

## The One That Got Away

by Jane Tesh

“Are you ready for this one?”

Jonathan MacKensie sighed deeply, put down his pen, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes wearily. “I don’t suppose it would do any good if I said no?”

Edgar Benedek grinned and with a flourish produced a well-worn piece of newspaper. “Mermaids, Jack! Honest to goodness real live mermaids, chicks of the sea, girls worth wading for. Let’s go.”

“Mermaids,” Jonathan repeated calmly. “Of course.” He put his glasses back on and returned to grading his stack of papers.

Benny hopped up on his desk. “Come on. I’ve got the tickets. Our plane leaves in an hour.”

“Correction,” said Jonathan, not looking up. “Your plane leave in an hour.”

“Come on!” Benny’s cheerfulness was, as usual, unfazed. “I figure with your charm and my expertise, we could lure these cuties out of the deep. Whadda ya say?”

“I’m not going.”

“You want to stay here in your stuffy little office,” said Benny, leaning over to see what Jonathan was doing, “squinting at some truly amazing examples of handwriting, when you could be soaking up some major rays in beautiful Bayville, Florida?”

Just when Jonathan thought he had used up all his exasperation and Benedek couldn’t possibly surprise him, the man managed to come up with something even more bizarre. Mermaids! Good lord.

Jonathan MacKensie was a tall, good-looking young man with a nose that lent an air of distinction to an otherwise boyish face. His honey-gold hair was longer than the current fashion and always slightly dishelved, and his dark eyes under serious brows were usually staring in disbelief at his colleague, as they were staring now.

Edgar Benedek, in direct contrast, was short and slight, with a homely, good-natured face that was brightened by a constant grin. His brown hair was slicked back, and his bright blue eyes were gleaming with a typical light of barely contained excitement. He liked nothing better than to rouse Jonathan from his complacency.

Now he flashed another incandescent grin. “It’ll be fun.”

This had the desired result. “Fun!” said Jonathan, goaded from his calmness. “Benedek, in the past few months, I’ve been accosted by every known form of paranormal nonsense ever devised, real or imagined. Mummy’s curses, vampires, ghosts --”

“So?”

“So?” he echoed. “I’ve had enough! I want a little peace and quiet.” He tried to explain. “Now, I’ll admit that some of our -- adventures, I supposed you’d call them -- have been quite interesting and in some cases stimulating, but I really want some time to work on my lectures for next semester. And my research --” he gestured helplessly at the ancient skulls lining the room. “I’ve done absolutely nothing for months.”

“I sympathize with you, pal, I really do,” said Benny, “but you can’t predict the unpredictable. When it comes, you gotta grab it. What can I say? It’s fate. Got your scuba gear handy? We’re gonna make like Lloyd Bridges and have a sea hunt.”

“Benedek.” He faced him squarely. “No. I wish you all the lick in the world, but you can do this one alone.”

Benny wasn’t concerned by Jonathan’s initial opposition. “Aren’t you even interested from an anthropological standpoint?”

“Anthropological,” Jonathan repeated, counting the syllables on his fingers. “Very good.”

“And before noon, too. See what hanging around academia does for me?”

“Academia,” Jonathan said, impressed, and Benny took a bow. “No, I am not interested from any sort of standpoint. There is not one shred of evidence that these creatures ever existed.”

“So let’s go prove it,” said Benny. “I don’t know why you’re backing out on this one, chum. You have a certain way with the ladies.”

“Ladies with legs, preferably.”

“Well,” Benny sighed, “I didn’t want to spoil the surprise, but Dr. M has given this expedition her blessing.”

Jonathan laughed. “You can’t honestly expect me to believe that.”

Benny produced another piece of paper. “Read ‘em and weep, Jack.”

“Mermaid sighting, Bayville, Florida. Investigate as soon as possible. Julianna Moorhouse.” Jonathan read, stunned. “What in the --?”

“She was coming to tell you herself when she got called off to some sort of upper level Tupperware party. She dashed off this note and --”

“And you cornered Liz and took it. Thank you so much.”

Benny held out his hands as if to ward him off. “Hey, who do you want breathin’ down your neck, me or Ma Barker? I was coming to tell you anyway.”

“All right, all right,” Jonathan grumbled. “I’ll give you two days. Two. No more.”

“Great,” Benny said, a bit surprised. He’d been around Jonathan long enough to know that once the professor was sufficiently involved in a case, he’d see it through. In fact, Jonathan MacKensie had the most annoying set of ethics Benny had ever run across. Trouble was, he’d found some of them rubbing off on himself. Well, things were even, weren’t they? Some of the thrill of the hunt must be rubbing off on Jonathan, or he wouldn’t have let Benny talk him into this so easily.

Benny hopped off the desk and gave the other man a punch on the shoulder. “Bait your hook, buds; we’re goin’ fishing!”

Marcy Evans had finished stacking the tee shirts in the back storeroom of her uncle’s shop when he came in, beaming.

“You should see the people outside, Marcy! It’s fantastic! They’re buying everything. Is that the new shipment of shirts? Let’s get them out.”

“Okay,” she said, taking an armload.

“This mermaid thing is the best idea I’ve had in years,” her uncle said happily, filling his arms with the bright yellow and green shirts.

“Yeah, about that,” Marcy began reluctantly.

Her uncle’s face fell. “Aw, sugar, just a few more times.”

“I don’t know.”

"You see what it's done for business."

"Yes, and I'm real glad, but --" she twisted a strand of her long dark hair nervously. "That man."

"What man? Oh, you mean the reporter. Why, he's doing us a favor, writing all those stories. Brings more people in."

"He's been real pesky. I'm afraid he's going to find out what we're doing. If people find out it's a hoax, we're really going to be in trouble. I think we ought to stop now."

Travis Taylor sighed. "Sugar, I know this whole thing started as a joke, and I never dreamed people would get so excited. But we can't quit now. Just a few more days, huh?"

Marcy was silent a moment, thinking. He was all the family she had, and she owed him a lot. The store would have gone under if it hadn't been for the prank she pulled one night. Maybe a few more days wouldn't hurt.

"Okay," she said. "But see if you can keep that Mister Benedek away. I don't like the way he looks at me."

Taylor chuckled. "Mermaids are supposed to be attractive."

Bayville was a pleasant little town on the Green River Bay, cottages, a row of small shops, and fishing boats of all sizes bobbing in the calm water. The weather was balmy, the sky a pale light blue. The crowd was amazing.

"I don't believe this," said Jonathan as he and Benny made their way slowly along the boardwalk. "What are all these people doing here?"

"Mermaid hunting, Jack, same as we are." Benny, too, was surprised by the size of the crowd. "Must be something to this story. This shop seems to be a popular spot. Let's go in."

They entered Taylor's Seaside Shop, wedging past eager shoppers. Benny paused to admire a couple of young ladies in bikinis. Jonathan propelled him on.

"Two days," he reminded.

"You didn't say which two. Whoa, check out all this stuff!"

Jonathan frowned in distaste. "mermaid decals, mermaid ashtrays, salt and pepper shakers -- it's all junk!"

"Good old American kitsch."

"Well, it's obvious this is all a promotional gimmick. Someone's cooked up this scheme to bring people to this little town. No mystery to that." His frown deepened at the sight of coasters shaped like well-endowed female fish. "It is a mystery why people buy these things."

"Hey, Jack, how 'bout this?" Benny held up a yellow tee shirt with the words, "I Saw the Bayville Mermaid!" emblazoned in green.

"Perfect," Jonathan said. "Buy two and the case is closed."

"Nah, gotta get one for Doctor M."

"I think we've seen enough."

Benny halted at the checkout counter.

"Now what?" Jonathan said.

"Just checkin' out the competition." Benny scanned the headlines of the tabloids. "'FBI Reveals Plot to Clone the Pope.' Can you believe such trash?" he grinned, his tone one of mock horror. "'Male Girl Makes Self Pregnant.' Now that I'd like to see."

“Benedek.”

“‘Bigfoot Signed for ABC Miniseries.’ Reminds me, chum. We haven’t tracked Bigfoot yet.”

“Could we finish this first? One outlandish thing at a time, if you don’t mind.”

Benny smiled at the petite dark-haired young woman at the cash register. “How much?” he asked, indicating the tee shirt.

“Ten fifty,” she said.

“Ouch. I’m a little short here, Jon.”

With a long-suffering sigh, Jonathan pulled out his wallet. The young woman blushed and gave him a shy smile as he handed her the money. Seeing this, Benny rolled his eyes. If Mackensie ever caught onto this strange power he had over the female sex, he’d be knee-deep in women.

Taking his package, he asked, “When’s the best time to see the mermaid?”

The girl hesitated. “Oh, about twilight, I’d say. She doesn’t come by every night, though. If you’re on the main pier, you’ll have your best chance of seeing anything.”

“Thanks.”

Jonathan thanked her, also, and she blushed again.

“Robbing the cradle. I’m ashamed of you,” Benny said when they were outside.

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Don’t mind me, pal. I’m just babbling.”

“As usual.”

“Let’s go get a good seat.”

Jonathan looked at his watch. “It’s three o’clock in the afternoon. It’ll be hours before dark.”

“Take a look at this crowd,” Benny said. “We need to make our move. Besides,” he added, “we can bask.”

“Not me,” Jonathan said. “I’m going back to the hotel.” He started down the sidewalk.

Benny trotted after. “And let all this sunshine go to waste?”

“You are welcome to my share.”

“What if the mermaid decides to take a little daytime dip?”

Jonathan stopped. “For the last time: there is no such thing as a mermaid.”

“Barnum had one.”

Jonathan sighed. “The Feejee Mermaid was half monkey, half fish, and probably made by the Japanese. They used to cut up all sorts of animals. They used the undersides of sting rays and skates and dried them and sold them to gullible fools like these people here.”

“You amaze me, pal.”

“It’s common knowledge.”

“Well, this is no monkey-fish. It’s a girl with considerable cajongas. Didn’t you ever see ‘Splash’?”

Jonathan’s normal speaking voice was calm, low, and pleasantly accented. Benny had the unique ability to send it up several octaves, which he did whenever possible. He felt it a

sacred duty to keep his friend stirred up; it'd be too bad if Jonathan became as dry, cranky, and inflexible as Dr. Moorhouse.

It went up now. "That was a movie! This is real life."

Benny started to reply when there was a piercing shriek of joy and a statuesque redhead in a tiny swimsuit flung her arms around him, picked him up, and swung him around.

"Benny!"

"Wanda!" he said, delighted. "Whoa! Are the planets aligned or what? I was just thinking about you!"

"Benny, you little jerk, how are you? She set him down. "I haven't seen you in ages! I read your stuff, though. Honestly, hon, where do you get your ideas? That out of body routine -- wild!" She eyed Jonathan appreciatively. "Who's your friend?"

"Wanda Brannock, meet Dr. Jonathan MacKensie. Jon-boy, this is Wanda Brannock, better known as Whiplash Wanda, one of the best lady wrestlers in the business."

Jonathan tried not to wince as the young woman wrung his hand. She was as tall as he, with broad sensuous features and long red hair. Several gold necklaces rested on her impressive chest. "Pleased to meet you," he said with his usual courtesy. "Um, did Benedek say wrestler?"

She gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder that knocked him off balance. "Don't let it worry you, dearie. I'm off duty right now."

"So what are you doing in Bayville?" Benny asked. "Is Rosie with you?"

"Yeah, we've got a grudge match over at the area arena against the Red Hot Mamas. Thought I'd come over here today and see what all the excitement's about. Pretty much of a fizzle, I'd say."

The Red Hot Mamas? Jonathan mouthed to Benny, who chuckled at the man's expression. "Wanda, Jonathan and I are investigating the mermaid sightings. You gals still got your boat?"

"Sure thing, honey. Tell you what. You come to our match tonight to cheer us on and bring the doc here with you. Me and Rosie'll take you out tomorrow."

"Whoa, great idea!" Benny beamed, ignoring Jonathan's low worried, "Benedek." "We'll be there, front and center."

"Benedek, we can't," Jonathan said with a quick nervous smile in Wanda's direction.

"Why not?"

He thought desperately for an excuse. "The pier, remember? You wanted to get there early."

"It can wait, Jack. Wanda and Rosie can take us over every inch of the bay tomorrow."

Wanda took a firm hold of Jonathan's tie. "What's the matter, doc? You got something against professional wrestling?"

"Oh, I-I'm sure it's very interesting," Jonathan stammered. He groped for words. "Very educational."

She nodded. "You said it. Eight o'clock, county arena, front row." She smiled and smoothed his tie. "See ya." She winked. "Twenty-five miles north on the coast road, Benny. You can't miss it." She sauntered off.

Benny could hardly contain himself. "Another conquest, Jonny. I don't know how you do it."

"Benedek, I am not going to a wrestling match and certainly not a female wrestling match!"

"Of course you are! You heard what she said. We need a boat to explore the bay and they've got one."

"We'll rent one of our own."

"And I suppose you're gonna drive? No way!"

"We'll hire someone."

"Jon-boy, you are spending Institute money pretty wildly here, Benny said, enjoying the sudden reversal. "Lighten up! We'll just stay for the main event."

Jonathan's dark eyes smoldered. "I am not going to a wrestling match and that's final!"

Jonathan winced as the solidly-built young woman in electric blue tights and very little else hit the mat, screaming and cursing. As she was hauled to her feet by her hair, he turned a forlorn face to Benny, who was watching the action eagerly.

"This is disgusting."

"Nah, it's great! I told you you'd like it."

"It's not even a sport," Jonathan said, his voice on the rise. "It's a circus! Look at that old lady yelling over there. She's practically apoplectic."

"I'd agree with you, pal, if I knew what that meant. Yo! Wanda! Rip her leg off!"

Jonathan sighed and put his hand over his eyes. "I might have known this would be your idea of entertainment."

"Sure beats the ballet."

Jonathan did not consider this worthy of a reply. After a few more minutes of raucous animal-like cries from the audience, boos, hisses, and the clank of thrown beer cans, he announced he had a headache and was going to leave.

"Leave?" Benny said. "You can't leave now. They're just getting to the good part."

Jonathan stared at him a moment and then said, "Good-by."

"Wait, wait," Benny said. "If you take the car, how am I supposed to get back?"

Jonathan's gesture took in the entire arena. "I'm sure one of your friends will give you a lift."

"Wanda and Rosie wanted to party, Jack. What am I going to tell them?"

"I came, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but --"

"Good, and now I'm leaving."

Benny considered running after him and persuading him to stay, but no sense both of them missing the fun. Turning his attention back to the women in the ring, he yelled, "Bite her, Wanda! Way to go!"

Jonathan drove back to Bayville in a pensive frame of mind. Since meeting Edgar Benedek, his calm, carefully organized existence had been shot out of the water, to use one of his friend's colorful phrases. Jonathan wasn't sure how he felt about this. On one hand, there was a lot to be said for security and a safe routine; on the other hand, he'd had some satisfying if

somewhat puzzling experiences. He and Benedek had solved some mysteries and age-old crimes. They were doing some good, weren't they?

He sighed deeply. Was it worth all the nonsense? He'd learned to put up with a lot of Benedek's craziness; he did admire the man's audacity at times. But Benedek had some of the oddest acquaintances. Wall-feelers, alchemists, lady wrestlers. Sometimes Jonathan felt he was the only sane person left.

The night was warm and the moon was well above the bay when he arrived at the hotel. Most of the sight-seers were clustered around one pier, binoculars and cameras in hand, jostling for position. Still, it was such a lovely night, Jonathan decided to take a stroll along the shore. He had some more thinking to do, and he wanted to clear the noise of the wrestling match from his head.

He took off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder and loosened his tie. He considered taking off his shoes to walk in the surf, then decided there might be too many unknown things to step on. He walked away from the crowded pier until the voices of the crowd were a faint murmur.

Benedek probably wondered why he had agreed to come to Bayville -- if indeed Benedek paused to wonder about anything. Well, the truth was, he could use a short break. Florida sounded more reasonable than Tibet, which was Benedek's choice last week, or Atlantis the week before. He would never, under any circumstances, tell Benedek this. Let him think he twisted my arm, as usual, Jonathan thought with a slight smile.

He had walked a long way from the lights of town and decided it was time to turn back. It was peaceful out here, the water gently lapping the shore, the moonlight giving everything a silvery glow. The bay curved out to a rocky point, and it was there he thought he saw a head in the water. There was a slapping sound. The head went down and came back up again.

Jonathan took a few cautious steps out on the rocks. "Hello?"

There was a splash and an unmistakable fish tail silhouetted against the sky. He saw a glitter of eyes that made him pause. He cleared his throat, uncertain.

"Hello? Who's there? Do you need help?"

A seductive chuckle sounded near by and the shape glided closer. Jonathan took a few more steps out. Now he could see a pale oval face and the gleam of satiny black hair.

"Who are you?" he asked, mystified. "What are you doing way out here?"

She swam closer. In the dim moonlight, he couldn't tell for certain, but she looked very much like a mermaid. Impossible!

"If you'd just tell me who you are," he said, stooping down and sitting back on his heels.

She slid up and folded her arms on the lower rocks, gazing at him curiously. She was startlingly beautiful, with a creamy throat and soft breasts bobbing just above the dark water. Jonathan found his voice didn't want to work properly. After a few unsuccessful attempts, he asked, "What are you doing here? Do you understand me?"

She cocked her head, listening, her graceful tail making a swishing sound in the water.

If this is a hoax, it's a damn good one, Jonathan thought. He offered his hand. "My name's Jonathan. Do you have a name? Where did you come from?"

There were footsteps in the darkness behind them. She jerked her head. Jonathan turned, startled. There was the sudden unexpected crack of gunfire. As he started up, Jonathan felt the girl's hands grasp his sleeve. She gave a sharp tug, and he tumbled over into the water, as bullets pinged sharply off the rocks. She pulled him down rapidly in an explosion of bubbles.

Jonathan had a moment of sheer panic as the dark water closed over his head. The weight of his clothes and shoes dragged him down. The girl kept a firm grip on his arm. Bullets whizzed and plopped harmlessly in the water around them.

The next few minutes were a blur. His lungs were almost bursting when she hauled him to the surface. Jonathan gasped and gulped in air. They were far from the rocks and very far from the shore. The girl -- mermaid -- whatever she was --started down again, but he struggled.

"No. Wait."

To his surprise, she did, her eyes curious.

"Let me -- catch my breath," he said, trying to keep his head above water. "I can't swim."

It seemed to him that her eyes widened. She stared at him, her firm grip the only thing keeping him from sinking completely.

"I know that -- sounds ridiculous -- to someone like you," he said between gasps, "but it's true. If you'd just -- take me back to shore --" My God, if she doesn't, I'm going to drown, he thought with rising panic. Or is that the idea? Didn't mermaids lure sailors into the sea? But this can't be a real mermaid. This can't be happening. This can't be real.

She gazed at him again, long enough for him to notice that even in the faint light her eyes were a bright emerald green.

Then she pulled him down.

"Hello, Marcy."

Marcy gasped and whirled around. A man stepped out of the shadowy corner. She didn't have time to hide the mermaid tail or take the seashells from her hair. How did he get into the storeroom?

"Nice lookin' outfit," he said, sauntering up. He smiled and caught a strand of her long black hair in his fingers. "I thought it was you," he said in a superior manner. "You look the part. Then I did some checking around. You were quite the little swimming champ in high school."

Marcy pulled away, frightened. "It was just a joke. Just to get some people here. M-my uncle's store was losing money."

"Hey, no problem," said the man she knew as Mr. Benedek. "I'm not going to say anything -- as long as you play mermaid for me."

She shook her head. "I'm not doing this any more." When she tried to back away, he grasped her arm.

"Listen," he said in a voice of soft menace. "These stories are doing a lot better than I expected, so I plan to keep getting them. You do as I say, or I'll expose you. I'll tell everybody you and your uncle planned this scheme from the first."

"No," she said, tears welling in her eyes.

"Then you do as I say. I'll tell you when to quit." He gave her a little shake. "And keep away from that MacKensie."

"Who?" she said, baffled.

"That fellow you were playing with tonight. The one I scared off. Scared you, too, didn't I?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Marcy.

"Don't play dumb with me," he snapped. "Just remember what I said. And don't try any tricks. You're in way over your head." He laughed. "Over your head. Get it?"

"Thanks for the ride, gals! See you in the morning!" Benny hopped out of Wanda's van. "Look after that eye, Rosie."

The van sped off and Benny strolled to the hotel, noting that Jonathan had managed to get the rental car back in one piece. Wow, look at that moon! He looked up at the silvery globe. Maybe I oughta stay out and howl. Nope, gotta get up in a few hours and start trolling for mermaids. Wonder if Theo has anything I could use for a lure? I'll call him tomorrow. He checked his watch. "Course, it's already tomorrow. Better get some shut-eye."

About seven o'clock, he got up, full of typical restless energy. Fishermen always start early, he decided, and Jonathan's had plenty of time to sleep.

He knocked on his friend's door. "Yo, Jonathan, let's go! Time to hit the beach!" Receiving no reply, Benny knocked again and rattled the doorknob. "Open up, MacKensie," he said in a deep voice. "Miami Vice!"

That's odd, he thought. I should be able to hear him cursing, at least. "Hey, Jonathan, you okay?"

Now truly worried, he went down to the front desk and asked for an extra key. "My buddy needs his heart medicine," he explained to the clerk.

Jonathan's room was empty, the bed neatly made, the clothes hanging in the closet. Benny gave a worried whistle. "Woo, boy, I sure hope you got lucky last night, because this is mundo strango."

Frowning, he went out, looking along the boardwalk. Only a few people were out, and no one had seen Jonathan. Benny's apprehension grew. How his staid, conservative friend managed to get into so much trouble was something he could never figure. Might as well hang a sign around Jon's neck, something in neon maybe: Skeptic. Please Attack.

When he saw the young girl sweeping in front of Taylor's Seaside Shop, he went over and gave her his best grin. "Hi. Excuse me a sec, but I'm looking for my friend, the guy who was with me yesterday. I'm sure you remember."

Her pink cheeks told him she did. "I'm afraid I haven't seen him," she said.

"If you do, will you tell him to meet me at the hotel? The Bayview. I'm Edgar Benedek, by the way, but you just call me Benny."

The girl's reaction startled him. "Edgar Benedek? You can't be!"

"Oh, but I am," said Benny, thinking at first she might be a rabid fan, but he quickly realized she was frightened. "Hey, now, relaxovision. If you want me to be someone else."

The girl backed away. "This doesn't make sense."

"You're telling me." Benny pulled out his driver's license. "Look. Edgar Benedek, see? Who's been using my name around here?" His heart plunged to his shoes. "Good lord! It's not some old guy, is it, kinda looks like me?"

The girl shook her head and Benny let out a sigh of relief. If his wayward father had been mixed up in this --!

"It's a man about your age," the girl said. "Dark hair."

"That lets out half the population," said Benny. "So what's he been doing?"

"N-nothing," she said. "It's really nothing. I didn't mean to jump like that." She eyed him worriedly.

Benny sensed there was much more to it than this, but the girl looked so unhappy, he just grinned and said, "Well, I'd sure like to meet him. Must be a distant relation or something. Look, what's your name?"

"Marcy Evans."

"Marcy, if this Edgar Benedek comes around again, let me know, will you? I'm a pretty well-known guy, and I guess he's been trading on my name."

"I guess so," she said.

He gave her another encouraging smile. "Thanks, Marcy. Sorry I startled you." Wowzers, he thought, what was all this? Poor kid looked terrified. I gotta find Jonathan and straighten this mess out.

Marcy gripped her broom, her heart pounding. Was that the real Mr. Benedek? If so, she liked him a whole lot better than the other one. But what could he do to help? Could anyone help her now?

Benny searched along the waterfront and down by the pier, her heart sinking. Was it possible this strange Benedek had something to do with Jonathan's disappearance? He gazed out at the water. Jonathan had never told him, but he was almost certain MacKensie couldn't swim. The man was extraordinarily unathletic. Would he have been out this way?

Might as well check before I call out the coast guard, he decided, loping off along the shore.

He jogged up to a curved line of rocks positive now that Jonathan would not have come this far. Then he saw the jacket. Wait a minute, he thought. I'd know that plain gray anywhere, one of the dullest in the MacKensie Collection. What was it doing out here on these rocks? He picked it up and looked around wildly. "Jonathan!" This was weird! Damn it, Jonathan, if you've gotten yourself drowned after surviving all out other escapades, you're going to look mighty stupid.

He crossed the rocks and continued up the shore, fearful of what he might find. When he saw the slumped figure half in the water, half on the sand, he felt his insides constrict.

"Oh, God. Jonathan," he said, running to him. "Hey, you okay? Say something, bud." He found a pulse. "Sheesh, you scared me! Come on, now." He propped him up against his shoulder. "Come on, come on," he said anxiously.

Jonathan coughed and put an unsteady hand to his head. "Benedek?"

"What's with sleeping under the stars?" Benny said, relieved. "Didn't like the hotel?"

He coughed again. "I nearly drowned," he said, his voice husky.

"Well, who told you to go swimming?"

Jonathan looked around dazedly. "Saw her."

"Saw who?"

"Mermaid."

"Yow!" Benny exclaimed. "I knew it, I just knew it. You are better than a lightning rod, pal. No wonder I put up with you." Jonathan's head sagged back wearily. "Whoops," Benny said worriedly. "I forget you're not an outdoor kind of guy. Hang on now, pal."

"I'm all right," said Jonathan.

"Sure, sure. Help me out here." He managed to get Jonathan to his feet and put his friend's arm around his shoulders. "Oof! Okay, slowly now."

"Don't believe it," Jonathan murmured as they made their way toward town. "Had a tail and everything."

"This is great!" Benny said enthusiastically. "What did she say? What did she do?"

"My shoes are full of water," Jonathan said suddenly.

"Yeah, I hear 'em sloshing. Go on. What was she like?"

"She was beautiful."

Benny was practically dancing. "'Prof Saved From Watery Grave.' 'Mermaid Beauty in Daring Rescue.'"

Jonathan was sufficiently recovered to glare murderously. "Don't you dare."

"So tell all, J.J. I wanna know."

"I don't remember very much. There were some gun shots, and she pulled me under out of the way."

This stopped Benny in his tracks. "Somebody was shooting at you?"

"Or at her."

"Did you see who it was?"

Jonathan shook his head. "There wasn't time. One minute, I was standing on those rocks over there; the next, I was underwater."

Benny's brow furrowed. "Something's fishy around here, Jon. Something real scaly."

"Could we dispense with the puns?" Jonathan sighed.

"No, I mean it. You'll be excited to know there's another Edgar Benedek in town."

"What?" he said, surprised. "Someone's using your name?"

"You catch on fast, kemo sabe."

"It's not your father again, is it?" Jonathan asked, alarmed.

"Nope. But I intend to find out who it is and send him back to Planet Ten real soon." He looked up anxiously as Jonathan's steps slowed. "What's the problem, Jack?"

Benny seemed to be moving in circles. "Just tired," Jonathan said, trying to focus.

"We're almost there."

"Weren't we going out in your friends' boat today?"

"Maybe later. Right now, I've got other fish to fry."

Jonathan had time for one more exasperated glare before his strength gave out. Benny saw his eyes close and tried to cushion his fall.

"Hey!" he called to some people on the beach. "Over here! Give me a hand, will ya?"

Jonathan was drifting on a raft far out to sea, up and down on the calm waves. The sun was warm. There was a comfortable breeze. A very attractive mermaid with long black hair and sparkling slanted eyes of vivid green glided up to his raft and gave him a kiss. When she started to dive back into the water, he held on, and they tumbled into the cool depths together. This was all very pleasant until something from far below snagged his leg; a thick coil of some hard cold tentacle wrapped tightly around his ankle. His mermaid tried to pull him free, but the tentacle was too strong. The water grew darker and colder. Jonathan struggled, but could not break its hold. He was running out of air. The mermaid turned her lovely sorrowful face away and swam off.

Come back! he tried to shout, but his last gasps of air escaped in a cascade of bubbles. Cold water rushed into his lungs. The owner of the tentacle pulled him down...

He woke with a start, breathing hard. His leg was tangled tightly in the blanket. He unwrapped himself and pushed his tousled hair out of his eyes. What a nightmare!

"Oh, good, you're up," said Benny, coming in with a paper bag. "Chow time."

"What time is it, exactly?" Jonathan asked, blinking away the last traces of the dream.

"About three. The day is still young."

Jonathan looked around his hotel room. "How did I get here?" He looked down at his pajamas. "And dry?"

Benny was taking packages of greasy fries and hot dogs out of the bag. "Oh, some very nice looking young ladies help me cart you home," he said, grinning. "We propped you in the shower for a while, and then we --"

Jonathan held up his hands. "Please. Spare me the details."

"So how are you feeling? Ready for the two hundred meter breast stroke, you should pardon the expression?"

"I feel much better, thank you," said Jonathan. "I'm even hungry enough to eat one of those, whatever they are."

Benny passed him a hot dog, which Jonathan took gingerly. "You're lucky it's warm out, pal, or we could be talking some major bronchitis here." He parked himself on the foot of the bed. "Now tell me all about this mermaid."

Jonathan took a bite of hot dog and made a face at the taste. "I'm sure I dreamed her. I must have."

"Nope, nope, don't pull a 'Dallas' on me," said Benny. "What were you doing in the water? Did you dream somebody was shooting at you, too?"

Jonathan rubbed his forehead, trying to think. "It's all very confusing."

"Jon-boy, you are not getting out of this one," said Benny, pointing an accusing French fry. "It's a well-known fact that all these critters come to you. There's a story here, so give."

"All right, all right," Jonathan said, exasperated. "There was a young lady with long black hair in the water, and I suppose with the moonlight and everything, anyone could have mistaken her for a mermaid. She didn't say anything, so I have no idea who she was or what she was doing out there."

"You said she had a tail."

"I did not!"

"Oh, yes, you did."

Jonathan sighed. "I had nearly drowned, I was very tired, my clothes were full of sand, and you expect me to be coherent? You try sleeping on the beach some night."

"Hey, I love it," said Benny.

"Do you suppose we could leave now? I'm sure your two days are up."

"No way! There's more. I told you someone was using my name, and it's got that girl at the store, Marcy Evens, really upset for some reason."

"Why on earth would anyone want to use your name?" Jonathan said. "I should think it would cause him no end of trouble."

"Yeah, well, it's gonna, when I catch him," Benny said somewhat grimly. "I can't get anything out of Marcy, she's too scared. But she said she'd call me when he comes around again. Want some fries?"

"No, thanks. I'm having enough difficulty with the so-called hot dog." He chewed and swallowed, a thought suddenly occurring. "I trust Wanda and her friend weren't angry when we didn't show up this morning."

"Nahh," said Benny. "They're more than happy to wait on you."

Jonathan looked puzzled. "On me?"

"You got 'em both snowed, Jack, what can I say?"

"You're joking, of course."

"Would I lie?" Benny tossed a fry into the air and caught it in his mouth. "Rosie saw you at the arena and decided you were the Guy Most Likely to be Body Slammed."

"Benedek, I wish you wouldn't talk like that," Jonathan said, irritated.

"Like what?" He eyed him seriously. "I've decided what it is, J.J. It's the hair."

"The hair?" he repeated blankly. "What's wrong with my hair?"

"Nothing," said Benny. "It just doesn't fit the button-down image. A guy like you should have -- I dunno -- a crewcut, maybe."

"For your information," said Jonathan, "I have always worn my hair like this."

"Oh, well, now it makes sense," said Benny, tossing and catching another fry. "If you've always done something, it's pretty well set in stone, isn't it?"

Jonathan glared at him. "While we're on the subject, I suppose you've always chosen to go about in shirts with day-glo parrots on them?"

Benny looked at his shirt fondly. "Great, huh? And check this out." He pulled up his trouser leg. "Socks to match."

Jonathan threw back the covers and got up. "How did we get on this subject, anyway?"

"You brought up Wanda, pal, not me." The telephone rang and he answered it. "Yello. He is? We'll be right there." he slapped the phone back in place. "Grab your clothes, Jack! The evil twin Benedek's in town!"

Jonathan dressed quickly and followed Benny to Taylor's Seaside Shop. "How are we supposed to find him in this crowd?" he asked. "Do we even know what he looks like?"

"Be cool, chum," said Benny, scanning the crowd. "Marcy's scared of this guy. He must've threatened her."

"But she did say he was here."

"Uh-ho. Here's an intriguing possibility." Benny's voice was unusually bitter, and Jonathan followed his glance to a dark, sharp-featured man in a bright yellow shirt.

"He certainly dresses like you," he remarked.

"Dan Wagoner," Benny said in disgust.

"What, you know him?"

"Oh, I know him. Too well, Jack, too well. He works for the Globe Standard, our main competition. Three guesses why he's here."

"But if he's the one, why would Marcy be afraid of him?"

"Everybody's afraid of him."

Jonathan shook his head. "Don't you find it rather odd that we keeping bumping into your weird friends everywhere we go?"

"Hey," Benny answered sharply, "Dirty Dan may be weird, but he's no friend of mine. That guy's a major scumbag. He'd do anything for a story."

Jonathan didn't see the distinction. "So would you," he pointed out.

"Yeah? Well, I do have a few scruples left, hard as that is to believe." And it's all your fault, MacKensie, he added silently.

At this point, Wagoner saw them. His grin was quick and humorless. "Well, well, if it isn't the original Edgar Benedek."

Benny advanced. "You sleazeball."

"Jealous?" Wagoner said, standing his ground, hands casually in his pockets.

"What's the big idea telling everybody you're me?"

"A harmless prank, Eddie," he said with a shrug. "It opened a few doors. Big deal."

"The fun's over," said Benny. Jonathan had never seen him so furious. "Take the next stage outta town."

"It's a free country, Eddie, and it just so happens I'm on assignment. This mermaid thing could be very big, and I don't need any help. Why don't you clear out, and take your Georgetown meal ticket with you."

"Not till I find out what's going on," Benny said. "What's the deal scaring young ladies? You getting your kicks in odd ways again?"

Wagoner shrugged again. "I made a pass at her. She over-reacted, and I backed off. Some girls just don't know what they're missing."

Benny hesitated. It would be just like Dan to come on too strong and frighten a small town girl, plus use Benny's name in case he went too far and got caught. Was this all there was to it? Somehow he just didn't believe this was the problem.

Jonathan's calm voice broke in. "Excuse me," he said to Wagoner, "but you wouldn't have been strolling along the beach last night, say, around midnight?"

Wagoner's eyes were dark gray and shrewd. "There were a lot of people out last night. I could've been one of them, sure." He flashed a big insincere smile. "Great to see ya, Eddie. You can use my name if it'll make you feel any better. It's been real, but I gotta go. See ya round, professor."

As the man disappeared into the crowd of shoppers, Benny said, "Promise me one thing, Jon, Don't wander off by yourself any more."

Jonathan remembered Wanda vividly, but had not been formally introduced to her partner, Rosie. Roundhouse Rosie, Benny called her. She built along the same lines as Wanda, dark-haired, buxom, and hearty. A rainbow-colored bruise surrounded one of her bright blue eyes.

"How ya feeling, Jack?" she greeted cheerfully, grasping his hand to easily pull him on board the Admiral Half-Nelson.

"Fine, thank you," he replied, almost losing his balance as the boat rocked on the waves.

"We were worried about you, doc," said Wanda, as Benny helped her cast off from the pier. "How did you like the match?"

"I'd never seen anything like it," Jonathan answered politely, and he hoped, safely. He found a life jacket under his seat and slipped it over his head.

"Oh, you won't need that," Rosie said. "We're just going to cruise the bay."

"Yes, he will," Benny remarked. "Take her up by those rocks, Wanda. That's where Jon saw his mermaid."

"I saw someone," Jonathan corrected. "A young lady."

"With a tail."

"This sounds exciting," said Rosie, sitting closer. "You'll have to tell me all about your adventures, Jonathan."

Benny's eyes gleamed with amusement as he watched Rosie in action. No problem. From the look on Jonathan's face, he could tell his friend was probably going to be seasick in a short while. He chuckled to himself. Looking after Jon was getting to be a full time job.

"Slow up a bit, Wanda," he called forward.

They checked all along the shore and out to where the sea came into the bay, seeing only other boats, sea gulls, and marker buoys. Jonathan was slightly green by twilight and suggested they turn back or put him out of his misery. They had rounded the corner by the rocks when Benny let out a whoop.

"Here's your mermaid, Jack!"

Forgetting his queasiness, Jonathan came to the rail and looked out. A strange sense of unreality came over him. There was the same pale face and long black hair.

I don't believe it, he thought dumfounded. Then he heard a weak call.

"Help! Help me!"

Benny was practically hanging over the railing. "I think it's Marcy!"

Relief swept over Jonathan, followed closely by indignation. Marcy! What the hell was she doing, scaring him like that?

"Whoa!" Benny exclaimed. "Turn the boats, girls!"

"Hold on, we're coming!" Jonathan called to Marcy. He could now see she was struggling in the water.

"Help! I'm stuck!"

"Any closer and we'll run aground," Wanda warned.

"That's close enough," said Benny, kicking off his shoes. "Hand me that life preserver, Jon." He jumped into the water and swam to the girl. Marcy flung her arms around his neck. "Wait a second, don't panic. Hand onto this." She grasped the life preserver. "What's stuck?"

"My tail," she gasped.

"Your tail?"

"On a branch or something."

"Okay," he said dubiously and went under. I'll be, he thought, seeing the realistic fish tail snagged on a piece of submerged log. He tugged and tugged without success.

When he came up for air, he heard Jonathan anxiously calling his name.

"It's cool," Benny assured him. "I've just got to get her tail loose."

Jonathan looked pained. "Do you have to be so crude?"

"Her fish tail," Benny said patiently, treading water. He went under once more and this time managed to unhook the stubborn flap of rubber that had trapped Marcy. He then swam to the boat, pulling her along behind. "Can you get her, Jon?"

"Yes, of course." Jonathan took Marcy in his arms. "Good heavens," he said when he saw the green tail with its cream-colored fin.

"Relax, bud, it's Goodyear's best," said Benny as Wanda and Rosie gave him a hand.

Rosie tossed Jonathan a blanket, which he wrapped around the shivering girl. "Are you all right?"

Marcy looked up at her rescuers and pulled the blanket closer. It was all over now. That horrible man would tell everyone she was the mermaid and Uncle Taylor's business would be ruined. She began to sob.

"Hey!" Benny said. "Whoa! Wait, wait!"

"Are you hurt?" Jonathan asked worriedly. "Wanda, can you get us back to town right away?"

"No, no," Marcy said, still sobbing. "If I'm not at the pier in an hour, he'll be so mad."

"Calm down, calm down," Benny said. "Jonny, do something."

Jonathan put a comforting arm around the young woman. "Marcy, please don't cry. We want to help you."

"Who'll be mad?" Benny asked.

Marcy shook her head.

"Who's been bothering you, kid?" Wanda asked, scowling.

"Look, we're your friends, and we're not going to let anything happen to you," Jonathan said. "Has somebody been forcing you to play mermaid?" When she finally nodded, he said, "Well, that's all over now."

"My uncle's store," she began, her voice catching.

"You've been doing this for him?" Benny asked.

"He said I could stop, but then, this man --"

"Wait," said Benny. "Start at the beginning. You tell us who the villain of this story is and we'll take care of him. You're looking at two of the toughest people in the country, and Jon and I aren't too bad ourselves."

This brought a watery chuckle from Marcy. She looked up at the two lady wrestlers, encouraged by their ferocious expressions. "Okay," she said. "I'm just so sorry. I never meant to do anything dishonest." She turned her tear-streaked face to Jonathan. "I really am sorry."

"That's all right," he said. "By the way, I never thanked --" he paused, looking at her for a long thought full moment. "Everything's going to be all right," he assured her.

Dan Wagoner charged into the storeroom of Taylor's Seaside Shop, furious. That little sneak thought she'd defy him, eh? "All right, where are you?" he demanded. "Don't try to hide. I told you to be at the pier by twilight. You need a few more warning shots to convince you?"

"Oh, by all means," said Jonathan, stepping out of the shadows. "Go ahead and shoot."

"That is, if you don't mind a few witnesses," Benny added, dropping down from a packing case.

"Like me," said Wanda, coming around one corner.

"And me," said Rosie, coming around another.

"Don't forget me," said Marcy in a trembling voice. Her discarded mermaid tail dangled from a garbage can. Her large uncle stood behind her, his hand protectively on her shoulder, glowering.

Wagoner gaped. His eyes darted from face to face. He laughed a short mirthless laugh. "Oh, good, Eddie. Very good. The kind of grandstanding you do so well. Only you've screwed up, as usual. I told Marcy I'd expose her little scheme, and I will."

"Too late," Benny strolled up, grinning. "I just made the deadline. The story's due out in the morning editions, page one, all caps: 'Courageous Girl Saves Dying Uncle's Business. Daring Stunt Proves Successful.' Of course, Taylor's not dying, but what the hell. Poetic license. We decided to beat you to the punch and expose ourselves, something I personally have always wanted to do." He had the pleasure of seeing Wagoner look disconcerted.

"It'll never work," the man said angrily. "This stupid place will be ruined."

"Oh, I don't know," said Jonathan, "but your credibility may come under question."

Benny pretended to be surprised. "How could a famous reporter like Dan Wagoner get taken in by a kid in a rubber tail? Unless you've been using my byline, too?" He could tell by Wagoner's rapidly purpling face that however freely he might bandy Benny's name about, when it came to his articles, he wanted full credit. "Nah, didn't think so. Tomorrow morning, America's gonna know you fell for a fish story."

"Damn you, Benedek," Wagoner growled, reaching into his pocket.

"The gun!" Jonathan gasped, trying to intercept, but Wanda, much faster, lunged forward and twisted Wagoner's wrist with a sharp crack. He yelped, and the gun clattered harmlessly to the floor.

"Nice move, Wanda!" Benny said admiringly.

Taylor moved in, his large hand clamping down on Wagoner's arm. "You and I have something to discuss, Mister Wagoner."

Benny ushered Jonathan out. "As much as I'd like to stay, this is going to be too painful."

Jonathan offered Marcy his arm. "Marcy?"

"Thank you," she said.

Behind them came a medley of thuds, groans, oofs, and ughs.

"Ahh," said Benny. "Bayville by night!"

Driving to the airport, Benny, tight-lipped, beat on the steering wheel. "I still can't believe that guy. That crumb. That lowlife. What did I tell you? He'd sell his grandmother for a story. He'd sell you grandmother. Sheesh."

Jonathan was watching the scenery. "I certainly hope we've seen the last of your fellow muckracker."

Benny eyed him uneasily, but Jonathan's profile was averted. Was this how he appeared to the other man, callous, grasping, indifferent? "What a creep," he muttered, winding down. "He got off easy. Wanda and Rosie could have flattened him just a tad more." Receiving no reply, he said, "Well, I guess you're satisfied. Nothing strange about this case, just a kid trying to help her uncle, and from the looks of the store this morning, I'd say they won't be hurting for a long time."

"Benedek," said Jonathan thoughtfully.

"Yeah, what is it?" he said, still annoyed by his conflicting emotions.

"The mermaid who saved me."

"What about her?"

"It wasn't Marcy."

"Huh?" Benny slewed around in his seat.

Jonathan was looking straight ahead, frowning slightly. "They both have long black hair, but Marcy is younger and smaller, I'm sure of it. And the eyes -- the other mermaid had green eyes. Yes. Beautiful green eyes."

Benny was astounded. "Why are you telling me this?" he asked, trying to keep his attention on the road. "I could turn this car around and be back in Bayville in a heartbeat."

"Well, you could, of course," said Jonathan calmly, "but you won't."

"I won't, eh? Why not?"

"Because we're going to leave Bayville and that creature, whatever she was, in peace. She saved my life. I'd like to return the favor."

Benny pulled over and put the car in park. He started to protest and was halted by Jonathan's dark steady gaze. So, Jonathan thought enough of him to trust him not to spill a potentially fantastic story? Dan Wagoner would have jack-knifed the car turning around, but he, Benny, was sitting on the side of the road, held by a look and the dawning realization that yes, he did have a scruple or two, thank you very much indeed, and Jonathan knew it.

"Okay," he said offhandedly, feeling oddly light. "I can always come back on my own, you know." He put the car in gear and moved out onto the highway. "Speaking of favors, Don Juan, I don't suppose you'd care to rustle up a lady Bigfoot for me?"

Jonathan sat back, satisfied. "I already have."

Benny's eyebrows rose. "Oh, yeah? When was this?"

"I think Whiplash Wanda qualifies."

Benny laughed. "She sure took a liking to you, pal, no lie."

Jonathan found his thoughts straying to a pair of mysterious glittering green eyes. A real mermaid? Or someone else, like Marcy, in disguise? No, the graceful tail, the eerily beautiful face -- all a trick of the moonlight, he decided. Had to be.

He was so preoccupied, he didn't hear Benny the first time.

"I said I'm hungry, Jack. Want some lunch?"

Jonathan opened his mouth to list the places where he would not eat, but Benny forestalled him.

"I know, I know. No junk food, trust me." His eyes lit up as he saw exactly what he was looking for. "Got it!" he said triumphantly, steering toward a sign with a fat happy fish in a chef's hat. "Seafood!"