

# Out of the frying pan...

by Mathew Paust

By the time we'd hopped up to the cedars I knew it was time to signal Jamie the information she needed. I knew I'd get another jab in the kidney, but figured my shriek would alert her to my situation. She'd undoubtedly heard the first one, and might have thought it was some feral creature. Hawk killing a rabbit, maybe. She might have heard the "hey, my neck" too, but I couldn't be sure. I took a deep breath, braced myself for the jab—or something worse—and let fly: "JAMIE! ONE!"

Instead of the jab, a hand big as a catcher's mitt and reeking of tobacco suddenly clamped over my mouth and nose, pressing so hard I could not expel any breath. Horrified that I'd forgotten to call her "Gertie" as instructed, and in agony this time from the jarring to my neck, a pain nearly as bad as the kidney's, I started once more to shout. This time to no avail. Nothing got out, and the pressure from my lungs threatened to burst my eardrums. At least the marching stopped, but the hissing voice again assaulted my ear. "One more squeak out of you, mousebrain, and this is as far as you're gonna go." Fingers strong as a vise squeezed my cheeks hard enough to break off molars. At the same time the hand gripping my shirt gave an extra twist pressing knuckles into my spine.

The pain sent my brain berserk, racing like the rodent it had been called. Then a cooler consciousness from somewhere above my fiery despair broke in to tell me that unless this monster had more than two hands, the two that were occupied with my person had no way to hold a gun. The instant this comprehension clicked into place, knowing there was no immediate danger of being shot, I managed to get my teeth into some of the flesh covering my nose and mouth and bit as hard as I could. At the same time I jabbed a foot and an elbow backward, hoping to hit something soft. I heard cursing above me, and realized I'd been thrown to the ground. I was lying on my back. I hurt like hell all over, but I was breathing.

I saw the giant staring down at me, face enraged. It was holding the hand I'd bitten with its other hand. I saw blood dripping through the fingers. I tasted salt. I heard Jamie's voice. It was strong and clear, and sounded nearer than I'd expected: "HOLD YOUR FIRE!"

The giant jerked toward the direction of the shout, and the next thing I remember was seeing a long-barreled revolver in its bloody hand. After an eternity I heard directly above me: "GERTIE!"

