

MURDER BY MISTAKE

by M.D. Bloemker

(previously published in Prime Time #7)

"Hey, MacKensie, look alive. Your lawyer's here."

Jonathan started out of his bleak reverie as the surly deputy unlocked and shouldered open the cell door. Responding to Hegedorn's impatient gesture, he rose from the cot and held his tongue as the man herded him from the cell block.

Two people waited in the small room into which Hegedorn shoved him; the same room, Jonathan realized, to which he'd been brought on the day of his arrest and left to sit alone for hours before an uncommunicative deputy finally showed up long enough to grab his arm and drag him to a cell. Dr. Moorhouse, her face white and pinched, turned from the barred window as the door opened. A young man seated at the long table glanced up as he sifted through the contents of his briefcase.

Jonathan froze when Dr. Moorhouse's eyes met his. What was she seeing? A confused and frightened anthropology professor, who had only the vaguest idea what was happening and no idea why--or a murderer?

She came forward, hands held out to him and his apprehensions melted in a sigh to see the tacit sympathy shining in her eyes.

"Don't touch the prisoner," Hegedorn barked.

Dr. Moorhouse stopped, eyes blazing. "Young man, I assure you, I have been thoroughly searched, and I have no intention..."

"Lady, you're not even supposed to be here, so don't start." Hegedorn nudged MacKensie with more force than necessary toward a chair on the far side of the table. "No contact. Got that?"

The young lawyer nodded his greeting as Jonathan eased down into the chair opposite. Abandoning her attempt to sandblast Hegedorn out of existence with her glare, Dr. Moorhouse took the chair next to the man as he said, "Dr. MacKensie? I hope you're feeling better today."

Jonathan peered at him through fingers splayed across his tired eyes. "I suppose so," he murmured. "But...I'm sorry, I don't even remember your name."

"Understandable," the young man sighed. "You were quite...distressed yesterday."

"Jonathan, this is Wallace Barrett Durham, Jr.," Dr. Moorhouse interjected. "I've engaged him as your attorney in this...unfortunate affair."

"I...remember that much," Jonathan said, staring at his clasped hands as he lowered them to the table. He summoned a faint smile. "Yours is a fairly famous name, I'm a little embarrassed for forgetting it."

Durham shifted uncomfortably. "Yes. My father. To be honest, it was he whom Dr. Moorhouse attempted to engage. I'm, uh...a little wet behind the ears, as it were."

"You came highly recommended," the woman assured him calmly. "And in all the years I've known your father, I've come to trust his judgment implicitly."

"Well, yes," Durham murmured, flushing. "I only hope I can live up to his expectations as well as his reputation."

Jonathan considered him for a long moment, finally nodding. "Believe me--I understand."

Durham dove into his briefcase, desperate to be free of the subject. "We didn't have much time for an interview before your arraignment, so I'd like to ask you some questions and get your version of the events...."

"I didn't do it. I didn't kill anyone."

Durham paused, then pulled out a long legal pad, retrieving a pen from his pocket. "Just a few questions to start. According to the evidence submitted at the arraignment, eyewitnesses place you in Harville between 2 and 5 on the afternoon of the 9th, is that correct?"

"Yes." He rubbed his eyes. "Yes, I was there, but...this is ridiculous. How do they even know a crime was committed?"

"Excuse me?" Durham blinked.

Anger boiled over, pushing Jonathan out of his seat to pace agitatedly behind the table. "He's done this before, you know."

"Done what before?"

"Died!" He leaned on the chair, gesturing with a shaking hand. "He's died before! How do we know this one's for real?"

Durham leaned toward Dr. Moorhouse, pleading with his eyes. The woman nodded gravely. "He's right. There is a precedent."

Dubious, Durham nodded slowly. "I see. Well, Dr. MacKensie, I can assure you that in this instance, there is no doubt." He placed his hand, palm down, on a manila folder. "I have a copy of the coroner's report."

Paling, Jonathan reseated himself. "May I?"

Hesitating, Durham again looked to Dr. Moorhouse for help. She considered, then nodded tersely.

Taking the proffered folder, Jonathan quickly scanned the first sheet, then stared as the words began to sink in. "Name of deceased: Edgar Benedek. Cause of death: Multiple trauma inflicted by heavy metal object, extensive injury to head, torso..."

His voice trailed off as his eyes, widening in horror, moved down the page. The long silence was finally broken by the soft rustle of paper as he dropped it to the table, staring at it as though hoping it would vanish and take the nightmare with it.

At length, he raised his head, revealing a face that had seemed to age ten years in as many minutes. Swallowing hard, he managed, "They're...they're saying that I...I did that to him?"

Durham nodded reluctantly, flinching away from the soft anguish in MacKensie's voice.

"Dr. Moorhouse?" His eyes and voice pleaded with her for reassurance that this was all some sort of horrible joke. "They can't think that...I mean, I couldn't...I'd never...."

His breath caught, a look of abject horror coming over his face as he pulled the report toward him again, staring at it. Clearing his throat, Durham began reluctantly, "I'm afraid to say that the prosecution's case appears to be very solid, Dr. MacKensie. There are no fewer than five eyewitnesses prepared to testify that you were overheard threatening Mr. Benedek's life on the afternoon of the 9th."

"But I never saw him." Jonathan roused himself out of his bleak mood with an effort. "I left Harville that same night without finding him."

"But you admit that you did threaten to kill him?" Durham ventured.

"Of course I did!" He broke off, rubbing his forehead as he struggled to collect himself. "He called me that morning, and insisted that I drop everything to meet him in Harville. But when I got there, there was no sign of him. No note at the motel desk, no message of any kind. No one had seen him since the night before."

"Did he give you a reason for his request for you to meet him?"

"No. No, he just said...." He paused, swallowing, before continuing in a softer voice, "...that it was a matter of life and death."

Durham made a few notes, then exchanged a noncommittal glance with Dr. Moorhouse. "I'll need you to retrace your steps for me, Dr. MacKensie. Everything you remember from the time you arrived in Harville to the time you returned to D.C. Everyone you talked to, everything you said, and everything that was said to you."

Jonathan nodded, lowering his forehead into his hands. "I didn't kill him," he said quietly after a long moment of silence. "I don't really expect you to believe that right now, but...."

"I do believe you, Dr. MacKensie," Durham assured him without hesitation. "And not merely because that's what I'm being paid for. From what Dr. Moorhouse has told me, and from our admittedly brief conversation yesterday before the arraignment...well, things just don't fit. Unfortunately, that's only a gut feeling on my part at the moment. With your help, we'll be able to build something a little more substantial to stand against the D.A.'s case."

Relief brought color back to MacKensie's pale face. He mustered a smile as he said, "Thank you. And please...call me Jonathan."

Durham extended his hand. "Wally," he agreed as they shook across the table.

He'd long ago come to the conclusion that darkness was one of his least favorite things. Cold, damp, foul-smelling little rooms with padlocked doors ran a very close second, though. The two in combination, with him in the middle, were certainly more than a sane man could be expected to handle. But given the alternative, things could certainly be a whole lot worse.

Shifting on the broken-down mattress, he mouthed a soundless yelp as his bruised ribs protested. He'd given up wondering what time it was, or how long he'd been here. At this point, he was far more concerned about the fact that he was here at all. Twice a day, that door opened and someone tossed in a tray of food, leaving him to find it again in almost total darkness; once a day, his keeper arrived, like clockwork, asking the same stupid questions, getting the same cheeky answers, and then taking the empty trays away with him. The routine was getting old and boring...and unnerving. He'd have never pegged any of them for the types who would waste their time and energy on cat-and-mouse games. And yet....

Voices from outside drew his attention. Unable to make out the words, he pushed off the mattress. With a few stifled gasps and one outright groan, he crawled over to the door and pressed his ear against it. One voice was young and high-pitched and he had to think to identify it. Heg, the young deputy, that's who it was. And the other was more than familiar; older, lower, laconic. The voice of the man who visited every day with the same questions to which he never got the answers he wanted.

"...just talked to Cronin," Heg said, his voice filled with the easy confidence of youth. "Told him that lawyer was making noises like he wasn't buying the story."

"Yeah?" A uninterested grunt.

Heg laughed shortly. "Cronin says it don't matter what the guy buys, 'cause in the morning, he ain't gonna have a client no more anyway."

"What's that mean?"

"Come on, you ain't that dumb. It means the professor's gonna crack, right? Couldn't take it no more, rigged up the sheets and hung himself, right there in the cell. Cronin says we gotta wait, make it happen sometime after midnight when we're sure nobody's gonna come snooping."

An affirmative grunt, then a moment of silence. Then: "What about him?"

"Without the professor--who needs him?" Heg laughed his indifference.

Behind the door, 'him' did his level best to keep the sound of his pounding heart down to a dull roar. This was the absolute limit. It was bad enough that they stuffed him into this stinkhole and subjected him to wormy food, brackish water, and daily audiences with a guy who could make Mt. Rushmore look animated by comparison. And it was worse when he'd learned that they'd dragged someone else

into this mess, especially since it had been his elaborate lies that had involved Jonathan MacKensie in the first place. But now they were just going too far. And now he only had until midnight to figure out what to do about it.

He missed the comment to which Heg sneered the reply: "Well, I wouldn't bother feeding him if I were you."

"You ain't me."

Heg's chuckle died. "Yeah. Look, um...Cronin's gonna call again in about an hour, he's gonna wanna talk to you about...you know."

"Yeah."

"So I'll, uh...let you know when he calls." Fast footsteps on the stairs matched the fading volume of Heg's voice.

A rustle of keys spurred him into action. Ignoring the scream of his bruised muscles, he made a dive for the mattress and managed to get his respiration to some semblance of normal by the time the door opened.

"Dinner."

Rolling over onto his back from his tight huddle, Edgar Benedek squinted up at the man holding a battered tray. "Aw, you shouldn't have," he rasped, pushing up to a sitting position. "I coulda ordered out, y'know."

"You're pretty funny for a dead man."

"Yeah, I'm booked solid beyond the pale. What is this stuff? Beans? Rice? Mashed potatoes?"

"It never showed."

Benny's grimace dissolved. He stared up at the man he knew only as Devon, and saw nothing on the shadowed, inscrutable face. "It didn't, huh? Well, pity poor you. I guess for once the U.S. Postal Service is on my side."

"Not for long."

"What does that mean?" he demanded, although he was certain that he already knew.

Devon's lip curled. With a low grunt, he turned to leave.

"Wait!" Maintaining a precarious hold on the metal tray, Benny levered to his feet. "Just wait a minute. Now, look--you and me, we've been together a long time, and I just think that..."

He held his breath as Devon, paused in the doorway, finally turned around to wait for the result of Benedek's desperately improvised plea. The words came in pieces as Benny's mind raced. "I mean, I think that, you know...we should talk. About, ah...we should talk about...*this*."

On the last word, he hauled back and nailed Devon square in the face with the metal tray. Unidentifiable foodstuff splattered as the man staggered back, bouncing off the doorjamb right into Benny's waiting hands. "Sayonara, Charlie!" he exclaimed as he slammed Devon back against the wall.

His head hit with a resounding crack. For a moment Devon stared at Benny in astonishment; then, eyes glazing over, he slid to the floor in a heap.

Reveling in the sheer adrenaline rush of victory, Benny bent over the unconscious man and relieved him of his gun and key ring. Nudging the man's stray leg out of the way, he pulled the door closed and locked it. A fast check of the other keys on the ring gave him no clue whether they would open the cells upstairs. But even if they didn't, he had a pretty good idea where he could find ones that would.

The door at the top of the staircase was locked, and he sifted frantically through the key ring in search of a key that worked.

"Devon?" Heg's puzzled voice on the other side of the door. "You having trouble or something?"

Benny growled low in his throat, his best attempt at a Devon-like reply. He pressed against the door, listening as Heg said, "Okay, wait a minute, I'll get it for you."

The door swung open. "Devon, what's the matter with y--"

With a bright smile of greeting, Benny settled the barrel of Devon's gun approximately two inches from Heg's astonished face. "If you're fond of your nose at all, you'll do everything I say, right?"

Behind closed eyes, Jonathan tried to knit together fragments of memory in some coherent whole that Wally could scribble onto his pad of yellow paper when he returned, as promised, in the morning. The difficulty was in filtering out the anger that colored his memories of the past week, which started six days ago with Benedek's phone call. Returning to DC after a wasted day trying to track the man down, his fury had gradually cooled to apprehension when two days passed without further word. He'd even ventured a phone call to a few of Benny's cohorts; none had heard from him, either, adding to his unease. But before he could become genuinely worried, his car had been pulled over on the George Washington Parkway by a sneering state police officer who seemed to take inordinate delight in cuffing him while intoning the Miranda warnings with relish.

Had that been fear in Benny's voice? He couldn't remember anything specific, just a fast, excited chatter that managed to bat aside all MacKensie's objections and had extracted a promise from Jonathan to drive up into wilds of northern Maryland without once giving a clear reason why he was making such an unusual and urgent request. But there had been something there that compelled Jonathan to honor his promise even after it dawned on him that Benedek had cajoled him into dropping everything, giving him less than an hour to find someone to cover his classes for the day. By the time he'd reached Harville, his blood pressure had been notched up by the concessions he'd been forced to make to Professor Dunleavy, by the icy glare of disapproval Dr. Moorhouse had given to his announcement that he was taking an unplanned day off to respond to what she considered Benedek's whim, and by the traffic jam on I-270 that had turned a three-hour drive into a six-hour horror.

The townspeople had been helpful enough, if a bit reticent. As he'd gone from hotel to grocery store, and from there to the post office and town hall, he'd learned that Edgar Benedek had made his presence known since his arrival a few days before, but that no one had seen him since early that morning, about the time of his phone call. Some were of the opinion that he'd gone fishing, which was the reason Benedek always gave when asked why he was in Harville in the first place. Only the tackle shop owner admitted his suspicions that Benny had little experience and no interest in fly-casting, trolling, or otherwise, although he made a valiant show of picking out equipment and bait just the day before.

Jonathan rubbed at his eyes, trying to sooth the dull ache behind them. He remembered something being mentioned at the arraignment about fishing equipment. Something about...the body lying atop a broken fishing pole.

That made no sense at all. Edgar Benedek's fish of choice came packed in oil or water in a can, covered with chocolate sauce and topped with pineapple chunks. Fishing. It just made no sense. Nothing made sense, really. And the more he tried to sort it out, the worse his head felt. Perhaps if he could get some sleep, he'd be able to think, and from there put together a clearer time-line for Wally to analyze. And by some miracle, that young man could point to an anomaly that Jonathan's less objective point of view had missed and, like Perry Mason incarnate, smugly and triumphantly demand that all charges against his innocent client be summarily dropped. And then they could get on with the important work--finding the real murderer.

He looked down at his hands, vaguely upset to see that they were shaking. Like clockwork, his stomach took hard twists as he remembered the cold wording on the death certificate. Bludgeoned to death, and then beaten to a pulp. Someone did that to him. Never mind that everyone thought Jonathan MacKensie the guilty party. They at least had the security of believing, however erroneously, that justice had been served with MacKensie's arrest. Only Jonathan, and with luck, Dr. Moorhouse and Wally Durham, knew differently. Only they knew that the real murderer was still free and unsuspected.

He watched his fingers curl into tight, white-knuckled fists. *Not for long*, he swore to himself. *Not if I have anything to do with it.*

Deep in silent fury, he only gradually became aware of a new sound in what had previously been eerie silence. Bewildered, he looked around for either a water pipe leak or an errant rattlesnake.

A rattle at the cell door snapped his head up. "Jonny! Come on, heads up! We're busting out of this joint."

Open-mouthed, Jonathan blinked once, twice, then squeezed his eyes shut tightly and shook his head. When the flurry of flashing lights died away, the man frantically fitting key after key into the cell door lock still looked exactly like Edgar Benedek.

The impossibility paused, leaned his head to peer through the bars. "Jack, you okay? You look like you've...never mind."

"You...you..." Gulping weakly, Jonathan staggered to his feet, collapsing against the dingy cell wall. "No. This isn't...no, I refuse to believe this. This isn't happening. I'm asleep, I'm dreaming, I'm...."

"Getting loud. Cool it, I don't exactly want to draw a crowd, okay?"

"Ow!" Jonathan stared at his arm, reddened from the firm pinch he'd given it, and groaned. "Oh, no. I'm...I'm not dreaming. You've come back to haunt me, is that it? It wasn't enough to bedevil me in life, now you have to do it in death?"

"As appealing as that prospect is, get ready for the news update, pal." He hissed in frustration as another key refused to cooperate. "Edgar Benedek is still among the living. He may be a shadow of his former self, but he is definitely *not* pushing up the daisies."

Jonathan's mouth fell open again as he edged closer to the cell door. Timidly, he reached out to poke lightly at Benedek's hunched shoulder and gasped softly when he made contact. "You ...you're not dead?" he ventured in a whisper.

"Want me to pinch you, too?"

MacKensie clutched his arm protectively, still dazed. "But the coroner's report...the death certificate..." He swallowed hard. "The arraignment! Benedek, they think I killed you!"

"And if you didn't make the front page of the *National Register*, I'm gonna have a few words with Jordy, let me tell you."

His crack ended in a yelp as Jonathan reached through the bars, grabbed his shirt collar and yanked him forward, hard. "Do you have any *idea* what I've gone through in the last few days because everyone thinks you're dead and I was the one who did it? *Do you?*"

"If I say yes, will you let me breathe again?"

"Breathe? You want to breathe? I'm going to *kill* you!"

Benny yanked out of Jonathan's grasp and stumbled back, one hand to his newly bruised neck, the other held up in surrender. "Far be it from me to remind you what got you into this mess in the first place. Look, I'll make a deal with you. Put your murderous tendencies on hold for at least two minutes and let me get this door open, okay? I'll explain everything to you, I *swear*, but right now, we have got to get out of here. Okay? Okay?"

He started edging back, like an animal trainer approaching a cranky lion. When his hands were on the keyring still hanging out of the lock, he resumed the search, one eye on the seething man glaring at him only inches away.

"Again," Jonathan snarled, startling Benny into a defensive flinch. "I can't believe you did this to me *again*. It was bad enough when I had to suffer through your funeral the first time --*this* time you've gone too far. If you think I'm going to laugh this one off, well...."

Benny's triumphant exclamation eclipsed MacKensie's mirthless laugh. Flinging the cell door open, Benny made a gesture that faded as he saw the bewildered look on the professor's face.

"What are you *doing?*" Jonathan protested, horrified.

"I'm breaking you out, that's what I'm doing. C'mon, already."

"What--? Wait!" He snatched his arm away from Benedek's attempt to snag it, retreating further back into the cell. "I can't just *leave*. That's...that's jailbreak, that's...illegal!"

Benny squinted at him. "Are you *serious?*"

Another hard look at Jonathan's obvious confusion answered that one. With a nervous look over his shoulder, Benedek wet his lips and resorted to a new tactic. "Okay, look. You're in here because they think you killed somebody, only you didn't do it, there's no victim, so there's no crime, is there? Now how can it be illegal for you to leave a place you shouldn't be in the first place?"

"That doesn't make any sense," MacKensie complained, eyes narrowed.

"Oh, you want sense, do you? How's this: move your keister, *now*, because there are people in the very near vicinity who want to make very sure your case never goes to trial. In fact, they're going to make sure you don't last the night. Am I getting through to you yet?"

"But why--how...?"

"I told you, I'll explain later. Right now, we have got to get *out* of here."

This time Benny managed a firm grip on Jonathan's arm, pulling him out of the cell. "I don't believe this," MacKensie mumbled under his breath. "I'm getting broken out of jail by the man I'm supposed to have murdered."

"No one ever said you lead a boring life," Benny assured him, propelling him through the door into the outer office. Jonathan stopped dead at the sight of the deputy, standing in one corner of the room with a wrist manacled to a hanging water pipe.

"Hey!" Hegedorn made an instinctive move for an empty holster. Rattling the handcuff menacingly, he glowered at them. "You're not going far, you two. You just wait. You just..."

"Stuff it, cowboy. Where's the keys to the Cherokee?"

"I'll get you for this, just see if I don't."

"The keys?"

"I'll get you, and when I do..."

With an impatient sigh, Benny pulled out one of the two guns that he'd tucked into his belt for safekeeping. "Will this help you get into the spirit of cooperation?"

Hegedorn closed his mouth and swallowed. "On that rack," he grumbled.

Benedek searched through the forest of keys until he found the one he wanted, and pocketed it. The rest of the keys he swept off the hooks, filling his hand. "Come on, Jack, we're outta here."

Eyes glazing, Jonathan followed Benny's gesture, staring over his shoulder at Hegedorn. "I don't think we should be doing this," he protested weakly. "Benedek..."

Detecting the first stirring of a potential anxiety attack, Benny grabbed his friend's arm again. "Out," he said firmly, near Jonathan's ear. "Go. Walk. *Now*."

Slamming the door on Hegedorn's belligerent hollering, he managed to drag Jonathan all the way out of the building and to the jeep parked around the side before the man's shock-induced haze began to clear again. Jonathan clutched at the vehicle's windshield support as Benny hauled back and sent the handful of keys sailing into the bushes nearby. "This is...insane," he muttered between gasps for breath. "I'm a civilized man, I lead a quiet life. What's happening to me? What did I do to deserve this?"

"Do me a favor, willya?" Benny gave him a solid push, not letting up until MacKensie was more than halfway sprawled in the passenger seat. "Can the philosophy lecture until we're over the county line."

He sprinted around to the driver's side, clambering in. "Here," he said, proffering the one of the guns he'd taken from Devon and Heg. "Why don't you..."

Getting a good look at Jonathan's dazed expression, he shoved both weapons under his seat. "Never mind. Just keep your head down, okay?"

He slammed the jeep into reverse a split second after the engine kicked over. With a startled yell, Jonathan clung to the top of the windshield. "What are you *doing*? Slow down!"

Benny began a retort, but froze as he heard a shout. "Damn!" he exploded, flooring the accelerator to send the jeep skidding neatly onto the main road. Glancing at the side mirror, he saw the fragmented image of one, maybe two men running after them. "Not a chance," he muttered with a grim smile. "We got 'em beat by a--"

Jonathan cried out, nearly toppling out of the speeding vehicle as he jerked straight, clawing at his shoulder. The steering wheel yanked out of Benny's startled hand, and two tires left the road. Teeth gritted, the man fought for control, holding the wheel steady. "Jack?" he demanded anxiously. "Jack, you okay? Jonathan?"

A low groan, followed by a sharp crack was his answer. Fury shoved panic out of his voice as he realized, "They're *shooting*! Damn! Did they get you? Jonathan, did--"

Finally kicking dust from all four tires, Benny chanced a look over and choked to see Jonathan staring at his blood-soaked hand.

"I--I..." MacKensie stammered weakly.

"How bad is it?"

"I've...been...."

"Jack, where'd you get hit?"

"...shot...."

"Jonathan!" He flinched violently as the windshield, with a dull plop, metamorphosed into a translucent spider's web, a dime-sized hole at its center. Another glance in the rear mirror gave him the bad news. It looked like he hadn't tossed those other keys far enough, because there was a pickup truck in hot pursuit.

"It's getting a little crowded around here," he decided aloud. A yank on the steering wheel sent the jeep bouncing off the road. He offered a quick prayer that the trees would stay at least a car's width apart, and hoped that reflexes that had seen him through countless video arcade games wouldn't fail him now.

"B-Benedek..."

"Hang in there, pal. I'm trying to shake our escort. They won't get far if they try...."

The jeep bounced, jarring the words out of his mouth. The terrain grew rougher, brush and fallen limbs making passage treacherous and bone-shaking. Above the rattling of axle and gears, Benny heard Jonathan groan, and realized that the numbing shock of the bullet wound was fading. And this obstacle course was certainly not helping matters along.

He eased down on the brakes, bringing the jeep to a crawl as he chanced a look back. Through the trees, he caught a glimpse of blue and watched it, determining after a few moments that their pursuers had stopped, not daring take the pickup over the same course as the hardier jeep. It would only be a matter of time before they'd mount up a foot search. Not a lot of time though--so Benny knew he'd have to make every second of it count.

Daring only a worried glance over at the man hunched over in the seat next to him, Benny nudged the jeep forward. "Jonathan--you okay? Talk to me. *Say* something. Make a rude noise--*anything*."

A low moan was his answer. "I feel sick," the thin voice quavered. "I'm...I'm...."

"Just hang in there. Won't be long now."

"W-why did they...shoot...?"

"I asked for a sound, not the Gettysburg Address. Shut up, already." He swallowed the panic behind his snappish words, perversely hoping that Jonathan was in too much shock to care. The situation was going from bad to worse. If he couldn't pull this one out of the fire, they were going to die just a few hours later than had already been planned for them. That thought set his teeth and his determination as the jeep bucked and bounced deeper into the thickening forest.

The third time he had to back the vehicle out of an impassable cul-de-sac was when he really started worrying. He had no idea where they were, and judging from the sounds that Jonathan was making, the man was in no condition for flight on foot. Then, just as he was preparing to give in to an urge to scream in frustration, he saw a heartening sight through the trees: the rushing waters of the Little River, and a very familiar outcropping of rock hanging over it.

He braked, killing the engine. "End of the line, buds. No transfers, we gotta hoof it from here."

"Here?" Jonathan lifted his head, peering around groggily as Benny dove under the seat to retrieve the two guns. "Where's...here?"

Praying that the safeties were secure, Benny tucked both weapons awkwardly behind his belt, then hopped out of the jeep, sprinting around to take Jonathan's free arm. "It's not the Mayo Clinic, but it'll have to do. Come on, real slow now."

With much hesitation and teeth-gritted hisses, Benedek got him out of the vehicle. It took real effort to unclaw Jonathan's hand from the injured arm, but Benny finally got the man's good arm anchored firmly around his neck.

"I've never been shot before," Jonathan quavered as Benny urged him forward, pointedly nudging the man's legs to get them moving.

"Think of it as a learning experience, then. Come on, cooperate, willya? This ain't exactly a stroll on the beach."

"Why did they shoot me?" The man's thin voice held only confusion. "I'm...I'm only a prof--...profe--...teacher. Teachers don't get shot...do they?"

"That's the sixty-four dollar question, isn't it?" Benny hissed as Jonathan stumbled against him for the dozenth time. "I'll give you the sixty-four dollar answer just as soon as I can breathe again."

To his relief, Jonathan fell into a dazed silence and needed less urging to keep one foot in front of the other. Still, every muscle in Benedek's body was screaming for mercy by the time he saw salvation through the trees.

The tent was intact, undisturbed by weather or wildlife, just the way he'd left it. The flaps were also zippered shut, which gave Benny a bad moment until he found that Jonathan could stand on his own for as long as five seconds before his swaying seriously threatened his balance. It took four tries, steadying MacKensie between attempts, before he got the flaps open.

He urged Jonathan through, managing to snag his loosely rolled sleeping bag with his foot as he did so. A few deft kicks got the bag into position and fully extended. "Come on, lie down here. See if you can watch where you bleed, this stuff is rented. Easy, easy, that's it...."

Jonathan's breath came in short, rapid gasps, interspersed with stifled cries as Benny eased him back. Waiting until the pain seemed to subside, Benedek took a moment to carefully lay aside the two pistols that had been digging mercilessly into his kidneys. He then plucked at the bloodied, torn fabric of Jonathan's shirt, taking cloth in both hands to rip apart and expose the injury beneath.

"Do you live right or what?" Shaking his head in wonder, Benny leaned back and freed a plastic box and a gallon jug of water from beneath a pile of blankets. "It's just a graze, pal--took a hunk out of your shoulder, but at least you don't have to worry about me doing surgery with a rusty knife. I hope I remembered the disinfectant. Who knows where that bullet's been?"

"Wha-what is this place? Where are we?"

"My home away from home. Up until last week, that is, but that's another story. Now...." Mindful of the wary look Jonathan gave him, he held up a gauze pad as he soaked it with alcohol. "I'm not gonna kid you, this is gonna hurt like you've never hurt before. Don't feel you need to be brave or anything, you can scream and shout as much as you want. Just remember that the guy who did this to you has about two dozen friends who are gonna be all over the place in a little while. Okay?"

He waited until Jonathan nodded stiffly before touching the cloth to the exposed wound. With a strangled cry, MacKensie shot bolt upright, and it took all Benny's strength to force him back by pushing at his good shoulder.

"Here." Taking Jonathan's upraised and trembling hand, Benny guided it to his own upper arm. "Hold as tight as you want, just keep out of my way. I know it hurts, but I gotta do this."

To his credit, Jonathan cried out only once more, then subsided into deep, gulping breaths and occasional sharp moans as Benny thoroughly cleaned the wound, first with the alcohol, then with the contents of the water jug. He ran out of gauze too quickly, cursing the makers of the little first aid kit even though he knew full well that the contents were intended to treat minor cuts from fishhooks or burns from campfires, not gunshot wounds. Parts of Jonathan's shirt remained unsoiled, and he ripped off strips of it to bind what little gauze he'd held in reserve around MacKensie's shoulder and upper arm.

Limp with exhaustion and drenched with sweat, Jonathan cracked his eyes open as Benny improvised the bandage. "That's county property, you know," he said hoarsely.

"And it'll never get put to a better use, trust me. You feeling any better?"

"Hurts," he said faintly. "A lot."

"Well, look at it this way. At least you're alive to complain about it." Benny wiped drying blood from Jonathan's arm and his own hands with a water-soaked rag, and gave up the finger-smearred blood stains on his clothing as a lost cause. Leaning over, he pulled two blankets off the nearby pile.

"You've...done this before?"

"Done what?" He unfolded the blankets, settling them carefully around Jonathan's body. "This? I change my sheets every Saturday, whether they need to be changed or not. I'd demonstrate my hospital corners, but..."

"No. Bullet wounds. You know what to do."

He shrugged noncommittally. "Guess it comes naturally if you've spent as much time as I did in a war zone."

"Viet Nam?"

"East 148th Street." A brief rummage through another pile produced a rumpled, but clean flannel shirt, which he proceeded to exchange for his hopelessly soiled one. "There was a time ...well, never mind. I'll tell you a story or three once we get out of here."

"Where's here and...and how did we get here? They told me..." He broke off in a soundless shout as his rising agitation jarred his injured shoulder. Benny held his good arm down until the spasm subsided. "Easy, Jack. Just take it easy."

"...they told me you were dead." His voice recovered strength slowly. "There was an autopsy, a coroner's report. They arrested me, there was...an arraignment. But you're not dead, so who--what--?"

"Okay, okay. Promise me you won't move anymore, and I'll tell you everything. C'mon, relax, willya? That's it."

Only when Jonathan was still and his respiration only slightly labored did Benny dare to release his grip. He tipped back to sit on the ground next to Jonathan, one arm propped against his raised knee. "This is kind of a long story, but as long as you don't have anything better to do...." He cleared his throat and rubbed briefly at his chin. "Ever hear of a guy named Charlie Doerfler?"

"Doerfler? I...I don't think so."

"Eh, you probably skipped his section on your way to the comics. He worked for the old Baltimore *News American* back in the days when being a newspaper reporter really meant something. They blacklisted him over some stupid argument he got into when management changed hands, so there wasn't another paper in the country that would touch him. So he went to work for the *Register* as editor-in-chief. Sailed the ship for ten years before he finally retired. And those were great years, let me tell you. Charlie, well...he taught me everything I know, no lie. He was like...." He paused, sighed and shook his head. "He was a great friend."

"Was? What happened to him?"

"I, uh...I'm not real sure. I mean, they said it was an accident, but...it wasn't, I knew it wasn't. I saw the accident report. It said Charlie was drunk, drove off the side of a mountain. Only problem, Charlie was allergic to alcohol--made him sick to even smell the stuff. And his wife said he came down to this area to fish the lower lakes, so what was he doing up in the mountains? Whoa--are you okay? Do you need another blanket?"

"I'm...I'm fine," Jonathan rasped. "The pain is...I'm fine, really."

Dubious, Benny sat down again. "You don't have to be macho, you know. If it hurts bad, just yell and get it out of your system."

"I'm...thirsty."

"No sooner said than done." A quick rummage produced a package of Styrofoam cups. He splashed water into one, then went to his knees near Jonathan's head. "Okay, now. Slow and easy does it."

With Benny's hand bracing his head and neck, and his other hand holding the cup steady, Jonathan managed a few gulps between gasps. Benny eased his head back, and grabbed a fairly clean strip of erstwhile shirt to wipe the beading perspiration from Jonathan's face. "Wish I had some ice. You gonna be okay?"

"I'm fine," he insisted, forcing his squeezed shut eyes open. "You were telling me about Charlie."

"Um...yeah, I was, wasn't I? Anyway, I got hold of some of his personal effects--don't ask how because I won't tell you--and nothing added up. I mean, his keys were there, when they should have been with the car. And his notebook had pages ripped out of it. His glasses were smashed, but he only used them for reading, so what were they doing out of the case in the first place? And I asked those questions, believe me. All I got in return were a lot of threats if I didn't mind my own business."

"They obviously didn't know you," Jonathan murmured, eyes closed.

"Too right. So I waited until after Charlie's funeral, then came down here on my own 'fishing' trip. I figured I'd just act like a holiday angler, do all the things that Charlie would do, but always keeping in mind the kind of guy Charlie was--a news reporter. If I called it close enough, I'd stumble onto whatever it was that...got Charlie killed."

"Did you?" Jonathan said quietly in the silence.

Benny lifted his head with an effort, and forced a dry smile. "Yup. Only took me three days to find the hollow where they keep the chop shop. It's a sweet deal they got here, Jack. Only an hour away from three major tourist hot-spots and two national parks. Porsches, Jaguars, family station wagons, RVs, you name it, they either repainted or chopped them all. Found out that they even had 'hit' squads--different groups of guys for different cars and trucks. Specialists. Can you beat that? That was just before I found out that half the county is in on the deal--as well as most of Harville."

"And?" Jonathan prompted in a shaky voice when Benny lapsed into silence, rubbing tiredly at his eyes.

"And...not too long after I found them, they found me. I gave 'em the slip, but then I made the mistake of going back to Harville to call you and notify the police. Mistake number two--I walked right into the police chief's office, right into their grubby little hands. Mistake number three..." He drew a deep breath. "I involved you. I told them that I'd been on to them for two days, that I'd taken pictures of the operation the day before, and I'd mailed the film canister to someone that I wouldn't name, even when they threatened to destroy the bridgework that sent my dentist's kid to Vassar. I told them a pack of lies, and...well, it did what it was supposed to do. It kept me alive, because they needed to get their hands on that nonexistent roll of film and needed me alive as long as there was a chance I'd crack and tell them whose mailbox to stake out. Then you showed up looking for me, and...I swear, I didn't say a word to lead them on, but then you told people that I'd called you, so they assumed, you know--that you were my contact."

"But...why? Why go to all the trouble of faking your death and framing me for it?"

"You really want to know why? Because they needed to keep you away from your mailbox. Does that give you any idea of the high moral and ethical standards of the people involved here? Do you want to know why they iced Charlie? The guy was here on vacation, a fishing trip, for pete's sake. Somebody remembered that he was once a hot-shot reporter and got paranoid. They took him out

because they don't like taking chances. Get what I'm saying here? They'd just as soon cut your throat as look at you if you so much as breathe in their direction." He cut off with a gulp of air, running his hand briefly through his hair as he struggled to compose himself. Calmer, he continued, "Anyway, the whole time you were getting nailed for murder, I was in the basement getting the full Count of Monte Cristo treatment. They were just waiting to see if that film showed up at your place, and it didn't, of course, so a few hours ago they decided that it was time to get rid of us both. You were going to be found hanged in your cell, a guilt-ridden suicide. Me...well, as far as anyone's concerned, I'm already dead, so all they have to do is throw dirt over me."

"They were...shooting to kill," Jonathan breathed. "And if they find us..."

"Let's leave the obvious conclusions for later, okay? I've got to figure out how to get us over the county line. That's assuming, of course, that this operation doesn't have franchises there and in four states surrounding."

"I don't think I'm going anywhere. I feel...sick."

"Let me take a look." He gingerly peeled back the edge of the makeshift bandage, and sighed with relief. "It's stopped bleeding, but you've probably lost a lot on the way in." His expression changed abruptly into a pained frown as he jerked his head up, thinking. "Damn. We've got to get across the river. Can't take the jeep around, they're sure to have the roads and the bridge covered. And it's a sure bet that swimming's out of the question for you, huh?"

"Don't even joke about it." Jonathan's voice deteriorated into a hoarse whisper, and the lines of pain on his sweat-drenched forehead deepened.

"Whoa." Benny did a quick check of the man's skin temperature. "Let's try not going into shock, okay? My Boy Scout manual only covered skinned knees and poison sumac."

"How far to the county line?" Jonathan slurred.

"Too far for you, maybe a mile or three for me. But once I'm across the river...no, wait a minute, before you say another word, I'm telling you this: I can't leave you here alone, so forget it."

"If you don't get out of here and go for help, then I will."

"Go for help?" Benny said incredulously.

"No," Jonathan murmured, closing his eyes. "Into shock."

"You wouldn't do that to me, would you?" The quaver in Benny's voice betrayed concern behind the chide as he did another check.

"I won't have a choice. Benny, just...go."

Head bowed, Benedek sighed heavily. "If they find you...."

"Then they'll find only one of us, won't they?" Jonathan's eyes opened to fix him with a determined look, marred by the sharp hiss of pain that greeted his attempt to grip Benedek's arm. "It's you they're after, anyway. Go."

Benedek wavered, torn. "I..."

"You came here to do something for Charlie, didn't you? So don't waste that effort. *Go.*"

It took a moment before he could form what felt like the hardest words he had ever had to speak in his life. "Okay. Okay. But you'd better be here when I get back. I'm not about to show up on Dr. M's doorstep, risen from the dead, only to have *her* kill me for losing her favorite professor."

"I'm not--" His instinctive protest failed abruptly, becoming a weary, pain-filled sigh. He failed to react as Benny worriedly checked the bandage again, then spread another blanket over him.

"Listen," Benny said, stretching over to snag one of the discarded guns. "I'm going to leave this with you. No, no, look--I've got another one, see? Do you think you could use it...if you had to?"

Jonathan stared blankly at the gun as Benny took his good hand and folded his fingers into position. He kept staring as the weapon began to shake in his paralyzed grip.

Alarmed, Benny shook his head. "This is no good," he muttered.

The sharp edge of anxiety in Benny's voice snapped Jonathan out of his daze. "I can do it," he insisted with all the confidence of someone whose mettle had yet to be tested. "Now, please--go."

Benny stared at him in silence, not in the least fooled by the valiant effort Jonathan was making to appear completely in control. "You promise you'll be here when I get back?" he asked in a low voice.

"If you promise to bring paramedics with you, it's a deal," Jonathan agreed with a sigh.

"Okay." He rose to his feet, taking a quick mental inventory to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. "I'm going to zip up when I leave. There's water in the jug there and if you get hungry, I think there's some cans...ah. Well, maybe I have a candy bar left, lemme...."

"Benedek."

"What?"

"Get the hell out of here."

With that, Jonathan shut his eyes and averted his head, a clear sign that he considered the subject closed and Benedek dismissed.

Tucking the gun safely into his belt, Benny paused to snag a small knapsack, then backed out of the tent. He pulled down the zipper with curiously clumsy fingers. Fighting a fast-rising sense of dread, he dug into the worn bag and produced a rumpled map. Fast calculations and a check of the sun's position gave him a direction, and he set off at a loping run.

The only real hope he had that he would find allies in the next county lay in his memory of some chance remarks exchanged between Devon and a disembodied voice on the other side of his prison door. They'd been discussing the fact that the county D.A. had rejected numerous bribes as well as various death threats offered to convince her to drop cases against several of Cronin's men caught red-handed in her jurisdiction. Rumor was that she had called the F.B.I. with a request to investigate. That at least had explained why, in the first days of his incarceration, his captors kept sneeringly referring to him as 'the Fed'. Well, that particular suspicion wasn't true, but Benny was determined that he was really going to give them something to worry about now. For Charlie--and for Jonathan.

That resolution was put to the test the moment he came to the banks of the Little River. He stared down into the foaming white water, heart sinking down to his toes to see an entire tree tumble past, helpless in the grip of the vicious current. This was what the tackle shop owner had warned him about--the spring floods from melting mountain snow farther north that turned the normally placid Little River into a raging monster. The bank upon which he stood was a sheer five-foot drop down into the tumultuous waters, and even if he did by sheer chance survive the crossing, the opposite bank was a mirror image: a wall of mud offering little in the way of secure footholds.

He pulled out the map again, already knowing that its information was useless. The county road was a half mile further north, but the bridge was sure to be covered by Cronin's men, as would be the footbridges on the hiking trails. With a hiss of frustration, he stuffed the map back into the knapsack and glared at the unheeding river.

Waiting until nightfall was out of the question--not with Jonathan counting on him to bring back medical help. And the idea that he could sneak past born-and-bred hunters, even with his expensive Nikes, was too absurd to entertain. No, he had to get across the river somehow, and quickly. But the how of the situation continued to elude him.

His progress hampered by the deep, clinging mud, he slogged up the river in the vague hope that he could find a safer place to attempt a crossing. By the time he had to stop for breath, his hope had dwindled to nothing. He was getting too close to the county road, and the churning water was, if anything, even more turbulent.

Frustrated, he leaned against a tree, but jumped back when his support abruptly shifted. He stared at the sturdy-looking trunk, then down at the roots that had lifted from the muddy earth, sending the entire tree askew.

He pushed at the tree, managing to dislodge it even more. Sudden inspiration became a surge of hope as he measured the tree's height with his eye and compared it to a calculation of the distance from bank to bank.

It could work. Dangerous as hell--but it could *work*.

Jonathan found that if he lay very still and concentrated on breathing regularly, the radiating pain in his shoulder subsided to a dull, agonizing throb, enough to allow him the respite of a half-drowse. More than once, a noise outside the tent started him awake, jarring his injured arm. Each time, it took endless minutes of teeth-clenched concentration to get through the spasm without passing out; each time, the noise turned out to be nothing more than a small animal scuttling past the tent, or dry leaves tossed against the canvas by the wind.

Utterly spent by his struggle with the last wave of pain, he drifted back into a light sleep. Somewhere in the fog, a sound intruded--a faint rustle, very near. But he lacked the strength to react anymore, for which he sent up a quiet prayer of thanks.

The noise returned, sharper and louder. Slowly, he opened his eyes, forcing himself to listen past the rushing sound in his ears. Field mouse? Too heavy and slow. Deer? Too stealthy. Fox or wolf? More of a possibility, except that he seriously doubted that either animal was capable of manipulating the zipper of the tent....

A surge of panic brought his vision into razor-sharp focus, allowing him to stare at the tent flaps, which were slowly parting with the harsh sound of an impatient hand on the zipper. He jerked up the hand that still gripped the gun, yelping when his injured nerve-endings violently protested the move. The weapon nearly slipped from numb fingers and with a determined hiss, he gripped it tighter, pointing it at the tent opening as the flaps flew apart.

A youngish, rough-hewn man pushed his way in, flinching back as soon as he saw the gun. But a moment's hesitation was all he needed to see how badly Jonathan's aim wavered, and a slow smile spread across his unshaven face. "Hey, Devon! Heg! I got one of 'em!" he crowed, calmly leveling his hunting rifle at Jonathan's ashen face.

Gulping in air, blind with panic, Jonathan used his last bit of strength to pull the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He fell back with a ragged gasp, drained, in agony. The gun, tangled in useless fingers, fell to the floor at his side.

Through the red haze of pain, he was dimly aware that another man had entered the tent, pushing aside the first intruder's rifle with a growled curse. "What's the difference?" the offended man complained. "He's dead anyway, ain't he?"

The question was ignored by the newcomer, who shoved his sulking companion out of the tent before moving to stand over Jonathan, taking a long moment to study him in silence. Gritting his teeth, Jonathan tried to firm his grip on the gun, but managed only to lift it less than an inch before a booted foot forced his wrist against the canvas-covered ground.

Dropping to a crouch, the man wrested the gun easily from Jonathan's weakened grip. He turned it over in his hand, breaking out in a wide, mirthless grin. "Not too bright," he said in a deep, unconcerned drawl. "Forgot to release the safety."

"Devon, come *on*." Through a pain- and anxiety-filled haze, Jonathan recognized Hegedorn's impatient voice. "Cronin's gonna skin us if we don't catch up with the fed. Ice this guy and let's *go*."

The deadly smile broadened as the man called Devon carefully released the safety. "He ain't gone far, not if he had time to patch up his pal here. And I think...I got a better idea."

Soaked to the skin, bruised, bloodied, and aching in every bone in his body, Benny lay on his back on the muddy bank and blissfully crowed his triumph.

It had taken the better part of an hour, as well as most of the skin off the palms of his hands, but he'd managed to get that tree uprooted. In a masterpiece of skill, timing and pure dumb luck, he'd engineered his last, bravura push so that the once-mighty maple toppled in the direction of the opposite bank. To his great relief and surprise, it had worked just as he'd envisioned: the uprooted half of the tree dug into the mud while its crown had gouged into the far bank. And the trunk became a convenient, albeit treacherous, bridge.

The churning rapids sprayed him incessantly, blinding him and turning the rough bark into slick mush beneath his hands. Every so often, his weight would cause the tree to shift, giving him a screaming panic attack that would last long, heart-pounding minutes before he could bring himself to move again. During one such white-knuckled episode, the pistol had slipped out of his belt, disappearing into the white foam beneath him. He'd given it less than a second's thought at the time, and then only a fast prayer of thanks that it had been only a gun that had been lost to the river.

With a groan, Benny forced himself up, wincing at the protesting ache of his muscles. As much as his body begged him to continue wallowing in the relative comfort of the cold, sticky mud, he knew he was running out of time. It wouldn't take Cronin's men long to catch up with him, not with this forced delay. There was a good chance that a search party had already crossed the county road bridge farther upstream, and were even now hunting for him on this side of the river. At least he didn't have to worry about any of them being foolish or desperate enough to try following his direct trail....

The tree under which he lay exploded at the same moment the unmistakable report of a rifle split the air. Pelted by a shower of leaves and bark, Benny scrambled to his feet with a yelp, diving for shelter behind densely-packed underbrush. Another explosion kicked up mud and vegetation barely two feet from his hiding place and he threw himself further back, flattening himself against the base of a thick, sturdy tree.

"Benedek!" The shout was muted by the roar of the raging river, but Benny recognized the voice readily enough. "Come on, Benedek, this is just a big waste of time and you know it. How far do you think you're gonna get?"

"Far enough, you bastard," Benny muttered under his breath, clinging to his hiding place. He looked around, mentally plotting his escape route, with any luck to be taken while Devon continued to rant on the far side of the river.

There was silence as Devon waited for an answer. Then, patiently, "Well, if you won't listen to me, maybe you'll listen to this."

Mid-crawl, Benny froze. His heart leapt into his throat at the sound of a sudden, sharp scream.

Silence again as Devon waited. Benny's muscle strength inexplicably gave out. He sat down, hard, as he fought to breathe. Obviously it had been a better than even chance that they'd recapture Jonathan, he'd just preferred not to consider that bleak possibility. And he certainly hadn't expected them to bring Jonathan with them as bait.

"Looks like he's lost a lot of blood," Devon said, in the same tone of utter unconcern. "Needs a doctor, I expect." A long pause, then: "Stand where I can see you."

Benny remained still, his fists whitening against the tree trunk. The rational part of his mind that remained unaffected by the waves of anger and frustration was screaming at him to run. None of Devon's men would risk coming after him over that precarious bridge, so they'd have to cross over a half mile upstream at the county road bridge. Which meant that Devon was stalling, hoping to keep Benedek pinned in place with fear and anger until his men could close in. Well, they hadn't reckoned with Edgar 'Hard-As-Nails' Benedek. Threats and intimidation weren't going to make him give up a hard-won thirty-minute headstart, not even....

Jonathan screamed again, a shrill, agonized cry. "Looks like he's taking a turn for the worse," Devon called. "He's not looking good at all."

"Lose the act, Devon," Benedek shouted, hoarse with anger. "He's dead two seconds after you nail me, and we both know it."

"Stand where I can see you." The voice was still calm, but had gained considerable volume. "I'll make it quick. That's a better deal than my boys'll give you if they get you first."

"If," Benny muttered, forcing his stiffened fingers to unclench. "No deal, pal!" he shouted back. "And when I show up with the police, you'd better deliver up one anthro prof, patched-up and breathing, or you can have a cozy chat with the D.A. about life without parole for murder one."

He forced himself to move, bent almost double as he side-stepped through the brush, careful to betray his movement as little as possible. Another quarter mile or so of dense forest, then the county road, after that....

"Benedek!"

Devon's shout rang through the woods, carrying easily over the steady rush of water. Like a voice from the heavens, it seemed to descend upon Benny and hold him in place, unable to breathe as he waited for some final pronouncement.

"Don't you want to say goodbye?"

Benny swallowed, cursing Devon under his breath. It didn't matter anymore, he tried to make himself believe that. He couldn't save Jonathan, there was nothing he could do to help the man now. Nothing except make damned sure that Jonathan MacKensie did not go unavenged.

"Benedek?"

Air left his lungs in a rush at the sound of Jonathan's barely audible voice. Squeezing his eyes shut, he made a valiant effort to boot out the disquieting waves of guilt and other unwanted emotions that kept him from running like hell. But an annoying vision persisted; that of Devon holding a gun to Jonathan's head, forcing him to plead with Benedek for his own life.

"Benedek?" A little louder and more desperate, as though urgently prompted. "Please. I'm begging you to...."

Deep in his throat, a scream of rage and frustration began to build, and he tried to envision Devon's scrawny red neck between his hands.

"...run."

He gulped in air, barely keeping his balance as the lack of oxygen took a momentary toll. "Get out of here!" Jonathan was shouting. "Run, damn you! Ru—"

His cry shattered into a scream of pain that suddenly sheared off into deadly silence.

"Jonathan?" His reflexes nearly took him to his feet, and he clung to a low bush to keep himself down and out of sight. "Jonathan!"

Only the rumble and hiss of the boiling stream answered his desperate cry.

"You bastard," he muttered, gasping to force air past the tightening constriction in his throat. "You bastard. You'll pay for this, Devon, I swear I'll make you pay for this. I'm gonna rip your guts out, and I'm gonna nail your hide to the wall, and after that, I'm gonna really get nasty. I'm gonna...I'm...."

He let out the stale air in his lungs and spent a moment trying to regain some semblance of normal breathing. Rapid blinking relieved the pressure building behind his eyes somewhat, but an attempt to rub his blurred vision clear resulted in a fresh smear of mud across his face. His chest throbbed with an ache that was different from the strain in his muscles and bones; more powerful, more insistent, more....

Utilizing every shred of his remaining will, he moved. Carefully, steadily, he made his way into the densest part of the forest, away from the stream, only daring to gain his feet when he was certain he was out of sight of the far bank. One foot in front of the other, faster and faster. Not because he wanted to. What he really wanted to do was find the strength to lift a five ton boulder and heave it across the creek to land on top of Devon's head. But he moved because he had to move. He had to get away, had to get to the nearest town and the relative safety of the local law enforcement office before Devon's goons found him. But not because he had any fear for his life anymore. He had to do it because he had to make Devon pay.

"Hey!"

The short, barrel-chested police officer with the lousy attitude blocked did a neat pivot, throwing himself against the car door that Benny was in the process of opening. Shoving a pudgy finger into Benedek's face, he growled. "Last time I tell you, pal. Stay *put*."

"Okay, okay." Hands raised in surrender, he shrank back against the upholstery.

Unconvinced, the officer scowled menacingly at him. "I mean it. Stay out of the way."

He backed away, maintaining serious eye contact and a raised warning hand until the shout of a fellow officer drew his attention. Then, like a bulldog on the scent, he plowed into the center of chaos.

Benedek watched the melee with detached interest; Cronin's men, caught off guard by the sudden appearance of dozens of state policemen, were being thrown up against squad cars or the sides of buildings, or merely dropped to the ground where an officer efficiently cuffed them while droning out one Miranda warning after another. He didn't recognize any of the dazed and bedraggled miscreants as they were dragged off, one by one, to the squad cars. No familiar faces. No personal satisfaction.

He squirmed against the vinyl seat, unable to get at the persistent itch between his shoulder blades. Someone had dug up a clean but rumpled shirt to replace his own mud-caked horror. But that was only after he'd spent a hair-pulling hour or more trying to convince the skeptical officers at the front desk that the help he needed didn't include a trip to the local rubber room. Two things finally helped get his point across. One was the shot taken at him by one of Cronin's less-than-brilliant goons through the window of the police station; the bullet shattered the glass and demolished a clock on the wall barely three feet from the desk sergeant's head. While half the station emptied out to pursue the sniper, another officer provided the final proof when he produced two of Benny's books from his locker and the photo on the back was held up to Benedek's scratched and bleeding face. After that, things had happened so fast that he hadn't had a chance to clean up, and drying mud in unreachable places was driving him crazy.

Strangely dispirited, he leaned back in the seat to watch the ongoing cleanup. From the corner of his eyes, he caught a stealthy movement. Tracking it, he saw a flash of plaid disappear around the corner of one of the ramshackle buildings that Cronin's operation used to store their stolen vehicles. It edged out again; first an arm, then the rest of the body slid around the corner, trying to make itself part of the building in an attempt to escape notice.

Sitting up straight, Benny started to sound a warning, but a quick glance told him that no police officer was near enough, or idle enough to respond in time. And another quick glance at the escaping man sent his blood boiling. He didn't know the name, but he remembered that face, one of about half a dozen laughing and grinning faces that had looked on as Hegedorn had broken the news to him that the Harville police station wasn't exactly the haven he'd expected it to be. He was a deputy, too; and, Benny realized with a growing fury, undoubtedly had been part of the search and destroy team.

He pushed the door open, dropped to a crouch and crept around the car, using it as a shield. Peering around the taillight, he saw his quarry inch closer to the corner of the building and potential freedom. Waiting until the sweating man's muscles visibly tensed, heralding an imminent headlong dash, Benny sprang to his feet. With a triumphant shout, he snared the front of the man's shirt and slammed him bodily against the old, cracked wood.

"Where is he?" Benny snarled, ignoring the man's yelp of pain. "Where's Devon?"

"I dunno," the man squeaked, shaking hands held up submissively. "I swear, I dunno where he is."

"You tell me." Eyes blazing, every muscle in his face stretched taut, Benny tightened his grip on the shirt until the man squawked, gesturing frantically that he couldn't breathe. "You tell me, or the cops pick up the pieces, you understand me?"

His victim choked a frantic agreement and Benny eased up enough to allow him a gulp of air. "I-I dunno where he went. We split up--no, the truth! We split up, he told us to go back and sit tight, and...and...."

"Where's the professor? Did you leave him out there?"

"I dunno. I dunno, I'm telling you! The guy was passed out, dead weight...."

"Passed out?" Benny echoed, momentarily stunned by the unmistakable sensation of his heart jumping into his throat.

"...Devon said he'd take care of it...."

He howled as Benny's grip tightened again. "Take care of it *how*?" he growled.

"I dunno," he wailed. "He just said he'd take care of it and he sent us all back, I swear....!"

A sudden blur of blue descended on Benny, pulling him off the shaken man with an irritated, "I thought I told *you* to stay in the car!"

Breathing hard, Benny stumbled back as his self-appointed guardian neatly spun his erstwhile captive against the side of the building, matter-of-factly beginning a Miranda warning while slapping on the handcuffs.

All his manic strength left in a rush; he started back toward the squad car and managed only a few steps before realizing he wasn't going to make it. Finding a flat stone, some remnant of a path up to the side of the old converted barn, he sank down and wearily rubbed at his aching head. Any relief he might have felt upon learning that Jonathan had only fainted back at the stream was gone before he could feel it. *Devon said he'd take care of it.* Well, there was no kidding himself what that meant. Ditch the body; dispose of the evidence; one less witness for the prosecution.

"Damn," he sighed, staring down at ground with his head cradled in his hands. "I blew it. I blew it big-time. I should've...I should've...."

He gulped in air, growling his frustration. "What *could* I have done? There was nothing I could've done to save Charlie, but I could've left well enough alone...." He broke off with a grimace as the thought twisted his already abused stomach. "Well, okay, I could've played things safer." Another grimace. "That's why I went to the sheriff's office in the first place, isn't it? Okay, then I should've...."

Useless. There was no other path he could have taken if he had the chance to replay the last week again.

He sighed, running his hand agitatedly through his hair, which served only to dislodge chunks of dried mud. "Why did you come?" he asked, an angry demand to thin air. "Just because I said it was important, that it was a matter of life and death--you picked a helluva time to start believing me, pal. I'm the one who plays footsie with big-time felons; you're the one who takes the bullet and gets all my press. Why did you have to believe me? Dammit! Why did you have to believe me? Why did you have to...."

His breath caught on a painful constriction in his throat. With a strangled, mournful sigh, he muttered, "Why did you have to care?"

He spent a few moments in silence, staring at the ground, fighting to get breath back into his strained lungs. Then, a strangely humorous thought brought a faint laugh to his lips.

"Looks like you were right all along, pal," he said quietly. "Looks like I was the death of you after all."

"That's not much of an epitaph if you ask me."

Heart pounding in his chest, Benny straightened with a snap. Frozen, he could only get his eyes to move as he searched for the source of the distant, all-too-familiar voice. Long moments passed before he could speak, and then only a cracked, disbelieving whisper. "Jonathan?"

"Just do me a favor and let Dr. Moorhouse choose the headstone. And don't get any ideas about hiring a mariachi band for the memorial service, either."

"Oh, boy." Benny swallowed hard, vainly scanning the area around him for some trace of an ectoplasmic presence. "You...you...I mean, you...you're doing it, aren't you? You--you're haunting me--that's it, right? You've come back to...to let me have it for getting you into this mess in the first place, you can't rest until...." He lost his breath suddenly and coughed on his frantic attempt to get air back into his lungs. "Until what? What? What do you want from me?"

A pause. Then: "So you freely admit that this debacle was all your fault?"

"Oh, yeah," Benny agreed fervently. "Mea culpa all the way down the line, you bet."

"And you'll say as much to the police?"

"As good as done."

"And to Dr. Moorhouse?"

"No problem, I'll go hat in hand and offer myself for target practice if you like."

"And you'll wear a black suit to my funeral?"

"Are you--?" He broke off, gathering the strength to force out the words. "Okay. Sure. A...a black suit. No problem. I'll rent one if I have to. Anything else?"

"I'm thinking."

"Sure, sure, take your time." He swallowed again, still searching for Jonathan MacKensie's shade. "Listen, uh...Jack. I mean, Jonathan. I'm kinda glad you came back, even if it was just to get on my case. It gives me a chance to say, well--I'm sorry this happened. And I'm *really* sorry that it was all my fault. I never meant...look, you gotta know, if there was some way I could...make it right, I would. I mean it. I know I gave you a pretty hard time and did some really dumb things, but you know I'd never have done anything to hurt you, not deliberately anyway, because...." He paused, drawing in a long breath. "Because you're the best damned friend I ever had. And I wish you were here--I mean, *really* here--so that I could tell you that to your face."

A long silence followed. Just as Benny was convinced that Jonathan's ghost must have drifted away before he could hear the heartfelt confession, the man's subdued voice spoke again. "Are you sure you aren't just saying that so that I won't haunt you for the rest of your miserable life?"

"Hey. The one thing I'd never do is lie to a dead man." His voice faded abruptly on the last words and he cleared his throat. "No, I...I'm saying it because--because I mean it, every word. I'm gonna miss you, pal. I'm really gonna miss you."

His voice cracked on the last word. He dropped his head into one hand, struggling to breath past the tightness in his chest. After another long moment of silence, Jonathan's distant, ghostly voice spoke to him again.

"Well--in that case, I suppose all I can say is...apology a-a-ah...ah...achoo!"

"Gesund--" The word died in his throat as his eyes narrowed abruptly. A sneezing ghost? A spectre with allergies? A dead man with the sniffles?

Suspicion pulled him to his feet and up the stone path to the side entrance of the old barn. A gaping black hole was partially blocked by the broken door hanging off one hinge and he peered in cautiously.

Sunlight streaming in through huge holes in the roof revealed Jonathan MacKensie sitting on a bale of hay, wearing a red plaid shirt that Benny realized, with a start, he had last seen on Devon's back only a few hours ago. One arm propped in a red bandanna sling, Jonathan was using his free hand to rub his eyes. He looked up at Benny's astounded face and gave him a weak smile of greeting. "Do you have a handkerchief? I think I'm allergic to hay."

Wallace Barrett Durham, Jr. shook his head dolefully as he said, "I'm afraid it's a clear-cut case of aggravated assault and battery, Mr. Benedek. And in front of nearly a dozen witnesses...."

"Come on, I barely touched the guy," Benny snorted, rooting in the depths of a grease-soaked bag for the last few french fries. Halfway to his mouth, a sudden attack of chivalry struck him and he offered the limp strands to Dr. Moorhouse. She declined with a pained wince. "So I popped a few buttons on his shirt," he went on, mouth full. "If those cops hadn't pulled me off, you would have seen some serious aggravation, you bet."

Barrett looked up with a long-suffering sigh. "I'm sure the judge would be moved by your expression of deep remorse," he muttered wryly.

"Remorse?" Benny leaned back in the chair, propping his feet up on a small table. "You want remorse? Okay, I'm sorry I didn't break the guy's nose. But it wasn't for lack of trying. You weren't gonna eat that, were you, Jonbo?"

Jonathan blinked drowsily, then grimaced in embarrassment to realize that he was in very great danger of nodding off completely. He'd spent the first ten minutes after their return from the hospital to his hotel room fruitlessly arguing with the trio of 'mother hens' that he didn't want to be put to bed, no matter what the doctor had said about getting rest. They'd finally compromised, allowing him to lie, fully dressed, on top of the covers, with a mound of pillows cushioning his head and injured shoulder. The soft bed, in addition to a powerful prescription pain-killer, was threatening to become his undoing.

It took him a moment to remember that Benny had ordered lunch for them, and another moment to locate the half-unwrapped hamburger lying next to him on the bed. With his good hand, Jonathan peeked under the misshapen bun, winced, and willingly surrendered his hamburger to Benny's outstretched hand. "You have to admit, there were mitigating circumstances," he offered. "After all, none of us had any idea that Devon was an undercover federal agent."

"The guy runs my car off the road, beats me up, keeps me locked up in the basement for a week, helps Cronin set up this whole scam to frame you for my murder and then comes after us with heavy artillery when we make a break for it." Benny tore a chunk out of the hamburger with his teeth, growling. "And I'm supposed to be *grateful*?"

With a disparaging click of her teeth, Dr. Moorhouse pointedly shoved a pile of paper napkins across the small table between them. Benny glanced at them, then at her, then at the ketchup dripping steadily from his hamburger onto his lap.

"According to Mr. Devon, or Agent Trautman, or whatever his name really is, Cronin's men would have killed you outright if he hadn't encouraged your fiction about the photographs," Dr. Moorhouse reminded him.

"Right," Benny growled as he swiped angrily at the worsening stain. "So he sticks me in a hole with wormy food and a daily kick in the ribs for my own good. Whose brilliant idea was it to fake my murder and nail Jonathan for it?"

"Agent Trautman claims that the matter went out of his hands at that point," Durham put in, referring to his notes. "Cronin orchestrated the phony murder. He paid for an autopsy report and death certificate, as well as the weighted casket that was sent to...." He squinted down at the page in front of him. "....Boom-Boom-A-Go-Go?"

"Oh, man, twice in four months," Benny sighed. "I hope Boom-Boom has a good sense of humor."

"I'd have thought that was a given," Jonathan muttered under his breath, returning an innocent look to Benny's suspicious one.

"So there was no body?" Dr. Moorhouse asked Durham. "Just paperwork and a closed coffin?"

"The entire county must have been in on this scam," Jonathan realized, shaking his head.

"Cronin's operation was spread over eight counties in Maryland, Pennsylvania and West Virginia," Durham reported confidently from his notebook. "Agent Trautman's eleven-month undercover investigation promises to bring about at least four dozen arrests on a wide variety of charges, including extortion, fraud, bribery, kidnapping...."

"...and murder," Benny enjoined when Durham faltered. Jaw set, he solemnly studied the last bit of hamburger left in his hand. "Where was Mr. G-Man when they iced Charlie Doerfler, anyway?"

Flustered, Durham flipped back through his sheaf of notes. "It appears, ah...he wasn't involved in the incident, and he knew nothing of Mr. Doerfler's murder until the next day. He's provided the authorities with the names of those he believes to have been involved, but he's unable to provide any eyewitness testimony. Still, an indictment for first degree murder, and four indictments for accessory to murder are expected to be handed down by...." Aware that Benny was no longer listening to him, Durham trailed off and cleared his throat.

"And J. Edgar Hoover, Jr. had the colossal nerve to yell at me for ruining his investigation," Benedek muttered indignantly. "How long can it take to get the goods on the bad guys, huh? Eleven months, and he says that he wasn't finished yet! If Jonathan and I hadn't made a break for it when we did, what was he going to do then? Pretend that he didn't know anything so that our 'untimely demise' wouldn't get in the way of his precious investigation?"

"Benedek." Jonathan's quiet but firm voice drew his friend's angry glare. "He saved my life."

"Yeah, well...." The air went out of Benedek abruptly. "Yeah, but it wouldn't have needed saving if he...if...he...."

"He was angry about your interference, yes," Jonathan pressed before his friend could gather more steam. "He told me he went along with your imprisonment and my incarceration on phony charges because we were at least safe and out of his way. He was using the time to figure out a way to wrap things up quickly and still get the evidence for the indictments his bosses wanted. If you'd only waited a few more hours before staging your escape, we could have been spared a great deal of...." he grimaced, rubbing his injured arm, "...aggravation."

"Oh, yeah?" Benny arched a brow, disbelieving. "When did he make these momentous revelations?"

"When he brought me back to the base camp, just after he kept Hegedorn from putting a bullet between my eyes," Jonathan told him with some asperity. "Come on, even you have to admit that everything Dev--Trautman did makes sense when you think about it."

Benny denied the claim with a rude snort.

"For once, I'm inclined to agree with you, Benedek," Dr. Moorhouse said. Ignoring the sudden choking noise from across the table, she continued, "I think Agent Trautman's actions were highly questionable. He put innocent people in a great deal of mortal danger to further his ends, and I for one will have something to say to his superiors about this affair." She paused to gather her purse from the floor, clutching at it with more force than was really necessary, and Jonathan, not for the first time, saw a glimmer of the controlled emotion that could, to someone who didn't know her better, be mistaken for righteous fury. A glance sideways met Benedek's simultaneous glance sideways, proving that the other man didn't believe that anger had anything to do with the quaver in her voice either.

"If you'll excuse me," Dr. Moorhouse said, rising. "I have several phone calls to make. I'll be in my room next door if you need anything, Jonathan."

"Thank you, Dr. Moorhouse," he said with a quiet smile, acknowledging a great deal more than her offer of assistance.

As she left the motel room, Durham closed up his portfolio, slipping it into his briefcase. "I hope you won't take this wrong, Jonathan, but...I must confess, in a small, selfish way, I'm a bit disappointed at the turn of events. Not a very propitious start to my law career, you must admit."

Benedek perked up, holding up his hand to stop Durham as the man rose and started for the door. "Since you've just lost a client, you can take my case, right?"

"I doubt Trautman will press charges, Mr. Benedek...."

"No, no, I don't mean that case. I mean the lawsuit I'm going to slap on three major credit card companies and my landlord. Do you believe they had the nerve to cancel my accounts just because I was declared legally dead? They *argued* with me, said that I had to prove I was alive, as if a ghost would be on the phone chewing their ear off. And that weasel of a landlord was showing my apartment an hour and a half after my obit hit the streets. I'm not going to let them get away with this, I have rights! Right?"

Hard-pressed to keep a straight face, Durham exaggerated a reflective nod. "You have a point, Mr. Benedek. Yes, I will take your case. After the events of the past few days, I could use the, er...change of pace."

"Nice guy," Benny remarked after Durham had excused himself to return to his hotel room. "He didn't think you did it, did he?"

"No, he didn't," Jonathan assured him, sinking deeper into the pillows with a sigh.

"That's good." He nodded, silent for a moment. "And, uh...Dr. M?"

"Not in a million years," Jonathan replied with a sleepy smile, eyes already closed.

"That's good. That's good."

Increasingly aware of the brooding silence on the other side of the room, Jonathan roused from his light doze. "Benedek, don't you have somewhere else to go?"

"Actually...no. They kinda have a policy here--they don't rent rooms to deceased people with no cash and no credit cards, y'know?"

"Oh." Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and looked over at the empty bed on the other side of the room. "All right. Help yourself."

"Thanks." The word was barely out of his mouth before he pounced on the bed, settling out with a long, relieved sigh. "Oh, man, I've been dreaming about polyurethane foam."

Jonathan barely heard him, already drifting into sleep.

"...but you don't have to worry about it."

"Hmph?" With a start, Jonathan realized that Benny's voice had awakened him, and he had no idea how long he'd been sleeping or what the other man was talking about. "What? Worry about what?" he mumbled sleepily.

"Your clothes. The ones you lent me, remember? I said, as soon as Wally gets my life straightened out and I can get back into my apartment, I'll mail your clothes back."

"Mail my....?" He fought to clear his brain, resenting the disturbance of his pleasant, albeit drugged sleep. "Why on earth....? Benedek, just bring them with you next time."

"Next time?"

There was something about the quality of Benedek's voice that drilled through the fog enshrouding his senses, bringing him suddenly, fully awake. He turned in time to see the other man avert his head, but not before he had caught the unusually apprehensive look on Edgar Benedek's face.

Carefully, he said, "You don't think there's going to be a next time?"

The look Benny gave him was quick, but full of surprise. "Well...yeah. After nearly getting her favorite anthro prof killed, I hardly think Dr. M is going to let me within ten miles of you."

"I'm *not*...." Jonathan stepped on the protest, drew a breath, and began again. "That's not her decision to make."

Several long moments passed in which Benedek's facial expression underwent a dozen different changes as he considered the implications of MacKensie's quiet statement. Then, softly, incredulously, he said, "Really?"

"Really."

"You mean it?"

"I mean it."

"You're not just saying that, are you?"

"No, I'm not just saying that," he said, exasperation creeping into his voice.

"After everything that happened?"

Jonathan ground his teeth, glaring at the ceiling. If he had any hope of putting this business to rest, once and for all, and getting any sleep, he was going to have to figure out how to express himself in terms that Benedek would not only understand, but completely accept.

Maybe it was the mellowing effects of the pain-killer, but he had no anger for Benedek anymore. He'd had a long time to think about it in the hospital while his wound was being treated, and had come to the surprising conclusion that, if anything, he admired the man. Before today, he'd never considered Edgar Benedek capable of the depth of loyalty he exhibited to the memory of Charlie Doerfler. And he would have never thought that Edgar Benedek would have jeopardized his personal shot at freedom long enough to rescue him from a jail cell.

And, even if he did think he was talking to an avenging spirit, Jonathan would've never imagined such heartfelt words of apology coming from the mouth--and heart--of Edgar Benedek.

Expressing anything remotely like his true thoughts would be batted away with the same distrust as Benny had discounted all his other assurances, that much was certain. He had to put this clearly and precisely to avoid any possible misunderstanding.

Gathering a deep breath, he growled, "All right, you want the truth? I'm going to make you pay for this, if it's the last thing I do. If you try to hide, I'll hunt you down like a dog. So you might as well just stick around and take it on the chin like a man, because I am not going to Chesterton next week to investigate Mrs. Gustaffson's flying dinnerware by myself. Do I make myself clear?"

"You betcha." Even without looking, Jonathan knew that Benedek's face was alight with relief. "No prob. You call the shots."

"Good," MacKensie snapped, his best attempt at impatience nearly destroyed by a smile. "Now may I get some rest, please?"

"Sure thing, Jonny, sure thing. I'll see you in the morning."

And just as Jonathan finally drifted into a deep, peaceful sleep, he heard a very relieved Edgar Benedek add, "Mrs. Gustaffson — your dinnerware has met its match."

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