

# INTUITIVE LEAP

by M.D. Bloemker

As the reporters and photographers finally gave up trying to get one last quote or photo and began to file out of the room, Jerry Wolecki groaned and lowered his head onto his folded arms. "I can't believe you did that to me. You promised, Benny."

Seated beside the distraught young man, Edgar Benedek chuckled as he removed his lapel microphone, passing it to a technician's outstretched hand. "Relax, kid, you were great. Call your mom, tell her to set the VCR. You're gonna be the top story tonight."

"But you promised," he sighed wearily, finally giving in to the impatient tech's prodding to hand over his own mike. "You said you were going to do all the talking."

"I did, I did," he protested amiably, tugging at the younger man's arm until he rose to his feet. "I did all the talking about the stuff I knew something about. Trouble is, those hounds out there wanted to hear about the stuff that only you know anything about. What could I do?"

Jerry delivered a dark look at Benny, not making a dent in the man's ingenuous smile. "I just wish ...."

The sentence died as abruptly as it had begun, ending in a heavy exhale of breath and a dolorous shake of his head. Benny's smile tightened as he patted Jerry's upper arm in commiseration. "Yeah," he murmured. "Yeah, I know, kid. I know. Look, why don't you head on home, make that call to your parents so they don't have to hear it from the neighbors, okay? I'll see you at the reception tonight. Uh-uh, don't keep making that face, or I promise you, it'll end up on the cover of Time."

"Yeah, you and your promises," Jerry muttered with a half-smile.

The young man exchanged a silent, heartfelt handshake with Benny before moving away. As he descended from the stage, a tumult off to his left drew Benny's attention. A large, heavysset man in an ill-fitting suit was arguing strenuously with campus security guards who were patiently trying to get him to leave with the rest of the press conference audience.

"Jordy!" Benny exclaimed. "Hey, hey, it's okay, guys, let him through."

As the security guards fell back sullenly, Jordy straightened his tie and his dignity, and gave them all an imperious look before reaching for Benedek's outstretched hand. "Benny, Benny," he crooned, using his powerful grip to pull the man off balance into an extravagant, backslapping bear hug.

"I wasn't sure you'd make it in time," Benny managed between thumps.

"Are you kidding? I busted my hump to get here. Although I gotta admit, when I got here, I wasn't sure that I was really in the right place. Rubbing elbows with Jennings and Rather, I mean, let's face it ...."

Benny's eyes fell on the id card hanging at an odd angle from Jordy's lapel. Everyone else had had their names printed above their professional affiliation, such as The New York Times, CNN, API and even USA Today. Where Jordan Kerner's badge should have read The National Register was instead the simple word 'Guest'.

"Hey," Benny said with mock, abrupt snappishness. "Not one of them belonged here more than you did. I'm glad you came. It means a lot to me."

Jordy accepted the sentiment with an embarrassed shrug and an unintelligible mutter. "Hey, where's that wife of yours? I still haven't given up on opening her eyes to the huge mistake she made when she nixed my offer to run off to Tahiti with yours truly. You do know, doncha, that she said she would have actually considered it if the timing had been better."

"Timing?" Benny scoffed. "You cornered her at the wedding reception, right after she tossed the bouquet. Fine way for my best man to behave." He grinned suddenly, tapping Jordy's arm with his fist. "Right in character, too. Rachel had to bail about ten minutes ago, you just missed her. She's giving Dr. Moorhouse a hand with planning the dedication next week."

"Dedication? Oh, that new campus building, right? That's next week? Sheesh, weren't they just breaking ground a coupla weeks ago?"

"More like five months ago," Benny chuckled. "Time getting away from you again, eh?"

"Oh, I think I got a pretty good grasp of time, for the things that matter, anyway."

Benny waited, sensing that the hard edge that had suddenly come into Jordy's voice presaged something a lot more serious. After a moment spent shifting his weight and coughing softly, Jordy finally came out with it. "So how come the first time I hear from you in over four months is a phone call from your admin telling me to get my butt down to D.C. for this press conference? Huh? Tell me that, Mr. Headline News."

"I called you for your birthday last month."

"You missed by two days and talked to my answering machine."

"See? You got the message."

"Yeah," he said, expression changing slightly. "I think maybe I did."

"Whoa." Benny held up his hand. "What is it? What's going on here?"

"You didn't call me down here to give me this story, did you?"

Benny blinked, thrown off-balance. "You heard everything these guys did ...."

"Yeah, sure. I got everything they got. That's not the way it used to be, Benny. You always gave me first crack, or at least more than you gave anyone else. But I guess I'm not good enough for that anymore."

"Is that why you came down here?" Benny asked lowly after a moment of stunned silence. "Because you thought I'd give you a scoop?"

Grimacing, Jordy sighed. "Okay, I blew that one pretty good. Look, Benny, what I'm really trying to say is ... aw, geez, hell, I don't know what I'm really trying to say. No, I don't want a damned exclusive." He froze for a moment. "Okay, I lied, I do want a damned exclusive, but that's not why I came in the first place. I came because ... because ... because I don't know why you asked me to come."

"Yes, you do," Benny said patiently.

"No, I don't," he said, making it clear that he did know but didn't accept it as a valid answer. "Eight months, Benny. Who are you now? There was this card on the table that said 'Edgar Benedek' on it, but I didn't recognize the guy sitting behind it. The voice was kinda familiar, but the words ... good grief, how many syllables were in that opening sentence? I gotta tell you ... whoever that guy up on that stage was, he scared the bejeezus out of me. Is that what you wanted me here to see?"

Thrown, Benny rubbed the back of his neck, struggling for something to say. "I scared you?" he repeated uneasily. "Really?"

Jordy glanced away with a shrug. "I guess that answers that question," he sighed.

"Oh, geez." Like a thunderbolt, it finally hit him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Jordy, you're right. I did give you the stiff for eight months, and then I expect you to come running when.... I've been all wrapped up in this thing, y'know? Okay, that's a lousy excuse, I know ...."

"No, no, it's not." Jordy laid a firm hand on Benny's shoulder. "I understand. I guess I just don't like to admit I do because ...."

"Because I scare you?" Benny ventured when Jordy seemed unable to finish the sentence.

"Because it ain't the same anymore." Kerner's expression reminded Benny of a lonely puppy. "Ever since you decided to go after your doctorate full time and then Wick left for that editorship at U.S. News & World Report f'cryin' out loud. All we've been doing, week after lousy week, is cracking out front page stories about snot-nosed movie stars who need a good crack across their comfort padding if you ask me. When I first heard about this, I thought you might have had something for me, but ... jeez, it sounds big. Too big for the Register. Too big for me."

"That's just the story, Jordy," Benny told him quietly. "Not me. I haven't forgotten the guy who came through for me back when ... you know, three years ago."

"That was nothing anybody wouldn't have done," he mumbled, eyes down.

"It was something you did. I wanted you here, Jordy. Not the editor of the National Register. You, the guy who, more times than I can count or even remember, did something for me that anybody wouldn't have done. So do me a favor, okay? Don't give me any more of this crap."

Jordy sniffed. "You used to be able to take it, you collegiate wimp."

"Just for that, I gonna make sure you're sitting next to the lovely Dr. Moorhouse tonight." He clapped Jordy on the arm and yanked at his askew tie. "Try to wear one without so much mustard on it, okay?"

"I was, uh, gonna head back to New York on the six o'clock shuttle. A few problems with the press boys, I should really ...."

"Eight o'clock," Benny told him calmly, pinning him with a steady gaze. "Hyatt Regency downtown, second floor grand ballroom."

Jordy's mouth opened and closed several times before he finally said, "You're sure? I ... don't exactly ... you know ...."

"You do. Exactly. I know. Eight o'clock. Sharp."

With a unexpectedly grateful smile, Jordy nodded. With Benny's hand guiding him, he took two steps toward the door, then paused. "This stuff you were talking about here, it's time travel, ain't it?"

"Not exactly," Benny said. "I mean, it could be, but not right now. We're just talking about being able to look into the past, not actually, you know, physically traveling."

"Like tuning a TV, only the signal's coming from the past instead of a satellite, right?"

"Yeah, you've got it," Benny congratulated him with a sound clap on the shoulder.

"Well, geez, why didn't you just say so in the first place? You two were giving me a headache up there. So ...." he hesitated again, a wary look coming into his eye. "The truth here, Benny. And remember, this is me you're talking to. What kind of angle can you give me?"

Benny pursed his lips, then shrugged regretfully. "It's really Jerry's baby. He's the one who understands the mumbo-jumbo, I'm just along for the ride. And to tell you the truth, I think it's too dry

and scientific for the Register. We think we can look back into the past, but although the theory seems sound, the equipment's been wonky and it looks like we can't peek back any farther than the last forty years even if we could get the machinery to work consistently."

Jordy chewed his bottom lip, thinking hard. "But say you could get the machinery working and you got some solid shots back into the past? That's what you're aiming for, right?"

"Yeah." Benny eyed him. "What kind of angle do you want?"

Jordy grinned slyly. "Jimmy Hoffa?"

"Deal."

The two men shook hands vigorously, then burst into laughter. "Ah, Benny, Benny," Jordy said, his arm across his chortling friend's shoulder as they left the empty room. "It really is good to see you again. Now, point me in Rachel's direction so that I can resume my noble attempt to right ancient wrongs ...."

?

It didn't take long for Benny to appreciate the irony of the situation. Here he was in the midst of a gala party, trying unsuccessfully to blend in with the elegantly dressed and coifed crowd, many of whom had been had been enthusiastically gushing and shaking his hand just last week. Most of them were treating him as just another guest at this reception, which is how he wanted it. The spotlight tonight rightly belonged to the small group of people in the center of the room, around whom the guests were crowded.

Representatives of the major news sources had politely packed up their equipment and departed at the end of the press conference, thirty minutes ago. The stragglers, for the most part reporters for smaller or less reputable newspapers, were the ones giving him grief. He recognized all of them; worse, they all recognized him. And every one of them had tried, or were looking for an opening to try, to get close enough to him to parlay that recognition into an exclusive interview.

Movement in the crowd caught his attention; two of them were on the move this time, converging on him from different directions. With a sigh, Benny excused himself from the conversation in which he'd only been half-involved anyway, and faded back, toward the doors. He lost one of his pursuers that way, but the other stayed on him doggedly. Pausing just long enough to place his champagne glass on a passing waiter's tray, Benny caught the eye of a campus security guard stationed at the doorway and made a quick forward motion with an upraised thumb — a prearranged signal alerting her that a member of the press had crashed the reception — then jerked his hand sideways to point the way to the miscreant. She glanced in the direction he indicated, and, giving him a quick, sympathetic smile, nodded as she moved forward.

Ignoring the raised voices behind him, Benny slipped out into the foyer, filled with the scent of flowers and new carpeting. Every raised surface and every inch of floor space along the walls was piled high with floral bouquets, paying silent and fragrant homage to two massive portraits, officially unveiled only fifteen minutes before, that dominated the room. His thought was to spend a quiet moment or two getting a closer, more personal look at the portraits without the interference of an ebullient crowd or blinding flashbulbs. But someone had already beaten him to it.

Dr. Juliana Moorhouse reacted to his approach by pretending not to react, but not fast enough to fool him. She unclasped her hands long enough to brush at her face, then resumed her quiet pose, shoulders just a little more erect and her head held just a little higher than before.

He gained her side and, deciding to forgo a meaningless greeting, followed her gaze up. It was Dr. Moorhouse who finally broke the contemplative silence, long moments later.

"Magnificent," she sighed, shaking her head slightly. "Rachel managed to capture the true essence of both men. It's almost as if ...."

She left the statement unfinished, her eyes lowering for a moment as though ashamed to have almost admitted a moment of weakness.

Benny smiled wryly. "What's the old guy been telling you?"

Her glance at him carried some surprise, and, he sensed, a spark of gratitude for the note of understanding in his voice. "He's complaining about the fuss," she murmured.

He looked up a moment at the portrait on his left, the static representation of a man who owned the ghost voice in Dr. Moorhouse's head. Like its companion piece, the painting was larger than life size, depicting its subject in three quarters view. Seated in a carved wooden chair, one hand draped casually across the chair arm, he was dressed in a somber blue suit that nearly blended into the dark background. By contrast, his face seemed surrounded by a nimbus of golden light, illuminating the benign, wise smile on the rounded and age-lined face.

Benny's eyes drifted to the second portrait, appreciating not for the first time how skillfully the artist, working only from photographs that had been painstakingly selected by Dr. Moorhouse, had placed its subject in a position that exactly mirrored its companion piece. The same dark background highlighted the same glow seeming to emanate from the smiling face, only this one belonged to a much younger man, whose neatly styled, nearly shoulder-length dark hair stood in direct contrast to the thin gray hair of his companion. Yet the resemblance was unmistakable.

"And then there's the guy who liked fusses," Benny said with a rueful smile that faded after a brief moment. "Sure wish he could have been here for this one."

She glanced at him again, then away without speaking. There was no need to say it. The fuss, the reception, the portraits, even the new building itself would not exist if the man to whom the rightmost painting stood in tribute had been with them tonight.

They stood in silence, each respectful of the privacy of the other's thought. Then Dr. Moorhouse lifted her hand and placed it briefly on Benny's arm. With a simple smile, she turned to leave.

He started to protest that he hadn't meant to interrupt her introspective moment, but then saw that Dr. Moorhouse was reacting to a new presence in the foyer.

Benny's smile grew as the newcomer glided across the carpeting toward them, her sequined evening gown glittering in the tastefully subdued indirect lighting. As she entered the golden pool of light that strategically illuminated the portraits, he took time to admire the way her auburn hair seemed to glow, framing a face that, by conventional standards, would not perhaps define beauty — her mouth was thin, her eyes perhaps too close-set, her nose a trifle long with a gentle but marked hook at the end — but to him, the arrangement was quite satisfactory.

"There you are." Her deep-throated voice held amusement reflected in her knowing smile as she reached them and accepted Dr. Moorhouse's extended hand. "I told them I'd know where you to find you."

"Admiring your work, of course," Benny told her with a wink and a warm smile.

Dr. Moorhouse's grip tightened slightly, and for a moment the women's eyes met. The newcomer smiled, a silent thanks for the gratitude and other telling emotions in the older woman's face. "Chancellor Burkhart asked me to tell you they need you for the head table."

"Yes, of course. You're coming, aren't you?"

"In a moment."

Dr. Moorhouse nodded her understanding of the look that passed between the woman and Benny. "Of course. Don't be long."

"I won't," she promised with little sincerity as Benny sidled up to her and slid his arm around her waist.

"Tell me the truth," he whispered after Dr. Moorhouse had headed off in the direction of the reception. "Did you really come out here looking for her?"

"Burkhart wasn't looking for you," she purred, laughing lowly.

"That's me, yesterday's news," he sighed, feigning sorrow.

"Not from where I'm standing."

Her whisper near his ear sent a shiver through his body. "One more like that, and you're going to have to deliver your closing remarks to an audience of one."

"I've already got my speech prepared."

"No, no," he sighed, pretending deep indecision. "I can't be selfish. I want you to go back into that room and let all those people tell you what a talented and wonderful person you are. Because you are."

She accepted his light kiss on her cheek with a sly smile. "There's not going to be enough room in the bed tonight for you, me and my swelled head."

"Well, in that case, we'll just do the same thing we did last week with my swelled head."

As they shared quiet laughter over the intimate memory, a quiet, hesitant voice spoke behind them. "Dr. Benedek?"

He turned to find himself facing a woman who looked to be in her late fifties, her dark hair laced with silver and an enchanting smile on her delicately lined face. Beside her, his hand resting on her upper arm, was an older man, resplendent in a white Navy dress uniform laden with colorful medals and military decorations. As Benny considered the strange, tense look on the officer's face with growing curiosity, the woman lifted her hand as she continued in a soft, mellifluous voice, "I was wondering if we might have a word with you?"

It was a safe bet that neither were members of the press, but with the closing ceremonies of his wife's moment in the spotlight almost at hand, Benny's first inclination was to put them off. As he opened his mouth to do so, he paused long enough to assess the expression on the woman's face. There was nothing overt or particularly obvious; in fact, she appeared positively serene. But there was something urgent in her eyes that silently begged him to listen to what she had to say. And, more curiously, something just as urgent in her companion's eyes that silently begged him to rebuff the woman's request.

That more than anything settled his decision. "Sure, sure — we've got a few minutes yet, don't we?" he asked his wife.

"Just a few," Rachel smiled, patting his arm. "Don't be too long."

She graciously accepted the woman's praise and her companion's congratulations before moving off to rejoin the reception. Turning back to Benny, the woman's relief beamed into her smile as she extended her hand. "My name is Beth

Calavicci. And this is my husband, Albert."

"Al," her companion corrected hastily, leaning past his wife's shoulder to return Benny's handshake. "You can call me Al."

"It's been a while since I rubbed shoulders with the military, but let me see, ah ...." He made a show of deciphering the insignia. "Admiral, right?"

"Retired," Al affirmed self-consciously. "As of next month, anyway."

"I apologize for intruding," Beth said, smiling graciously when Benny dismissed her concern with an airy wave. "And I hope we won't keep you long, but ... well, I understand that you've been looking for this man."

From the small purse hanging from her wrist, she produced a folded newspaper clipping and handed it to Benny. He stared down at the creased, familiar photo and the short article giving details of the ongoing search for the missing scientist.

"Yeah," he brightened. "Yeah, we've been looking for this guy for nearly a year now. Do you know something about him?"

Beth's "I think so" and Al's "No, not really" eclipsed each other; they spent a moment exchanging uneasy glances. "We're not really sure," Beth admitted as Al, jaw tightening, remained silent. "I believe, however, that I have met the man in that photo."

"When?" Benny demanded, excitement surging through him. "When did you meet him?"

She drew a breath, clutching tightly at her husband's hand as she answered. "Twenty-five years ago."

?

Al Calavici sighed heavily as he let his hands drop to his side in an expression of utter defeat. "I'm telling you, I have never met that man before in my life. Not now, not twenty-five years ago, not ever."

Seated in one of the elaborate overstuffed visitor chairs in Benny's office, Beth reached over to pat the arm of the chair next to hers. "Please, dear, sit down."

He did, but only after deciding that his preference for pacing agitatedly served no useful purpose and only seemed to upset his wife more. Benny was seated behind his desk, one hand buried deep in his tousled hair while the other held the newspaper clipping at which he'd been frowning at for nearly five minutes. "I don't know him," Al continued when the silence began to build again. "And neither does my wife. She only saw him that one time."

"Twenty-five years ago," Benny repeated, his voice as neutral as it had been since he'd hastily ushered them into his third floor office. "Time travel."

Beth straightened, hope lighting her drawn face. "When I saw your press conference on the news last week and connected you with the search for that man, it ... it started to make sense. He did work with you on this time travel project, didn't he?"

"It's his project," Benny said, dropping back against his chair back, still staring at the photo. "Or was. We took over the work when he disappeared, but ... this doesn't make sense. He'd have had to have gone back physically, we can't do that. We're not anywhere near doing that."

"But it says that he was involved in a top secret military project for a short time after he left Georgetown Institute. Perhaps ...."

"The military won't tell us a thing about what he was working on when he turned up missing," Benny sighed, shaking his head helplessly. "They won't even acknowledge that he ever existed, let alone worked for them. Okay, look, tell me ... tell me what happened, twenty-five years ago. Where did you see him? Did you talk to him? What did he say?" he pressed when Beth nodded her head.

"He seemed to just ... appear in my living room," she began hesitantly. "The doors were still locked from the inside, I didn't hear anyone.... I was frightened, but he somehow managed to convince me not to be afraid of him. I think perhaps he looked so sad."

"Sad?" Benny inclined his head, intrigued.

She nodded again, her eyes searching the distant memory. "And then he told me that my husband was alive."

Benny glanced sharply at Al, who reacted to the misting of his wife's eyes by reaching over to gently squeeze her hand. "I was a P.O.W. in 'Nam," the man explained quietly when Beth appeared momentarily unable to continue. "No one knew where I was. No one knew whether I was alive or dead. I was officially missing in action. Presumed dead. No one knew, Dr. Benedek. No one."

"But he did," Beth said, her voice struggling for balance. "He told me my husband would come home to me. He told me ... begged me to wait; begged me to believe. I asked him who he was and how he could know this. He just looked even sadder, even though he smiled when he told me his name was Sam. And then ...."

"Then?" Benny urged.

She shook her head slowly. "He left. He must have left, but ... I don't remember how. I don't remember him leaving."

"You're saying ... he disappeared, like ... poof?"

"I don't remember," she said, a soft whisper. "For a long time, I thought it must have been a dream, because he was there one minute, and just ... gone the next, and it seemed as though it didn't really matter how he got there or how he left." She faltered on the last words, almost apologetic for her inability to explain such an abstract thought. "The only important thing was that he was there, and that I had to listen to what he had to say. Nothing else mattered. And ... and that's the reason, I think, why that's all I can really remember about it. I'm sorry."

The phone rang at Benny's elbow, and he held up a hand to beg their patience as he picked up the receiver. "Benedek. Jerry, yeah, listen, are you still down at the reception? Great, great. Look, I'm heading over to the lab, and I want you to meet me there as soon as you can, okay? I'll tell you when you get there. Oh, have you seen Rae? I beeped her, too, but she hasn't called yet. Still on stage, huh? She's gonna kill me for bailing," he muttered under his breath. "No, I said I'll tell you when you get there. And hurry, okay?"

He replaced the receiver, leaning heavily on it for a moment as he lost himself in deep thought. With an effort, he roused himself enough to direct an innocuous smile at the waiting couple. "Listen, folks, ah ... you weren't in any hurry to get back to the party, were you?"

?

Jerry Wolecki's sole thought throughout most of the evening was how damnably uncomfortable he felt in his rented tuxedo and inflexible shoes. That thought as well as any other that might have sneaked sideways into his brain vanished like a soap bubble as Benny hurriedly filled him in while dragging him into the main lab.

"Wait, wait, you're saying that Sam went back into the past?" Jerry plopped down into his well-worn seat in front of the main console, staring at Benny and the two well-dressed strangers in turn. "He said that wasn't possible!"

"Yeah, well, he said a lot of things, like swearing he'd become a short-order cook before he sold out to the military — no offense," Benny sent aside to a still-bewildered and confused Admiral Calavicci, who vaguely gestured that no offense had been taken. "Okay, look, here's what I want you to do. This woman, she's got a time and a place, okay? That's all this contraption of yours is supposed to need, right?"

Jerry's eyes widened as understanding came. "You got it," he cried, spinning around to slap on every switch in sight. "Pull up a seat, ma'am, we've got a scientist to find. My name's Jerry, by the way, how do you do? I don't suppose you know the approximate latitude and longitude ....?"

As Beth and Jerry went head to head over the flickering computer screen, Al placed his hand on Benny's arm, drawing him a short distance away. "I'm just trying to understand this," the officer began, almost apologetically. "Hell, I've been trying to understand this for nearly twenty-five years. What's happening here? I mean ... okay, explain this to me again. You're saying that you can use this machine to ... to peek into my wife's living room, twenty-five years ago and see the exact moment that this guy showed up. And then ... what?" He frowned at Benny's uneasy shrug. "You don't know what, do you?" he realized.

"Look, I'll be honest with you," Benny sighed. "I'm not really sure I understand what's going on here anymore than you do. Now, if I'm reading you right, and I think I am — we've both got the same question on our minds. Assuming that Sam is the same guy that your wife met way back when, we both want to know what he was doing in your wife's living room twenty-five years ago. And right now, this is the only idea I've got for figuring that out."

"Hey, Benny, we've got something!"

As they joined Jerry at the console, Beth was pointing at the blurry image on the monitor. "That's the street. The church — there, see? That was at the corner, and ... no, back up. Yes, that way. Three houses down, next to a white mock Tudor with a chain link ... there." Without looking back, she reached up and somehow unerringly found her husband's arm, squeezing it tightly. "That's our house," she said, smiling wistfully.

Jerry made a frustrated sound as the image wobbled, defying his efforts to tighten the focus. "I don't know if I can get any closer," he muttered. "We weren't exactly worried about precision tuning at this stage of the experiment."

"You're doing fine," Benny soothed as he watched the blue, ghostly image of the house fill the screen. "You said the living room, right? Just inside the door?"

"Nearer the window on the right ... no, left side. Here." She pointed.

With occasional remarks beneath his breath, Jerry fought to sharpen the images, to no avail. He settled for moving the field of vision, panicking for a moment when the picture went dark before realizing that he'd merely moved into a shadowed corner of an interior room."

"Yes, that's the mantel," Beth said suddenly. "You're in the living room. You need to bring it back to the right ... your right, yes. Yes. There."

The images were blurred, almost beyond recognition. Benny squinted, barely making out what look to be two people of undetermined age or even gender seated on a sofa. "That's me," Beth said quietly, her finger hovering near the screen. "And that's Sam."

"Sam," Benny breathed, squinting harder. As much as he wanted to see some distinguishing detail, it was all a blue smear to him, save for a dark splotch that he thought might be the woman's head.

"Look at this reading," Jerry said suddenly, his low voice filled with controlled excitement.

"I'm looking," Benny said after a moment staring at the display. "So what am I looking at?"

"It's a match." Jerry looked up, eyes gleaming. "Benny, it's an exact match for our frequency."

"That means ... what?"

"It means that what I'm detecting here, twenty-five years ago, is exactly the same frequency and bandwidth as what we're generating in this portal. Sam's projecting from another place, Benny, just like we are. And I think I can make a connection."

"Connection, what kind of connection?"

"I can sync up the projections." Jerry chewed his lower lip in open anxiety. "I can snag him."

They stared at each other, hardly daring to hope. "Do it," Benny decided firmly.

Jerry worked in determined silence, seemingly unaware of the three tense people watching his every move. Suddenly, he jerked, blinking rapidly in open astonishment. "The pad!" he barked, gesturing frantically. "Activate the pad!"

"The pad?" Benny echoed in confusion, glancing at the long-unused structure next to the console. A small enclosure, only a eight feet in diameter, it took up most of that corner of the room, and was surrounded by white, waist-high ceramic walls and above, a circle of floodlights interspersed with small, specialized field generators. It was part of the original prototype, abandoned when the decision was made to concentrate on images rather than physical objects.

Jerry pushed his arm impatiently. "Turn it on, quick! I'm gonna lose this trace if you don't move it, now!"

Benny sprang for the control panel mounted at one end of the oval-shaped enclosure, and swiped at the dust obscuring the small print above the switches. His hand came down on the large activation switch with confidence, and floodlights speared down into the middle of the pad as he searched for any other toggles that looked like they might be useful. "Rev? Amp? Vel?" he called out. "What do you need?"

"Amp and Mod," Jerry replied, voice filled with rising excitement. "And hit anything that said Field Gen."

"How much on Amp and Mod?"

"Floor 'em! Give me 50% on Rev while you're at it. Hurry!"

Benny jumped back as the console shuddered violently in response to his manipulation of the requested controls. Above, the field generators hummed to life, emitting light that slowly increased, bathing the enclosure in a brilliant blue glow.

"Focus, focus," Jerry barked, miming a twisting motion while waving to the right. Benny found the focusing controls, discovering within a few seconds that manipulation of the calibrated sliding switch sharpened or blurred an image on the tiny monitor set in the console above. An image, he realized with a thrill, that vaguely resembled a man.

"I've got something," Jerry said, eyes fixed on his own monitor. "I've definitely got something. It's... it's ...."

"There," Al interjected, voice and eyes filled with wonder.

He was pointing into the middle of the enclosure, where bright sparks of floating dust seemed to be coalescing. At first no more than a column of blue light, it shimmered and flickered and slowly took form.

Jerry jumped out of his chair to gain Benny's side, checking his progress with the focusing controls, then staring in awe at the phenomena forming within the enclosure. It was definitely man-shaped and man-sized now, with a defined head, arms and legs. As they watched, the blue nimbus surrounding the face dimmed slightly, revealing distinct features.

Benny heard Jerry's gasp and felt the man's fingers dig into his shoulder, but found himself unable to move or react. He could only stare, openmouthed, as the light-wrapped image within the enclosure moved. Its head came up, eyes blinking groggily, searching. "Hello?"

The voice was distant, muted, but unmistakable. Still gaping, Benny somehow found the presence of mind to turn a light onto himself to make himself visible to the man in the enclosure. "Sam?" he ventured tentatively.

The image responded, turning toward him to squint against the bright light surrounding him. A moment passed in silence, then: "Benny? Is that you?"

Benny gripped Jerry's shoulder, shaking it in mute, fervent congratulations. "Yeah, it's me, you dutz. Where the hell have you been?"

Sam started to answer, then frowned slightly, glancing around him. "I'm not sure where I am now."

"Lab B at the Institute. Sound familiar?"

Recognition flooded his face. "You're not messing with my prototype, are you?"

"It's my prototype now, remember?" Benny replied, responding to the ghost's less than serious chide. "You gave it to me for my birthday before you took off to New Mexico three years ago."

"Three years ...." Sam passed a blue hand through his hair distractedly, then started as though mildly surprised that he had contact with his own body. "Feels like a lifetime ago."

Deep fatigue seemed to suddenly envelop the specter, bowing his head and causing his shoulders to sag. "Sam?" Benny ventured, alarmed. "What's going on here, what ...? "

At the touch on his shoulder, Benny turned to see Beth next to him. With a significant look at the hologram inside the pit, she inclined her head questioningly. With a nod, Benny adjusted the perimeter light to bring her into view.

"Hello, Sam," she said softly, with a shy smile. "Do you remember me?"

The hologram lifted his head, squinted, then seemed to catch his breath. "Beth? That is you, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's me. I realize that I'm a bit grayer and a lot older than when we first met, but ... it's me."

"Oh, no, you look wonderful," he said on a long exhale, seemingly unaware of the goofy grin spreading across his face. "But ... I'm not sure I understand ... don't take this wrong, but what are you doing here?"

"She helped us find you, Sam," Benny offered when Beth silently asked him for help. "Somehow, she put two and two together when she discovered that the man she met twenty-five years ago and the one we've been looking for were dead ringers for each other."

Sam swallowed, suddenly agitated. It seemed to take him a moment to work up the courage to speak. "Beth, is ... is AI with you?"

"He's right here, Sam." She held her hand out, waiting patiently until a reluctant AI allowed her to pull him forward into the light. "He's right here."

Something happened to Sam's face as soon as AI appeared in the light. Confusion, tension, all traces of any emotion except pure relief vanished as he stared at the man, who returned the look with even deeper confusion and some suspicion.

Sam dropped his eyes briefly, struggling to maintain composure despite the obvious emotion wracking his body. When he looked up again, it was with a strangely serene smile, as though AI's existence at her side provided a sense of deep, personal satisfaction.

"He came back, just like you said he would," Beth continued softly. "When everyone else had given up all hope, you didn't. When no one else had faith, you did. And I ... I am so glad I listened to you."

"Thank you," Sam said, mustering a smile. "Thank you for listening."

AI was still staring, still frowning, still utterly bewildered. "I don't know you," he said, almost to himself. "Do I?"

"No," Sam said after a moment spent searching for the answer in his own heart. "No, you don't know me, Al. And that's the way it's supposed to be. Everything is the way it's supposed to be, now."

"Hey," Benny barked. "You always did have a problem with the obvious, didn't you, farm boy? I want to take a good, hard look at yourself, pal. Does this look like the way it's supposed to be? You disappeared off the face of the earth ten months ago, and the government won't give me the time of day. I can't even get Donna to talk to me."

"Donna." Sam stiffened as though struck, eyes going wide. "Donna, she's.... How ... how is she?"

"She's fine, I guess. If she weren't, she probably wouldn't even tell me that much, though. The most I could ever get out of her was a warning to stop asking questions she couldn't answer before the government put a stop to it themselves. And that warning was for my benefit, not hers."

Sam lifted his hands, inspecting them carefully as though only just becoming aware of the full extent of his disembodied state. With the intent air of a scientist embarking on an experiment, he leaned over to touch the sides of the enclosure, and jerked his hand back when his fingers seemed to dissolve upon contact with the surface.

Benny snorted his told-you-so. "Help us out here, Sam. How did you get into this lady's living room twenty-five years ago, and how the hell do we get you back?"

Instead of answering, Sam moved back into the middle of the enclosure, squinting against the harsh lights as he looked around. "How long can you maintain this field?"

Jerry shrugged at Benny's questioning look. "Indefinitely?"

"Until they shut you down or the generators fry, you mean," Sam said with a dry smile. "I used to work here, remember? As soon as the Physics department detects the load you're pulling, they'll yank the plug on you. What time is it now?"

Benny checked his watch. "A little after 11pm."

"No one should notice for about eight hours, until someone tries to power up in the morning and finds out you're hogging it all. I give it ten hours. Twelve hours, max, until it kills the generators — and if Dr. Freuhoffer has anything to say about it, your career with it."

"You let me worry about my career, okay?" Benny growled. "Just help us figure out how you got wherever it is you are, and how we can get you back."

Sam glanced at him, a strange, troubled expression on his face. His eyes blinked rapidly as he looked away again, pressing his lips together in intense thought. "I ... I'm not sure I ... know how."

"We're kinda breaking new ground here, so I don't think we'll find someone who does know in the Yellow Pages," Benny retorted, exasperated. "You're not working with us here, Sam. What's going on?"

Shaking visibly, Sam took a moment to rub his face tiredly. "I don't think ... I'm supposed to get back," he said, every word a tortured gasp. "Too much has changed. I ... I can't really explain it, but ...."

"Changed?" Benny repeated the words under his breath, a cold chill stabbing through him. "Sam, are you ... you're not saying ... you ...?"

Sam averted his face, a simple, eloquent answer. "Oh, no," Benny whispered, sagging against the enclosure as his mind reeled. "You did it. After everything ... after what you ... you said it wasn't possible!"

"I said it wasn't ...." He gave up with a sharp sigh, waving one hand helplessly. "Possible, yes, I said that. But I was wrong. I was wrong." His voice shimmered, nearly breaking on the last words.

Benny swallowed in a dry throat, watching as Sam turned away from them. "Is there any chance we could fix it from here?" he ventured in the silence.

"No." Sam's reaction was immediate, his voice firm. "No, I don't want it fixed. I want things to stay just the way they are, I want ...."

His voice faded as his anguished expression softened. Following his gaze, Benny saw that Sam was staring at Beth, who was clutching the arm of her badly confused husband. Sam drew a deep breath, calming. "I want things to stay just the way they are," he said again, mustering a confident smile.

"You changed something," Al said suddenly, never taking his narrowed eyes off the ghost inside the enclosure. "That's what this is all about, isn't it? You and this time travel business, that's what this is all about. You traveled back in time and you changed something ... for my wife. Didn't you?"

"Not ... just for her," Sam admitted, reluctantly.

For a moment, Al remained silent, but the suspicious lines in his face faded slowly, leaving him openly bewildered. When he spoke, it was in a soft voice that nearly refused to ask the question that had been at the back of his heart for nearly twenty-five years. "Why?"

"Because I could," he replied, leaving no question that he would not respond to any attempts to persuade him to elaborate.

The frown returned, frustration this time. "I don't know what's going on here," he said, anguished. "There are so many things that shouldn't make sense, and yet they do, and the one thing that should make sense ...." He hesitated, hand extended in a gesture of mute helplessness. "Why don't I know you?" he begged.

"Because," Sam said quietly, willing the man to accept each word as it was carefully intoned, "that's the way it's supposed to be."

Al's hand began to shake as he moved it slowly, pointing at Sam as though to pin him in place until the thoughts could coalesce enough for him to give them voice. "What's supposed to be for me," he said slowly, an awful realization, "isn't for you, is it? That's what's changed — hasn't it?" He flinched, swallowing hard. "You know, I've lived with this ... this mystery for over twenty-five years, and in all that time I've had this really awful feeling that if I ever did find the answer — I wasn't going to like it very much. And you know something? I was right." He backed away a few steps, hands flying up in surrender. "I don't like this," he said, choking on the words. "I don't like this at all. I still don't know why you did it, I don't know why this is happening, or why it has to happen, I just ... I just know that it's wrong."

"No, it's not," Sam said, suddenly intense, almost angry. "And you have got to believe me. You have to trust me. This is right."

Eyes shut tight, Al shook his head rigidly, causing Sam to shout, "Al!" in ragged frustration. On the third cry, in a lower, more urgent voice, Al finally edged his eyes open to tentatively meet the ghost's fierce glare. "Don't throw this back in my face," Sam begged. "This is the way it's supposed to be. Please. Please. Let it be."

His last words, a fervent whisper, hung in the silence as Al, trembling slightly, stared at the man, trying desperately to shake his head. Failing with an anguished sigh, he accepted his wife's embrace, lowering his head to her shoulder.

Benny watched in silence, feeling the muscles in the back of his head tighten. Pretending to pace, he moved around the enclosure slowly, hands in his pockets, head down. To his credit, Sam picked up on the cue and reluctantly moved where Benny was waiting for him.

"You're in rare form," Benny said, low-voiced and angry.

"Don't start," Sam warned wearily, rubbing his forehead.

"Think that speech is gonna work on Donna, do you?"

The name had the same effect on Sam as before, causing him to flinch and stare wide-eyed at Benny. "Donna," he breathed, visibly deflating. "I ... she ... oh, boy. Benny ... am I married?"

The question caught Benny off guard, leaving him able only to blink at Sam for a moment. "Are you married?" he echoed incredulously. "What kind of question is that?"

"Don't analyze it, just answer it," Sam said, making an obvious effort to keep his anxiety under control. "Am I married?"

"Of course you're married."

"To Donna?"

"To — " Benny gaped, falling back a step as he searched Sam's face in vain for even the slightest hint of duplicity. "Whoa, whoa, hold on here. Are you telling me that you don't remember Donna?"

"I do remember her," Sam assured him distractedly. "It's just that ...." He sighed, shaking his head. "It's complicated."

"We've got all night," Benny reminded him meaningfully.

"When I first ... went back into the past," Sam began slowly after a long silence spent drawing in deep, steeling breaths for courage. "I wasn't married. I hadn't even seen Donna in ... in years."

"Keep going," Benny urged when Sam lowered his head, falling silent.

"I had a chance ... I was given a chance," he amended firmly, "to change things with her. To keep from losing her like I did ... before. But the memory is still there." He touched his temple. "The memory of losing her in the first place. No wedding, no ... other memories. And I ..." He paused, becoming wistful. "I would give anything to have those memories right now."

"Wait. You just said that you had a chance to keep from losing Donna, but losing her is what you remember happening, even though that's not what happened." He made a fast, irritated motion with his hand. "That makes no sense."

"It does, but not without a very long explanation," Sam assured him wearily.

A disturbance at the lab entrance drew their attention. Jerry had risen to greet Rachel, whose stormy expression, undoubtedly meant for Benny, dissipated into open shock upon finding her husband. She was still staring wide-eyed at the bluish apparition inside the floodlit pad as Benny hurried to her side.

"Is that Sam?" she whispered incredulously as he touched her arm to draw her away from the others. "It is, isn't it? But he looks —?"

"Like he's missing a few fine-tuning controls, yeah, I know," Benny assured her. "Look, um ... he's been telling me a few things — a lot of things, actually — that, well ... I can't explain it all to you now because I don't understand much of it myself. Can you stick around?"

She made an incredulous noise in her throat. "Could you get me to leave?"

He squeezed her hand, a quiet thank you. "Listen, these people are about as confused as you are, and I can't talk to them until I sort things out with Sam over there. Do you think...?"

"Does the coffee machine in the workroom still work?" She smiled, and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Beep when you need us, okay? And don't take too long, I'm dying to hear this."

As she left his side to speak to the Calaviccis and usher them from the room, Benny moved to the console where Jerry had returned to his work. "How's it holding up?"

"He's right about those generators," Jerry said, shaking his head. "We may not have much more than a few hours if I can't stabilize the input stream."

With tap on the man's shoulder to convey his faith, Benny returned to where Sam was still waiting for him. "Who was that woman?" the blue ghost wanted to know.

Benny blinked at him. "Rachel," he said, his tone making it plain that the answer should have been obvious. "My wife?"

"Your wife?"

"You don't remem— oh, geez."

He turned away, one hand clutched tightly to the back of his neck where the muscles were bunching up in a painful knot. "You were the guy dragged me into the jewelry store when I started changing my mind about making a commitment. I've still got your speech ringing in my ears, about love and sacrifice and how I should just stop feeling sorry for myself because my first marriage didn't work, and how damnably happy you were as a married man and how everybody should be as happy as you and Donna. Hell, Rae's probably got that speech framed somewhere. And you don't remember any of that?" At Sam's apologetic shrug, Benny made a sharp sound of exasperation. "Just how much did you change, anyway?" he pleaded.

"I'll spare you the answer for now," Sam said quietly. "What I remember is that you never married."

Intrigued despite himself, Benny turned his head to peer at him. "Never? I was married to Lisa for nearly seven years, what happened to her?"

Sam hesitated, obviously debating whether he should be discussing things that, although they were his memories, were now never-weres. "It happened long before I met you," he began reluctantly. "There was an accident. A plane crash, a few weeks before the wedding."

Benny blinked again, more confused. "She never made that flight," he said, reciting the memory in a flat, emotionless voice as it came flooding back to him. "A friend of hers, he kept trying to talk her into a later flight. When that didn't work, he insisted on driving her to the airport, but for some reason he got lost. He'd lived in that city for twenty years, but kept missing the same exits. Then she swears he deliberately drove into a ditch. And on top of that, she said he was acting real strange ... not like himself at all."

Sam met Benny's bewildered gaze directly, a smile edging onto his face. "I imagine she caught him talking to himself a lot?"

Mouth agape, Benny nodded as Sam chuckled. "That was your Lisa? I should have guessed, she was exactly like you described her. She was supposed to become a mover and shaker in the African drought relief effort, am I right?"

Numb, Benny nodded in disbelief. "His name was George, and he was short, dark-haired, fifty pounds overweight and 23 years old. She'd also known him since grade-school."

"And he didn't remember much of the incident afterwards, did he?" To Benny's helplessly confused stare, he continued, "He didn't remember because he wasn't there at the time. I was."

In the silence, Benny finally roused enough to lift his hand, one finger raised. "I talked to George a couple of years later," he said, strangely calm. "One of my first interviews, as a matter of fact. I did have a career as a journalist, didn't I?"

"The National Register?" Sam ventured cautiously. "Best selling-author?"

Benny exhaled. "Nice to know some things don't change. So I talked to George. Here's a guy who my wife swears up and down knew, somehow just knew that the flight she held tickets for was going to

crash, but never came right out and told her that. He just made it impossible for her to get to the airport in time. And ...." He paused dramatically, eyes wide. "And afterwards, didn't remember a blessed thing about it. Wasn't even sure what he was doing at the airport, couldn't so much as remember offering her a ride in the first place. And what you're telling me is that the reason he couldn't remember is because he ... was you."

"I was him," Sam corrected gently. "I looked like George, I sounded like George, but everything else, including knowing that Lisa had to miss the flight so that she could head up the African drought relief effort in the late '80s, was me." Sensing a flicker of dawning understanding in Benny's shock-paled face, Sam pressed on. "The reason I insisted that physical time travel wasn't possible was because I couldn't figure out the mass displacement problem. What I discovered was a phenomena that we called 'leaping'. When I traveled into the past, I 'leaped' into a person who already existed in that time and place. My consciousness in their body, no displacement anomaly. I stayed in touch with the project ...." He broke off, his composure faltering as he blinked, drawing back from Benny and the subject. "The rest doesn't matter," he said tiredly.

Benny studied him, frowning. "So you never traveled physically, as yourself, I mean?"

"Once." The admission was obviously difficult; Sam had trouble keeping his gaze trained on Benny. "The last time."

"The last time," Benny echoed, struck still by the realization. "When you told Mrs. Calavicci to wait for her husband's return."

At Sam's nod, Benny leaned against the enclosure, mouth open in incredulous awe. "So that means ... what? If you got there in the first place, why can't you get back?"

When Beckett looked away, silent, Benny's frown increased. "Sam ... where are you?"

"I don't know," the ghostly figure sighed after a few moments of silence spent looking around him helplessly. "It's ... nothing. Lots and lots of nothing."

"You don't have a project to come back to. It doesn't exist here, at least not in the way you need it to exist in order to get back. Why? Because ..." His brow furrowed suddenly. "Because of what you did? Because you told a woman her husband was alive?"

When Sam again refused to respond, Benny tapped his finger against the enclosure, a sure sign that he was sending his thought processes into realms of high imagination that only he could reach. "It's not the project that doesn't exist anymore, is it? It's circumstances. People aren't where they're supposed to be because you changed things. People who could help you don't even know you anymore, do they?"

At Sam's stricken look, he suppressed a smile of victory. "Bingo," he said softly.

"How do you do that?" Sam sighed, defeated. "I've never been able to figure out how you do that. You came out dead average on every psi test we could throw at you, and yet ...." He dropped his hands in frustration.

"It started out as a knack, then long about my third or fourth news scoop, it got upgraded to a gift, and I believe you yourself called it a brilliant talent for theorization."

Sam mustered a smile. "That I remember."

"It doesn't take a mind-reader to figure things out here," Benny said quietly, leaning against the enclosure. "All it takes is seeing. All it takes is knowing you. Take an example — your obsession with the string theory, okay? We both know that it was like selling your soul to the devil for you to accept the military's offer to continue funding. I saw what that did to you, don't kid yourself. Yeah, I can see you remember that, so that much hasn't changed. You jumped ship three years ago, but turned up missing only ten months ago, and from what few letters and phone calls I got from you, plus what very little I could squeeze out of Donna, I know you weren't out in New Mexico weaving blankets for the tourist trade. Ipso facto, there's still a project here on my side of the looking glass. As for that military connection, let's

see now. Didn't I just see someone around here wearing a really sharp Navy uniform? Someone who didn't know you from a hole in the wall, but you were talking to like your best buddy? Does it take Sherlock Holmes to figure out that you wafted into his wife's living room right about at the point where she was about to give up on him? Or, more to the point, how hard is it to figure out what would've happened if you hadn't?"

"You've made your point," Sam sighed uneasily.

"I'm just warming up," Benny returned, regretting how very little he was enjoying making Beckett squirm. "Somewhere along the line, you went back to the idea of physical travel into the past. Was that the military putting pressure on you, or did all that unlimited government funding rush to your head?"

"It wasn't like that," Sam protested, stung. "I know I said it wasn't possible, and that's still true — according to the original theory. That's why I refused to consider trying it. But we made some real breakthroughs in that first year, before ...." He broke off with a frustrated noise deep in his throat. "We modified the theory. And, I have to admit, I owe you a large debt of gratitude because, in a way, the modification came from you. It was something you said ... well, it's always something you say, isn't it? That brilliant talent for theorization — you do know that's just a kind euphemism for an imagination that borders on the psychotic, don't you? The way you kept insisting that the Grandfather Paradox was insurmountable, that a person couldn't travel back and interfere with his own existence because such a paradox couldn't exist in an ordered universe. And you were right. We just took it a step farther. We discovered that a person could travel into the past physically, but only within their own lifetime."

"No chance of interfering with the circumstances of their own conception and birth, yeah," Benny said, deep in thought. "Just every chance of interfering with everyone else's life."

The sudden hardening of Benny's voice caused Sam to flinch in anticipation. "Now, I can understand that once you solved the mass displacement problem, and figured out how to beat the Grandfather Paradox, you had everything you needed to make the theory work. But there's one thing that I don't understand. And I want you to look me right in the eye and tell me... why."

The last word was spoken softly, but the stormy expression on Benny's face left no question as to the depth of anger behind it. "You changed history," he continued when Sam averted his eyes for a moment. "You actually went back and changed lives. Saved lives. And I'm really glad to hear that you've proved that the theory works, but I want to know just what the hell did you think you were doing? Who gave you the right?"

"No one gave me the right," Sam said quietly, his strangely resigned manner dampening Benny's ire with a cold dash of surprise. "But someone gave me the chance. I ...." He turned away for a moment, gathering his thoughts. When he faced Benny again, it was with a new calm that dissipated the rest of Benedek's anger. "I made the mistake of letting it be known that the theory was sound. Naturally, they wanted verifiable results. I'll admit, I wasn't used to the pressure. In the academic world, there would be papers to publish and conferences and discussions ... actual physical experimentation would still be months, years away. That wasn't good enough for them. So I ... I yielded to the pressure. I only meant to go back into the past briefly, just enough to give them the proof they were demanding. But ...." He swallowed, wetting dry lips. "I couldn't get back. For a while, we thought it was equipment failure, but ...."

"But?" Benny urged when Sam lapsed into reflective silence.

"I didn't choose to interfere with people's lives," Sam finally said after a time spent staring at the floor. "I wasn't in control of where in time I ended up, or who I ended up being, or the circumstances that I found myself involved in. The project staff tried, they really tried to get me back, but the best they could ever manage was to track me from one time period to another. And what we found was that every time I leaped into another person, another time period, there was something wrong. Something that had to be fixed. Your fiancée was supposed to save lives in Africa, so it was my ... my job to keep her from catching that flight. But I wasn't the one who made the decision whether one woman died in a plane crash or hundreds of people died because she wasn't there to help them. That decision was already made by the time I found myself in a new place and in a new body. All I could do was help make it happen."

"If you weren't controlling all this, then ...." Benny squinted at him. "What are you trying to tell me here?"

"More than I could possibly explain," Sam said thinly, closing his eyes.

Benny covered his mouth with one hand, marshaling his shock-scattered thoughts. "Something ... someone jumps you around time so that you can play cosmic handyman, and then ... lets you paint yourself into a corner?"

Sam shrugged helplessly at Benny's faintly accusing question. "There were ... some decisions that were under my control," he said awkwardly. "One, at least."

"No." Eyes focused on something only he could see, Benny shook his head firmly. "No paradoxes in an ordered universe, remember? The piper doesn't get paid with a flip of the coin, double or nothing."

"What are you talking about?" Sam pleaded.

"I'm talking about that 'one, at least', decision of yours. The one I'm guessing that you think nailed the door shut behind you. The decision, I might add, that made such an impression on a woman that twenty-five years later she can still ID you from a grainy newspaper photo. A woman, I might add, who made a beeline for me instead of Geraldo. Me, I might add, who has the only working prototype of the project that made you what you are today, Casper. You, I might add, who seems to be moping about the door you lost rather than realizing that with a little bit of help and a lot of luck, we can just build you another damned door."

"To where?" Sam said, his voice filled with anger and despair. "Where is there a place for me anymore? I don't have the memories I need to be a part of the world you're standing in right now. I don't belong there. Right now ... I don't belong anywhere."

The anger dissolved, leaving only bitterness as he turned away, hand clasped tightly against his forehead. He remained still, not reacting as Benny quietly spoke. "Up until ten months ago, there was a Sam Beckett who belonged here. It's pretty obvious that you're not him. But that doesn't mean that you couldn't be."

Benny waited until Sam finally let his hand drop, turning to peer at him with curious eyes. Taking that as his cue to continue, Benny allowed himself a smile. "My first choice would be to somehow get to your project in New Mexico, but even if we could guarantee that the Sam Beckett here was at the same stage that you were in the experiment, the fact remains that the military isn't going to let us within a hundred miles of the site. One of the few things Donna would admit to me was that everyone was locked out once you disappeared. I'm assuming that was because no one could explain where you went or how you got out of a high-security area without raising an alarm. If there's one thing I've learned about the military over the years, it's that they really hate mysteries like that."

Sam kept his gaze steady, with the familiar rapt expression he wore whenever Benny took his 'brilliant talent' out for a little exercise. "First choice implies a second choice," he urged with a touch of impatience.

Raising his arms, he placed the palms of his hands down lightly on the rim of the enclosure. "What would happen if you were to try to leave the pad?"

Sam opened his mouth, then closed it. With a grimace that said without words that it was a silly question in the first place, he raised his arm and leaned over the enclosure. At the point where the blue light from the field generators ended at the perimeter, so did his arm, right at the elbow.

Nodding as though the action was only a small part of a larger experiment and therefore the results only a minor point of interest, Benny paused for thought, then leaned over the enclosure with his arm extended. His skin glowed blue under the light, but showed no other change or reaction. The dark material of his tuxedo sleeve seemed to shimmer, even sparkle, but despite blinking several times, he couldn't catch whether it was merely an effect of dust-sparked light.

Another moment passed in thoughtful silence as Benny turned his hand over, inspecting it carefully. Then, without a word, he moved away, back to where Jerry was still hunched worriedly over the control panel.

Jerry watched, his confusion turning into alarm as Benny's searching fingers landed on a set of switches. "Hey, what — wait!"

A shout from Sam eclipsed Jerry's cry as both reacted to a small gate in the enclosure wall springing open. Springing from his chair, Jerry grabbed Benny's arm with both hands, preventing him from moving toward the opening.

"Hey, hey," Benny protested amiably. "Mind the suit, okay?"

"What do you think you're doing?" Jerry hissed angrily.

A glance at the blue ghost inside the enclosure told Benny that the same question was on Sam's anxious face. "It's an experiment, okay?" Benny soothed. "Just an experiment. Come on, there's nothing dangerous in there, you know that as well as I do. It's just imaging, that's all."

"Which means you can see everything you want to see right here," Jerry insisted.

Benny patiently removed Jerry's hands from his arm. "It's just an experiment," he said calmly. "Relax, okay?"

Torn, Jerry glanced back at Sam, who shook his head stiffly. "Can we just talk about this first?" Jerry tried as Benny stepped forward again.

Ignoring him, Benny entered the pad, making a ceremony of closing the gate behind him before looking up at Sam, who had backed away from him the entire length of the enclosure. "I don't know what you think you're trying to prove," Sam said agitatedly as Benny approached him at a deceptively casual gate. "But I do know I don't like that look in your eye. Never did, and never will. Benny, please. You know my nerves can't take it when you do things like this."

"Yeah, I remember," Benny said with an odd, amused smile. "I always wanted to prove my latest theory by just jumping right in there to see if it would work, and you were always there to drag me back by my collar. You always managed to sound just like my mother, too. You know, that 'look before you leap' speech that you must have given me what, a dozen times? More?" His smile widened slightly. "If you don't remember it, I can probably recite it for you. It'll do about the same amount of good in the long run."

Sam shook his head, staring with anxious eyes. "You haven't thought about this. You have to think about this."

"Does it look like we have time for meetings and conferences and debate?" Benny paused to swallow back the hint of anger that had emerged with his words. "It's just a simple experiment. That's all."

Benny had moved to within three paces of where Sam stood. On the last words, he extended his hand and, with a lift of his eyebrow, wordlessly asked Sam to do the same.

Caught in an agony of indecision, Sam stared at him for a long moment. Then, with an abrupt exhale signaling resignation, he brought his arm up and gingerly reached out to touch Benny's fingertips.

When only a fraction of an inch separated them, a spark of blue light arced between their forefingers. Benny jerked his hand back with a startled cry that became a shout of terror as the light flared suddenly, still connecting him to Sam. Throwing his hands up in an instinctive move to shield his face, he sensed rather than saw arcs of jagged blue light springing from every finger, whipping around his body, enveloping him in a blinding glow that suddenly exploded with a sharp snap, taking every shred of his muscle strength with it.

Fighting hard to keep his balance, Benny blinked to clear his light-blind eyes, succeeding only in making the blue lights swirl faster. Somewhere close by, someone was saying in a shrill, exasperated voice, "I don't understand why you keep doing that. Would it kill you to show just the slightest bit of respect? If not for yourself, then for my sake at least? Benedek. Benedek, are you listening to— "

The voice broke off in a squawk as Benny, losing the battle, fell against the speaker. Books thudded to the pavement as the hands which had been holding them grabbed Benny's shoulder instead, keeping him upright. "What's the matter with you, what —? Are you all right?"

Still half-collapsed against his rescuer, Benny froze, staring up in astonishment at the irritated but increasingly concerned face above him. "Jonathan?" he squeaked. "Jonathan?" A surge of joy got him on his feet and his hands gripping the startled man's shoulders. "Oh, man, it is you! It worked! I can't believe it, it actually worked!"

"What on earth are you talking ab— ah!"

Jonathan flinched back with a gasp, but not fast enough to keep Benny, cackling in pure delight, from throwing his arms around him. "Benedek!" he croaked, unable to breath in the crushing embrace.

Only belatedly remembering that he was the only one who knew the reason for his unrestrained joy, Benny jumped back, hands raised in apology, silently placating the wild look of confusion and dismay in Jonathan's narrowed eyes.

"What on earth's gotten into you?" Jonathan snapped, shying away when Benny made a move toward him again. "What worked?"

"Quick, quick, what day is this?"

"It's Monday," he replied, confused.

"No, no. Month, day, year. Come on, tell me."

"It's September 7th," he sighed, exasperated.

"1992?"

"Of course it's 1992. Benedek, I don't have time for this. I'm already late for my appointment with Dr. Elder, and ..."

"Forget it! Forget Dr. Elder, listen to me. I said, listen. Go back to your office. No, no, listen, I said. Go back to your office." He kept talking as he bent over to retrieve the scattered books, shoving them firmly into Jonathan's hands. "Stay there. Don't leave, don't go anywhere, just stay in your office. Don't argue with me!"

At his impassioned shout, Jonathan abandoned his protests and froze, staring

at him, dumbfounded. "What's gotten into you?" he repeated, a quiet plea for understanding. "One minute you're insulting Dr. Moorhouse to her face, the next you're acting like ... like this."

"Benedek!"

Both men turned at the shout. A short distance away stood Dr. Sam Beckett, who gave Jonathan a cursory look before focusing his full attention on Benny. "I need to talk to you."

Benny stared, memory fragments coalescing as he did. "Newport News. You're supposed to be in Newport News, you're not due back for three days."

"I need to talk to you," Sam repeated, more urgently. "Now."

"One more minute." He dug his fingers into Jonathan's shoulder. "Do this, okay? Go back to your office and stay there. Please."

"And how do you propose I explain this to Dr. Elder?"

"I'll explain it to him. Just go."

Completely bewildered by the strange, intense light in Benny's eyes, Jonathan agreed with an uneasy nod. He moved away slowly, in the direction of his office, looking back three times as though hoping Benny's strange expression would change into mocking laughter.

"Benedek." Sam had approached within a few paces, his voice low and urgent. "That isn't going to work."

Benny's head snapped around, his mouth falling open. "You.... It's you, isn't it? I mean, not the now you, the-the ...."

"The future me, yes," Sam cut in impatiently. "You leaped in about a minute ago, didn't you? Yes, it was that obvious," he confirmed to Benny's surprised look. "As I recall, you didn't exactly make a habit of hugging tenured professors in the middle of the quadrangle back then. Back now. Whenever."

"I'm entitled," Benny returned defensively.

"How did you do this?" Sam demanded in an urgent whisper after checking to make sure that no one would accidentally overhear. "How did you even think it would work in the first place, let alone make it work?"

Overwhelmed, Benny took a moment to clutch Sam's arms for support as he regained his breath. "I swear to you, I was telling you the truth. It was just an experiment. I had no idea, not a clue. But I'll tell you this much ...." Pausing, he took a moment to look at himself, at the unstructured jacket of a type he favored a few years ago instead of his tuxedo, at the grass beneath his feet instead of the lab floor, and the brilliant blue sky above him instead of the ceiling. "I'll tell you this much," he repeated, more certain than ever. "In an ordered universe and with a time limit like we were facing — this suddenly makes all the sense in the world. Don't you get it? We don't have to build you a door, it was already there. You just needed a little help to find it." He thumped his chest meaningfully. "Unless you really want to think that your imaging prototype did this, eh?"

"I know better than that," Sam sighed.

"When did you get here?" Benny demanded, already on a new thought track.

"Yesterday. Newport News, actually. I'm sure everyone at the symposium thinks I'm insane for leaving before the awards dinner, but ...."

"Why the time lag?"

"I don't know," he shook his head.

"Maybe because that's the way it needs to happen," Benny said hopefully.

"I have to admit, it's beginning to look that way," Sam admitted, a spark of hope lighting his tired eyes. "But ...."

"And from what you've been telling me about how this worked for you, we must be in just the right time and place that we need to be to fix whatever it is that you need to have fixed. September 7, 1992. Tell me that it doesn't take a brilliant theoretician to spell it out for you."

"Why do you think I left a smoking trail from Newport News to here?" Sam retorted, mildly affronted. "Why do you think I called you this morning to ask you how things were going?"

Benny squinted, working to reconcile the recent memory into his altered perception. "Yeah, I did think that was odd, didn't I?" His expression changed abruptly becoming annoyed. "Then why are you saying it won't work?"

"I meant Jonathan. He wasn't listening to a word you said. I could tell." He quirked an unamused smile. "I could always tell. He may get as far as his office, but it won't take him two minutes before he'll be heading back to his appointment."

"And I still don't know why he went to Building C when Elder's office is on the opposite end of the quadrangle. We've got to stop him. No, wait ... that's not what we've got to stop."

"The fire," Sam agreed, an odd shadow passing over his face that Benny missed in his excitement, burbling, "If we keep that from happening, your life's work doesn't go up in a puff of smoke, G.I. doesn't divert your funding into disaster recovery, you don't bite at the military's offer, your project stays right here, yes!" He slapped his hands together in delight.

"Wait, wait, slow down." Sam held his hand up placatingly until Benny subsided with an impatient growl. "Look, it's only 2:05. The fire didn't start until around 3pm. We've got a little time. No, I mean it. If we've got time, that means we were given time for a reason, right? We've got to talk about this. Listen to me!" His suddenly angry voice stopped Benny's protest cold in his throat. "And listen very carefully, okay? I haven't told you nearly enough about what happened to me, or what's happening here for you to have any idea what you're doing. I may look like the seasoned hand around here, but the truth is ...." He gestured helplessly. "We're on our own here. I mean... all those times that I changed people's lives, Benny — I had help. Direction. I told you I had a link to the project, right? They were able to relay information to me, critical information. I always knew what it was I had to do, what I had to change. How I did it was left up to me, but as long as I did the job I was put there to do, I never had to worry about the outcome. That link is gone now, and so is any hope we have of being sure that we're doing the right thing."

Benny stared at him, openmouthed with incredulity. "The right thing?" he repeated angrily. "Do you seriously believe we ended up here by accident?"

"That's not what I mean," Sam told him firmly. "Let me finish, please. I've been here since last night, and I've had a lot longer to think about this than you have. And what I want you to tell me is ... what is this going to change for you?"

"I don't believe this," Benny muttered, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

"I'm serious, Benny. I want to know. I ... need to know."

"Why?" Jaw jutting belligerently, Benny retreated a step away, glaring. "So we can compare changes? Figure out who gains the most or loses the least? Flip a coin to see if we end up going for coffee while the sirens wail?"

"You haven't thought this through," Sam decided, his suspicions confirmed.

"Look, I don't need to think," Benny said, increasingly agitated the calmer Sam's expression became. "Look at me. Look at where I'm standing. Look over there." He gestured across the quadrangle. Sam didn't have to ask which of the four distant buildings he was indicating. "In twelve hours, that building is gonna be a black, smoking hole. Now you can stand there all you want and ask whether we should just let it be, but I don't have to stand here and listen to it. I'm not going to let it happen. I won't ...."

The words backed up in his throat, stopping him with an embarrassing croak. He turned away, ostensibly to look at the building again, more to keep his face averted from Sam's searching look.

"You and Jonathan were doing fine work with the Paranormal Research Unit," Sam said quietly after a long moment of silence had passed. "Did you ever figure out why he and I never seemed to get along?"

Benny nodded, not looking back. "Yeah. Yeah, I knew. He resented not having 100% of my time and interest involved in the Paranormal Unit anymore. And he really got his nose out of joint when he

found out that you were the one who encouraged me to go for my doctorate, after I'd laughed him off for so many years."

"What would you have chosen, if you'd been allowed the choice?"

Benny turned around, reluctantly facing Sam's challenge. His mouth opened, but nothing escaped the sudden storm raging in his mind and his heart. With a soft, anguished sigh, he lowered his head, shaking it once. "I don't know," he said, a pale whisper. "I don't know."

"That's why we've got to talk," Sam told him firmly.

His defiant shake of the head was weaker, less certain. "Why are you trying to talk me out of this?"

"Because you have to understand what you're doing. What you'll be changing." He paused, bringing his hands together in a precise motion that mirrored his efforts to compose his thoughts. "I've had time to think since getting here, but more than that, I had a chance to touch a life that ... that I changed, but never got a chance to experience. Until now. When I leaped in yesterday, I was sitting on a stage at the symposium, surrounded by some of the greatest minds of our century. That much I remembered. But there was a difference this time. This time, Donna was sitting next to me."

Benny listened, nodding his acknowledgment of the sheer awe in Sam's quiet voice as he continued, "I could touch her, I could talk to her, I ... I never lost her. And then ... I had to leave her, because I realized that if I didn't get back here, I'd lose her again. Then, when I got home early this morning, I found a message on the machine." He swallowed, eyes focused on something only he could see. "My brother Tom. My brother, who was killed in Vietnam in 1969. But I changed that, too. And changed a lot more besides, because the message on the machine was about my nephew's fifteenth birthday party next week." His eyes shimmered as he paused, drawing in a deep breath. "I woke him up in the middle of the night just to ask him how he was," he continued, his voice a hoarse whisper. "It's amazing, you know? How only your family can go from calling you every name in the book to hurting themselves from laughing so hard. I could have talked to him for hours, I ... I wanted him to tell me everything, but he was starting to get a little concerned about the sorry state of my memory, so ...." He shrugged, embarrassed.

Benny lifted his head, giving Sam a curious look. "I don't know if you realize this or not, but you're arguing my side of the issue, you know."

"Not really. What I'm telling you is that this still isn't my life. If it were, I would do anything, anything to preserve it. But it is your life, Benny. What we do here today will change it. It'll change everything. Not just the bad parts — everything. It's not too late. Being given a chance doesn't mean you have to take it. That's why I need you to tell me what will change for you. I realize that I can't influence your decision, but I have to make my own. I used to have someone to tell me how things will turn out, help me figure out what to do. Without that, I'm on my own, using my own judgment. And I won't decide what to do until I understand what will happen — to you."

"Did I ever tell you," Benny said after a long silence spent staring down at the toes of his shoes, "that altruism gives me indigestion?"

"How far had you gotten with my prototype? I think I remember something in your last letter about public trials."

Benny resisted, the muscles in his neck stretched taut under the effort with which he clenched his teeth. The words finally came, tense and strained, accompanied by a pained grimace reflecting his feelings of betrayal. "We had 'em, last week. Nothing fancy, just a few quick scans back a year or two ago, lasting about five seconds. We, um ... got the cover of Time. Me and Jerry." He darted a look at Sam. "The answer is no. There's no way I'm going to let that building go up in flames just for that. After all, if you stick around, we could get twice as far, even more."

"What about your wife?"

"What about her?" Benny returned, a strange hollow feeling growing in his chest.

"Tell me about her. Who is she? How did you meet?"

"She's an artist," he said reluctantly. "Specializes in formal portraiture. I, uh ..." The memories hit him hard, leaving him unable to move or breathe despite knowing that every delay hardened Sam's resolve. "I met her in New York, at her studio. The new building, the Board voted to name it MacKensie Hall. The Leonard and Jonathan MacKensie Memorial Hall. They wanted portraits in the new foyer, so I got some referrals and went interviewing. I gave her the commission, all the materials, answered all her questions, and the next thing I knew ...."

"They won't need a new building," Sam reminded him when he trailed off into silence, staring at the ground. "No memorials, no portraits. No commission."

"I think you can ease up on the sledgehammer now, okay?" Benny growled angrily. "You made your point." More so than he would admit to Sam, even. In the back of his mind lurked a memory, an intimate moment in which Rachel had admitted that she'd fallen in love with him the moment he had opened up to her, admitting to unfamiliar emotions stirred up by watching Jonathan's face taking shape on the canvas, day by day. Without that catalyst, she might have continued to keep him at an arm's length, never accepting any of his invitations or taking him the least bit seriously.

"This isn't my life anymore than it is yours, you know," Benny said after a long time spent staring across the quadrangle in reflective silence. "I mean, think about it. You said that I'd never been married, yet I've dodged rice barrages twice now. The first time was to a woman whose life you saved, so in a way — you're responsible for the way things are now, aren't you? This life that you claim is mine ... is the net result of something you did to change it." His head swiveled to fix Sam with a strange, piercing look. "So it's my turn now. Tell me what was I like. You know, the carefree bachelor me that you remember. Have I changed? What's different?"

"You're, um ... pretty much the same, actually," Sam admitted reluctantly. "But a lot less ... I don't know. Edgy? Impatient?"

"I think the term you're looking for is somewhere west of 'spontaneous' but not quite as far south as 'neurotic'," Benny said with a thin smile. "You don't remember my marriage to Lisa, so you don't remember why it failed, do you? She said I'd become boring. Me, boring. What she meant was that she really liked the way I would routinely wangle first classes tickets to Bermuda from Jordy and write them off as a business expense. She wasn't so thrilled when I started spending my time sleeping on the floors of old houses, or baby-sitting electronic equipment for weeks at a time in drafty European castles. And, oh, did she hate Jonathan. She blamed him and the Paranormal Research Unit for the fact that I wasn't whisking her off to exotic places on a moment's notice anymore. Kinda ironic, you know, how the poster girl for 'live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse' suddenly found a social conscience and a serious purpose in life not three months after the divorce."

"Maybe she didn't resent Jonathan so much as she was jealous of you," Sam offered quietly. "I remember when I first joined the G.I. faculty, I — forgive me — didn't think much of you. I couldn't figure out how on earth you'd managed to wangle an association with the Institute. You were shallow, brash, disrespectful, rude and ...." At the mild warning look from Benny, Sam let the rest of the character analysis fall by the wayside. "I saw that change the more you were drawn into the research work for the Paranormal Unit. It's why I finally gave in to your nagging for an interview. An interview, as I recall, that you never published."

"I was too busy researching your theory," Benny recalled, abashed.

"I'd never seen anymore so intrigued and inspired as you were by the mere concept of making time travel work. And I certainly wasn't the only one who noticed. That was about the time that Jonathan couldn't seem to find two words to say to me anymore. But the point is ....you found a purpose in life, and I think that's what you're saying your first wife was reacting to."

"What she couldn't handle, you mean," Benny said, nodding to himself at how much sense it suddenly made.

"I'm sorry to have to put you through this, but ...." Sam sighed. "I have to make sure you aren't treating this like a game. You have to be aware of what you're doing, what the consequences will be."

"It's not like it did you a bit of good," Benny muttered, still staring at the building in the near distance.

"I like to think it did," Sam replied quietly. "When I first started this project, I thought I understood. But I didn't, not really. Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should. I made the worst mistake of my life by stepping in that accelerator before we'd finished testing, because I didn't understand. I think finally realizing that was why it was a lot easier to accept ... the changes. That one incredibly arrogant mistake could have ended it for me, but I was given a chance to ... to make things right. If not for me, then at least for others. That's more than anyone has a right to expect, and a whole lot more than I deserved. The fact that you're here, with me, doesn't mean that you deserve to pay for my mistake. You're trying to help, I understand that, and I appreciate it more than you could ever know, but you have to know what the price will be, or I can't accept your help, Benny. I can't."

"The fact that I'm here with you means that I'm right," Benny said slowly, every word delivered with quiet confidence. "My belief in an ordered universe, without which time itself could not exist, let alone time travel, remember? I might not be able to prove it scientifically, but I know that something or someone imposed that order in the first place. And I gotta tell you, the proof of that has got to be the fact that Beckett the Skeptic isn't rolling his eyes like he always did whenever I got started in this direction. But you still don't have any faith, do you? It's hard to believe in a greater force when you don't even believe in yourself, isn't it?"

Stung, Sam lowered his head, not moving for a long time. When he finally spoke, it was in a low, tired voice. "I learned a lot about ... faith, about believing in things even when it made no sense to believe. But I'm not sure I've learned ... how to accept it."

"This isn't about choices," Benny told him, voice filled with quiet frustration. "It's about faith. We have to have faith that we're here because we're meant to be here, that we don't need to have things explained to us because we already know here ...." He tapped his chest. " ... what we were sent to do. I appreciate the fact that you want to make sure that I come out okay, I really do. But, come on, think about it. My life took the same direction here as it did before you changed my life by saving Lisa's life, didn't it? I was fine there, I'm fine now, and I'm damned sure I'd be fine no matter how things turn out here today. That's faith, pal. I had it before, and nothing that's happened has shaken it. And that means I know ... here ... that if it's meant to be with Rachel, then it will be. Somehow, it will be. And if it doesn't, then ...." He opened his hands in a gesture of acceptance. "I'll be fine."

Sam's eyes moved slightly, his expression tense as though he wanted desperately to believe, but couldn't allow himself to even dare hope. Benny sighed heavily. "Look. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm doing any of this for you. I just told you that I have a rather distressing reaction to altruism, and you'll excuse me if I would prefer not to throw up all over your shoes, okay? I am doing this for me, only me. Because this is something ... this is something I have to do. I have to. You know that, because you remember why. Don't you?"

"I remember," Sam told him quietly.

Benny nodded, a silent thank you for the look of understanding that softened Sam's anxious expression. "Now," he drew air deeply in his lungs, forcing a resolute tone into his voice. "Are we finished with the soul-searching or can we get this thing done?"

?

Benny stared forlornly at the massive tangle of wires covering two sides of the small closet, the lock of which he had just expertly jimmed rather than waste time hunting for the chief engineer. "I don't suppose you've got a degree in electrical engineering you haven't told me about?" he sighed, shaking his head.

"Always meant to get one," Sam murmured, moving closer to inspect the panels as though staring hard at them would bring instant understanding. "The police report said that the engineers claimed they hadn't made any significant changes to these boards for at least a week prior, but the conclusion was that mis-wiring was probably the direct cause of the fire. So you'd think the problem would have manifested by now. Unless it was something that someone ...." Sam caught Benny's hand as he poked at a wire bundle, giving him a warning look. " ... did today," he finished in a growl.

"So what do we do now? Stand at the door with fire extinguishers?"

"Let's try something a little more constructive. I'll track down the chief engineer and talk him into looking at this, see if he can't spot something we're missing. What's his name again? Peplinski, right."

"Maybe I should go," Benny said with a knowing look. "You weren't ... aren't exactly his favorite guy, you know."

"That's exactly why he'll be more likely to listen to me," Sam assured him. "If the guy whose project causes you the most headaches tells you that something might be wrong, you come running, right?"

"Point taken. Listen, just in case you can't budge him, I'm going upstairs to power up the prototype."

Sam stopped him, peering at him quizzically. "Why?"

"Backup plan." When Sam's expression didn't change, he continued, "The fastest way to cut the power to this place, as well as most of the city and parts of Northern Virginia, is to cycle the prototype, remember?"

"Don't I," Sam agreed, bursting out into laughter. "Wait, wait, before you go." He held out his hand until Benny, baffled, took it in a warm, firm handshake. "I just want to make sure you know how really grateful I am for what you're not doing for me."

There was a much deeper layer of emotion behind the broad smile and cheeky words, and Benny acknowledged his awareness of it with a nod and a smile of his own. "Name your first kid after me," he cracked, pushing him out the door. "I'll meet you back here, okay?"

As Sam hurried down the hall, Benny made certain that the door remain unlocked before closing it. Halfway to the stairs leading to the second floor and Dr. Beckett's laboratories, a voice calling his name stopped him dead in his tracks.

For a moment, it was the voice from his dreams and his nightmares and the blood froze in his veins. And then, with a start, he realized that the voice wasn't accusatory or beseeching, or taunting him from a vast distance. It was merely mildly irritated, as he'd heard it for the first time in nearly three years just this morning, but that he didn't realize until now how much he'd missed.

He started to turn, but realized just in time that the visceral reaction had produced a physical effect he had no intention of putting on public display. He was still rubbing his face, pretending serious distraction, when Jonathan finally drew up to him and fixed him with an exasperated look. "I left a message for you at your office. I don't suppose you've gotten it."

Benny suppressed a shudder. He'd gotten it, all right. Two days later when he'd finally dragged into the office despite his doctor's injunctions. In his admin's precise handwriting, the message had read, "Request meeting this p.m.." He'd spent nearly an hour sitting at his desk, staring at the pink slip, reading the words over and over, never understanding what they could have meant, and realizing that it didn't matter anymore.

He cleared his throat. "No, I, uh, haven't been to my office today," he managed, watching Jonathan's expression become one of mild disgust.

"Of course not," MacKensie sniffed. "I suppose I should have left the message with Dr. Beckett's department."

"Wait." Memory struck him a hard blow again, this time taking the breath out of his lungs. The question, the question that no one could answer except for one person, one person who'd never had a chance to answer it, the question he'd asked himself over and over and over, for months and years, the question came bursting out of him to startle that one person who knew the answer: "What are you doing here?"

Recovering, Jonathan swallowed his initial attempt to answer, and cleared his throat. "I came looking for you, of course," he replied with some asperity.

"Me," Benny whispered, paling. "Oh, my god. You came here looking for me."

Jonathan squinted at him. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, hastily piecing together his shattered composure. "What did you want to see me about?" he managed, feigning impatience to cover the fluttery feeling in his throat that would have surely cracked his voice otherwise.

MacKensie eyed him strangely as he replied, "I need to talk to you about the PRU, about ... your involvement."

He coughed, gaining a few more moments in which to approximate normal behavior. "Which speech is this one? The one about me taking liberties with the organizational structure, or the one about not telling you before I commit resources, or...."

Jonathan cut him off with a wave. "It's about whether you want to continue to be involved at all. What Dr. Moorhouse was attempting to tell us this morning before you drove her off with your inappropriate comments about her personal life ...."

"My ...." He squinted, searching his memory. She'd attended a faculty function three years ago — no, last week — on the arm of a new administrator, half her age. He'd gotten a lot of mileage out of the situation, and could have milked it a lot longer had events not put an end to his sense of humor for a long time afterward. "Oh. Yeah." He mustered what he hoped was a passable version of his old cheeky grin.

Jonathan rewarded the effort with a dark glare, continuing, "What she was attempting to tell us was that she's made a major commitment to the future direction of the PRU. I've talked with her at some length this morning, and ..." He slowed down, every word an effort. "... we've decided that, owing to my responsibilities here at the Institute, including my teaching load, I can no longer continue in my role as head of the Paranormal Research Unit."

Benny stared at him, openmouthed. "She didn't fire you, did she?"

"No," Jonathan assured him hastily. "I'll still maintain a connection to the Unit, but it will have to be in a subordinate or a consultant role. We've both agreed that, with the changes she has in mind, we need someone who can devote all their energies to the Unit. She's empowered me to offer the position to you."

"To ..." He snapped his mouth shut in time to keep his jaw from dropping onto the floor. A frantic search of Jonathan's taut expression gave him no clues as to how the man felt, other than he didn't seem confident that Benny would accept the offer. "Are you serious? I mean, are you really serious?"

Jonathan answered with a flick of his eyes heavenward, his standard reply to an old question.

"I had no idea," Benny murmured to himself, abruptly drawing inward. No idea at all. Dr. Moorhouse had never mentioned it, not once. Then again, both of them had allowed the Paranormal Unit to slide into the ashes as both had dealt, in their own separate ways, with the aftermath. She'd never really recovered, never won back the spark that had always danced in her eyes whenever she'd imposed another PRU assignment on them, or listened to their reports at investigation's end. And his heart had

never recovered enough from the blow to broach the subject, and so they'd allowed the PRU to die a quiet, unlamented death.

"Before you say anything, there's something I have to point out to you." Jonathan folded his hands carefully behind his back, adopting a stiff, formal attitude. "Accepting this position means accepting the course that Dr. Moorhouse has plotted for the PRU. I can tell you this much — it's a full time commitment, and will leave no room for ... distractions."

Benny inhaled, suddenly realizing the reason for undercurrent of anger in Jonathan's voice and pose. Resentment that had been smoldering under careful control for the past several years was now curling out of long confinement. Resentment over the time Benny had spent with Dr. Beckett's time travel experiments, first as a nosy journalist, then as an eager acolyte at Beckett's feet, then as a dedicated graduate research student. What Sam had embraced as Benny's gift for theorization had been the PRU's unexpected blessing as well, and Jonathan deeply resented not having it at his disposal just when he'd finally become interested enough in the work to make the commitment himself.

Three years ago, if he'd had a chance to have this conversation with Jonathan, he would have huffed at the suggestion that his involvement with Sam's project was a mere distraction, and probably would have terminated the conversation with an invitation for Jonathan to come back after he'd undergone an attitude adjustment. Instead, he blinked once, then again, watching Jonathan's face grow more puzzled as he did. "What do you think?" he asked finally, subdued.

Hesitating over an obviously unexpected question, Jonathan managed a shrug. "I don't really see that it matters what I think."

"It does," Benny assured him, watching him carefully. "More than you know."

"I happen to think that it's a simple choice," Jonathan told him after a reflective silence spent looking at the floor. "But then again, I'm not the one making it."

"What happens

if I turn it down?"

From the slight flinch that Jonathan was unable to suppress, Benny got his first answer. The second came haltingly. "Then I would assume Dr. Moorhouse will look elsewhere."

He sneaked a look at his watch, noting that it was just a little past two-thirty. "Look, um ... I have something upstairs I need to do ...."

"Yes, of course. We can continue this discussion at a more convenient time for you," Jonathan replied stiffly, leaving no doubt that he'd interpreted Benny's words as lack of interest.

"No, no!" Benny ducked past him as Jonathan turned so that he stop the man face-to-face. For a moment, he berated himself for the move — what he should be doing was sending Jonathan as far away from this place as he could get in thirty minutes. But there was no way he could ensure that MacKensie would actually do it, and therefore the only logical course of action was to not let the man out of his sight for a minute.

"It's just a few things I have to check," Benny assured him. "Come on, we can talk while I work. No, really, I want to hear about this new direction. Is she talking about expansion, what?"

By the time they reached the door to Sam Beckett's main laboratory, Benny's mouth was hanging open. "She's serious? I mean, she's really serious? She can do it? She can get the Institute to fund a whole department for Paranormal Studies?"

"With the work we've done in conjunction with the University of Amsterdam, yes," Jonathan said, some of the stiffness replaced by quiet pride. "You know that your last paper made quite a stir in the scientific community, and I mean that in a positive way. Since you're less than a year away from your doctorate, barring, ah, distractions of course, and combined with the other papers you've published over

the past three years, Dr. Moorhouse has no reservations about offering you the position of department chairman."

Benny glanced back as he tried to cover the fact that he was having trouble remembering the touch pad combination. "Just tell me one thing. Did she offer the position to you?"

"Yes," he said on a long exhale. "But I'm unwilling to make the sacrifices that would be required." To Benny's questioning frown, he elaborated. "I enjoy teaching anthropology, and I have research -in-progress that I would be extremely reluctant to abandon, as well as some long-range plans that wouldn't fit in with the job requirements."

"And it has nothing to do with the fact that Dr. Moorhouse is grooming you to replace her as Anthro Department chair?"

Jonathan started violently, signaling a direct hit. "I-I couldn't say," he lied badly, reddening.

"Would that make you my boss?" he grinned, trying another combination.

"Peer, actually," Jonathan said quietly, abandoning pretense with a sigh. "We'd report directly to the Dean of Sciences."

"Something tells me that's going to be someone with a killer set of pearls," Benny winked slyly, hiding the slight desperation he felt at the fact that the lock wasn't responding. If he could only tell Jonathan that it was more than a premonition — he'd been the one recruited to move Dr. Moorhouse's vast collection of arcana to her new office in Administration two years ago— one year from now.

"Does that mean you're reconsidering?" Jonathan wanted to know, regarding him without expression.

"First, I haven't considered yet, so let's not be so hasty with the prefix, okay? Second, you still haven't told me how you are on all of th— yes!"

The lock finally beeped and disengaged.

Benny grinned weakly at Jonathan's puzzled stare. "Lock's been sticking. Come on, this won't take but a second."

The darkened room was already filled with a steady hum from the equipment Sam tried to keep powered up at all times, since it took forever for them to reach full power from a cold start. Benny paused, frowning down at what looked to be plaster fragments scattered on the floor. They hadn't been there when they'd all left and locked up two days ago — Sam heading off to Newport News, and his assistants to personal matters they planned to catch up on during the unexpected four day vacation that Sam's absence granted them. No one should have been in the room since.

Another sneak look at his watch distracted him from the question. He started making the rounds of the various panels, edging input controls carefully to a point where just a few switches on the main control console would earn the local electric company's emergency technicians another few hours of overtime pay. "So, how are you on this decision, anyway?" he continued his interrupted thought smoothly.

"How I feel is really not important," Jonathan replied impatiently, leaning against the doorjamb with his arms folded. "If you mean, will I have problems accepting a subordinate role, I just told you — "

"I don't mean how you feel about me taking over your job," Benny said, concentrating on his delicate task. "I mean, what's behind this attitude I'm getting from you?"

"Attitude?" Jonathan inclined his head uneasily, as though deflecting an unwelcome intrusion into his ear. "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean this total lack of confidence you seem to have over whether I can handle the job."

"That's ridiculous," MacKensie scoffed weakly. "I have every confidence in you."

"Okay," Benny drawled, unconvinced. The answer came to him as he moved to another panel, and for a moment remembered the look of disappointment on the man's face when he'd interrupted the conversation downstairs. "It's this, isn't it? You think I'd turn down the job so that I could stay on this project?"

Jonathan pressed his lips together tightly, eyes downcast for the entire time it took him to gather his courage to speak. "No, that's not what I think," he said quietly. "If you were to decide to turn down the offer for that reason, I would actually be relieved."

To Benny's surprised, almost stricken stare, he continued, "If you did that, it would demonstrate to me that you were capable of making a commitment to doing one thing and doing it well. In all the years I've known you, I've never seen you commit, not to anything or anyone. Even your journalism career was a jumble of freelance work, including your time with the National Register. In the beginning, your involvement with the Paranormal Unit was when the investigation suited your interests. And then, just when I thought you were about to make full-time commitment to the Unit, you went off in another direction altogether, latching on to this ... this time travel nonsense."

"Nonsense, huh?" Benny murmured neutrally.

"Despite my personal feelings on the subject, I recognize that you are fascinated with the work that Dr. Beckett is doing here, but ...." He spread his hands. "The point is, you can't keep playing the dilettante, not anymore. You made a decision to pursue an academic career, Benedek. You're less than a year away from your doctorate, and the papers you've already published have gotten enough positive attention so that Dr. Moorhouse feels she won't have any problems installing you as a department chair. But you can't keep spreading yourself thin. The position requires commitment, it requires your full attention, and unless you're willing to face that fact ... I see no hope that you'd last even a year. Either you'd be ousted because your required published output was insufficient, or you'd quit on your own."

"You know me so well," Benny returned, subdued, keeping his eyes fixed on the control panel before him. And he was right, too. He had been playing a little too loose with this academia stuff. As much as he might chafe at the rules and strictures, he had to accept and abide them if he wanted to stay here. He had to start demonstrating that he was worthy of their respect.

"Actually, I've known you for, what — seven years now?" Jonathan said quietly, with the deep resignation of someone who knew that he was quite probably going to regret everything he was about to say, but felt compelled to say it anyway. "And yet, after all this time, I can't say that I understand you at all."

"Spoken like someone who keeps trying anyway," Benny said with a sly grin, eyes focused on his task. "Keep going, I hear the distant creak of an approaching question."

"Why did you let Lisa go?"

Benny glanced up in open surprise at the quiet, sincere question. "Whoa, wait a minute here. She let me go, remember?"

"When I first met you, I couldn't think of two people more suited for each other. Somewhere along the line, you drifted apart and ... she wasn't the one who changed, Benedek. You did."

"In violation of what criminal statute?" he huffed mildly.

"I'm not faulting the fact of the change. Just the nature of it." He paused, visibly trying to match the right words to the thought. "You had fame, a not insubstantial fortune, a beautiful wife, and... and yet you chose the drab, repetitive, stifling life of an academic professional. I don't understand. I've never understood."

"That's because you've got the basic facts wrong," Benny said, making an effort to sound confident despite the fact that he was winging it, putting the realizations together for the very first time. "I didn't

choose it, it chose me. Have you ever been in a position where you couldn't not do something, even knowing how much you'd lose by making the choice? That's me. You've been inside this drab, repetitive, stifling world all your life, so you don't see it the way I do. The life I had before, what was I doing? Trying to get attention, that's all. Yeah, I'm serious. Front and center, me and my personality, living from talk show to talk show. Somewhere along the line, I realized that was all there was for me. Maybe it happened long about the time when the talk shows got too weird even for me. Everything's been downhill since Merv bid his last sayonara, y'know. Or maybe that question finally got through to me. The one they all asked, just before the commercial break.

"Where do you go from here, Benny?" He shook his head ruefully. "Where could I go from there? I didn't really know anything, except how to read people, how to sucker them, how to make them believe anything I told them. But what I was telling them ... I didn't even believe myself."

He glanced up long enough to see that Jonathan was listening intently. "My lifestyle looked pretty good, didn't it? I think I caught a few flashes of green in your eyes from time to time, don't bother denying it. But I'll let you in on a little secret, pal. There's nothing that can compare to the moment someone turns to you and says, 'Tell me what you think,' and really means it. Because that means that what you think is actually important to someone, not just transitory entertainment." He slapped his hands lightly on the console, mildly irritated at the memory. "Lisa wasn't the least bit interested in what I thought about anything, unless it was how to entertain her. That worked just fine for a while, but ... in the end, it just wasn't good enough for either of us."

Another glance revealed that MacKensie was still frowning. "And then there's another basic fact you're ignoring. The academic life ain't that different from the one I left behind. Come on, think about it. The audience is a little smaller, and a lot harder to please, but I'm still doing research, still writing, and still wowing them with my shtick every Monday and Wednesday morning at the sophomore level, every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon at the senior level, with encores Saturday morning at the graduate level. The difference is, people remember what I say now. Hell, I even get to grade them on how well they remember," he finished with a pleased cackle.

Jonathan's frown eased into a suppressed smile. "I've never quite thought about it that way."

"Neither have I," Benny said under his breath, impressed despite himself.

Amusement still lingering in his eyes, Jonathan spent a moment in reflective thought. "You know, I think this may actually be the longest conversation we've ever had."

"Without me making a bad joke, or you threatening bodily harm, you mean?" Benny chuckled. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Geez, I've sure missed...."

He cut the nostalgia trip short with a sharp cough. "I think I missed something here. I'm getting an interruption in the power-up sequence. And it's consistent, too."

Responding to the worried tone in Benny's voice, Jonathan approached the back of the console at which the man was frowning. "How serious is it?"

An eloquent facial expression gave him the answer — very. "There's a reason this sequence is a sequence," he muttered. "No one would have messed with this, and it's not acting like a fluke, so what...?"

Jonathan lifted his head, a quizzical look on his face as he sniffed the air. "Do you smell something?"

Alerted, Benny inhaled three times in rapid succession. "Like what?"

"I don't know, it's like...." Searching the room as he spoke, he paused, leaned forward briefly, then moved closer to free-standing console in the far corner of the room. "Something's burning here."

Benny sprang for the console, sniffing frantically. Finally catching the faint, acrid scent, he followed it around to the readily identifiable source — the massive electrical outlet that had been specifically designed to bear the tremendous electrical load the test equipment pulled from the main generators.

"Someone's been monkeying with this," he yelled. Instead of one outlet, there were now two, marked "Main" and "Backup". A converter box replaced the direct connection, and it was at the point that the box connected to the wall source that dark smoke curled ominously. An electrical spark spit at him as he tentatively reached for the converter, searing the wall.

"Backup," he whispered in horror. The backup generators. They had been due to be installed last week, but there had been some delay or another. Somewhere between the time Sam had left for Newport News and today, someone had taken it upon themselves to hook the most troublesome of all the building's projects up to the new backup generators. Someone who hadn't consulted with anyone on the project, who would have told them point blank that the power specifications weren't standard.

But the fire hadn't started here in the lab. Had it? He flinched back as another, more violent spark erupted, sending more smoke billowing up from the wall connection as well as the interface box. New cabling disappearing into the wall gave him the answer. The wire bundle undoubtedly led down to the first floor wiring closet. The feedback from the short in the lab would set off a chain reaction there, sending every piece of electrically powered equipment in the entire building into overload.

Behind him, Jonathan said something, and it took a minute for it to register on Benny. "Wait!" he cried, too late to keep the man from leaving the room. He looked between the worsening problem and the open door, torn. Then he dashed for the door.

His shout caught in his throat to see that MacKensie had stopped just outside the door, and was in the process of reading the directions on the fire extinguisher he'd just yanked off the wall. "Shut this thing down!" he cried, pushing past Benny without apology. He skidded to a halt a few feet from where tiny flames were now erupting at the wall connection, and after only a few seconds of fumbling, got the extinguisher working at full force. Benny flew at the control console, frantically trying to identify all the switches that needed to be closed.

As the first set of generators darkened and the busy hum diminished, his thoughts spun out in a dizzying reel of memories, all jumbled up in one adrenaline-fueled mess. Sam had been in Newport News, and his staff had used the opportunity to take a small vacation. Benny had been catching up on the work for his doctorate that he'd been neglecting for too long. No one would have been in the laboratory for at least two days, nor expected to be there for two more. This was how the fire had started. It had been fully involved on the first floor by the time anyone had sounded the alarm, so there would have been no real way to tell how it had started.

By the time all the power had been cut, Jonathan was breathing heavily, staring at the sodden mess in front of him as though daring it to flare again. "That was close," he gulped, shaking his head.

"We're not out of this yet," Benny told him, springing forward to latch on to his arm. "We've got to check the connections on the first floor."

Benny snagged another fire extinguisher on their dash to the stairway. Halfway down, they paused at the commotion just below them. Sam and the chief engineer had one moment been walking down the hallway, engrossed in argument; the next moment, both had spotted something at the end of the hallway that caused them to register immediate alarm. Peplinski took off at a dead run, but Sam hesitated upon spotting the two men on the steps above him. Then he focused on what both held in their hands. "Come on!" he shouted, taking off after Peplinski.

They found the man at the door of the wiring closet, reeling back from the cloud of intense black smoke he'd released upon opening the door. Without apology, he ripped the fire extinguisher out of Benny's hands, and, gulping in a deep breath, plunged back into the tiny room.

"Somebody rewired the power source," Benny told Sam in a low, urgent voice. "The fire started upstairs, in the main lab."

The news visibly distressed Sam, but he shook it off determinedly. "If we can keep this from spreading ...."

With a ragged gasp, Peplinski fell out of the room, coughing harshly. Sam caught him, dragging him a short distance into breathable air. "Pull the alarm!" the engineer managed to croak.

The sound of cracking wood and sinister electrical sparks followed Benny as he sprinted down the hallway and yanked on the wall alarm. As the shrill four-tone warning sounded, Benny spied Jonathan's movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Hey !Wait!" Benny caught up with Jonathan at the steps, reaching through the balusters to successfully grab MacKensie's trouser leg. "Where the hell do you think you're going? Evacuate, dammit!"

"I have to make sure everyone is out," Jonathan insisted, vainly trying to free his leg.

"They can hear, can't they?"

"Not all of them!" Giving up on trying to dislodge Benny's grip, Jonathan leaned over the railing to address him urgently. "Dr. Gillespie has TTY equipment in his office that he allows deaf students unrestricted access for research purposes. If someone is in there alone, with the door closed, they won't see the strobe lights. Let go!"

So that was it. That was the reason. Not that he'd sat waiting for Benny to show up until it was too late for him to escape the blaze. It was because when the alarm had finally been sounded, he'd gone gallumphing off to the fourth floor to make sure everyone got out safely. And by doing, sealed his own fate.

Shock numbed his fingers, enough for Jonathan to finally wrest free and bolt up the steps. Shock that kept him frozen for only a second before he shouted. "Wait up!"

"Benedek, get out, now!" the voice, somewhere at the top of the steps, ordered brusquely.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight!" he huffed, taking the steps two at a time, but still not catching up to the determined professor until the fourth floor landing.

"I don't need help," MacKensie snarled, hurrying down the hallway.

"Yeah, famous last words, pal."

He followed Jonathan into an outer office, stopping in the doorway to the inner office as Jonathan continued on. Sure enough, a male student was looking over the shoulder of a female student, both intent on the display of a TTY machine. "Great, he had to be right, too," he moaned to himself. Had he saved those students before? Or had he been doomed by the effort? He couldn't remember the exact number of fatalities, since only one had really mattered to him in the long run. But he didn't remember two students crediting an anthropology professor with saving them from the fire, either.

Getting the students' attention by interposing himself in their line of vision, Jonathan gestured briefly, saying just enough in sign language to cause a flare of panic. Another few gestures had a calming effect, and he guided them from the office, shutting the doors behind them.

Expecting Jonathan to follow the students as they hurried down the hallway to the stairway, Benny yelped when MacKensie turned in the opposite direction. "Hey, enough heroics for today, okay?"

Ignoring him, Jonathan pulled a fire extinguisher from the wall, then went further down to snag the one at the far end of the hall. When Benny caught up to him, one of the extinguishers was immediately shoved into his hands. "Come on," he urged, growing desperate. "Let's let the professionals do their jobs, okay? I've got to get you out of here."

Jonathan gave him a sharp look. "You've got to get me out of here?" he repeated incredulously.

"Don't start picking on semantics now. Come on!"

Flying down the staircase, they pulled up sharply at the second floor landing, staring down into the roiling black smoke covering the last six steps as well as the entire first floor. Benny looked around frantically, already knowing there were no windows nearby by which to make a hasty escape. He was about to suggest a retreat to the second floor to hang out a window until firemen arrived with a ladder, but Jonathan called the question by whipping out a handkerchief. Positioning the fire extinguisher in one hand, he juggled the nozzle and the handkerchief in the other so that he could manage both in a pinch. He hesitated, a glance showing regret that he didn't have something to offer Benny, who responded by drawing up the collar of his shirt, tacitly demonstrating that he could manage. Not at all assured, Jonathan nodded reluctantly, drew a deep breath into his lungs, then plunged down the steps.

Too late Benny realized that he was bound to lose sight of the man in the thick black smoke. On instinct and blurred memory alone, he followed, making a left in the direction of the main exit. Once more too late, he remembered that was also the direction of the fateful wiring closet. "Jonathan!" he called, immediately choking on the smoke that swirled into his lungs.

"Here!" To his despair, the choked cry was in front of him. "Come on, it's just a little farther....!"

The words ended in a frantic coughing fit. Shirt fabric clutched tightly over his nose and mouth, Benny surged forward, sweeping his arm before him in hopes of making contact. He did, with the fire extinguisher still clutched in his hand. Jonathan's pained yelp disintegrated into hacking noises. Dropping the extinguisher, Benny got a grip around Jonathan's shoulders just as the man slumped heavily against him, choking. Abandoning his effort with his shirt fabric, Benny found the hand with which Jonathan clutched the handkerchief drooping at his side. Grabbing the cloth, he twisted enough to force it back against the man's face while bearing his weight, dragging him toward what he hoped was just a few more feet to the exit.

Suddenly, something cold and wet struck them with the force of a tidal wave, knocking them to the floor. Sprawled atop Jonathan's body, Benny tried to get up, but the water pressure kept him down, spraying into his nose and mouth and eyes. Finally getting his head turned enough to gulp a breath, he shouted, "Hey!" with increasing urgency until the bombardment abruptly ended. Through smoke thinned by the water barrage, someone in full fire gear and gas mask trotted up to them, and shouted something Benny couldn't quite make out through ears full of water. He didn't resist when similarly outfitted figures appeared out of the shroud, yanking him to his feet without warning or apology.

Fresh air hit his face as his faceless rescuer expertly dragged him from the building. His grateful gasp became a coughing fit, rendering him completely helpless as he was carried a short distance, then gently dumped onto the ground. Other hands reached out, keeping him in a seated position as a blanket was slipped around his shoulders, and an oxygen mask pushed over his face and held there until the worst of his hacking fit abated. He nodded to acknowledge the paramedic's instructions to remain still and just keep breathing.

After a while, he became aware that Jonathan was nearby, also sitting in the grass huddled within a blanket, with his oxygen mask held away from his face in one hand as he tested his lungs. "I don't know what's worse," he rasped. "The soaking or the smoke in my lungs."

"Could be worse, buds," Benny replied, fighting the bubbling tickle at the back of his throat. "Could be lots worse."

Jonathan looked back at the building, at the smoke curling from the lower story windows. The fire fighters' pace had slowed considerably, a good sign, Benny realized, that they considered the situation well under control. "You knew, didn't you?" he said after a long silence. "Somehow, you knew."

"I get these flashes sometimes," he shrugged noncommittally. "And sometimes, they actually come in handy."

"It's more than that." He glanced back at the building, then at Benny, a strange look in his eye. "A lot more."

"Hold that thought," Benny told him as a distraction arrived in the form of a disheveled and sodden Sam Beckett, who broke into a huge grin upon seeing them. "You had me worried, you really had me

worried," the man bumbled as he went down to one knee at Benny's side, gripping his shoulder in deep, silent gratitude.

"Did we do it?" Benny wanted to know, sotto voce.

Replying in kind, Sam told him, "They've got the fire contained to the closet and part of the computer lab. Looks like the damage is going to be minimal. Benny ... you did it."

"We did it," Benny amended, responding to the light in Sam's eyes with a warm smile of his own. "So what happens now?"

The question caused him a moment of uncertainty. "Usually I leaped out right away, but sometimes ... sometimes there was something else, some little thing I had to see or do. Like now. I think I'm meant to stay here just a little bit longer so that I thank you properly."

"Don't need it," Benny assured him, fighting back another promising coughing fit as he directed a significant glance past Sam's shoulder. "I've got all the thanks I need, believe me."

Understanding, Sam gave his shoulder another heartfelt shake. Then, giddy, he turned to Jonathan, who was watching them with a puzzled look on his face. "It is really good to see you again. Really, really good." As he rose, he paused to lean down and grip Jonathan's shoulder. "Have a really, really good life. Okay?"

Jonathan nodded, beyond confusion. With a wink at Benny, Sam moved off into the gathering crowd. "Both of you," Jonathan said, shaking his head in disbelief. "You're both insane."

Benny didn't hear him, staring openmouthed at the retreating figure of Sam Beckett through the crowd. No one else seemed to have noticed the brilliant blue aura that had briefly enveloped the man. At the moment it happened, Sam faltered slightly, his hand lifting to his head as though he'd suffered a moment of dizziness. Then his attention had focused on the smoky building as though it were the first time he'd really noticed it. And then he was off at a dead run, undoubtedly in a panic over the condition of his equipment since Benny knew, without a doubt, that Sam no longer remembered that everything was going to be just fine.

For a moment, he was content to sit, concentrate on not letting the coughing take over, take swigs from the oxygen mask and wonder why he'd not 'leaped' out yet. Some little thing I had to see or do... some little thing....

"Hey, hey," Jonathan barked, a mistake he paid for with a couple of harsh coughs. "Where are you going?"

The question was repeated, more forcefully, by the paramedic in charge of monitoring their condition, who intercepted him before he could completely gain his feet and gently settled him back on the ground. "I just need something to write with," he told the young man, almost begging. "Anything, I just need something ... yeah, thanks. Thanks, I appreciate it." More than you know, he thought as he took the pencil and notepad the paramedic produced from his kit.

Jonathan eyed him strangely as he scribbled frantically, then blinked in outright surprise when Benny ripped the sheet of paper out of the pad and thrust it at him. "If you've ever agreed to do a favor for me, you've got to do this one, okay? I'm counting on you. This is really, really important. This is my life. I can't explain everything to you now, but...."

"This is an address," Jonathan declared, more confused than ever. "Who is Rachel Harris?"

"She's someone I've got to talk to," Benny told Jonathan, silently willing the man to accept the urgency in his voice and expression without question. "But I might not remember who she is, and ... look, I want you to hold on to this and give it to me tomorrow when ..." He swallowed. "When we go see Dr. Moorhouse about this new Paranormal Studies Department thing, okay? And I'm going to warn you right now, I might not remember giving you her address or why I even gave it to you in the first place. If that

happens, you've got to tell me that it's important that I contact her. Really important. Like, the single most important thing I'll ever do in my life. Do you understand?"

Jonathan shook his head, the baffled look frozen on his face. But he carefully folded the piece of a paper, and after a moment of hesitation, slid it gingerly into his damp jacket pocket.

Relaxing with a quiet sigh, Benny lifted the oxygen mask to his face, then stopped when he saw that his hand was glowing blue.

?

He woke up with a start, the smoke searing his lungs, choking off his air....

No. No. Just the nightmare again. Just the nightmare ... again....

Staring into the darkness, he waited until his breath returned to his aching lungs, and some solid pieces of his fragmented mind to settle back into place. And one of the first pieces that not only settled but nagged as well as that what had awakened him was a brilliant blue flash of light.

The last time he'd seen that light....

He lifted his hand, barely distinguishable in the gloom. Only then did he become aware that his movement had disturbed the other occupant of his bed.

For a moment, he stared at the blanket-covered form next to him, unable to sort out two distinct sets of memories. Only one set could be real, so the other had to be from a dream so vivid that it was almost liked he'd just lived an entire lifetime in one night. But which was which? And why was the confusion making it so hard to figure out who was lying next to him?

Was he still married to Lisa, or had she in fact walked out years ago, arranging for divorce papers to be served on him the day he'd been given the keys to his own office at Georgetown Institute? Rachel? Had he first met her as a prospective client, or as an eager fan crashing her gallery showing in Soho? Or, he recalled with a start, was it possible that he'd ended up in the reality that someone in a dream had told him about, in which he'd never married? In which case, was the face of a total stranger about to be revealed to him by the person who was even now turning over and opening her eyes?

"Is something wrong?" the sleepy, blessedly familiar voice mumbled as fingers smelling faintly of turpentine brushed auburn hair out of her face.

He released his pent-up breath in a controlled rush, dizzy with relief. Impulsively, he leaned down to kiss her forehead, not realizing until she touched his arm how much the gesture alarmed her.

"What's the matter? Benny?"

It took a few moments of shushing and soothing noises to get her to relax back. "Nothing's wrong," he assured her. "Nothing. I ... I just thought of something I need to check down in the study. That's all. Go back to sleep, okay?"

He caught the glimmer of apprehension in her eyes, but she finally nodded, letting her fingers trail off him as he left their bed. "Don't be long," she whispered.

Pausing at the door, he switched on the hall light, then looked back, torn. She'd already closed her eyes, curled up on her side as though protecting his space. What did the rest of his confusion matter, with that waiting for him? The thought almost drew him back, but something else drew him up short: the realization that he had no more idea about the rest of his life than he had about with whom he shared his bed.

The house was familiar enough; he unerringly made his way downstairs to his study guided only by the faint hallway light above. At the doorway, he found the light switch and took a moment to survey the small, comfortable room. Something about it was different. He had a vague memory of curtains that should be newer, books on the tall shelves behind his desk that should have been arranged in better order, any number of little, telling touches that were missing due to the fact it had taken him six months longer to persuade Rachel to become his wife....

Six months longer than ... when?

A vivid image floated behind his eyes, stealing his breath away with its clarity. A portrait, larger than life-size, lit by a soft golden halo. And a small gold plate fastened to the frame, detailing a name, a birth year and ... a death year....

He found himself seated at his desk, as though the wrenching memory had physically dragged him there. A crystal and gold perpetual calendar he didn't recognize — from the inscription at the base, it appeared to be a token of appreciation from an international paranormal symposium he had apparently chaired in 1994. But hadn't he failed to so much as get invited to that symposium? The memento said not, as did the business card he found tucked inside the cover of a leather-bound planner. Dr. Edgar Benedek, Ph.D., Chairman, Department of Paranormal Studies, Georgetown Institute of Science and Technology. With shaking fingers, he found the ribbon marking the pages holding his schedule for the next day, and opened the planner. The date struck a wobbly note in his memory. Yesterday ... a quick scan showed no entry for a gala reception and building dedication. Because there was no new building to dedicate. Because....

He reached for the phone, and paused with his hand on the receiver. A framed portrait commanded his full attention. Rachel, radiant in a simple street-length white gown, standing next to his tuxedoed self, her arm entwined with his, both beaming out at the camera. A smug Jordy Kerner stood by his side, while Rachel's maid of honor smiled shyly at the bride's side. It wasn't the same pose that some stubborn part of his mind remembered, and yet it was somehow ... better. Perhaps it had something to do with the smaller photo set off to one side amidst a grouping. He picked it up, squinting at the faces: he and Rachel as centerpieces, bridesmaids lined up behind her, groomsmen behind him. Six attendants in all, he recalled, then realized as he stared at the photo that his count was off by two. Including Jordy, who took up most of the room on that side of the photo, there were four tuxedoed groomsmen, not three.

Dropping the photo back into its place, Benny picked up the receiver, but paused again, this time staring at a small card attached to the front of the telephone. A speed dialer-directory, filled out in his own barely legible scrawl. Staring at the names, his trembling finger punched the first stored number. He was still staring when the answering machine picked up on the third ring.

"Hello," a cheerful, slightly accented voice boomed, followed immediately by a perky, distinctly feminine "Hi!" In chorus, the voices continued, "We're on our honeymoon right now ...."

Honeymoon? Benny barely heard the male voice go on with instructions to leave a message, and that they might eventually get around to returning the call. Honeymoon? Who...?

He grabbed the wedding party photo again, zeroing in on the fourth bridesmaid. Tricia. Of course. The assistant Humanities professor Jonathan had just started dating a few weeks before ....before the fire in Building C. She'd resigned a few weeks after the funeral ... no, wait, she'd shown up at the hospital just as he and Jonathan were being released with the admonition to take it easy for the next few days, and had taken charge of the unresisting MacKensie, who'd borne Benedek's teasing over the woman's concern with a surprising amount of composure.

Flipping a week back in the planner revealed the entry, and a quick scan of several pages before that brought the memories flooding back. His notes were cryptic, but enough for someone with a brilliant talent for theorization to deduce that he'd been best man and that he'd somehow gotten Jonathan to agree to a bachelor party at a notorious strip joint. As much as he wanted to entertain the memories that poked through at that revelation, he determinedly shook them off and returned his attention to the wedding party photo. Standing next to Tricia was another familiar face, one that had been there in that nagging alternate memory, but nevertheless gave him a strong jolt. For her position in the lineup mirrored a

groomsman on the other side, whose smiling face seemed to hold a special glow, as though it was more than just this happy occasion that filled him with a sense of elation.

Their telephone number was listed second on the speed dial directory, and Benny called it up, barely daring to breathe. This time the phone was picked up on the fourth ring, answered by a sleepy, feminine voice. "lo?"

"Donna?" he ventured.

"Benny?" She sighed heavily. "You promised."

"Promised?" He made a low guttural noise as he fought for the memory. "I promised ... not to keep calling this late," he recalled, vastly relieved. "I know, and I'm sorry, but ...."

"Yeah, yeah," she grumbled, amusement poking through her mock annoyance. "He's right here, hold on."

"Benny." Sam's voice was terse, distinctly unsleepy. "Did you ....?"

The hesitation meant that there was something he was reluctant to say in front of Donna, and that could only mean one thing. "I did if you did," Benny confirmed.

Sam's quiet exhale signaled understanding, even relief. "Meet me at the lab."

Ignoring Donna's heartfelt groan, Benny agreed readily, then cried, "Wait! Uh ... where ....?"

"Building C," Sam reminded him patiently. "Second floor."

"Of course." His own wave of relief nearly drained him. "I'll see you there in 30 minutes, okay?"

?

Sam's commute to campus was less than 15 minutes, so the lights were already blazing by the time Benny arrived at the tiny office attached to the main lab. Despite the fact that, as a faculty member, he'd been assigned much larger and better-appointed office space in the Sciences building, this was where he spent most of the time not otherwise spent in the classroom or in the labs. As such, every corner was crammed with computer equipment, bound readouts, schematics, everything that Sam needed on hand and at his immediate disposal. Seated behind the battered desk, Beckett looked up from an open magazine as Benny tapped on the open door. Without a word, he closed the pages, placing the publication face up on the desk.

It was an issue of Time, with Sam Beckett's abashedly smiling face on the cover. As Benny picked it up, Sam spoke, his expression unconsciously mirroring that of the photo. "They gave everyone a decent write-up, just like they promised. Donna, Jerry ... Gooshie ...."

"Gooshie." The name, for just a moment, caused him to draw a blank. Then he remembered the intense yet personable young man, actively recruited by Sam at a time when the Institute

had finally approved funding for expanded staff. "Gooshie," he repeated to himself, finding the page where each photo was placed, like satellites, around a larger one of Sam in front of his new prototype. The team. He knew the names and faces of all of them, some from both memories. The one person conspicuously missing from the photo lineup in his mind's eye — was himself.

But why would he be there? Three years ago, he'd accepted the Paranormal Studies Department chair position, and by so doing had effectively severed all official participation in Dr. Samuel Beckett's project. In another life, after he'd failed to keep Sam from accepting the military's offer to resurrect his destroyed project, he'd pattered in the Physical Sciences as well as the Humanities departments for over two years, until Sam's disappearance prompted him to recruit Jerry and together dust off the old prototype

that had long languished in storage. In that other life, his face had been on the cover, his and Jerry's, and it had been their team profiled on these pages.

And for some strange reason, when what he thought he should be feeling was loss, even disappointment — all he felt was a strong sense of relief.

Which he belatedly realized must have reflected on his facial expression, because when he looked up, Sam's concerned frown cleared immediately. "You got a sidebar," he pointed out, making a flipping motion with his finger to encourage Benny to turn the page.

A full column, with a small photo. Consultant. Of course. He had managed to figure out how to maintain a tenuous connection to the project without compromising his responsibilities to the Paranormal Studies Department. Not that he'd ever had to force it; every memory contained vivid images of Sam Beckett seeking him out to deliberately provoke him with unresolved questions, and then hanging on to every word out of his mouth, no matter how bizarre or farfetched. "Idea man", the blurb described him. "Indispensable", claimed the quote from Dr. Beckett.

And while one part of him remembered reading this article over and over again, sending copies to everyone he'd known even remotely in his entire life, another part of him had never seen these words before in his life.

The disparity finally wore him down, causing him to drop the magazine back to the desk with an abrupt sigh. "How long is this gonna last?" he begged weakly, rubbing his temples.

Implicitly understanding the question, Sam shook his head ruefully. "I don't know. Not long, I think. It would have to be a temporary phenomena, really. At least ... I certainly hope so," he ended with a sigh that made it clear he was having his own problems.

"You're right," Benny decided, lost in thought as he made his way to the chair in front of Sam's desk. "I mean, that it would have to be. In an ordered universe, presupposing that there's ... something ... behind this whole experience. Think about it. There's no New Mexico project. The first prototype is still gathering mothballs. Unless you want to claim that a project that never existed until the moment they got that fire under control is what put us here, nothing else can explain how we got here."

Sam rose abruptly, moving to stand before a small mirror tacked haphazardly on the wall, usually used to hastily check appearances or grab a quick shave on the run. "I can't get used to this," he said, his voice low and wondering as he lifted his hand as though to touch the image that greeted him. "My face. Do you know how long it's been since I've seen my face in the mirror?" He exhaled slowly as he rubbed his stubbled chin. "Actually, it wasn't that long ago," he murmured. "But..."

"But?" Benny urged when Sam shook his head. "Come on, you might as well tell me. I think that's why I'm here, so that you can tell someone who's actually going to understand. It's probably part of your severance package."

Sam inclined his head, a pensive look coming over his face as he kept regarding his mirror image as though expecting it to vanish at any moment. "It all sounds so ... so logical when you say it, but it wasn't like that. It never felt like that. I believed ...." He broke off sharply, drawing a deep breath to start over again. "I was given a chance to change things, for the better, for other people and myself, but I never felt as though I was ever given a choice," he continued, his voice lower and calmer. "At the end, I was finally given a chance to choose, I was finally asked what I wanted to do, what direction I wanted to turn. I thought I knew what the consequences would be. I was given no reason to believe ... otherwise." He turned his head, fixing Benny with a piercing look. "Why would they do that to me?" he asked, almost pleading. "In your ordered universe, why ... why would they do that to me?"

Benny took his time answering, making sure he had all the words in the correct order before dispensing them with utmost care. "You stepped over a threshold that no human has ever crossed. Maybe one that no human was ever meant to cross, I don't know. But the fact remains, you crossed over, and once you were there, well ... it makes sense to me that whomever or whatever was already there might want to check you out, see if you belonged there. If that's true, then ... you've got to stop thinking that they were using you as some sort of punishment for your presumption, and start accepting that maybe,

just maybe, that what they were really doing is testing your worthiness. Which would mean, of course, that the choice they gave you was your final exam."

Light reflected from the desk lamp flashed in Sam's startled eyes as he absorbed the concept. "A test," he murmured, swallowing in a dry throat. "Put the pieces together, answer the questions, make the decision. Make the decision," he repeated in a whisper, finding sudden relevance in the phrase. "A test. Present the problem, monitor the solution process, evaluate the data. And make the decision."

He'd moved back to his desk, sinking down into the chair as he spoke. With a heavy sigh, he lowered his face into his hands, rubbing slowly at his eyes. "It makes sense," he said, voice muffled. "It all makes sense now."

Long moments later, he looked up as a shadow fell across him. Benny stood before him, smiling oddly, hand extended. "Let me be the first to congratulate the graduate. Magna cum laude, my guess." He gestured with his free hand. "Summa, at the very least. They let you keep the door key, didn't they?"

Suppressing a sudden, threateningly giddy smile, Sam accepted the handshake warmly. "Thank you," he said in a voice nearly stolen by emotion.

"Hey, I should be thanking you, remember?" Benny assured him breezily. "So should a lot of other people, come to think of it. I guess it's up to me to say it for all of them." He paused long enough to sweep up the magazine, presenting the cover to Sam's startled eyes. "Do all of us a favor and lose this tie, okay?"

They burst out laughing at the memory, one they were both aware belonged only to one place, and one time — five days ago, when Donna had gotten her first look at the magazine cover and shrieked to discover that he'd somehow resurrected the monstrosity from what she'd thought had been a foolproof burial place. "It's my lucky tie," Sam chortled, a phrase he'd uttered often since, mostly in childlike protest in response to Donna's continued muttered imprecations. He took the magazine from Benny's hand, studying the photo with a warm smile. "I was wearing it ...."

Benny eyed him warily when he broke off, a lost look coming over his face. "Come on," he prodded in a soft singsong.

Sam shook his head as though to clear it. "I first wore it at a small reception, at the start of Project Starbright. I'd just arrived that morning, and I hadn't unpacked yet, and, well ... the selection at the nearest department store wasn't exactly Brooks Brothers. And Donna wasn't due in for another few days, so there was no one there to stop me," he recalled with a quick smile. "Everyone at the party was too polite to say anything, I think. Except ... one person." His expression softened, only a slight frown revealing his struggle. "He loved this tie. I mean, he really loved this tie. He even offered to buy it from me." Falling silent, he shook his head again, more slowly. "But that didn't happen," he continued, a pale whisper. "No one said anything to me about that tie at the party. An entire thirty-minute conversation about a piece of cloth ... never happened."

Benny exhaled slowly. "Letting us go bonkers from two sets of memories, that would be a slip-up that I personally can't credit, not after all this."

"Unless we're supposed to be able to handle it?" Sam said uncertainly.

"What do you think?" Benny said, asking more with a raised eyebrow: did he really think he could spend the rest of his life remembering things that never happened and people he'd never met?

Sam answered with a resigned nod. "Then ... what?"

"You told me that sometimes you had a little leeway, something to do before you moved on. Well, you're not moving on this time. So maybe ... is there something we need to do while we still remember?"

Sam raised startled eyes to Benny. Without a word, he shuffled around on his desk until he found an envelope. Extracting the contents, he opened the card with shaking hands. Benny sat up straighter to see the color drain from Sam's face.

"I didn't understand this," Beckett said, his voice strained and hoarse. "It came a few days ago, I didn't understand ...."

"What? What is it?"

With great difficulty, Sam cleared his throat and regained his composure. "It's an invitation. And now ... now I understand."

?

The hostess greeted the Becketts as they arrived at the entrance to the hotel ballroom, already alive with elegantly dressed couples seated at tables arranged before a small head table, behind which were seated several people that Sam couldn't make out through the crowd. Upon hearing his name, the hostess made no effort to disguise her surprise and excitement. "Wait right here, don't move. I'll be right back."

Donna edged closer to Sam, entwining her fingers with his as she leaned in to whisper, "Are you sure this isn't a mistake? I don't recognize any of these people. Most of them look like they're career military, Sam ... this isn't exactly the circle you travel in."

"I know, but ...." A commotion at the head table distracted him. The hostess was pointing directly at him as she leaned down to whisper into the ear of another woman, whose widened eyes immediately found his across the length of the room. Rising immediately, she gently urged the man seated next to her to leave with her, and a brief argument ended with another whisper in his ear, and another startled stare across the room.

Sam felt his smile grow as the couple moved toward them through the crowd as fast as decorum would permit. "It's not a mistake," he assured Donna, clasping her hand warmly.

The man, elegantly dressed in full Navy whites complete with an impressive array of military decorations, came within a few feet before hesitating, allowing his companion to approach Sam alone while he looked on, eyes narrowed intently. The woman, staring at Sam with a expression of quiet awe, came forward slowly, hands extended to him in silent, heartfelt welcome.

"It is you," she whispered, eyes glistening as she continued to gaze up at him in wonder. "Sam. It is you."

He answered with a gentle squeeze on her hands and a quiet nod. "Hello, Beth," he whispered. "It's, uh ... been a long time, hasn't it?"

Freeing one hand, she used it to reach back, summoning her uneasy companion. Al came forward slowly, staring in suspicion and confusion. "I'm not sure I understand this," he said falteringly. "My wife insists that some guy on the cover of a magazine is the same one she met twenty-five years ago, and ... it's true? I mean...you ....?"

When Sam confirmed with a short, embarrassed nod, Al made a eloquent gesture begging for understanding. "How?" he said, a heartfelt whisper.

Sensing the same question in the way Donna squeezed his upper arm, Sam reassured her with a quick smile before facing the Calaviccis again. "I really wouldn't want to interrupt your retirement party ...."

"No, no!" Al insisted, grabbing his arm. "Please! You ... you don't understand, I ... I have to talk to you. I really have to talk to you."

"I do understand," Sam assured him. "And I think that ... I really have to talk to you, too."

A relieved smile broke out over Al's face, replaced almost instantly by chagrin. "Oh, I'm sorry, geez," he said, releasing Sam's arm. "We haven't even been introduced, uh ... have we?"

Stifling a laugh, Sam gestured at the still-baffled woman at his side. "My wife, Donna Alessi ... Admiral and Mrs. Calavicci."

"Al," he corrected as he accepted her hand after Beth had released it. "Please, call me Al."

His last word ended as he faced Sam, hand extended. "Sam Beckett," he introduced himself as he took Al's hand in a firm, warm handshake. "And I am really ... really ... glad to meet you."