

RESCUE

Mac &
jennie

book 1

a novel by
GARY HENDERSON

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Mac & Jennie, Book 1

Gary Henderson

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Diamonds and Dragons

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Chapter 3

Mac stood on the back deck, staring at the zinnias and snapdragons, the rose bushes and the carefully-tended bed of day lilies.

He took a long, slow drink of the iced tea in his hand, and sank into the plastic Adirondack lawn chair. The one with the empty chair next to it.

She really is gone. So this is what it feels like.

Not a good feeling.

Why did I spend so much time away from her?

“You were doing good things,” a voice chided him from the back of his mind. “People needed you, you saved lives, you protected people, you may have kept a whole country from falling into hardcore tyranny — at least for another decade or two.”

That’s what his mind said.

That’s not what his heart said.

His heart said, “Shut up.”

An hour later he realized the sun had gone down, the mosquitos were devouring his bare ankles, and the iced tea was no longer even ice, much less iced tea.

He lifted himself up and dragged into the house. The dark house. He turned on the living room lights as he came through the door, and listened.

Nothing. She would have had the Beethoven channel from Pandora playing by now, to carry them into the evening hours.

“I should do something about dinner,” said his mind. “Why?” responded his heart.

I need to go somewhere, do something.

He bought a ticket an hour later. Then he canceled it.

The next morning, with a small overnight bag and a few essentials, he backed out of the garage and pushed the “close the door” button on the remote. Somehow the closing of the door felt

like the closing of an era, and he drove away not quite as sad as he had been for ... a month? Two months? Too long.

He stopped at the post office and asked them to hold mail until further notice. How long? Not sure, he told them. Not at all sure.

The leaves were starting to turn in New England. Good time to go wander. Maybe a good time to buy a decent camera, and quit depending on a phone. Get something with a zoom lens, and something that doesn't need film.

He drove north, staying away from the big cities and taking side roads wherever they looked interesting.

At a camera store in a small town outside of Boston he bought a used Canon Rebel XT and a small zoom lens.

Not too heavy. Nice. And not too expensive, so if I lose it, not a big deal.

As he walked out of the camera store, he started seeing pictures. The intersection, with the American flag over the hardware store, and the older fellow with a cane just entering the street to cross. Sunlight coming from behind those buildings, backlighting the man's white hair.

Twenty pictures later, he looked around to remember where he had parked. Had he eaten breakfast?

Couldn't remember.

"Is this what life is like, now that she's gone?" he wondered. Forgetting things, no goals, no direction? His stomach voted, and he decided the Cozy Cafe looked just fine, and it probably wasn't too late for breakfast.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said, taking off his hat and slipping into a booth. The waitress stopped placing silverware and a menu in front of him, and said, "Excuse me?"

"Good morning."

"That's what I thought you said. Good morning. Coffee?"

"Sure. And some Splenda?"

She paused again, and asked, "Sugar OK? Or the pink stuff, the saccharin?"

"No Splenda? Equal?"

“Equal to ... what?”

“Sugar will be great, and some ... some milk for it, please.”

“Be right back.”

Maybe I’m a little too far off the main roads, he thought. Actually I’m not too sure where I am.

He pulled out the iPhone, opened up the map app, and touched the arrow that centers the display on wherever you are.

Amazing, he thought. And I thought it was a phone. It’s a computer, and they added a phone thing so people would buy it!

“What else can I bring you?” asked the waitress.

“A life?”

She set the coffee down, and pulled two Splenda packs from her apron. “Found some. Just for you. So, what’s got you down?”

He leaned back and really looked at her for the first time. She honestly cared, and it showed in her eyes.

“Thank you,” he said. “Just lost my wife, and I’m having trouble adjusting.”

She nodded, and set an open menu in front of him. “This one’s on me. Order everything you like, and don’t worry about eating it all. Seriously. Have a wonderful breakfast. The cook is good.”

She touched his shoulder briefly as she turned away to seat another customer.

After the oatmeal, the fried eggs, the bacon, the eggs benedict, the stack of toast, the sausage, and the fresh fruit, he decided a stack of three pancakes would be perfect. And some hot chocolate, and yes, he would like whipped cream on it, thanks.

She brought the ticket when he pushed the last plate away and felt like he would never be able to eat again. The amount due showed “\$0.00”, and was signed with a smiley face.

“Are you a church-going girl, may I ask?”

“Sure am.”

“Say a prayer for me now and then, if you would. I’ll get through this, but I sure would like some help now and then.”

“You got it. So, I gather you’re passing through? Looking at the trees?”

“I would like to, if I can make it back to my truck!”

She laughed. “Glad you liked the food. Listen, turn left on the state road at the next light, and follow that road for about a hundred miles. You’ll like what you see.”

“Excellent,” he said. “You’ve been most kind.”

He slipped out while she was waiting on another customer at the other end of the cafe, and left fifty dollars under the ticket. A tip, he thought, just a tip. And well-earned.

The state road led quickly out of town and into wooded country, spread with farms and scattered homes. The maples and beeches were in full color, and every now and then a Bradford pear did its best to compete. Finding places to pull off the road to grab the pictures was the hardest part of the day.

As he sipped coffee at a Love’s truck stop that evening, the phone rang.

“Mac, how are you doing? Haven’t heard from you since she’s been gone.”

“It’s tough, boss. I’m wandering New England at the moment, to get my mind out of neutral, and my body out of the house.”

“How about a bodyguard role for a few days?”

“Not sure I can stay that focused, truthfully. If you’ve got a job watching paint dry, maybe I could handle that.”

“All right, I’ll bring in someone else. Stay in touch, would you?”

“Sure. I will.”

He watched the sun set behind the 18-wheelers and gas pumps. Romantic, he thought. What am I doing?

Chapter 13

“So choose your project,” said Dr. Sorenson on the first day of class, “and let me know by next Monday what it is. Needs to require investigation, and you will create software to gather data and produce recommendations. This is called “data science,” and you’ll thank me forever if you decide you like it!”

Now what? thought Celena. I need a project and a programming language!

“Sal, what should I do? I’m not a programmer.”

“Python is easy to learn,” replied the student next to her. “That and ‘R’ are the two big languages in data science, and Python does lots of other stuff besides. Great choice for a math major, and especially one pretending to be an economist.”

OK, then. Python.

And she began looking up ebooks. The Dummy’s Guide to ... Learn in 24 hours ... Automate the Boring Stuff ... that sounds good ... a lot of choices!

She settled on “The Python Apprentice”, and marked one about “Python and Data Science” to pick up next.

Looks easier than Java, and more fun than Fortran. This can work. But I need a project.

By the following morning she had settled on predicting stocks, the golden standard of goals that no one expects you to accomplish.

Jennie turned the latch and pushed the glass door open. The fluorescents high above flickered and came on. Celena dropped her bag outside the court, dug out her shoes, and sat down to pull them on.

“Nice court,” said Jennie. “Not all scarred up like the others.”

“Too bad,” called Celena. “I depend on those marks to distract you, or hide the ball. Anything that will help!”

“Not today!” Jennie tossed a hot pink ball against the side wall and stroked a smooth backhand into the corner. “Ah, not today. That felt good.” She caught it, set it up again, and lobbed it to the front of the ceiling.

“Here we go!” said Celena, closing the door behind her and swinging at the ball while it was still shoulder-high. It skipped on the plywood just before the front wall.

“Not percentage racquetball, that shot. Tough to make it work,” said Jennie, as she scooped it up and punched a z-serve into the right wall. “Playing to 15?”

“Let’s do a couple to 21, I’ll have more time to catch up!”

They both laughed, and Jennie bent down to serve.

An hour later Celena collapsed against the side wall, flushed and breathing hard.

“Whew. Good workout!”

“Me too. Stretch out, I’ll get the water bottles.” Jennie brought the drinks in and sat down beside her. “So what else is going on in your life, besides teaching me Spanish and learning how to dig line drives out of the backhand corner?”

“Your Spanish is better than my defense, ¡no hay duda!” Celena took a long drink. “Well, I’m working on a fun project — predicting stock prices!”

“But you’re in the math department ... isn’t that more an economics deal?”

“I’m taking macro from Dr. Sorenson. An elective. And it’s kind of a mathematical analysis problem, really.”

“So, can you do it? Make you rich!” winked Jennie.

“No one does it very well, but it’s been fun. And if you cheat a little, you can do it really well!”

“What do you mean? How would you cheat?”

“Well, if I guess that you’re going to serve into my backhand corner, and just as you swing, I jump that way, I have a much better chance of returning it. Right?”

“And if you guess wrong?”

“Oh, no doubt, the point is over. I’ll never make it back. But if I could look just a few seconds into the future and know which way you’re going... why, I might actually win a game now and then!”

“Or if I had the flu. That might help you, too, and that might actually happen! But ... seriously ... look into the future a few seconds?”

“I’m analyzing historical data. So the truth is already known. It’s just a question of whether the software, the program, knows the answer...”

“So you let it peek ahead.”

“Exactly.”

Jennie leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. “Just don’t ever present it as real.”

“I know, I know. It’s a fun problem, though... and sometimes I can get pretty close!”

Jennie stood up. “Got a few more minutes? Let’s see how close I can get you to the front wall!”

Philip Cross stared at the screen. What was she doing?

Celena pointed to her notes. “Here’s the formula, I just don’t see how to do it in Python. Do you see what’s happening?”

Philip studied her notes, then looked back at the screen. “This is a mess. How did you get this far as a math geek and not learn any more about programming?”

“FORTRAN. ‘Formula Translator.’ Been around a long time. I’m good at it. Or, I was. Just haven’t taken the time to learn Java, or this new stuff.”

“The “new” stuff? Gosling dreamed Java up in, what, ’94? ’95? And Guido what’s-his-name created Python before that! I thought FORTRAN had gone the way of COBOL and, you know, Visual Basic?”

“Philip. Please. Doesn’t the business world still run on COBOL? And most of what us non-programmers use to talk to Oracle is

really Visual Basic? You just won't admit it. Now how do I do this recursive thing so it works?"

Philip drained the styrofoam cup. "More, please? I'm a gallon short of my daily requirement!"

She laughed and went to find the Keurig brewer.

Forecasting stocks? How can that work? he wondered. What she was trying to do here wasn't hard ... take him a minute to unscramble the index ... indices ... in her loops, but no big deal, she just had it backwards. But what was she really doing?

"OK, I think we got it," he said, when she returned. "Two sugars, no cream?"

"Yup. You're done? You're already done?"

He smiled. "Thanks. I'll take that as a compliment."

"But that means I already had ninety percent of it, right?"

"Yes... you had ninety percent of it right."

"Thank you. Want to see what it does?"

Absolutely. He nodded, getting up and moving to her chair so she could settle in at the keyboard.

"Here's the historical data." She opened a text file and let it stream across the screen. "Economic data, start/stop and average values of hundreds of stocks, world event indicators, temperature - it affects demand for lots of things - other weather factors, everything I could think of that might drive stock prices."

He stared.

"So I'm in Sorenson's class, macroeconomics, not the beginner stuff, and I thought this would be a kick. See if I could squeeze the golden goose and get the egg everyone wants - accurate stock predictions!"

"OK ... " His measly investment in Worldcom had evaporated, so he understood the wish. If only he had put the money in Wal-Mart, but he had thought he understood the tech world. It was the larger ocean, the one called economics, that his stock had drowned in.

"All right. Pick a stock, and the day you want to forecast."

"The day?"

“Sure, why not? If you can’t predict both the value a stock will reach, and the day it will get there, what’s the use?”

“Well... Wal-Mart. Next Monday.”

“No, silly, pick a date in history.”

“But then you already know the answer!”

“But the program doesn’t. We’ll feed it the data coming up to that date... let’s say, a month before the date you pick... and see if it can tell us what the number was going to be.”

“Oh, I understand. And if it can predict stuff in history, you assume it can predict the future. Like, next Monday.”

She nodded.

“Let me see some history on Wal-Mart. Can you do that?”

“Sure, let’s just use Ameritrade’s screens.”

She pulled up Firefox and logged into her stock account. “What date are we sneaking up on?”

“My birthday — April 11, last year.”

She pulled up the history of WMT.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty. You?”

“Not supposed to ask a woman.”

“Only fair. You?”

“Twenty-six. Late start.”

“I would have guessed nineteen, maybe twenty!”

“Racquetball. Jennie and I play all the time!”

“Jennie ... really? Teaches journalism? She scares me ...”

“Why? She’s funny, and really smart.”

“Yeah, well ...” He drained the cup. “So confident. So sure of herself. Can you imagine her being afraid of anything?”

“I guess not,” laughed Celena, “but if you could hit a kill shot like she does, you’d be confident too!”

“Let me get one more cup,” he said. “Then you can show me your stuff. Want some?”

Chapter 22

“Yeah, come in. Scotch on the table. Sit there.”

Philip Cross stepped into the room and stared. He had never drunk Scotch, never been in a luxury suite, and never been manipulated so easily as by this man.

He walked past the drink and sat down, straight up on the front of the chair. “Who are you?”

The man smiled. “Does your stuff work?”

He hesitated. “Who are you?”

“Son,” said Leonard, “I told you. I’m Leonard. Chicago. Do I have to tell you everything twice?”

Philip shook his head. “What do you want? I’m busy.”

“You want money, right?”

Philip nodded.

“I have money. You have software. I want software. You have software and you want money... I have money and I want software. Got it, or do I need to go slower?”

Philip sat back in the chair and examined Leonard, who sliced and lit a cigar while he waited for an answer. Suddenly a sense of deja-vu came over Philip, and he tried to remember where he had seen this man before... but no such nightmare came to mind.

“I got it. Now what?”

“How much do you want for your stuff?”

“Depends on my partner.”

“He didn’t tell you? He sent you here to pitch it, and didn’t tell you what to do when some big fish bites on the bait?”

Philip reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a business card with two items on it: the name “Doc” and a phone number. He handed it to Leonard.

Leonard picked up the hotel phone, put it on the speaker, and dialed the number.

“Yes?”

“Is this ‘Doc’?”

“Yes.”

“This is Leonard. From Chicago. I have your boy in my room. How much do you want for the stuff?”

“What do you mean, ‘you have him’?”

“Relax, Doc, he’s just visiting. I invited him up for a chat. How much do you want?”

“Exclusive?”

“Of course.”

“A million.”

“I’ll give you 600 grand, and another 400 when I see it works. Cash.”

Silence. Then, over the speaker, “Phil, are you OK?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“You good with that?”

“Don’t know anything about him ... ‘Doc’.”

“Yeah, I got that. But let’s do it.”

“OK.”

“Leonard, here’s the routing info. You ready?”

Leonard picked up the hotel notepad and pen. “Go.”

When the numbers were given and repeated, Leonard added a condition. “Here’s the deal, Doc, or whatever your name is. I’m going to send this money, and then Philip and I are going to get on a plane to my place for a private screening. Here’s the phone number.”

He rattled off the number. “Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it, but ...”

“No ‘but’. I just told you how this is going down. When I see it works, I’ll send him home and you get the rest of the money. If I see it doesn’t work, I’ll come looking for my 600 big ones.” And he hung up.

Philip stood up. “What do you mean, ‘your place’? I’ve got a presentation to do!”

“Sit down, Cross. You just sold the goods. You got no meeting. I’m your meeting. We’re gonna gather up your stuff and hit the

road."

A knock, a single knock, sounded at the door.

"Come in," yelled Leonard. Two men walked in. Locals, by their look.

"You Leonard?" said one, with a glance at Philip.

"Yeah."

"Ramón sent us."

Leonard nodded. "Good. Take this young man back to his room — 217, I believe — and gather up his stuff. All of it. Scrub the room. Take him to the United check-in counter at the airport at exactly ... nine o'clock tonight. If he's been drinking a little by then, so I need to help him onto the plane, well, that'll be just fine. But I don't think he will."

"Right, Mr. Cross? We have a deal? I send the money, and you come with me. Right?"

Philip looked at all the men around him - tough, serious, ugly men - and nodded.

"Fine. Now give the gentlemen your room key, so we don't have any difficulties. They'll wait with you while you pack. And don't worry about the meeting... I'll cancel it for you. Oh, and do you have a cell phone? Let me have it. You won't need it while you're with ... us."

He walked over to the glass door, still open to the balcony, and stepped out to the railing. "Look, Mr. Cross, there's a swimming pool. Wonder if I can reach it from here ..."

Looking back with a smile, he tossed Phillip's phone high in the air.

Jennie sat in the front row, off to the side where she could keep an eye on the double doors leading into the presentation room. She sipped the chai tea latte and wished there had been more on the breakfast buffet. Glancing back, she saw Mac wander in, slip off his western hat and settle into the back corner of the room. Always cautious, always observant. He winked at her across the crowd.

The meeting should have started thirty minutes ago. People talked, fussed, complained. A stooped elderly gentleman stood up at the other end of the front row and spoke to the crowd, or anyone in it who happened to notice he was speaking.

“What’s going on? Anybody know?”

Murmurs of complaint and frustration welled up, but apparently no one knew.

A hotel manager came in and walked to the podium. He tapped on the microphone, and slowly the room turned its attention to him.

“Has anyone seen Mr. Cross?” he asked. Silence. Jennie looked back just in time to see Mac disappear through the doors.

“What do you mean?” shouted someone in the middle of the crowd. “Isn’t he checked in?”

“Yes,” nodded the manager, “but there’s no answer at his door, and the ‘do not disturb’ sign is on the handle. I thought perhaps someone had seen him this morning, at breakfast perhaps.”

Apparently no one had. People began standing up and looking about.

Jennie slipped down the aisle and out of the room, jumped into the stairwell, trotted up one flight, and almost ran to room 217. As she turned the corner, she saw Mac closing the door behind him and peeling off the latex gloves.

“Andy’s on the way; let’s go for a scenic ride together. Cross is gone.”

“Right,” she said, and suddenly they became two strangers walking different ways in the hallway. She went down the far stairway while Mac strolled back to the elevator.

Jennie walked up to Mac in the milling crowd in front of the hotel entrance. “Mr. Williams, I was thinking of taking a ride around the city. Would you join me?”

“Absolutely,” he said, and waved for a cab. “Great idea. Nothing else to do now, since the meeting is apparently delayed a bit...”

He stepped across the lane of taxis waiting for passengers as Andy's cab arrived and pulled into another lane. The taxi manager waved them back. Mac stepped over to him, shook hands, and spoke quietly. The man looked at his hand, patted Mac on the shoulder, and sent him on his way. Jennie followed, as Andy walked around the cab and opened the door.

"He won't bother you," said Mac, and Andy nodded. They settled into the back seat.

"Andy. Cross has disappeared. Any idea what happened?"

"Yes, Mr. Cowboy, sir. Heard some of the local guys were at the hotel last night to hustle someone to the airport. Could be your guy?"

"When?"

"Late. Maybe for that United flight that leaves at 10?"

"Let's find out."

They pulled out into traffic and turned towards the airport.

Jennie dug her cell phone out and dialed a call.

"Dr. Sorenson?" Mac could not hear the response.

"I'm in Mérida. Where is he?" Again, he could not hear what was said.

She hung up. "Chicago."

Andy slammed on the brakes and slid over to the curb. Three cars surrounded them, pulling in close in front, behind, and on the street side. Men appeared on both sides of the car. Andy's hands did not leave the steering wheel. Mac's door was pulled open, hands reached in, and he was yanked out of the cab. He pushed one man away with a punch to the chest, twisted another man's arm up to force him to the ground, and the barrel of a shotgun was shoved into his stomach.

"No más."