

Hello, My Ragtime Gal

By Jane Tesh

“Another haunted house?” Jonathan MacKensie looked up from the folder he’d been reading, his dark eyes filled with dismay. “Dr. Moorhouse, Benedek and I just finished a case involving a haunted house not two weeks ago.”

“Don’t carry on so, MacKensie,” she said testily. “You may investigate a hundred haunted houses before the year is out. Read on.”

Jonathan bent his head, sighing. “Several sightings, mysterious figure – this is exactly like the one before.”

Then it shouldn’t take you too long to solve,” said Dr. Moorhouse with a satisfied smile. “And Dr. Overton will be assisting you.”

Once again, Jonathan’s heart sank. “Roberta Overton?”

“What’s the matter now? Dr. Overton is quite competent.”

“Oh, I have no problem with Dr. Overton’s competency,” said Jonathan, “but she is – how can I say this? -- somewhat difficult.”

Dr. Moorhouse gave him one of her frostiest stares. “That is not the point, MacKensie.”

“No, of course not,” he said hastily. “I’m just saying it might be better if I handle this case myself.”

She shook her head. “I have a particular reason for wanting Dr. Overton to work on this assignment. The era in which Miss Emma Lovelace lived happens to be Dr. Overton’s field of expertise.”

“Then why not let her have this case?” Jonathan suggested brightly. “I’d be more than happy to step aside if you think—”

“If you think you’re getting out of this, think again,” she snapped. “You will be in Sedalia, Missouri, by Tuesday. Make your arrangements. Dr. Overton will meet you there.”

Sedalia, Missouri, was a sleepy little town with red brick stores, large stone churches, and many beautiful old homes surrounded by ancient shade trees. Along the fringes of town were all the trappings of modern civilization, motels, fast food restaurants, malls, and movie theaters, but the inner core of the town seemed unchanged. The streets were either numbered or named for states. Jonathan passed Massachusetts and Ohio and turned down Kentucky, looking for Third Street. He saw several signs and banners welcoming ragtimers to Sedalia and remembered reading in the visitor’s guide that some sort of annual music festival was held here.

Ragtime seems appropriate for this place, he thought. Most of these houses look like they were built around the turn of the century.

Third Street had several stores, a large brick school, and a large brick auditorium. Further down the street, the trees were older and thicker, the houses spaced further apart, the neighborhood quieter. Here, at 1621, was the Lovelace house, a white house with lacey trim, a tower, and a porch all around. Jonathan was not surprised to see Edgar Benedek on the front porch swing.

“What kept you, Jack?” Benny greeted.

“Good morning,” Jonathan said wryly. “How did you find out this time?”

Benny grinned, shaking his head in wonder at his own cleverness. “Sometimes I believe I’m truly psychic, J.J. This little voice in my head kept sayin’ ‘Go to Sedalia, go to Sedalia.’”

Actually, I bribed Randy. Promised her I'd take her with me to the Harmonic Convergence."

"I'm sure she was thrilled." Jonathan came up the front steps, admiring the stained glass panels on either side of the door. "This is a beautiful house. Where do people get the idea it's haunted?"

"Hey, I just got here," said Benny. "You can fill me in, partner."

Jonathan sat down in one of the rocking chairs on the porch. "I hate to break it to you, Benedek, but I have a new partner, thanks to Dr. Moorhouse. You're welcome to stay, but I don't think you'll want to."

"I am deeply intrigued, Jack. Who could possibly replace me?"

"Dr. Roberta Overton."

Benny frowned, thinking. "I've heard that name. Overton. Would that be Roberta Overton, ex-wife of Greg Overton, hot shot lawyer?"

"Yes, I believe her husband's name was Greg," said Jonathan. "I wouldn't bring up the subject, though. She's very touchy about it. She's very touchy about a lot of things."

Benny stopped swinging. "Pal, I know Greg Overton. Many's the time I've helped him drown his sorrows. The happiest day of his life was when the divorce came through. He cleaned her out, too."

"Just keep it to yourself, okay?"

"Sure, sure," Benny promised. "When does she make the scene?"

He did not have to wait long, for in a few minutes, a taxi pulled up and a tall young woman got out. She paid the driver and came striding up the walk, an intense-looking woman with short sleek dark hair and dark eyes that narrowed when she saw the two men on the porch.

Jonathan had gotten up. "Dr. Overton, hello," he said with his best smile. "I don't believe you've met Edgar Benedek. He's worked with me on several--"

"Let's get this straight," said Roberta Overton sharply. "I don't want to be here. I don't want to work with anyone. I am here under extreme duress, and I just want to finish and leave."

"Ooo, hostility," said Benny, grinning. "I like that in a woman."

She glared at him. "I know who you are, Mr. Benedek. You're that little charlatan of a reporter who drags the Georgetown Institute into every bizarre scandal that comes along."

"Got it in one, sugar," he said, unfazed. "You any relation to Greg Overton?"

"Benedek," Jonathan pleaded.

"Heard you lost a bundle," he continued cheerfully, as Dr. Overton's face pales in anger. "Old Greg sure knows his stuff, doesn't he?"

She turned, speaking to Jonathan in a voice that could have peeled paint from walls. "Dr. MacKensie, I see absolutely no reason to continue this investigation. I'll just tell Dr. Moorhouse you were unable to keep your associate under control."

"Oh, no problem," said Benny, forestalling Jonathan's apology. "Jack, I'm gonna let you two thrash this out. Catch you later."

"Benedek," he protested, but Benny was already down the porch steps.

Roberta Overton stood with arms folded, her eyes murderous. "I appreciate you telling everyone my personal business, MacKensie."

Jonathan tried to explain. "He's a friend of your ex-husband's. He probably didn't--"

"Who isn't a friend of my ex-husband's?" she broke in bitterly. "Never mind. Let's get this

over with.”

Jonathan followed her into the calm quiet of the empty house, thinking Benedek had the right idea. In her present mood, there was no way to placate Roberta; he'd seen that steely glare in committee meetings when things weren't going her way. Well, the best thing to do was finish the investigation, write the report, and forget it. Maybe he could stay out of her way.

There were a few pieces of furniture in the front parlor, a sofa and two matching chairs, some small round tables. The faded draperies had once been a rich burgundy; now they were a muted pink and covered with dust. There was an old upright piano in the corner, a dusky fringed shawl draped over the top, and what looked like an old phonograph in a large wooden case.

“Why don't I start in here?” Jonathan asked. “You can check in--”

Roberta's face was still taut with anger. “Start anywhere you like, MacKensie. You're the expert here, or haven't you decided that yet?”

“I don't know what you mean by expert,” he replied, treading carefully. Why was she so angry? “It's true I've been on a few cases involving ghosts, but I'm certainly no expert. Actually, Benedek knows quite a bit more than--”

“Oh, stop it,” she said, to his surprise.

“Dr. Overton,” he said, “if we're going to be working together, we're going to have to come to some sort of truce.”

“You still don't know, do you?” she said, exasperated. “Didn't Dr. Moorhouse bother to tell you? When I heard she was setting up a unit to investigate the paranormal, I was the first one to apply for the job.”

“I didn't know that,” said Jonathan uneasily.

“Of course not. No one knew. She didn't even consider me. I'm totally ignored, and who gets the position? Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, who doesn't care, who isn't even qualified. No matter. You're her pet, her favorite--”

This time, Jonathan did the interrupting. “Wait just a minute. I may be skeptical, I may be unconvinced, but I assure you, I do care about doing the job properly. And as for being qualified, what are the qualifications for hunting ghosts? Does your history degree give you an edge?” So this was the source of her animosity against him. He'd never known she had the slightest interest in the paranormal or supernatural.

“When I see you bumbling about with that ridiculous reporter,” she began, and then stopped, obviously trying to control her temper. “I wanted to head the unit, MacKensie, and Moorhouse knew it. This assignment is her idea of a joke, a bone tossed my way.”

Jonathan wondered what would be a safe reply. “I'm sorry if things didn't turn out as you'd hoped,” he said in as neutral a voice as he could manage. “As for this investigation, Dr. Moorhouse thought I would benefit from your knowledge of the early 1900s.”

She was shaking her head. “Sell it somewhere else, MacKensie.”

Jonathan took a moment to force his anger down. “Fine. How would you like to proceed?”

“I'll go upstairs,” she said. “You can look down here. We'll each write a report and submit it. It's pointless. It's a waste of time, like every other project I've attempted, including marriage,” she added bitterly. “But we're here, so we might as well look around.”

She clumped up the stairs. Reminding himself this would soon be over, Jonathan took several deep breaths, calmed down, and began looking around the pleasant little parlor. He was not exactly sure what he was looking for. Neighbors had seen a figure and had heard some odd noises. No one had any definite information. Perhaps it is a waste of time, he thought, still shaken by the depth of Roberta Overton's bitterness. I never knew she wanted this position. I

would have gladly let her have it. But it is my responsibility now, and although there have been times when I wanted to turn and run, Benedek and I have done a lot of good, as well. I feel we've really accomplished something, made some important discoveries. Of course, it's been frustrating to put my other research on hold, but I do care about this work.

Well, maybe not this particular case, rooting about in someone's private belongings. Feeling as if he were trampling on someone's grave, Jonathan gingerly inspected the contents of a table drawer: the dainty gloves, the fragile fan, the beaded bag, all treasured possessions from a lady's life – a lady, not the callous woman upstairs. I'm all for women's lib, but there's no need to be rude. I wish I didn't have to go through these things. If Benedek were here, he'd say something snappy, like, she's not likely to complain, Jack.

He carefully returned the items to their places in the drawer. The information on Miss Lovelace had been sketchy. She had lived here all her life and had been a model citizen. Even if there were such things as ghosts, it was doubtful Miss Lovelace had become one. What could be unresolved in such a calm and uneventful life?

Well, how about some music? he decided. Let's see if the Victrola works. He opened the heavy case and pulled up the flower-shaped speaker. Choosing a record at random from the stack of thick, heavy records, he put it on the turntable. He carefully wound the crank and set the large needle in place. There were loud raspy scratching sounds and then a surprisingly sweet violin solo over a syncopated piano arrangement.

Pleasant sort of tune, he thought as he inspected the contents of a second small drawer. Might brighten up the atmosphere around here.

The violin was joined by a viola and horns in a sprightly dance-like chorus. Then the tune returned to the violin, the sweet melancholy melody floating lightly above the other instruments. Jonathan found himself smiling, imagining the concerts in the park, ladies strolling with their lace parasols, gentlemen in straw hats bowing politely as they passed.

"What are you doing in here?" a voice gasped.

He looked up, startled, to see Roberta Overton in the doorway, her eyes wide, her hand to her throat in surprise.

"What are you doing in my house?" she asked.

Jonathan stared at her, perplexed. "Your house?"

Her eyes glanced over him nervously. "I-I don't believe I know you, sir," she said, her voice light and somewhat breathless.

My God, what's happened? He wondered. IS she having some sort of nervous breakdown? "Dr. Overton," he began worriedly.

"Doctor?" she said, flustered. "You must have me confused with someone else, sir. It is highly unlikely that I or any other young lady my age would be a doctor. Now what are you doing in my house? What are you doing with my things?"

Jonathan hastily dropped the embroidered handkerchief he'd been holding. "Roberta?" he said, bewildered. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"I don't think we've been properly introduced, sir," she said. "I am Miss Emma Lovelace."

"Jonathan MacKensie," he replied, stunned.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. MacKensie," she said a bit shyly. The hard light had gone from her eyes, replaced by a softness he found disconcerting. He was wondering what to say next when she noticed her beige slacks and tailored blouse and gasped, a fiery blush staining her cheeks. "My clothes!"

"You look fine," Jonathan hastened to assure her. "These clothes are perfectly acceptable for these times, Miss Lovelace. Please don't be embarrassed."

She stared at him. "These times?"

Accepting for the moment that this was indeed Miss Emma Lovelace, he nodded. "It's 1987."

"1987?" She was so pale, Jonathan moved forward, afraid she might faint, but she steadied herself. Her eyes were shining, and an awed smile brightened her face. "1987," she repeated slowly. "I did it. I actually did it. I've come back."

Jonathan watched her, equally awed. There had been a time when he vehemently denied the possibility of ghosts possessing the living. That was before he met Edgar Benedek, before he had experiences that could not be explained in a logical manner. What other explanation could there be for the radiant and pleasant young lady smiling at him so happily. This certainly wasn't Roberta Overton.

"How nice it is to be young again," she said, tentatively feeling her face. When she felt Roberta's short hair, she gulped. "This is the fashion, also?"

Jonathan removed the needle from the record. "Yes, you look fine, please believe me. I'm sure it's difference from what you remember, but it the correct look for the Eighties."

"Oh," she said, uncertain. Then, "Oh, this--" She faltered. "Dear me, I seem to be in another person."

"Is she in there, too?" Jonathan asked, concerned.

After a moment, Miss Lovelace said, "I can't tell. But surely she wouldn't mind if I stayed just a little while?" She gazed around the room. "I just wanted to see if everything's all right. I just wanted. . . I don't know what I wanted," she confessed. "I heard music. That song is one of my favorites, 'Springtime Rag.'" She looked at him shyly. "You haven't said what you're doing here, Mr. MacKensie."

"Oh, I'll be glad to get out of your way," said Jonathan. "If you want to be alone to – to do whatever it is you need to do. I hope I haven't disturbed anything." He wasn't sure what to do.

"Please don't go," she said, and then blushed. "Dear me, I sound awfully forward. I mean, if you are looking for something, perhaps I can help you."

He had never realized how large and dark Roberta's eyes were, nor how pleasantly low her voice could be. Was there some way to explain? "Miss Lovelace, I'm supposed to be investigating some rumors of a ghost in your house."

"A ghost?" she said. "Do you think that could be me?" Her eyes sparkled. "How exciting! Mr. MacKensie, I've never been anything, and now I'm a ghost." She spun around the parlor, laughing. "This is wonderful! I'm a real live ghost!" Abruptly, she stopped. "Oh, you must think I have no upbringing, at all."

"No, please, go on," he said, enchanted.

"I can't help it," said Miss Lovelace, smiling. "This is like a dream. Oh, my garden! It looks splendid! Who has tended it, I wonder?"

She hurried out the back door. Jonathan watched from the parlor window as she touched each flower, smiling into the blossoms, caressing the roses. This was impossible. He was seeing Roberta Overton laughing and carefree, possessed by a dead woman's spirit. Was she all right? Would she come back? Did anyone want her back was the question. Her new personality was so delightful.

The young woman came back inside, breathless, beautiful. "Oh, the flowers look wonderful. I had forgotten what it was like to smell flowers, to feel how soft they are. How I wish I had more time."

"More time?" Jonathan asked.

“Just today,” she said wistfully. “You see, I’ve been trying to come back for some time now, but I can have only one day. I suppose this is it.”

Jonathan felt compelled to help this young lady. “Miss Lovelace, there must be something important you needed to do.” Benedek always said these spirits come back for a reason. “Can you think of some unfinished business, or something that was unresolved in your life?”

“No,” she said, puzzled. “I led the calmest of lives, Mr. MacKensie. I kept my garden. I did a little needlework and made all my clothes. Which reminds me,” she frowned at her present attire. “If you will excuse me, I really should put on something more appropriate. I am quite uncomfortable in these trousers.”

She went upstairs, and Jonathan pondered his next move. Should he try to locate Benedek? What could he do? The truth was, he was enjoying Miss Lovelace’s company. She seemed so fresh and uncomplicated. Just today, she had said. Why not talk with her, find out more about her? This was investigating, wasn’t it?

When she returned, she was wearing a white lace blouse and a long dark skirt. She had pinned a cameo brooch in the center of the high neckline and turned down the frothy lace cuffs. “Miss Overton is taller than I,” she said, apologizing for the length of the skirt, “and my shoes do not fit her feet, but I do feel better in a dress.”

“You look very nice,” said Jonathan. All the hard edges were gone now, leaving Roberta almost delicate.

“Why, thank you,” she said, her eyes meeting his. “I must say, Mr. MacKensie, you look so different from the men I remember.” There was a slight catch in her voice. “Your clothes, your hair – fashions change quickly, do they not?”

“Too quickly, perhaps,” he said, smiling.

She blushed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean – I think you are – very nice looking.” Her voice faded out in embarrassment.

“And I think you are very lovely,” he replied quietly.

Up came her eyes, filled with wonder. “But I was always accounted quite plain. You must mean this young lady, Miss Overton.”

He shook his head. “I mean you, Miss Lovelace, and you make her lovely, as well.”

She turned away, her cheeks bright pink. “Dear me, sir, and we are barely acquainted. I – I – why, there is my piano. Let me see if it is still in tune.” She opened the piano and played a few quick chords. “It’s not too bad,” she said with a hesitant smile. “It has been so long. . .” Roberta’s graceful hands played lightly at first and then with more confidence. The tunes all had the same lilting quality Jonathan recognized from the old recording. Miss Lovelace seemed lost in the music, so he sat down in one of the faded chairs to listen. Some of the songs were fast with complex rhythms, but most of them were sweet melodies, slightly minor.

Miss Lovelace stopped. “My heavens,” she said, turning to face him. “How remiss of me. I am a poor hostess to ignore you for so long.”

“No, no, I’m enjoying this very much,” Jonathan assured her. “What was that last piece you played?”

“That is one of my own composing,” she admitted.

“You’re a composer,” he said, impressed.

“No, not really,” she said. “You see, there were a few women composers I admired, and I thought perhaps I might be able to write some rags of my own. If my books are still here – ah, yes.” She reached under the fringed shawl for a small stack of music and showed him. “This one, ‘The Thriller,’ by May Aufderheide, was very popular in 1909, and this one, ‘Horseshoe Rag,’

by Julia Lee Niebergall, in 1911. Just as good as the ones written by men.”

“Yes, of course, I’m sure they are,” said Jonathan.

“I keep forgetting,” said Miss Lovelace, abashed. “In your time, men and women are equal, are they not? But in my time, to have music published was quite an accomplishment for a woman. Miss Aufderheide was fortunate that her father owned a publishing company, otherwise, her lovely rags would not have survived. I thought perhaps I might--” she sighed. “But that’s over and done, isn’t it? That was a long time ago.”

“Does your piece have a title?” Jonathan asked, hoping to divert her from her sad mood.

“I was going to call it ‘A Summer Breeze,’” she replied, “but Mr. James Scott, a very prolific composer, had used that. My friend Althea suggested ‘Somebody’s Smile,’ because she said it sounded as if someone had looked up and smiled at her, someone she liked very much.” She paused gazing at him with her shy smile. “I think it’s appropriate.”

“Yes, it is,” Jonathan agreed. “Miss Lovelace, I don’t know a lot about ragtime music, but it is a lovely song, and I think someone would publish it. Do you have a copy of it? Would you let me see if I could get a publisher to look at it?”

She sat still for so long, he was afraid he had insulted her. When she finally spoke, her voice was not quite steady. “You would do this for me?”

“I’ll try. Do you have others?”

She nodded, her trembling fingers searching through the music. “I-I don’t know what to say, Mr. MacKensie. That would be most – most kind of you. There are five, I think – yes, they’re all here. Someone has taken very good care of my things.”

“I’d like to hear them,” said Jonathan.

The look she gave him made his heart turn over. “Thank you,” she said. She spread the yellowed sheets of music out and began to play. This melody also had the appealing minor sweetness, the bright rhythm. When she finished, she sighed. “It’s been so long. I loved to play. I never realized how much until now. It was such a consolation to me.” Her eyes were filled with an infinite sadness. “I suppose I wasted a great deal of my life, Mr. MacKensie. Wished it away.” Before he could answer, she stood and closed the piano. “You know, I’m very hungry. Isn’t that odd?”

Jonathan looked at his watch. “It’s past twelve. Would you care for some lunch?”

“I’m afraid I can’t leave the house or the garden,” she said. “Unless. . . unless Miss Overton needs to come back? Am I keeping her from something important?”

“No,” Jonathan said quickly. “No, I don’t want – that is, she doesn’t need to come back, not just yet. Why don’t I get something and bring it back here?”

Her gaze was steady. “You will come back?” she asked, as if she didn’t believe him.

“Yes, of course.”

“All right,” she said, still uncertain. “I’ll set the table.”

Anxious to return, Jonathan stopped at the nearest restaurant, buying some salads, sandwiches, and iced tea. He thought of trying to find Benedek to tell him of Dr. Overton’s remarkable transformation, but reconsidered. He was having a very nice time with Miss Lovelace. Was this really her ghost, or had Roberta had a breakdown of sorts? After all, she was an expert on the 12900s; she’d know how to dress, how to speak. Was Roberta playing some bizarre game with him? Or did her affinity with the turn of the century simply make her a more convenient channel for Miss Lovelace? And why had Miss Lovelace come back?

His questions fell away at the sight of her in the doorway.

“You did come back,” she said in amazement.

"I try to keep my promises," said Jonathan, smiling.

There again was her becoming blush. "Please forgive me for doubting you. Come in. I've set the garden table. It's so pleasant outside."

There was a white wicker table and two chairs in the garden, surrounded by the hedges of hollyhocks and zinnias and trellises covered with red roses.

"I can hear music," said Miss Lovelace, pleased. "Is there a concert of some kind in Liberty Park today?"

"It's part of the ragtime festival," Jonathan explained. "I saw some signs in town. Apparently, they hold one every year in honor of Scott Joplin."

She brightened. "Why, of course. Mr. Joplin's Maple Leaf Club was downtown on Main Street. I suppose it's gone now. I know all his works. I think 'Weeping Willow' and 'Leola' are my favorites."

"Was this his home town?" Jonathan asked.

"No, but he lived here several years. So they hold a festival now. How wonderful. Perhaps that's why I came back today." She laughed. "Maybe Mr. Joplin's here, too."

Jonathan had put the food on the table and now held her chair for her. She was delighted with the small salads and sandwiches. "This is all very nice, Mr. MacKensie. And iced tea. How thoughtful."

"I wish you'd call me Jonathan," he said. "Amy I call you Emma? I know we haven't known each other very long, but if you have just this one day."

Her hand fluttered to her throat. "Well, I-I suppose that would be all right, J-Jonathan," she said, stumbling over his name. "This is a little unusual. I really should have a chaperone, as well as my mother and father's permission to see you, but since everyone is dead, and I'm probably old enough to be your great-grandmother. . ."

"I assure you I won't think any less of you as a lady," he said. "I don't see how I could. How anyone could."

She thanked him, still flustered. "Perhaps you'll tell me something about yourself."

Jonathan told her he was a professor of anthropology and a part time investigator into the realms of the paranormal and supernatural. "But I've never met such a charming ghost," he added.

"And Miss Overton?"

"She was supposed to help me on this case. But don't worry," he said, seeing an anxious look cross her face. "She's doing just fine where she is."

"Will you tell me about some of your other cases?" Miss Lovelace asked after a dainty sip of tea. "I have always been fascinated by stories of the spirit world."

As Jonathan related some of his tamer adventures, Miss Lovelace's face brightened and her eyes became round with amazement. "What an exciting life you lead," she sighed enviously.

"Too exciting sometimes," he grinned. "This is more like it, a quiet afternoon with a lovely lady."

"You are too kind," she said. She tilted her head slightly to hear the faint strains of music from the park. "Ah, I know that one." She hummed along for a while and then sang softly. "Oh, I never felt so blue. I never will get over you, because you left me singing those neglectful blues." She smiled at Jonathan self-consciously. "I feel a little silly singing that."

"But you have a pretty voice," he said.

"Thank you," she said, "but I've never had a broken heart, so it seems a bit absurd to sing

the 'Neglectful Blues.' But I do so like the tune."

"You're fortunate," said Jonathan. "A broken heart isn't something you want to have."

"Oh, yes," she said, and at his puzzled look, explained. "It would mean I had truly been in love." Her parasol was hanging on the back of her chair, and as the afternoon sun was bright, she opened the lacy umbrella, effectively hiding her face for a moment. When she looked at him again, her expression was calm. "You see, I lived all my life in this house, sheltered and secure, waiting, dreaming. I died here. Nothing ever happened to me. I never did anything. I never went anywhere, just to town now and then with my parents. It was a very quiet life, but I grew used to it. It was all I ever knew. I was thirty-five when I died. Today, talking to you, I am ten years younger, as if it were 1916 all over again." She was silent for a long moment, listening to the music. Then she said, "Miss Overton is waiting and dreaming, too. She has been out in the world, has done things I've never even dreamed of, but we are the same, she and I. We've never really been in love." She timidly put her hand on his, her voice a whisper. "Until now." Her hand trembled. "Could you, for a short time, indulge me? Pretend? Just for a moment?"

Jonathan folded her hand in his. "I don't have to pretend," he said, and leaned over to kiss her.

There were tears on her cheeks. "Ordinarily, I would never be so forward," she whispered, "but I think Miss Overton is giving me a push."

He laughed. "You're not being forward, Emma. I wanted to kiss you." Her took her handkerchief and gently wiped away the tears. "Don't cry. I'm going to kiss you again."

She sighed, dropping her parasol to put her arms timidly around his neck. "If I weren't already dead, I would die of sheer pleasure," she murmured, causing him to laugh again. "Jonathan," she said, eyes downcast. "Perhaps we could walk in the garden for a while?"

"Of course," he said, retrieving her parasol. He offered his arm. "Whatever you like."

The sun was just below the trees and a few butterflies were taking last sips from the roses when Emma paused, as if hearing some inner call. In the soft light, Jonathan could almost see a delicate face, blue eyes, and long chestnut curls like a shadow over Roberta's features. She turned to him and gently touched his cheek. "Good-by, Jonathan," she said, "and thank you."

"Emma?" he said. Suddenly, he was shoved back.

"What is this, MacKensie?" said Roberta Overton's sharp voice. "Keep your hands to yourself! What the hell is going on?" Her dark eyes flashed. "You'd better explain and explain fast," she warned. "Where are my clothes? What am I doing in this get-up?"

Feeling almost physically ill at the loss of Emma, Jonathan tried to recover. "I'm not sure you'll believe me, Dr. Overton, but--"

"Save it," she snapped. "I don't want to hear your lame excuses. This must be your idea of some weird sex game."

"Don't you remember anything?" he asked. Hoping there was a memory of the gentle lady left somewhere.

"My clothes had better be upstairs," she said angrily, stalking away.

Jonathan looked back at the little table with the remains of the luncheon and then down at the lace parasol. He picked it up, smoothing the ruffles. How could he expect Roberta to believe the truth? Despite what Emma had said, she and Dr. Overton were light-years apart.

She was dressed and back in only a few moments. "Is that your rental car out front? Give me the keys."

"If you'd just let me explain," he protested, knowing it was useless.

"Wait until Moorhouse hears about this kinky little scene, MacKensie. I may have a new

job, after all.”

“It isn’t what you think!” Jonathan said. “You were possessed by Miss Lovelace.”

“The keys, MacKensie.”

“This is absurd,” he said, following her out to the car. “I’m telling you nothing happened. Miss Lovelace just borrowed you for a while, and we had a very pleasant afternoon.”

“I’ll bet you did,” she said acidly. “Give me those keys, or I start screaming for the police.”

“Dr. Overton--”

She remained firm, one hand stretched out imperiously. Jonathan sighed and reached into his pocket. In the taut silence, he could still hear music from the park. Roberta stiffened.

“That music,” she said, her voice odd.

“It’s the ragtime festival,” he explained, resignedly handing over the keys. “Not that that means anything to you any more.”

She stood still, listening. When she spoke, her voice was faint and troubled. ““Springtime Rag,”” she said.

For a moment, Jonathan thought Emma was back. He let his breath out slowly. “Yes,” he said. “A favorite of yours.”

“N-no. Of hers,” said Roberta. She looked at him searchingly. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s all right,” he said, instinctively taking her hand. She didn’t draw away. “You don’t remember, but you’re all right, believe me. It was just--” he faltered, wondering how to explain it to her.

She was still looking at him steadily, as if reading the answer to her confusion in his eyes. The music continued, sweet, lilting, slightly melancholy. “Yes,” she whispered. She slowly put her hand to his cheek, her eyes soft with tears.

“Yo, Jack! This is the only taxi in Sedalia. Have I got the knack or what?”

They turned to see Benny grinning from a small white taxicab.

“Hey, am I in the right place?” he asked, eyebrows up.

“Dr. Overton and I can handle this, Benedek, thank you,” said Jonathan as Roberta quickly stepped back.

Roberta handed Jonathan his keys. “The music,” she said suddenly. “My – I mean, Emma’s music. I’ll get it.”

“Jon, I swear, you could get Godzilla’s mother to kiss you,” Benny said admiringly. “I’m impressed, pal, I really am. I thought I’d find a pile of well-chewed bones, and here you and Ms. Overton are goin’ to it like somethin’ out of ‘Dynasty’”

“Yes, thanks to you for deserting the sinking ship,” Jonathan said.

“I’m sorry, buds, but coming to blows with a certified harpy is not my idea of a fun afternoon,” said Benny. “I knew you’d be okay. I had money ridin’ on it.”

Jonathan smiled. “Dr. Overton is a different person when you get to know her.”

Roberta came back, her hands full of the yellowed, fragile music. “Jonathan, if you don’t mind, I’ll take the taxi.”

“All yours,” said Benny, holding the door for her.

“Thank you,” she said, causing him to roll his eyes in surprise.

Jonathan leaned down to speak to her. “Roberta, Benedek was just telling me about a

UFO sighting in Nebraska. If it's not too much trouble, I'd like for you to come along."

"Thank you," she said. "I appreciate the offer, but I think I have something more important to do." She glanced down at the music. "I don't exactly know what happened, Jonathan, but I feel I owe it to her to try. I know this time, this music. This could be a discovery, couldn't it?"

"You're welcome to come with me any time," he said.

She thanked him again. "History is my first love. I just felt so slighted when--" Catching Benny's interested look, she said, "Well, you know what I mean. You and Benedek go chase ghosts. I don't want to waste another minute." She touched the faded music once more.

"I understand," said Jonathan.

"I'll call you, Jonathan," she said. "I'll let you know."

When she had gone, Benny leaned against the rental car, amused. "UFO sighting in Nebraska?"

"Well, I'm sure there's one there somewhere," said Jonathan. He ignored Benny's snort of laughter, glancing back at the silent house. Could he hear the piano, or was that music from the park? No, she was gone, but she had left a part of herself, not only in Roberta, but in him, too.

I never did anything.

Yes, Emma, you did. You changed a woman's life for the better, showed her it wasn't wasted, that there could be some kindness, some love. You left some beautiful music. And you gave me a day in time I won't forget.

"You driving?" Benny asked. "Say no."

"What? No, go ahead."

Benny got behind the wheel, giving him a curious glance. "So what did I miss, besides a passionate little close encounter? Find anything interesting? Any ghosts?"

"No," said Jonathan. "Nothing."

He took a last look at the white house before Benny pulled out into the quiet street. They drove past other houses, graceful and silent, where others had lived sheltered dreaming lives, consoled by the cheerful music that still played. He could hear it even closer now as they drove past the park.

"So what are you thinking about with that look on your face?" Benny asked.

How to describe the music. How to remember. "Somebody's smile," he replied.

Stoned

The idea of six hours in a car with Edgar Benedek made Jonathan MacKensie's head ache, Well, it couldn't be helped. Maybe, just maybe, Benny would be tired from his trip and take a nap, or become involved with a book, a crossword puzzle, something. Anything.

I'll have to put up with his inane chatter if I want to solve this case, Jonathan decided. Unfortunately, he does have some expertise in this particular are.

He had called Benny to tell him he would pick him up at the airport, and then they would drive to Galax, Virginia, site of the alleged meteor shower. Only now did the content of their conversation nag at his thoughts. Benny's tone had been even and friendly, but something hadn't been quite right.

"I'll pick you up in front of TWA at noon," Jonathan had said, and Benny's reply had been, "Sure."

Nothing to get excited about, except that one word from Edgar Benedek was as rare as finding a true statement in the National Register. He must have been in a hurry, or perhaps someone else was anxious to use the phone.

His concerns melted when he drove up to the curb and saw Benny's brightly colored jacket and jaunty grin.

"Jonathan!" he called, waving. He tossed his bag in the back and hopped in.

"Sorry I'm a bit late," Jonathan apologized. "You know how traffic is around here."

"No problem," said Benny, buckling his seat belt.

Jonathan edged out carefully into the right lane. "How was your trip?"

"Fine," he replied.

Jonathan had to watch where he was going, so it took a few minutes for this brief answer to register. He gave Benny a curious glance. The man was smiling, watching the steady stream of cars. "You feel all right?"

"Great," he answered, surprised.

"You seem a bit . . . subdued," Jonathan said, not certain that was the word he wanted. Benny was as beaming as ever.

"Not me," he said with a chuckle, leaning back comfortably in the seat.

Jonathan started to say something else, then closed his mouth and concentrated on finding the right exit. He had driven almost thirty miles and Benny hadn't uttered a sound. Not a word, a noise, not even a song. It was Unnerving.

I know I wanted peace and quiet, but this is unbelievable. "Benedek, you're sure you feel all right?"

"Never better," said Benny.

"You haven't been saying very much."

Benny shrugged.

Has he finally wound down? Jonathan wondered. Has he reached his limit? Impossible! "Benedek," he said, striving to remain calm. "I want you to tell me – in detail – about your trip to Ireland."

"Okay," said Benny. "I left on Friday. Got my story. Sent it in. Came home."

"Didn't you meet anyone?" Jonathan couldn't believe the bare bones of this recitation. "See anything unusual? Eat something weird? Break into someone's house?"

"No."

By now, Jonathan was truly worried. Benny should have at least one bizarre story to tell and a blow by blow account of the trip, including the conquest of yet another stewardess and numerous colleens. "What's wrong with you?" he asked bluntly.

"Me?" said Benny, surprised. "Nothing."

"This is some sort of game, right? You're trying to drive me crazy. Okay, it worked. I'm

crazy. Now will you stop?"

"Stop what?"

"This!" Jonathan exclaimed. "Monosyllabic answers! You're supposed to be bending my ear with all kinds of nonsense about leprechauns and castles and ghosts. You were in Ireland, for heaven's sake! You must have had some--" he broke off, aware of Benny's genuinely puzzled expression. Then he turned back to his driving. No. No, Benny had played this kind of game one time too many. "All right. You don't want to talk. Fine."

He'll get tired of this, Jonathan thought. He can't keep it up forever. I'm surprised he's lasted this long. Sooner or later, he'll have to start chattering. He'll explode if he doesn't.

But Benny was eerily quiet all the way to the Virginia line. He was awake, alert, obviously interested in the passing scenery, but not one comment escaped his lips, not even when a yellow convertible with two blondes zipped around them, honking cheerfully, not even when a massive truck loaded with logs narrowly avoided scraping their fender.

Jonathan set his mouth in a grim line, determined not to be goaded into speech himself. For some unknown reason, Benny had decided to shut up. He should be thankful. The trouble was, he was so used to his friend's customary noises, this time it was the silence that was giving him a headache.

"You drive," he said shortly when they stopped for gas. Benny obligingly hopped into the driver's seat. Jonathan pretended to go to sleep, still irked. Benny would have to drop this charade once they got to Galax if he planned on doing some interviewing.

To Jonathan's surprise and growing unease, Benny continued to use the briefest of phrases. It was up to Jonathan to interview the witnesses, ask permission to walk in their fields, and discuss possibilities with the local media and other scientists who had come to the small town to investigate the meteors. Benny stood by, hands in his pockets, grinning, and offering absolutely no suggestions, no help of any kind.

"If you didn't want to come, why didn't you just say so?" Jonathan said furiously on the way back to the car. "Or is that too much to ask? A simple yes or no seems well within your capabilities today."

"What's wrong?" Benny asked.

"What's wrong?" he echoed. "What's wrong? That's what I'd like to know! You haven't said a dozen words since I picked you up at the airport."

"I haven't?"

"Benedek," Jonathan began in a low growl. He stopped, struck again by the bewildered look on Benny's face. Did the man honestly not know how he sounded? "No, you haven't," he said, equally bewildered. "Are you ill? Do you have a sore throat? Laryngitis?"

Benny shook his head.

"Something on your mind? Some big problem?"

"Not really," Benny said.

Jonathan was fast losing what little patience he had left. "Then say something. Go ahead. Rattle it off."

There was a long pause during which Benny looked puzzled and Jonathan's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I see," he said finally. "This is your juvenile way of getting even for some real or imagined slight. Instead of saying, 'No, thanks, Jack, I'll pass on this one,' you decided to come along and make my life a living hell. I understand completely." He started off. "I'll do the work. You can tag along." He swung around, pointing an angry finger. "But your expenses are coming

out of your own pocket on this one!"

"Jonathan," he heard Benny call after him.

But that was all. No excuses, no cons, no attempts, however false, at an apology. Jonathan kept walking.

He worried all night. It wasn't like Benny to keep a joke going this long. Ordinarily, he couldn't wait to get to the punchline, the zinger. Suppose it wasn't a joke? Suppose. . .well, then, what could it be? Worst of all, he missed the colorful patter, the wild speculation, the genuine humor.

He was still pondering his friend's odd behavior the next morning. They were out in a grassy field with the grizzled old farmer they'd been following for about an hour. The man wore faded overalls and a blue cap and occasionally turned his head to spit a stream of tobacco juice into the weeds.

"Well, durn," he said. "It was right here." He pointed to a deep depression in the soft ground. "Big chunka rock."

"You're sure it was one of the meteors?" Jonathan asked.

The farmer spit again. "Don't see the reason for all this fuss over a buncha rocks and stones. Hell, you can pick up rocks anywheres."

Jonathan bent down to examine the area. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Benny checking another part of the field. Ordinarily, the journalist would be chatting nonstop with this old geezer here, finding out his entire family history and accurate descriptions of the men who took the meteorite. Today he was calmly and quietly searching the grass.

Jonathan turned his attention back to the farmer in time to hear him say something about the weather. Then the man spit again and said, "Yep, you two fellers might as well kiss that old rock good-by. Somebody beat you to it."

Jonathan froze. Kiss. Rock. Ireland.

The Blarney Stone.

The gift of gab.

"Benedek," he said excitedly. "When you were in Ireland, did you kiss the Blarney Stone?"

"Sure," he said.

"That's it!" Jonathan said in triumph. "That's the answer. You already had the gift of gab – more than your share. The stone's power must have worked in reverse."

Benny looked relieved. "Think so?"

"That has to be it," said Jonathan. "All we have to do is get you back to Ireland and let you kiss it again."

"Okay," said Benny.

Jonathan paused a moment, thoughtful. Did he really want to do this? Yes, yes, the quiet was too disconcerting, too normal. "Come on," he said, taking Benny by the arm.

"Hey," said the farmer. "What about these space rocks you're so interested in?"

"No, thanks," Jonathan replied. "More important things to do."

The farmer watched the two men walk off across his field. He shook his head and directed a stream of tobacco juice onto a daisy. "City boys," he grumbled. "Just no talkin' to 'em."

