks we're the Clantons. With people trying to harvest organs from you or push you off the roof of hospitals. I never signed up for this."

Benedek endured the dressing of his wound with utter equanimity. "Isn't it funny you should be so good at it?"

That was something Jonathan didn't even *want* to think about. It took the wind out of his sails and he finished the job in utter silence.

Now he stood in his office facing Benedek and the cut on the journalist's forehead was halfway to being healed. The X-rays Jonathan had insisted on had shown nothing—"*Nothing, Benedek,*" he'd raved at the time, to the amusement of the ER doctor in Harlan. "*That means there's only empty space between your ears.*" Benedek was all right; he'd even had the utter gall to brag about his thick skull, a fact that Jonathan had endorsed as sarcastically as possible.

As sarcastic as his tones now. "Learn to duck?" he accused. "Learn to *duck*? Benedek, this is ridiculous. We both could have *died* out there. I don't know about you, but I have no desire to end my existence in a barn. And if that makes me a 'Scooby Doo kind of guy,' then I'll simply have to be one." All right, so this had been a similar situation to the cartoon. Fake paranormal event, bad guy—or woman in this instance—and a confrontation. He wasn't sure he wanted to think about that.

Benedek eyed him steadily. Maybe he was trying to determine the seriousness of Jonathan's rant. "You can't have it both ways, you know," he said at last.

Jonathan's eyes narrowed. Benedek was up to something. Surely not a new case? All Jonathan wanted was to go back to nice, safe teaching. No one shot at professors when they were grading papers. To question Benedek's statement was to plunge into yet another foray through the twisted morasses of his friend's mind. But he heard himself asking involuntarily, "What do you mean?" Bad question. He had learned early on in their association never to ask anything like that.

"Well, it's like this, buds," Benedek replied. "Either it's Scooby Doo, with all the Starsky and Hutch bad guy stuff that implies—the mummies just guys wrapped up in strips of sheets, the levitators wearing wires, the zombie a guy in a mask—or there's something wonderful and mystical out there that the man on the street isn't quite ready for yet. Long as you hold out for the Scooby Doo explanation, then you're stuck with the consequences. Come on, Jonny, there's all this Robin Hood, dashing-hero stuff in your nature. You thrive on it. Jumping between me and a gun, claiming to be Judge *Ray* Bean—and didn't you ever *watch* a western when you were a kid? You really had a misspent childhood."

Jonathan didn't want to touch that one.

"And if some of it's Scooby Doo, then some of it's real. You know it was real in Blueberry, Minnesota. You *know* that. I saw your face when that was coming down. You do wonder just great, Jack. So, what's wrong with wonder? You think *I* like getting shot at?"

"Yes," said Jonathan bluntly. "Because it makes great copy. You're not out there shaking in your shoes as you duck for cover. You're running blindly *into* danger so that I have to run into it after you."

Benedek started to give a flippant answer, then he broke off and considered Jonathan's words. The fervor of his conviction faded slightly, to be replaced with something warmer, something almost...humble and gratified. It couldn't be.

"Have to?" Benedek echoed softly.

"You surely don't think I'd let you face it *alone*?" Jonathan asked before he could stop himself. Then he fell silent and gazed with astonishment at Benedek. Yes. He *had to* follow. Or even lead, because he *couldn't* let Benedek do it alone. And that implied what? Not a belief in anything beyond Scooby Doo, because the fact that the Minnesota incident had been real didn't mean they all were. What he'd just blurted out without even realizing it wasn't a capitulation into belief, not for a second. He was going to remain a debunker because that was his nature. But a debunker needed to have something to debunk.

What he'd claimed was more than that. A commitment to Benedek. A loyalty. A friendship. He'd known for some time that Benedek had long ago crossed over from annoyance to friend, that he liked the journalist. Benedek's well-being mattered. If he had to pursue Scooby Doo games until they turned into Starsky and Hutch games, so be it. Because this was *right*. This was where he belonged. Maybe proving Julius Caesar was never in Utah wasn't as interesting as the existence of a bicameral brain in Australopithecus and its quasi-contemporary hominids, but investigating the paranormal with Benedek had become a vital part of his life and he would miss it if he couldn't do it any longer. It was *right*. He didn't want to admit it, not to Moorhouse, and particularly not to Benedek, who would be both chagrined and willing to take advantage of the fact.

But this man who stood before him like a cocky bantam rooster waiting for Jonathan to make sense out of what he'd just said—or to admit loudly and publicly that Benedek was right—had opened up Jonathan's world. Not to the paranormal, but to life beyond academia. He'd helped free a part of Jonathan that had long been buried in conventionality. And Jonathan was glad of it.

He and Benedek stared at each other and both of them fumbled for words. Uncharacteristically, Jonathan found them first. "But that doesn't mean that I *believe* in all this stuff," he said severely.

Benedek held his gaze for a long moment that said everything neither of them could speak aloud. Then he grinned brightly and rocked on the balls of his feet. "Like I said, buds," he concluded brightly. "You're a real Scooby Doo kind of guy."

"And what does that make you? Hans Holtzer? Erich Von Daaniken?"

Benedek's eyebrows lifted. *Aha. Caught you out.* He didn't even have to say it, to remind Jonathan that admitting he knew who they were proved he'd taken some interest in his adopted field. Instead, he grinned shamelessly. "Nope. Don't have to be. Don't forget, I'm famous. They love me on the talk shows. I'm an Edgar Benedek kind of guy. The one. The only. Unique."

"Not to mention amazingly full of himself," Jonathan pointed out helpfully.

"Nah." Benedek buffed his fingernails on his shirt front. "It's not ego if it's real. Just an honest appreciation of one's own talents."

"That would be fine, if you weren't so adamant about it," Jonathan plunged in. "Do you know the definition of vanity, Benedek? You drive me crazy! Levitating? Vampires? Werewolves? Ghosts? I never thought I'd wind up a ghostbuster, let me tell you..."

Benedek grinned. "Welcome to the world of the mysterious, buds," was all he said.