



Long Shot

The Death of Hercules



by Helene Baron-Murdock

The deputy hurried straight for him, face squeezed red. Donovan stepped aside, letting him rush past, and resumed his slog through the waist high thistle and dry grass of the marshy field. He didn't bother to turn at the sound of retching. A slight breeze ruffled the cold autumn morning and brought with it the putrid odor of rotting flesh.

Claymore, the shift Sergeant, stood with his hands on his hips shaking his head in disgust. "Damn rookie, now he's gone and contaminated the crime scene!" Cropped close grey hair and ruddy face creased by a grin, he was obviously enjoying the young deputy's discomfort.

"What we got here, Sarge?"

"Dubya-Em, I'd say mid to late forties. No ID, but we're waiting for the ME before we roll him. He's gassing pretty bad. Been out here a while. Bugs've made a meal of his eyes and one side of his face."

Donovan stood by the head of the corpse, involuntarily placing a hand over his nose. There was a smell that would stay with him all day. He swallowed hard against the rising gorge. It was a stink you could taste.

Nothing unusual about the clothing: Levi's, western boots with riding heels, flannel hunting shirt, a dirty blue under a brown leather vest. Shoulder length black hair. One arm, the right, stretched out and pointing in the direction of the road and the fire engine, ambulance, patrol units and the Violent Crimes Crown Vic. The other hand was tucked under him, out of sight, like a sleeping child. Probably six foot or just short of.

"Who reported it?"

"Citizen walking his dog."

Donovan nodded. What would they do without dog walking citizens? If it weren't for them, murders, accidental deaths might never be discovered. "Check the hip pocket for a wallet?"

"Yeah, nothing there."

Donovan moved to get a better look at the victim's back. He pointed at the stiff blood rimmed gouge below the left shoulder. "Entry wound?"

"Or an animal."

Donovan looked up at the officer and smiled. He didn't think it likely, but he knew not to argue with Claymore. Besides, it was just conversation. The ME would sort it all out. No sense jumping the gun, as it were.

The sergeant smiled back. "My guess is, from the size, that it's a nine. What do you think?"

It was an open invitation as with any shooting investigation Claymore had a hand in. Guess the caliber before the ME decided.

A fiver to whomever was right. “Come on, I already owe you from the last one.”

“Don’t worry, I’m keeping track.”

Donovan stared at the victim’s posterior. “He didn’t have a wallet on him but the impression of his hip pocket has the shape of a wallet.” He pointed to the ghost of a square shape, using his pen to flick the belt loop above the pocket. “It’s been cut. Probably had it chained, biker style.”

“Robbery. There’s your motive.”

Donovan had dispatch on the phone. “Yeah, get me a land line to this address.”

“Is that your 10-20?”

Carol was the dispatch shift supervisor. She’d been around longer than Donovan could remember.

“While you’re at it, could you give me any recent LE calls to this address or close by.”

He looked out at the dilapidated gray wooden farm house with the shabby peeling white porch balustrade and wide worn stairway leading up from a chain link enclosed bare yard. The sign on the gate read *My Dog Bites*.

“How far back and what radius.” Carol was nothing if not professional, but she liked to tease. Pushing three hundred pounds, she was a jolly one. She had a terrific radio voice, too. Like phone sex, some would say. The old timers called her CC, short for *cattle call*.

“I dunno, 14 days, the immediate vicinity.”

“Oh my, have you seen a vicious dog or been attacked by one?”

The dog had almost strangled itself on its tether chain trying to get to him when he approached the gate. He couldn’t be bothered and had gone back to his sedan to call dispatch.

“Yeah. What else?”

“Pretty much all animal control calls, citations for vicious dog, deputy responded to a fight between this address and a neighboring one, arrest for disturbing the peace. . .wow, you’re at the center of the vortex! You gonna need back-up?”

“That it?”

“Hmm. . .about a week ago, report of gunshot in the vicinity.”

“Gunshots?”

“Gunshot, singular. Looks like we had numerous calls on it. Deputy found nothing.”

“A single gunshot in this neighborhood? No wonder they found it unusual.”

“I have that number, ready to copy?”

Donovan rummaged through the door pocket and pulled out a Thomas map guide. “Can you just patch me through? I got my hands full.”

“Jim, I didn’t know you felt that way about me,” she said hanging up as the line rang through.

He put his cell on speaker and placed it on the dash. The phone rang repeatedly, apparently not hooked up to an answering device. He found the neighborhood on the map page. Pretty much all unincorporated county bumping up to the city limits to the north, a warren of narrow open ditch dead end country roads. He’d had a patrol beat in this part of the county as a young deputy. Farming and grazing land back then. The urban sprawl had spilled over and now it was cheap housing for the working poor and immigrants. He also knew about the prevalence of meth labs in abandoned trailers in this part of the county from reading the daily activity reports, though it had been a while since any of that was his business. Longer than Homicide had been Violent Crimes, as if the name change would make what he did any different.

He looked up from the page and stared at the ringing phone. He’d let it ring a couple more minutes before trying his other option. He was going over his notes of what the crime scene tech had told him, that there were a lot of old beer bottles with shattered tops indicating someone had used the field for target practice when the phone barked, “Whadyawan?”

“Mr. Gorton, County Sheriff. You discovered the body at the end of Willig this morning? I would like to get some follow-up information.”

“Yeah, I already told the cops everything I know.”

“Mr. Gorton, secure your dog and come to the front door.”

“Go to hell.”

“Mr. Gorton, you don’t get to choose. I can have animal control take the dog down as a vicious animal or. . .” Donovan paused. “I can shoot it.”

Donovan stood in the middle of the trash strewn living room. Roger Groton was a square chunk of beef in a black wife beater with pasty arms that matched his pocked faced shaved head. His ears looked like they were trying to flee. The ink on his arms and on the left side of his equally square neck had likely been applied during some of his many idle moments in stir.

“Why did you call it in?” He had his hands on his hips, jacket pushed back, badge and weapon in plain intimidating view.

“I didn’t call it in. Nosy neighbor called it in. I found the body.”

“And you told him about it?”

“Naw, he saw the birds. The crows, a ton of them. Asked what was going on when he seen me coming back out the field.”

“And you told him there was a body.”

“Yeah, told him that’s what was gonna happen to him if he didn’t mind his own business.” Einstein started to laugh and then realized who he was talking to.

“And you took the wallet.”

The hulk defied gravity for a moment, jumping out of his boots a few inches. “Whatahellyatawkinabout?”

“You took the wallet off the body. Hand it over.”

“The hell you say. Don’t know nothing about any damn wallet. You’re crazy!”

Donovan swept his arm around to indicate the room they were standing in and the doorway to another room covered in black plastic and taped shut, the damaged filthy beige couch with a puff of stuffing poking out at one shoulder, the long coffee table hastily covered in newspaper from under which various kinds of drug paraphernalia were only partially obscured. A bong that looked like it could hold a dieffenbachia was propped in one corner. And the pungent skunky odor of an indoor grow. “I don’t care about any of this. I’m with Violent Crimes. You’re growing high octane weed and probably violating your parole. Not my problem. Just give me the damn wallet so I can do my job and ID the body”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“All right then I’m gonna have to arrest you and hold you until DEA gets here.”

“DEA!? Alright, no, ok, here’s the wallet. I don’t want no fed rap!” Ro-Go, as the large monogrammed tattoo on his forearm identified, lifted up one of the cushions on the couch displacing untold tons of dust, body ash, spilled blow and wayward bud, retrieved the wallet and handed it to Donovan. “Ok, we’re good, right, what you said, right?”

“Right.”

When Donovan got back from the break room with his coffee, Jerry Butler from Drug Interdiction was sitting at his desk. A dark skinned man with a macho brushstache in Levi’s , a blue Dodgers warm up jacket , and a Glock on his hip was with him. He might as well have been wearing a neon sign that said *Fed*.

“Leave my bobble-head alone.”

“You’re an Oriole’s fan?”

“That’s all they had left at the souvenir shop.” He wasn’t going to tell them it was a present from Miriam, the emergency room nurse he’d been seeing. She’d gone back to Baltimore to live with “her people” as she’d told him. The coast was just too white. Even the black folk were too white. She’d sent him the bobble-head to say

that she still thought of him. Not that he was a baseball fan. Miriam knew he cared only for round ball.

“You know Eric Mendez? DEA.”

Donovan shook the extended hand and looked directly into the coal black eyes. “Yeah, I think I’ve arrested him before.”

Butler colored and glanced in alarm at Mendez who was smiling. “That’s right, when you were with Narcotics! Yeah, that was a while back. I don’t do undercover anymore. I got bumped over to intelligence and liaison.”

“Well, how can I help you girls today?”

“**When I got an *access denied*** on his NCIC file,” Donovan said closing the door to the staff conference room behind them, “I figured I’d be getting a visit from someone with the federal government.”

“Mark Nesso was under close surveillance in the hills outside of Yellville, Arkansas until about six months ago. Then we lost him. His file is flagged *need to know*. Anyone tries to look at it, we get pinged. Tracked it to the department computer assigned to you.”

“Well, looks like I found him for you. Mark A. Nesso, dob 10/16/67. Interesting guy. Graduate in chemistry from Montana State, PhD in pharmacology from USC. Scion of a prominent Montana family, horse breeders, it would seem. Married. Divorced. No kids.”

Mendez looked alarmed. “Wait a minute, how did you know all that? You don’t have clearance.”

“I looked up his Facebook account.”

“When you say you found him,” Butler interjected, “You mean in custody or. . .”

“Yeah, deceased.”

The drug cops exchanged looks, one was a troubled frown.

“We’re gonna have to ID the body. Something’s wrong.”

“Ok, when the ME’s done with him. I’m expecting a preliminary report.”

“You sure it was Mark Nesso.”

“That’s what his driver’s license said. Florida, by the way.”

Butler made a dismissive noise. “Florida, that’s a joke, you can get those in a cereal box.”

“What’s the big deal with this guy?”

Mendez shrugged. “Well, if he’s dead it don’t matter. He was a chemist for the Laredo cartel running labs in the Ozarks. The thing is he wasn’t a lowly cooker. As you said, this guy has a degree in pharmacology. He was cooking up crank of unbelievable purity, laboratory grade, and blends.”

“Sounds like you admired him.”

“Big pharma would love to have someone like him. He was making drugs that had absolutely no side effects. And that was his

rep. He was like the Armani of drug designers. A couple of his batches went south on him, though. And he's left a trail of damage behind him. People who used his blends ended up with symptoms that mimicked cerebral palsy or Parkinson's. Or dead. Our lab took a look at some of his product. They were impressed by how sophisticated it was. The defective stuff was like just one or two molecules off."

"That's all it takes."

"The cartel was after him. Some of the damage was done to a few of their top lieutenants. Might have been some kind of power struggle. . .who knows with those *cholos*."

"How did he end up in my neck of the woods? Think the cartel finally caught up with him?"

Butler nodded, "Possible, but there's been no rumble about any new players so maybe not."

"A local hit then."

"We're looking into a possibility." Butler looked at Mendez and got the nod. "Apocalypse Inc., the motorcycle club. They're deep in the drug trade. They may have taken an option on the hit for the Laredo boys."

"By the way the body was found I wouldn't rule out a professional hit." Donovan turned away from the window that looked down on the parking lot. "But the Horsemen are involved?" He pointed to the computer station in one corner of the conference room. "Let me see if I can pull something up." He wiggled the mouse and the monitor came to life. He logged on.

"Your password is *bobblehead*?"

"Now I'm going to have to kill you."

"Changing your password is not as messy."

"But not any easier." Donovan pointed at the screen. "Here I input an address near where I found the body and get a crime stats map using information from dispatched calls and clearances. Ok, I can specify the calls in this area by type for say the last six months." The map populated with a profusion of colored dots. "The red ones are the unresolved, the yellow are in process, and the green are resolved or sent to the DA."

"Nice neighborhood," Mendez chuckled behind his back.

"They figure Nesso was out there almost a week. I set that parameter, say ten days."

"That cleared up some of the acne."

"And I widen my radius. And then narrow my incident type down to just a couple, say dead at scene and report of gunshots."

"Looks pretty quiet now. Sheriff musta come to town." Mendez pointed at the screen. "Those green dots report of gunshots?"

Donovan ran the cursor over the dots to display the text. “Yeah, pretty much. Notice how they’re mainly clustered around or near to where the body was found?”

“Yeah, I don’t see how that’s going to tell you much.”

Donovan circled the arrow on the map. “This is where we found the body, this vacant lot here. When he fell he was facing this street, here, Willig. So assuming the shot came from the direction opposite of the way he was facing, that would put it up coming from up in here.” Donovan circled the arrow on the upper part of the map.

Butler leaned in to look. “Yeah, Willig. Thanks for the tip on that address, by the way. A task force team took it down a couple of hours ago. You were right, it was a grow operation. Looks like they may have been dabbling with a junior chemistry set, too.”

“No problem.” And back to the screen, “Notice that if the shot came from this direction how there are no reports of gun shots at all.”

“Are you suggesting suicide?”

“Not unless you want to add contortionist to his list of accomplishments.”

Butler straightened, exclaiming, “What a minute, I recognize that neighborhood!”

“Right, that’s the Horseman compound right there and home of Jerzy Herkovanic, the president of Apocalypse Inc. So anybody in that neighborhood knows better than to report gunshots or even a gunshot.

“Why’s that blue dot there?”

Donovan grunted. “That’s an old case. One of mine. A reminder that I need to put that one down.”

“Oh yeah?” Mendez looked surprised. “What’s that all about?”

The pulled pork sandwich was as good as it got at the barbeque joint Donovan favored in Old Town. Since the Fed had an expense account, he sprung for lunch. Dabbing a corner of his mouth with a napkin, Donovan continued, “It wasn’t originally my call. This is about two years ago. We had a new guy, Hutter.” Butler nodded like he knew the name. “And Collins, who was undersheriff then, had me go in and back him up. Considering that it was at the Horsemen’s compound, he thought that it might be a little intimidating to the new guy. I’d dealt with Herko before so I wasn’t going to be put off by his bullshit.”

“What went down?” The agent had barely touched his ribs.

“They all said it was an accident. I didn’t expect anything less. Hutter was falling for it. A kid, maybe 16 or 17 was dead from a fist to the face. Apparently there was a party and the kid, the son of one of Herko’s lieutenants, was drunk and staggered into Herko

just as he was about to take a hit of blow from the blade of his Bowie knife.”

“Oh, oh, I see what’s coming.”

“Right, Herko who is notorious for his foul temper smashes the kid in the face and kills him with one blow.”

“He’s a big guy, makes Hulk Hogan look like a midget wrestler,” Butler added spearing a fry with his fork.

“You couldn’t charge him? That’s a pretty damning story.”

“Well, it was one I heard only after the fact. The story the witnesses were giving was that the kid was drunk and had run into a post in the compound patio. Place they used for dog fights if you ask me. We could have got him on manslaughter maybe, contributing to the delinquency of a minor leading to mortal injury. The DA didn’t think we had enough so they let it slide.”

“Killed the kid with one blow for messing with his blow. Almost poetic.”

“I dunno about that, but I’ve been wanting to nail Herko for something since then. He paid a blood price to the parents of the kid. I hear the mother wasn’t too happy about it. And he promotes the kid’s old man to second in command and then sends him on a buy down south where lo and behold he gets popped with a load of product by the Feds and local gendarmes who got the tip from an anonymous caller and now poppa-san is doing large in a federal institution.”

Butler’s phone rang first. “Yeah, when was that? You sure it’s him?” He turned to look at Mendez who was bringing his own phone to his ear. “Ok, ok, hang tight. Yes, go with them, get out of there!” He looked across the table, worried. Donovan was taking the call from dispatch. “On the way to Community? Alright, thanks Carol, I owe you.”

Butler blurted, “Something’s gone down at the compound. They think it’s Herko!”

Mendez nodded. “I’ve got someone inside. She says it looks like an overdose of some kind. It’s Herko.”

Donovan stood, dropping his napkin on his plate. “Meet you in emergency at Community.”

When they wheeled Herko into emergency he was screaming that he was on fire. He struggled against the restraints on the gurney and finally broke free of them. He careened down the hallway in agony, tearing at his clothes, his cut, his shirt, insisting that he was burning up. An EMT tried to tackle him and got a blast in the chops from an elbow that landed him crumpled against a wall. Security and deputies who were attending a stabbing call joined the fray. They tased him but he merely ripped the barbs out of his skin and continued to rage, batting at anyone who came near him. He raised his dusty

leonine head and roared at the ceiling, digging his nails into his bare flesh. He fell to his knees and gasped for breath. Then he was silent and dead.

At the same time Bridgette, his longtime old lady, added to the cacophony, hysterically screaming “It’s all my fault! It’s all my fault!” She was being consoled by another biker momma who looked very much on edge, eyes wild, jumping at every sound and motion, spring loaded like a feral cat. Donovan directed a nurse he knew over to help with the grieving girlfriend. A phalanx of club members muscled their way through security to see their leader, face and arms scratched and bleeding, shriveled into a fetal position. They couldn’t help but notice the spent taser wires. Their eyes darted around the room looking for someone to blame. Donovan gave them a choice. “Let’s step outside, boys, and let the hospital staff do their job.”

The snarl lasted only as long as it took Donovan to place the barrel of his weapon to the biker’s tattooed forehead. “You may be in an emergency room, pal, but I’ll make sure you get a hole they can’t do anything about.” The biker’s resolve melted away so apparently he wasn’t as stupid as he looked. “Don’t go too far, boys, I’m going to want to ask you some questions.” He heard a chortle, “Yeah, like that’s gonna happen.” And moments later, the roar of two stroke engines snarling with menace driven away.

Mendez had the skittish momma by the elbow, leading her into the little office behind the reception desk that the shift nurse hurriedly vacated. He motioned Donovan over with a tilt of his head. Butler joined them in the tiny room and closed the door.

“Ok, Angie,” Mendez demanded, “What the hell went down?”

The woman, a nondescript brunette, still rather young but trying to look hard, nodded her head, her hands shaking. “It was totally freaky, man. I was watching TV and I could hear them arguing in the kitchen. He was on her about Mark. About how she should have told him the first time Mark came on to her. Someone else in the club must have seen something go down between them. And told Herko. I mean Mark was a good looking guy and he liked to play. But he should have been smarter than that.”

Donovan held up a printout of the Florida license. “This the man, Mark Nesso?”

The woman pulled her head back in shock. “Yeah, that’s Mark. How. . . ?” She stopped and looked inquiringly at Mendez.

“They found him in a field almost mile behind the compound, Angie. He’d been shot in the back.” He addressed Butler and Donovan, “This is Angie Renfro, she’s one of ours.”

Donovan nodded and smiled. “Pleased to meet you Angie. I think you’re going to help me solve a murder.”

Angie fixed him with a dumb stare and scratching her arms turned to Mendez. "You gotta get me into detox, Eric, my skin's beginning to crawl."

Donovan was on the carpet. The carpet was in Sheriff Tim Collins' office. It was a large office, conference table off to one side, designed to make everyone else feel small. Donovan didn't feel small and he didn't like the implication that he didn't know how to do his job.

"I put down a murder in less than eight hours. If that's not enough, I closed a case that was over two years old. And I got the killer for both. Jerzy Herkovanic.

"The most you could have got on Herko was manslaughter for killing the kid with his fist." Phil Collins, a large man who spent too much time behind his desk and the dining table, rested his elbows on the arms of his large chair behind the wide oak desk and put the tips of his fingers together. Donovan knew that face. It was his I'm-gonna-stick-it-to-you-no-matter-what-you-say face. "How can you tie Herko to the shooting?"

"It's all there in the report, Phil. The slug they dug out of Nesso was a .223. Stopped right in the center of the heart. The DEA's undercover confirmed what I suspected. Herko had a trophy room, strictly off limits to anyone not in the inner circle, on the second floor of the compound with a large window overlooking the undeveloped field that abuts to a number of rural dead ends about a mile away, one of them being Willig near where we found Nesso's body. Herko had a shooting range set up in the room that allowed him to target practice in the vacant lot behind. He had everything in there, competition rifles worth a couple grand easy, tripods, sandbags, scopes, range finders. Looked like he did his own loads, too. Apparently, according to one of my sources, he did a lot of plinking from his perch.

"Right, now it's coming back to me. Wasn't he on an Olympic rifle team when he was a kid?"

"The Serbian team. He comes from a family of sharpshooters, there's generations of them, snipers, all dead shots. I'm putting Herko up there drawing a bead on Nesso's back."

"Wait a minute, I used to patrol that neck of the woods. That's impossible. It's at least a mile as the crow flies. And what's his motive? Bad drug deal?"

"What I put together from what I've been told, Nesso made a play for Herko's woman and got caught. Nesso tried to deal his way out of it with some of the hybrid blow everyone was raving about. Herko had another idea. He would take *all* of Nesso's stash and give him a running start across the field. If Nesso made it to the pavement of one of the dead end streets he would let him live. Nesso

didn't have much of a choice and he gambled that he could get out of range of the average weapon."

"Why'd Herko even let him get that far? He almost made it."

"You're right. The ME said that had Nesso made it a few more yards he might have lived. The round was starting to tumble. On the other hand, Herko, being the show-off and sadist that he was, probably let Nesso think he was going to reach the pavement when he took that gold medal long shot."

"OK, I suppose congratulations are in order. You solved two killings in one day. And Herkovanic overdosed and saved the County the added expense of trying him and sending him away."

"Herko may have overdosed, but it was deliberate, murder."

Collins rolled his eyes. "Come on, out with it."

"We could never make a case on it, but here's how I figure it went down. The blow that Nesso gave Herko was a tainted batch. The DEA lab confirmed it. They said it was a very sophisticated formula. It produced euphoria in small amounts, but there was a tipping point if you overdid it. It was designed to attack the nerves under the skin and make the user feel like his entire body was on fire. That much stimulus caused the brain to shut down and death was not far behind. Nesso must have known that Herko would have overindulged when he handed over his entire stash."

"Alright, what's this Nesso's motive?"

"Murder for hire."

"Aw, jeez, Donovan, gimme a break!"

"You'll remember that Herko killed the kid of one of his lieutenants and had to pay a blood price. And then by coincidence, the kid's old man who gets promoted to number two is popped on a Fed drug bust and ends up doing large in a Fed pen. But the kid's mother wasn't having any of it. She took the payoff and bided her time. She knew that revenge is a dish best served cold. The opportunity came along when Nesso bolted from the cartel and needed cash to get his own operation going. She connected with the chemist and he gave Herko the deadly product. Killer blow for a killing blow. I think that's called poetic justice."

"You realize I'm still going to have to reprimand you for pulling your weapon and threatening a citizen. I have to appear before the grand jury today to explain your actions. A citizen's group filed the complaint."

"Tim, I was doing my job. That situation could have gone south in a hurry. Cut me some slack! Your job, I don't have to tell you, is to run interference for your people. Do your job so I can do my job!"

Sheriff Tim Collins gave his detective a blank look. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. "You're getting pretty close to retirement age, aren't you?"