

Double Identity (working title)
By David Benedict

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Page 1 of 12

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INCOMPLETE

Author's notes follow the main text.

Chapter 1: A Big Bite

I came to in a gutter, a tiny river created by the ever-present rain piling up behind me like I was the Hoover Dam. I ached. They'd worked me over good. If my bones could break, mine would be good for toothpicks right about now. As it was, I hauled myself up to a sitting position and took a look around. I didn't recognize this part of the city...maybe I wasn't even in the same city anymore...except I could recognize the stench of burning hot dogs and rancid popcorn. Only one theatre on the planet could ruin junk food like that and still stay in business, so I couldn't be too far away from home.

I looked up into the overcast skies, rain pelting my face like an overly affectionate dog. Luckily I'm right at home with water. The bastards had taken my hat, but I didn't care. I could get another one, and I still had my trenchcoat. It was beige, but the label it had when I bought it said "wheat". I took a deep breath, let it out, and began the chore of getting to my feet. I had no clue where I was going to go, but I figured I could follow my nose to the movies and then go from there. Now that I'd had a chance to assess the situation I realized that some damn fool was blowing his horn. The sound wrapped itself around my brain and squeezed, which went a long way towards explaining why I didn't feel any better than when I woke up.

I lurched over to the car, which was sitting about 25 yards away with its hood up. What this guy hoped to accomplish by making a godawful din in the middle of this burg I couldn't imagine. It would be like building a signal fire in a volcano or sending up a flare from a supernova. And then I got to the car and looked in the window and realized that this guy would never be accomplishing anything again, unless his ambition was to help the grass grow.

He was slumped over the steering wheel, blood running down into the seat in a river that rivaled the river of rainwater I'd woken up in. His eyes gaped open, his jaw sagged, and he had bite marks on his neck. Ragged, flesh-tearing bite marks, leaving a gaping hole.

Great. Just great.

I lurched away as fast as I could. When I woke up I hadn't known anything. Now I knew two things. Who was responsible for this poor schmoe's blaring, dissonant New Age concert imitation and who was going to get blamed for it, eventually. They were two different people. One of them was me.

I made it to the movie theatre before falling down, which I considered the moral equivalent of winning a biathlon and the Boston Marathon on the same day. The marquee threw its harsh neon message at me like a shotput, burning my eyes out with its brilliant intensity, announcing to the world that something part fifty was having its 30th anniversary and that tickets were going fast. I briefly wondered if the last original idea that left Hollywood had turned off the iron before it went out, but then I decided I could ponder the artistic integrity of the average moviegoer better from the comfort of my own

apartment, even though it really wasn't that comfortable. I staggered up, shifted my weight, did a forward roll, used the momentum to get my feet under me, and moved on.

I shambled down the street, making it to the corner, and leaned against a metal pole. Now that I was away from the scene I had a few moments to think, but I wouldn't really be safe until I could get home. I looked around. I'd have to cross the street, take Hillandale down to Lilac and then across to Shoal. The scenic route, to be sure, but also the best way to stay out of sight. The light changed and I hurried across the street, losing my balance midway but managing to stay upright until I reached the other side and then ran headlong into the brick facing of the building over there and falling right on my ass. I sat there for a minute. Normally this sort of thing wouldn't faze me, but the beating I'd taken was still affecting me. I couldn't even remember who it was or what they'd done, but there was a briny taste in my mouth that led me to believe I'd been given a message at the bottom of a dunk tank. I hoped I could remember what it was. I'm sure it was something along the lines of "stay away from the boss" or the like. Goes with the territory...when you get nosy, people complain. I guess the message wasn't so important after all...I fully intended to ignore it anyway.

I rolled over onto my stomach, got on my knees, and pushed up sharply with my arms, vaulting myself backwards so as to put my back to the wall. I turned down the nearest alley and staggered down it, heading back to my apartment where I hoped to put all the answers together with bandages and alcohol.

Chapter 2: Make it a Double

Waking up in your chair is never a desirable way to start the day. It's like your brain has decided to wake up but your whole body is still asleep and you just know that the crick in your neck is going to be with you for the duration. The fact that it was already three in the afternoon didn't help. I looked out the window of my office and saw the sun streaming in. It hadn't rained here in weeks, although across town was having a monsoon. The average rainfall for this city is pretty normal, but they have to truck water in from one side to the other. It's a crazy world, and the atmosphere is only the beginning.

I laboriously got out of my impromptu bed and smoothed out my shirt. I rotated my neck for the look of the thing, but the dull ache there looked like it had settled in. I made a mental note to talk to my favorite massage therapist, but that would be later. First things first. I opened my door, bent down to get the newspaper, and saw the headline. PLANNED SERIES SPINOFF SCUTTLED, it read. ORIGINAL CAST AGREES TO NEW TERMS, it went on in the subheadline. I ignored it, closed my door, and flicked the entire front section into the trash, taking the rest of the paper back to my desk. I started with the funnies and then moved on to the horoscope, because you never know what you're going to find in either, and then turned to section three where you sometimes found actual news if you were lucky.

Instead I saw the mayor's face leering at me through the magic of ink transfer and dot gain over a headline about how great things were going these days. I flopped the paper on my desk and turned to look out the window again. How did we get here? What happened? What didn't happen? I sighed and got up again, walking over to my metal filing cabinet. It's my job to ask questions, but those aren't the ones that pay the bills.

Traditions are important, and one of mine is to look at the picture of my ex-wife that I keep on top of the cabinet. I look at it and remember the good times, and then I consider briefly putting it face down or even moving it somewhere else...possibly even getting rid of it altogether. And then I sigh, leave it where it is, and open the cabinet. The hinges always make the loneliest, most forlorn creaking sound, as if the cabinet was sympathizing with me.

The section of unsolved cases was getting thick again. This would mean visits from clients. They visited me often, mainly because I refused to answer my phone, preferring to let them yell at my voice mail rather than into my ear. Why should I risk damaging my hearing when I have nothing to say back? It's smarts like that that keep me in business.

I selected a file at random, glanced at the contents, and put it back. That one could keep a while longer. It took the client an hour to get here on the bus and they had to take a day off to do it...he wouldn't be by anytime soon. People wonder why guys like that hire me. What can I say? I work cheap. And in a city like this, where all the crime and mystery kind of meshes together like a Gordian knot you can solve 5 or 6 of them in a row once the pieces start falling into place. Usually, anyway.

I closed the cabinet. Some days you just don't feel like working, and today was one of those days. Instead I grabbed my black jacket and walked out into the street. The case I wanted to work on today was personal.

Chapter 3: Pre-pondering

After about two hours of walking, if you could call it walking, I finally made it back to my apartment. Calling it that was an insult to the word, but the landlord objected when I called it a fleatrap and calling it an extension of the deepest, coldest pits of Hell tended to put off prospective dates. I unlocked the door, opened it, and fell through face first. I used my feet to pull on the little brass handle I had installed into the base of the door and heard the catch click shut. When something inconveniences you enough, you eventually do something about it. I slid out of my "wheat" coat, crawled across the floor into the bathroom, shedding the rest of my clothes along the way, and hoisted myself into the tub. A warm bath was what I needed. Then I could get drunk.

As the warm water caressed my skin, taking away the aches of the previous night, or most of them anyway, I tried to concentrate on exactly what had happened and why. They clearly knew who I was or else they wouldn't have bothered putting salt in the water. Which was an odd thing anyway, since I *prefer* salt in my water. It was almost as if their heart wasn't really in it, even though my ribs would have said otherwise. I

reflected on the fact that as much as it hurt, at least I wasn't in the hospital and I wouldn't be needing a body cast. Things like that make up for falling down every twenty feet. Usually, anyway.

As I sunk deeper into the still-running water I heard footsteps out in the hall. Probably the neighbors. Except that they stopped. I didn't have neighbors on either side of me or across the hall. They were all the way down at the end and I was used to the sound of them coming and going at odd hours just fading away, but these stopped. And then I heard knocking on my door. Fighting the urge to recite "The Raven" in my head, I sunk deeper into the water and hoped they'd go away. Instead they knocked louder. So loud that I could still hear it even after I dunked my ears under the surface, the water deepening the sound so that it resembled the heartbeat of an elephant, low and resonant.

Please, God, make it stop.

Surprisingly that seemed to work, as the pounding went silent. I cautiously raised my head up and heard footsteps receding down the hallway. Good. I was in no mood to talk to anyone...at least not yet. I planned on doing quite a bit of listening later, but no talking just yet. I crawled out of the tub and dripped all over the linoleum tile, sliding over to the closet where I extracted my leg braces. I only use them around the apartment, usually. Out on the streets it pays to be flexible, but here I like to be able to walk a little more normally. I got up and walked over to my phone to check my messages. Oddly there weren't any. But I did notice a piece of paper had been slid under my door. I went over and picked it up, unfolding it.

The writing was gnarled and crabbed and looked like it had been written by someone really old or someone trying to hold the pen in the wrong hand. There were only two words on it. "Tracks. Midnight." Someone trying to set up a meeting. I wadded the paper up and stored it in the circular file, then looked at the clock. It was only six in the afternoon. Plenty of time to make the world a better place...or at least my world. I poured myself a glass of something toxic and settled into my favorite chair to think.

Chapter 4: Essential Drive

After a brisk twenty minute walk I made it to my car. I hardly ever use it, I usually prefer to walk wherever I go, but today I needed to go across town and needed the windshield wipers. The key fit roughly into the lock and turned with the sharp creak of little-used metal. I opened the door and slid into the vinyl seat, which cracked slightly as I sat down. Maintenance was never my strong suit. I turned the ignition and the engine sputtered to life like a drowning man, then settled into a steady clicking rhythm that you could play the piano by.

I pulled away from the curb and began to think. I'd first read about the murder three days ago and had known immediately who the prime suspect was going to be. Whether he'd actually done it I wasn't sure. All the signs pointed to him, which was a pretty good bet that he was innocent. The guilty always have some hole in the plot. When everything

adds up, it's got to be a frame job. So if it wasn't who the evidence pointed to, who was it?

I made a left and the engine sputtered, but I stepped on the gas and it choked back to life.

I could think of a few people to talk to, but nobody really stood out as the kind of person to go to this sort of trouble. As I drove, the first sprinkles of rain hit my windshield like the heavens were spitting on me...which they probably were. I flicked on my headlights and drove on.

About fifteen minutes later I reached my first stop. The Empire Nightclub on 12th Avenue. I don't know where writers get the idea that you can just pull up to places like this and find a place to park. They were closed, wouldn't be open for another two hours, but all the parking spaces around the joint were already occupied. Sometimes I wondered if anyone owned those cars or if they were just there to make life more difficult. After about another half hour of wandering around I finally found a place willing to rip me off to the tune of ten dollars for the privilege of walking three blocks to visit a place I planned to be in for only five minutes. What a world.

I rapped loudly on the glass door and was eventually greeted by a small, mousy guy with glasses. He wore a white shirt and a tacky brown and blue striped necktie, loosely wound around his neck. The lenses on his glasses were thin, but they still distorted his eyes, giving him a perpetual look like a basset hound that had been cutting an onion, a sure sign that they were expensive. The frames were thin and gold. He also wore a haggard look and a brown hat. He was just who I'd come to see.

After a moment's pause he asked "What?"

"Ain'tcha gonna invite me inside for a drink?" I asked.

"No," he replied. When nothing further seemed ready to come from him I picked up my end of the conversation.

"I'm here about the murder," I said, getting right to the point. Two can play this game, even if some of the pieces are missing and the dice are loaded.

"Murder?" he laughed. "Sorry, we're fresh out of murder. Come back in a few hours and I can get you a grilled cheese or somethin'"

"You know what I'm talkin' about, Murray," I said.

"So what if I do? Sure, I heard about it. Sure, I got somethin' you might find interestin' about it. But I ain't gonna tell you, and that's out of pure spite. You had a real good thing goin' on and you blew it, and now you want me to help you? Well ain't that just dandy?"

“Look,” I began...

“No, you look. I don’t remember seein’ *my* picture in the paper about a year ago. I don’t remember my name bein’ in there either. Not even ‘an anonymous source’, ‘a well-placed insider’, or even ‘a low down dirty rat who sold out his buddies at great personal risk’ which wouldn’t have been true, but would have sounded kinda neat. No, it was all you. Well, guess what? It’s gonna be all you for real this time. Now get outta my doorway before you scare the customers.”

Murray closed the door roughly in my face, a bit more roughly than I would have recommended for a glass door, which clicked as the lock engaged, and then he pulled the blind. A moment later a hand reached through the blind’s slats, rotated the sign hanging on the inside from “Open” to “Closed”, gave me the finger, and withdrew.

I rapped on the door again, but nobody came to answer it, so I trudged back to my car. Murray had been right. You gotta give credit where it’s due, and I hadn’t. I’d been too wrapped up in...in whatever had been happening. It all seemed like a dream now. Or, more recently, a nightmare. I got back to my car and found that someone had thrown a rock through the side window to get at the bag of catnip I’d left on the front seat. That’d be a surprise for someone, and it wouldn’t be my cat. I got in and drove away.

Chapter 5: Making Tracks

It was five-til-Midnight and I was still in my chair in my apartment. The tracks were at least twenty five minutes away. There’s such a thing as living life on the ragged edge of disaster. There’s also such a thing as someone holding a gun on you, having broken in while you were drunk and unable to react. Luckily I was doing the former. The guy with the gun was trussed up in the corner and would be waking up in a few hours. I never get *that* drunk.

I’d quizzed him about the murder, but he didn’t know anything. I hadn’t really expected him to, these guys just show up from time to time hoping for a little payback or a little glory or in some cases a little money. I’d drop him off at a corner somewhere where he could be appropriately ridiculed later, but right now I was in a hurry. I stripped off my leg braces, got dressed, put on my “wheat” coat, and reached for my hat. Damn...I forgot. Whatever. I rolled over to the door and grabbed the doorknob. I got a good grip, hoisted myself up, opened the door, fell through, and closed it again all in one motion.

As I clomped down the hall I thought about where I should start tomorrow. I had about three people I needed to talk to right away, who would almost certainly point me to other people. Starting with Betty was always pleasant, but usually time consuming. Huck usually had good information, but you had to find him first. He was always on the lam from someone or something. That left Gek. Gek was one of those funny kids who always seemed to know everything, even though you couldn’t imagine anyone telling him anything. Everybody knew he couldn’t keep a secret, but he was big and knew several different kinds of martial arts, plus he carried a nightstick so nobody ever tried to

shut him up. The best you could hope for is to somehow cut off his supply of information. No luck so far. He probably knew what I would have had for breakfast if I'd had time to eat it, which I hadn't. The problem with Gek was that he wanted you to make it worth his while before he'd tell you anything useful. He didn't want money or favors, he wanted information. Obscure, useless trivia was his favorite. You could tell him what time it was and he'd tell you the date, but tell him that Simon Bolivar triumphed over Spain in the Battle of Boyaca on August 7, 1819 and he'd tell you your secret admirer's name, address, phone number, and your choice of a list of turn-ons or escape routes. I wondered what I'd have to tell him to get what I needed.

I exited my apartment building and made my way towards the tracks. Glancing at the bank display across the street I noticed that it was now 11:58 PM. The note hadn't said what would happen if I was late. Maybe I could renew it like a library book or reschedule it like a dentist's appointment. That was pretty much how I felt about this whole situation. I hated these midnight meetings...so melodramatic, and usually called by some know-nothing loser who was hoping to score a quick buck by being all cloak-and-dagger with information that I'd known for two weeks. The whole thing was like a root canal for the brain, complete with novocaine so you could be sure to feel like a real numbskull when it was over. Maybe I'd get lucky and get run over by the train.

Rounding the corner brought the tracks into view, but as I was at the top of a hill looking down on them I still had a long way to go. I did, however, see something that made me quicken my pace a bit. A train was on fire. Looking around, I found another bank clock and saw the time. 12:01 AM. At this distance the train was little more than a ribbon of light, like the afterimage you see when waving a sparkler around. The flames were rising high and I wondered what the train could have been carrying. Just then the car at the end of the line exploded with a shower of brilliant green sparks that everyone in town must have seen. I stopped and leaned against a telephone pole. No sense going down to the tracks now. Whoever was there was gone...one way or the other. I looked up into the rain and wondered if Gek was awake at this hour.

Chapter 6: Silophosy

The new hole in my window was letting in all the rain. I made a mental note to complain to the installer at some point, but that was for later. For now I was more interested in finding someone I hadn't pissed off so I could ask them some questions. It was more difficult than I'd thought it would be. So far I'd been to Murray, Ralph, Sue, "Bat", and Haden with no luck. Everybody thought they'd get to cash in when I did, and when they didn't they decided to take it out on me. The fact that I'd since fallen from grace didn't seem to cut any ice with anybody. I was just about to pack it in when I remembered Bert. Surely Bert wouldn't let me down. Right?

I made a right on Golden Leaf Drive and stepped on the accelerator. Bert was one of my "old schoolchums" as he liked to put it. We went way back and had been through a lot together. Which is cliché, but sometimes there's just no other way to put things. He even tried the gumshoe racket for a while with me, but eventually decided that he didn't like

staying up until 4:00 AM to get kicked in the teeth by some gorilla who had spotted you following him and then get stiffed on your fee later by the client. He still kept it up in an amateur fashion, but his heart wasn't really in it anymore. Still a good source in a tough spot, though.

Bert's place was a good twenty minute drive away, which would give me time to think. Why was this case so important to me, anyway? The whole thing had been a fiasco from the beginning and I should be just as glad he was dead...shouldn't I? Even though the docs kept calling him my brother, I just never felt the connection. How do you meet someone for the first time when you're in your mid-thirties and suddenly accept them into your life as a member of your family? It was the same kind of disconnect I'd felt when I was a kid going to those family reunions in the mountains of Tennessee and Virginia, meeting all those people who were related to me by genetics but who I'd never seen before, had no reason to believe I'd see again, and telling them I loved them just because we were alike on some microscopic level. I even had to remind myself a few times that the really pretty girls were my cousins.

And that's how it was with my brother. Alike on some microscopic level, but it just wasn't the same as if you'd grown up with him. Now he was gone, and for all that we'd ever talked he could have been the guy who sells me my coffee in the morning, but for some reason I was taking it personally. He was my brother who I barely knew and here I was taking time away from paying cases to track down his killer.

I made the left onto Valley View and began the long, curvy ascent that would, on the other side of the mountain, lead to Bert's place. Over the guardrail I could see what was left of the trainyard, the cold, blackened wreckage all that remained of a vehicle that many people use as a metaphor for toughness and unstoppable. I hadn't been down there yet. Even though that event led directly to my brother's eventual fate, the scene had been corrupted by the cops within the first 5 hours after it happened, so why bother?

The road finally made the summit and I began the slow drive back down. Bert's place was right at the foot of the mountain, so I was almost there. I thought about the last time I'd been to see him...it was for his birthday, about 8 months ago. Almost time for the next one. Birthdays meant something different these days, but they were still cause for celebration...usually. At last I saw the small, brown, ranch-style house up ahead. I pulled into the driveway, got out, and went to knock on the door, but Bert was already standing on the other side of the storm door, waiting for me. I hoped he knew something else besides that I was coming to visit.

Chapter 7: Trivia

The galoot who'd met me at the door ushered me into a well-lit room. Gek was sitting behind a large mahogany desk that had been polished to a brilliant finish. He had a large book open in front of him and looked even bigger than the last time I'd seen him. Gek pretty much did only two things: read and exercise. He'd decided at an early age that improving your mind and body were the only two activities in life worth doing, and he'd

done them both to an extreme that made Jekyll and Hyde look like chumps. He wore a white shirt with a dull silver tie and a black jacket. It was all he ever wore. Gek wasn't the kind of guy to waste time or money on picking out a wardrobe. It was all down to your priorities, and his were focused entirely on himself. Just goes to show, you don't have to be a miser or live lavishly to be a selfish prick.

My escort turned and walked back out the door, closing it behind him, leaving me alone, leaning on the wall. Gek didn't employ bodyguards, he didn't need them, but he did delegate out as much of the chores of everyday life to other people whenever possible. This included things like answering the door. He didn't even own a telephone. He also didn't look up at me. I cleared my throat.

"I know you're here," Gek said in a smooth, deep voice. Despite that acknowledgement he still didn't look up and continued poring over his book. After a while he turned the page.

This wasn't completely unusual for Gek. As I said, he's a selfish prick interested in only two things. And he knew I was there to get something from him, not to give him anything unless I had to. After about fifteen minutes he opened a drawer in the desk, took out a leather bookmark, placed it carefully in the book and closed it. The cover was cloth-bound in a coarse blue weave with gold lettering in some language I didn't recognize. Not that that took much. I was good at a lot of things, but languages wasn't on the list.

Gek regarded me impassively. "Now," he said, finally, "what can you do for me?"

I licked my lips nervously. There was no telling what he was going to want me to tell him in exchange for what I wanted him to tell me. "I'm here about a guy in a car," I eventually managed. That seemed like a safe enough lead-in. The trick was to make the information seem unimportant. Because if Gek knew how much I really wanted him to tell me he'd have me spilling my guts about anything. I suddenly realized I knew too much already.

"He's dead," Gek said, "But you already knew that, so you can just tell me what time it is now."

"It's ten minutes after one a.m." I said, checking my watch and cursing my luck. I was hoping he hadn't heard yet. Someday I was going to figure out how he did it. This was a typical game Gek played. Nobody ever came to see him unless they needed something...social skills weren't exactly a priority for him, so he'd lead you around by your nose because he knew you'd come sniffing for information he had. It could be maddening, especially if you hadn't had time to stock up on useless trivia before you came. Unexpectedly, however, Gek cut to the chase this time.

"I'm glad you're here, actually. There's something I've been meaning to ask you," he said, leaning forward over the desk. Gek didn't intimidate me...hardly anybody did. But

I'd heard the door lock click to a few minutes ago and wondered what that was all about. It had happened when he first started talking to me, as if they thought they could keep me from finding out until it was too late.

“What is it, Gek?”

“Just a little detail I've had some trouble unearthing,” he said, getting up and walking around to my side of the desk. There was only one chair in the room and it was Gek's...he never invited you to stay long enough to sit down anyway. I tensed up, but kept leaning on the wall. It's better to keep them thinking you're relaxed for as long as possible.

“I know what you want to know, Gek,” I said. “But I can't tell you. I can't tell anybody.”

“Then we have a problem.”

I considered my options. I hadn't come here to get into a fight, but it looked like the conversation was heading in that direction. The future loomed over me just as Gek was looming over me now. Considering where I suspected this case was going to go, I'd be able to spill the beans on the whole thing very soon. But I needed to know something about the guy in the car right now. Gek stopped moving towards me and looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he turned, went back to his desk, sat down, and opened his book.

“You have a train to catch,” he said. I heard the door behind me unlock and open, my “escort” standing on the other side meaningfully. I turned and slouched out the door.

Chapter 8: Smoke Gets In Your Lies

I sat in Bert's living room under a dense haze of cigarette smoke. I never developed the habit, but Bert felt that it was required anytime you were doing any kind of investigating. One of those little symbols like fog in a haunted graveyard, complete with shadows at dusk. He never smoked unless I was discussing a case with him.

“I'm glad you came,” he said, sitting down. “I was sorry to hear about...your brother.”

“Yeah, me, too,” I lied. Or was it a lie? I was still wrestling with the whole issue and my mind kept wandering back to the filing cabinet back in my office. I had so much to do and here I was wasting my time on this case.

Author's Notes:

This was my second year of doing NaNoWriMo. Unlike the first year I had no outline or plan, I just had the germ of an idea and thought I could fake my way through it. Maybe I could have, but work intervened and I was not able to devote the time to the story that was necessary. As a result, this novel stands unfinished currently (11/28/07) although I still like the basic idea well enough that I keep thinking I'll work on it. The story structure is much more complicated than anything else I've written, however, and so it will require much more character development and timeline plotting to really do it justice.

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