

Jack O'Diamonds

By Jane Tesh

There.

She was certain she heard it.

Jossie Gentry lifted her head from the pillow and looked out at the night sky brilliant with stars.

A voice. Yes. Clear as the stars, silvery as moonlight. I know I heard it. It wasn't a dream. It can't be.

She sat motionless, willing her heart to calm its loud beating, trying to quiet her rushing breath.

Sing it again, please. I know I heard you.

The night was silent. After a while, she lay down, tears bright on her faded, wrinkled cheeks.

It wasn't a dream. It wasn't. Please sing again, Laura. My baby. Please.

Jonathan MacKensie looked up from the folder he'd been reading, his dark eyes incredulous. "This woman claims the spirit of John Ashford Buncombe is talking to her?"

Dr. Julianna Moorhouse was beaming. "Sending her songs, MacKensie. Songs from beyond the grave!" Her eyes behind her large glasses were shining.

Jonathan smiled weakly, bracing himself for another outlandish assignment. "That's very nice, Dr. Moorhouse, but couldn't she just be imagining all this? Could it be, perhaps, her own latent musical talent?"

"Not by any chance," she said firmly. "Imagine it, MacKensie! John Ashford Buncombe's music manifesting itself in another person!" She indicated a large book on her desk. "He was one of our finest folk musicians and a collector of songs from all over the country. When he died, we lost a wealth of material. Some of his Patchwork Collection songs have been lost for years."

"Couldn't this Mrs.--" Jonathan checked the folder "– Gentry be using a copy and pretending it's spirit music?"

"That's for you to find out, isn't it?" she said with a superior smile.

"Dr. Moorhouse," he protested, "I know very little about folk music."

"I've arranged for you to have an assistant," she said. "Elise Whitman is working on her doctorate in music. She should be very helpful. She'll meet you in Richmond."

Jonathan was slightly mollified. "Oh. Well, then. I don't suppose this will be too difficult to prove if Miss Whitman knows what we're looking for."

Dr. Moorhouse agreed. "It shouldn't take long." She frowned "By the way, where is Benedek? Do you know?"

"Ahh, no," said Jonathan, after a thoughtful pause.

"You know how I feel about this association, MacKensie. The less he's involved, the better."

"I understand completely."

"Miss Whitman should give you all the assistance you require."

“Yes, and I appreciate your concern,” he said, “but dead people singing folk songs – it’s absurd.”

“Is it? There have been many cases of spirit music. One woman wrote entire Chopin nocturnes, and she didn’t even know how to play the piano.”

Jonathan tried another suggestion. “Couldn’t Mrs. Gentry simply be playing an elaborate trick?”

Dr. Moorhouse smiled her thin smile. “The sooner you get to Richmond, the sooner you’ll find out.”

As he drove to Richmond, Jonathan listened to a tape of Bumcombe’s folk songs. For the most part, they were simple tunes with many verses and catchy refrains, but there were several plaintive melodies he found quite lovely. After a while, all the songs began to sound the same. He turned off the cassette player and concentrated on the project ahead. For once, without Benedek’s interference, he might be able to finish a case within a few days. It was true that, at times, he enjoyed the man’s company, but Benedek had the annoying habit of turning the simplest investigation into a psychic free-for-all. Well, no chance of that this time. He hadn’t told Dr. Moorhouse, but he knew where Benny was. He’d read in the paper—a legitimate paper not the National Register – that the annual meeting of the Flat Earth Society was being held in Philadelphia this weekend. This was just the sort of event Benedek would not miss. So, with his friend safely away in Pennsylvania, Jonathan felt confident that this case would be, in Benny’s words, cake.

First stop: the seminar on Regional Folk Music at the Richmond city auditorium. Dr. Moorhouse had said Miss Whitman would be attending. As he walked down the wide hall, Jonathan noticed that there seemed to be an unusual number of highly attractive women wandering around. Surely these ladies weren’t all folk music enthusiasts.

“You look kinda lost,” one said to him. She was a dazzling blonde with the brightest smile he’d ever seen. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” said Jonathan. “I’m looking for the seminar on Regional Folk Music.”

The blonde looked disappointed. “Oh,” she said. “That’s in the Warfield Room on level B. Go up those stairs and to your left.”

Jonathan thanked her, and she went to join her companion, an equally dazzling brunette. Maybe there’s a show in here somewhere, he mused. A show requiring a chorus line.

The Warfield Room was large and chilly with rows of green plastic chairs. Jonathan took a seat near the back of the room. He kept thinking Miss Whitman would make herself known, but no one approached him. He saw several likely looking candidates in the crowd: an older woman in a severe gray suit; a Bohemian type in a poncho and beads; a small round woman carrying a stack of books. Everyone settled down as the main speaker, a thin man in olive green tweed, took his place at the podium and began to lecture.

Most of what he said was lost on Jonathan, who, reminded of the duller courses of his undergraduate days, set his mind in neutral. The speaker gave an overview on the various regions of the country and their typical folk music, its melodic content and rhythmic order.

“During the course of this seminar, we will be examining each region’s music in depth,” he droned. “Check your agenda and schedule of events, as we will make every effort to adhere to this schedule. Now, our first area of concentration will be the interpretation of the tempered scale in regard to the singing of mountain folk songs.”

Jonathan sat through about an hour of this and then slipped out. He was going to need some food in order to survive this session. He remembered seeing some drink machines on the first level, so he went down stairs. There was no one in the lobby. Muffled music from behind the closed auditorium doors made him assume the show was in progress. He got some coffee out of

one of the machines and was taking tentative sips when there was a burst of noise as someone came out of the auditorium. Jonathan nearly spilled his coffee as Edgar Benedek came bounding up, grinning broadly.

“Yo, Jonny! Is my intuition workin’ overtime or what?”

Jonathan stared at him, amazed. “What are you doing here?”

Benny’s hands sketched the air. “I had this mysterious feeling you were out here, Jon-boy, a strange premonition that our paths were fated to cross once more. Plus I needed a drink. What’s up?”

“No, you first,” said Jonathan, wincing at his friend’s garish attire. He could not believe Benedek was in the same building, but here he was, all animated face and toothy grin, his blue eyes blazing with excitement. Jonathan had long ago given up trying to figure out where Benny got his inexhaustible supply of energy and good humor; the man’s life was permanently set on High. “What’s this?” he indicated the large purple ribbon pinned on Benny’s orange and yellow flowered shirt. “Don’t tell me you’ve won a prize.”

Benny patted the ribbon proudly. “Hey, pal, you are lookin’ at one of the judges of the first annual out of this world Miss Paranormal Phenomenon Contest.”

“A beauty pageant?” Jonathan said. “You’re judging a beauty pageant?”

“Beauty and talent, Juanito. You should see what some of these girls can do.”

“I’ve never heard of a Miss Paranormal Phenomenon Contest,” Jonathan said skeptically. “are you sure you’re not just making this up?”

Benny selected a drink and pushed the button. “Come with me, Jonny, and get ready for a trip to paradise. Miss Poltergeist will knock your socks off, and Miss Levitation will have you walkin’ on air.”

“I suppose there’s a Miss Ectoplasm, as well?” Jonathan asked sarcastically.

“You got it, J.J. A figure you won’t believe. Twenty-five of the most bewitching ladies this side of Atlantis – oh, there’s a Miss Atlantis, by the way, a Miss Easter Island, Mss Tibet, of course, and Miss Utopia.”

“And just who is sponsoring this cultural event?”

“The National Register!” said Benny, pleased. “this is the brainchild of none other than Jordy himself. Great, huh? He’s around here somewhere, drooling. Plus we’ve got backing from Paranormal Society International, PSI, itself, and the organization of Psychic Occurrences. This is gonna be the best thing since striped toothpaste!”

Jonathan was not impressed. “and what does the winner receive, an all expense paid trip to the Other Side?”

“Plus ten thousand dollars, a genuine Yeti skin coat, and a brand new car,” said Benny in his best game show voice. “Wait till you meet Miss out of Body, chum. She’s my personal favorite.”

“She would be.”

“So come on, come on.”

“No, Benedek, I can’t,” said Jonathan. “I’m supposed to meet someone here, a Miss Elise Whitman. She’s going to hlp me with this case.”

“I’m hurt, pal, I’m crushed,” said Benny. “I turn my back for one minute and you replace me. Who’s Elise Whitman, and what’s she got that I don’t?”

“She’s an expert on folk music,” said Jonathan, ignoring the dramatics. “There’s a woman here who claims a ghost is sending her songs.”

“Jossie Gentry?”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said, surprised. “How did you know?”

“I did a piece on her last week,” said Benny. “Boy, that old Bumcombe just won’t shut up, will he?”

“There is no way a dead person could be singing. You didn’t actually hear anything, did you?”

Benny took a big drink of cola and gestured with the can. “Pal, ghosts have been singing, howling, and yodeling all over the place for years. I have heard them all.”

“This is nonsense,” said Jonathan, exasperated. “I’m sure Miss Whitman will be able to expose this fraud.”

“She’s welcome to try, Jon-boy. I gotta get back. Come on.”

“I should be back upstairs.”

“You won’t be sorry.”

“No, thank you,” said Jonathan. “I don’t approve of beauty pageants.”

Benny was shocked. “Don’t approve? What’s not to approve?”

“I certainly don’t mind young women in bathing suits or pretty gowns, but I object to the basic premise, which is based solely on physical beauty.”

“We got talent here, too, chum. It counts fifty percent.”

“Don’t give me that. You know as well as I do the judges and the public are looking for a real glamour girl, some fantasy creature.”

“Nothin’ wrong with that, Jonny.” Benny enjoyed watching his friend get wound up. It was something Jonathan did quite well, especially with a little goading.

“Of course there is! It sets totally unrealistic standards of beauty. It makes it impossible for ordinary women to achieve any sort of self-esteem if these beauty queens are so perfect. If you’re not beautiful, you’re nothing. That’s the message.”

“It’s the American way,” said Benny, grinning. “You wanna get off that soap box before your ulcer kicks in?”

“It’s just all so pointless.”

“Who said it had to have a point? Lighten up! Come look at some pretty girls and forget the warped self-esteem part. Come on, there’s some people I want you to meet.”

Reluctantly, Jonathan agreed to come in for a few minutes. Unlike the Warfield Room, the auditorium was warm and cheerful with plush red seats and a huge stage framed by gold curtains. On the stage were twenty-five young women, all long legs and speakly teeth. Each wore a white banner across her prominent chest proclaiming her title: Miss Telekinesis, Miss Druid princess, Miss Palmistry and the like. A willowy man in a black leotard and tights was trying to arrange them in order.

“No, no, girls!” he was saying. “Step, step, step right. Step, step, step left. Go to your right first. Three steps in each direction. Miss Numerology, sweetie, you of all people should be able to count. Okay, let’s try again.”

Benny led Jonathan down front where a long table had been set up for the judges. As he could have predicted, most of the contestants immediately focused on Jonathan, who smiled self-consciously. Benny had several theories about the MackKensie Spell. He had decided that Jonathan’s basic gallantry, coupled with an innocent face and eyes that gave away every thought was a potent combination. Then of course, there was the accent, guaranteed to melt the coldest female heart – he’d seen it in action many times – and a smile of great charm. And, for some

reason he could never figure, the long disheveled hair turned them on.

“Girls, girls! I need your attention up here, please!” the choreographer fussed. “Ready and step, step, step right. Good!”

“JONny, I want you to meet the other judges,” said Benny. “All real good pals of mine. This is Jason parker, voodoo doctor and CPA. This is Manuel Revis, expert on UFOs. And this,” he said proudly, flinging his arm around a short, bald little man with a fringe of black hair, “this is Louie the Finger, best safe cracker in three states.”

“Reformed,” said Louie, extending a pudgy hand.

“Nice to meet you,” said Jonathan.

“I told Louie we could’ve used him on a case not long ago,” said Benny. “He does a few jobs now and then, strictly on the up and up, of course.”

“Of course.”

“We were really lucky to get him for this. Old Louie here’s in big demand on the pageant circuit.”

“Ah,” said Jonathan. “Is he?”

Benny patted the little man’s shoulder. “Yeah, me and Louie go way back. We met when I was investigating a haunted house in Jersey and Louie was robbin’ it. Sorta bumped into each other in the hallway.”

“Gave me a start,” Louie put in.

“Me, too,” said Benny. “I thought he was a ghost, and he thought I was the cops. Had a good laugh about that, didn’t we, Lou?” Louie nodded. “Now, we’re in a real bind here, Jack, ‘cause Louie doesn’t think Miss ESP has a chance, and I have this incredible feeling she’s top ten material. Gonna have to be some in-depth research around here, I can tell.”

“Fine,” said Jonathan. “You and Louie have a good time. I need to find Miss Whitman and finish this case.”

“Whitman,” said Louie thoughtfully. He flipped through his papers until he found the one he wanted. “Elise Whitman?”

Stunned, Jonathan nodded.

“She’s right there,” said Louie, pointing to the first row of women. “Miss Séance.”

“Yo, Miss Séance!” Benny called. “Come on down!”

“You’re Elise Whitman?” Jonathan said in disbelief, shaking hands with the tall young woman. She had a wealth of strawberry-blonde hair, big blue eyes, and the kind of perfect pearly smile he never expected a real person to own.

“Hello,” she said cheerfully. “You must be Dr. MacKensie. Nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s mine,” he said, still dazed. “I just never expected to find you here.”

“Why not?” she smiled. “I think it’s a kick, and the money’s good.”

“But the seminar – upstairs--” he tried to recover.

“Oh, I’ve heard that stuff a hundred times,” she said. “I’m interested only in Bumcombe’s work, and since the pageant’s here, too, I thought I’d enter.”

“But will you have time to visit Mrs. Gentry?” Jonathan asked. “There seems to be a lot more to this pageant than I first thought.”

“Oh, sure,” she said. “I know the opening number. I can go any time this afternoon.”

“Mrs. Gentry is expecting me at three,” he said, checking his watch. “Could I pick you up

here, say, quarter of?"

"I've got a better idea," said Miss Whitman. "It's almost lunchtime. Let's go eat and talk over this case."

"You don't have to stay here? Chaperones, that sort of thing?"

"Hey, this is a new-age beauty pageant," Benny put in. "I'm Edgar Benedek, Miss Whitman, but you just call me Benny. You any relation to Slim?"

"I get that all the time," she said good-naturedly. "Actually, I'm first cousin to the sampler, okay? And if you're a judge, it's Miss Séance to you."

"You bet," he grinned.

"Miss Séance," Jonathan repeated with a sinking feeling. "You don't actually conduct séances, do you?"

"Of course," she said. "I've been trying to contact Bumcombe for years. If I can meet Mrs. Gentry and possibly link with her, it'll be the chance of a lifetime."

Jonathan didn't have to look at Benny to know his friend was enjoying this immensely. "Yes, well, have you considered the fact that this may all be a hoax?"

"I hope it isn't," she said. "But we should be able to prove it one way or another. If you'll excuse me, I'd better finish rehearsing. Then I'll change clothes and be ready to go."

"Woo-hoo," Benny chuckled. "Dr. Jon and Miss Séance. Too bad she's not Miss Close Encounter."

"Very funny," Jonathan said with a scowl.

"Have a good time, bud, and bring her back in time for the preliminary talent competition."

"What does she do for her talent, go into a trance?"

"She's singing 'Knock Three Times,'"

Jonathan sighed. "Benedek."

"Okay, okay, I'll 'table' it till our next conversation."

"Tell Miss Whitman I'm in the lobby."

"I was going to call myself Miss Medium," Elise Whitman commented over lunch, "but that sounded funny. Miss Petite? Miss Half-Size?" She chuckled. "So I decided on Miss Séance. Actually, we prefer to be called channels."

"Oh," said Jonathan politely.

"Miss Channel sounds like a waterway." She speared another forkful of salad. "This is an important contact for me, Jonathan. You see, I've been collecting Bumcombe's songs for six years. There are only four songs missing from his Patchwork Collection. Four! Do you know what it's like to be so close?"

"Yes, I've had similar experiences in my field," he replied.

"Then you know what I mean. If Mrs. Gentry has any sort of information, I'm willing to try anything to get it."

"So you'll definitely be able to tell if the songs are authentic?"

"Without question. As I said, I've been living and breathing this music for six years."

"Tell me some more about these four missing songs."

"I've got the titles, but little else. "'Brightness,' 'Under the Flowering Tree,' 'Jack

O'Diamonds,' and 'The Shepherd and the Maid.' I know some of the words and have just fragments of tunes. It's so frustrating to have little bits and pieces! If I can find these songs, my thesis will be finished, and I'll have the first complete Patchwork Collection. And, if I'm really lucky," she added, blue eyes twinkling, "the first Miss Paranormal Phenomenon title."

Jonathan smiled. "It's too bad I'm not a judge."

"Ah, but you're friends with one."

"Only the merest acquaintance."

She grinned. "That's okay. I'm only in it for fun. What I'm really after are those missing songs."

"Well, then," said Jonathan. "Let's go find them."

Mrs. Gentry lived in a small house out near the edge of town. Wide fields lay on all sides. Beyond, mountains loomed like shadows.

"No wonder she's getting such great vibes," Elise remarked.

"What do you mean?" Jonathan asked.

"The mountains. Buncombe got all his inspiration from the mountains."

Jonathan rang the bell. "These mountains in particular?"

"Yes, he was here in the late Sixties."

The door opened and an elderly woman peered out cautiously. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Gentry?" said Jonathan. "How do you do? I'm Jonathan MacKensie. We spoke earlier. And this is Miss Elise Whitman."

"Oh, yes," she said. "Yes, come in."

The rooms were dark and cluttered and smelled faintly of lavender. Mrs. Gentry led them down the hallway to a small parlor.

"Please sit down," she said, indicating a Victorian style sofa and chair, both of faded pink floral brocade and dark wood. "The tea should be ready soon. I hope you'll have some and some cake."

"That would be very nice, thank you," said Jonathan. With her short grey curls and mild blue eyes, Mrs. Gentry reminded him of an aunt he remembered fondly. This sweet old lady seemed hardly the type to perpetuate a hoax. He wasn't sure how to start.

"Now what can I do for you young people?" she asked.

"Mrs. Gentry, I'd like to know how all this began," said Elise. "When did you first hear from Buncombe?"

"Well," she said, "it was about a month ago, very late at night. I heard a voice in my head just singing away. I knew I'd heard it before, but I couldn't place it. Then I remembered that my daughter, Laura – that's her picture over the mantle – had a book of folk songs, and sure enough, the song was in there."

"And it was one of Buncombe's?"

Mrs. Gentry nodded. "'Old Jimmy Jones.' Well, from then on, I started hearing all his tunes. Checked them every one in that book."

Elise was leaning forward anxiously. "And did he ever, or does he ever sing songs that are not in that book?"

"Yes, indeed," she replied. "all kinds of songs. I'll show you." A shrill whistling noise

came from somewhere in the house. "Oh, dear," she said. "That's the tea kettle. Excuse me. I'll be right back."

"Jonathan," Elise said excitedly.

"Don't get your hopes up yet," he said. "These might not be the songs you're looking for." He was still looking at the picture above the fireplace. A lovely dark-haired girl with beautifully sad dark eyes gazed peacefully at him. This seemed such a pleasant family. It made him uncomfortable to talk of ghosts.

Mrs. Gentry returned with tea and cake on a tray. "here we are," she said, smiling. "Miss Whitman, if you'll take this, I'll go and get those songs."

Elise set the tray on the marble-topped coffee table. "Go ahead," she told Jonathan. "I'm too excited to eat."

Mrs. Gentry brought in a handful of papers, which she handed to Elise. "I wrote them down as best I could remember," she said. "Just the words. I don't know who to write music. But I can hum a few of the tunes."

Elise looked through the papers, her expression intense. "'Down the Gap,' 'My Little Dove,' 'The Field Mouse Dance,' 'Tell Me, Lucy Love.' My God, I never heard of these!" She raised wide eyes. "I've never heard of these," she repeated, stunned.

"Take them if you like," said Mrs. Gentry.

"Could I? Thank you very much." She checked the songs once more. "Mrs. Gentry, do you recall hearing a song called 'Brightness' Or 'Under the Flowering Tree'?"

The older woman thought a moment. "No, I don't believe so. There was one called 'Maypole Tree.'"

"Yes, I know that one. What about 'Jack O'Diamonds' or 'The Shepherd and the Maid'?"

"No," she said slowly. "Can't say that I remember hearing either of those."

"You probably will," said Elise, untroubled. "This is most intriguing, Mrs. Gentry. You're sure you don't mind if I borrow this list?"

"Not at all, my dear."

"And there's one other favor I'd like to ask you. I'd like to conduct a séance here in your house. I want to get in touch with Buncombe, and this would be the ideal place."

"A séance?"

"It isn't dangerous," Elise assured her. "I just want to try to talk to him."

"If you'd rather not," Jonathan began to say.

"No, no, it sounds interesting," said Mrs. Gentry. "You mean hold hands around a table, that sort of thing?"

Elise nodded. "Then you agree?"

"All right."

"Great! Say tonight, maybe nine o'clock? I'll be through with my part of the talent competition by then."

Mrs. Gentry said this would be fine. They stayed a while longer, Jonathan making polite conversation while Elise poured over the new songs, occasionally asking a question which Mrs. Gentry answered as well as she could. Then they thanked her, and Jonathan took Elise back to the auditorium.

"I don't see how I can concentrate on the pageant," she remarked, still staring at the papers in her lap.

"Forgive me," said Jonathan, "but couldn't someone with an in-depth knowledge of Buncombe's work – yourself, for example – write some very convincing fakes?"

"Yes, but in this case, I don't think it's possible. I don't know. I'll have to study these very carefully. And, of course, tonight's séance should clear up everything."

"Oh," said Jonathan. "Of course."

"Oh, good, you brought her back," Benny remarked as Jonathan and Elise came down the aisle of the auditorium. "Take maybe you'd take a side trip to the great Beyond."

"No, that's tonight," said Elise. "Mrs. Gentry agreed to let me hold a séance at her home. I'll be able to reach Buncombe and ask him about these songs."

"That sounds great," said Benny. "Mind if I invite myself along? I haven't been to a good séance in a couple of weeks."

"Sure," she said. "See you guys later." She hurried off, her eyes still examining the songs.

"So what did ya get?" Benny asked.

Jonathan sighed as he took a seat on the aisle. He brushed a stray lock of hair out of his eyes. "Mrs. Gentry is a very sweet old lady, very gracious. She gave Elise some songs that seem to be authentic Buncombe folk tunes."

"So what's the problem, Jack? Benny perched on the arm of another seat.

"I can't believe a dead man is sending her these songs, but then, she hardly seems capable of making them up herself. And why would she do something like that?"

"Maybe she's bored with knitting."

Jonathan frowned thoughtfully. "She has a nice house, seems well off, has a pretty daughter she's obviously proud of. Why on earth would she be lying?"

"People lie every day, Jon-boy, for all sorts of reasons," said Benny. "Now, I personally believe old Buncombe is broadcasting through Mrs. Gentry, and Miss Whitman can rack up big bucks if she plays her cards right."

"Big bucks? What are you talking about, big bucks?"

"It's a great story, and she's a knockout. I take her with me on the circuit and we're good for at least six major guest shots. Miss Séance, Queen of Folk Music!"

"Benny," Louie called from down front. "We're ready for talent group B."

"Send 'em out," he called back. "You gotta see this, Jon. It's out of this world."

"No, thank you," he said, getting up.

"Miss Spectral Apparition is gonna make herself disappear, and then Miss Transylvania turns herself into a bat."

"What, no Miss Zombie coming back from the grave?"

"Couldn't make it, pal. Dead on her feet."

Jonathan gave him a dark look. "I'm leaving."

"Okay, have it your way," Benny said, unfazed. "See you at the séance."

This stopped Jonathan. "I'm sure you'll be too busy with the pageant to attend," he said hopefully.

"No way, pal. Wouldn't miss it. Louie can cover for me."

"I'll tell you all about it. It's not going to amount to anything anyway."

"Nope, nope. I don't like the MacKensie version. Not enough punch. I like to see séances from the beginning. I'll be there."

"Benedek, it's really not necessary for you to come."

"I love séances, Jack. One table, no waiting. Call in from the Great Beyond. Spirit 603, you're on the air. You're in the air!"

"It's just a trick," Jonathan protested. "Nothing's going to happen."

"Do you know how many times you've said that?" Benny asked. "Do you realize that, every time you do, the sky falls in? It's like a red alert to the Spirit World: Okay, you heard him. Let him have it."

"There are very few things that cannot be explained scientifically, Benedek. I'll grant you one or two, but voices from the dead? Music from ghosts?"

Benny grinned. "I won't embarrass you by bringin' up a certain mermaid, Jonny, but there have been more than one or two things. What time do we tune in tonight?"

Jonathan sighed, resigned. "Nine o'clock."

"I'll bring both hands."

This is ridiculous, Jonathan thought as he sat at Mrs. Gentry's round table, one hand in hers, the other in Elise's. Nothing is happening. I knew it was all nonsense.

Across the table, Benny sat holding hands with the women and grinning in anticipation. If there were spirits in this room, they would zero in on Jonathan. He'd bet good money on it.

Elise was deep in a trance, her eyes closed, her mouth half open. Everyone sat very still for a long time. Abruptly, she opened her eyes.

"This is odd," she said, confused. "I'm not getting anything."

"Not even an Indian chief?" said Benny. "You tellin' me nobody's home? Whoa! What's going on up there?"

"I told you this wouldn't amount to anything," said Jonathan.

"Let me try again," said Elise.

They joined hands once more and waited patiently. Elise's voice rattled in her throat.

"I don't understand," she said, coming out of her trance again. "I heard several voices, but no one came in clearly."

"We're gonna have to check your fine tuning," said Benny.

Mrs. Gentry said, "I don't know, my dear. Maybe Buncombe doesn't want to speak through you."

Elise looked offended, so Jonathan quickly said, "Perhaps if we came another night?"

"No, wait a second," said Elise. "Wait just one second. Mrs. Gentry, what do you mean Buncombe wouldn't want to speak through me?"

"Well, it's just that he's been speaking to me, and maybe that suits him."

"But why would he choose you?" Elise asked.

"I'm sure he senses in me a deep understanding and appreciation of his talents," Mrs. Gentry said calmly. "More so than anyone else."

Jonathan caught Elise's arm as she drew back to swing. "Miss Whitman!"

"Whoa! Dueling mediums!" Benny said. "Hold on, Elise. Maybe Buncombe's just shy."

"Maybe she's a fraud!" Elise said angrily, pulling free. "If he speaks through anyone, it should be through me. I am the leading authority on his life and work, and I certainly know more about his music than this little dried up granny!"

"I fail to see how John Ashford Buncombe would have anything to do with a young lady who parades around in front of men in her bathing suit," Mrs. Gentry said primly.

"Ladies, please," said Jonathan. "Elise, please sit down. I'm sorry, Mrs. Gentry. Perhaps we should go."

"No, I want this settled now," said Elise. "I've been over those songs she gave me. Buncombe's spirit is somewhere in this house with more songs, and I want them."

"Elise, Mrs. Gentry is willing to give--" Jonathan began.

"I don't want them secondhand!" she snapped. "There is absolutely no reason why he shouldn't talk directly to me."

"Unless he isn't here. I'm sorry, Elise. I just don't believe any of this. You've tried and tried with no response. You're quarreling over nothing."

Elise looked suddenly embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I got carried away. I'm sorry, Mrs. Gentry. This just means so much to me. I didn't mean to get so upset."

"That's all right, dear," she said, though she looked a bit stiff.

"Jonathan, maybe we'd better go."

"Mrs. Gentry," said Benny, "when I was here before to interview you, you said something about making sure the right people knew about Buncombe's music, do you remember?"

"Yes, of course," she said.

"Well, Miss Whitman's the one to do it. She's on the inside track in the folk music world. What say we give it one more try?"

Mrs. Gentry looked from his face to Elise's and back. "All right."

"Great! Sit down, Elise, and plug in. Three time's the charm."

Reluctantly, Elise sat down and they all joined hands. After a long moment, Elise shuddered. Her hand in Jonathan's grew cold. He glanced at her worriedly. Her face was pale.

"Elise?" he said anxiously.

Benny shushed him. "She's onto something, Jack."

Abruptly, Elise work, looking around in confusion.

"Are you all right?" Jonathan asked, and she nodded.

"Was it Buncombe?" Benny asked.

She shook her head. "Another spirit. I couldn't tell--it was very faint. Very troubled."

"Who would that be, Mrs. Gentry? Do you know?"

She was as pale as Elise. "I have no idea."

Jonathan got up. "I think this has gone on long enough," he said. The room had become chilly, and there was a strange tension in the air. "Mrs. Gentry, thank you. We'll be leaving now." He helped Elise to her feet.

"Aw, come on, Jack," said Benny. "Things were just getting good."

"Things were just getting ludicrous," he said. "Come on."

"He's such a wet blanket," Benny complained to Elise. "What did you see? What did the spirit say to you?"

"Nothing," she said. "It was a feeling, a deep feeling of loss, of regret."

"Whoa! Buncombe's ticked 'cause he gave away those songs."

"Not now, Benedek," said Jonathan, hoping to forestall the flood of excitement. "If you're riding with me, come on."

"I don't see how you can just leave," Benny said as he followed them out.

"It's simple. You walk out, get in the car, and drive away."

"But you heard Elise. There's a troubled spirit in there!"

"And it can stay there. Get in."

"Okay, okay," Benny grumbled, "but we're comin' back tomorrow."

As they drove off, he caught a glimpse of Mrs. Gentry's face in the window, still pale. She knows who it is, he thought. By tomorrow, I'll know who it is, too.

"Five, six, seven, eight!

Oh, we are the girls

Who are out of this world!

Can you feel the excitement?

Can you feel the fun?

We're sending out vibrations to everyone!"

Benny admired the somewhat irregular dancing and the fixed cheesy smiles of the twenty-five Miss Paranormal Phenomenon contestants. Miss Astral Projection there, what a set of lungs, and Miss Bermuda Triangle, I'd like to get lost with you.

"So check your horoscopes,

You Ouija boards and cards,

This is a special night,

You'll need your second sight,

'Cause we might even make it to Mars!"

Catchy little number. Whoa, shake it, Miss Séance! Elise seemed fully recovered from her spirit encounter of last night. Wonder what it was? Just like Jonathan to stop when things were getting interesting. With dress rehearsal tonight, it was going to be hard to get away, but he wanted Elise to have another crack at it.

Louie nudged him in the ribs.

"I'm tellin' you, Louie, I got 'em all picked," Benny said. "Miss Witchcraft is okay, but Miss Voodoo's got that certain look. Just catch that hip action there. Is that paranormal, or what?"

"Welcome all you aliens,

Just park your UFOs.

No need to try your ESP,

'Cause no one really knows

Whose world is gonna turn upside down

When she wears the crown

Of Miss Paranormal Phenomenon!”

Lights bounced off twenty-five dazzling rigid smiles and twenty-five sparkling gowns decorated with every kind of glittery bead known to man. Seeing some of the smiles turn warm and inviting, Benny was highly flattered until Jonathan slid into the seat behind him.

“I tell you, pal, I’ve got a pocketful of telephone numbers,” Benny said over his shoulder. “Take your pick.”

“How soon will this be over?” Jonathan asked.

“Bored already?”

“It’s just that I’m a bit worried about Mrs. Gentry. I called over there, and there’s no answer.”

“The ghosts have carried her off, J.J. She’s history.”

“She didn’t look well last night. I think I ought to check on her. Tell Elise I’ll meet her later.”

Benny smirked. “Just close your eyes and make a wish, Jonny. She’ll pick up on it, along with twenty-four others. And say hi to the troubled spirit for me. Oh, Jon, before you go, check out Miss Reincarnation. Thinks she’s got the edge ‘cause she’s been a queen before.”

Jonathan looked at the statuesque brunette in silver spangles. “Which one? Cleopatra? Queen Elizabeth?”

“Bess Myerson. No, no, wait, wait! You gotta see this number.”

Jonathan watched as the girls paraded by, teetering on their high heels. Miss Easter Island wore a large papier-mache replica of one of the large stone heads perched on her own head. Miss Numerology wore large glittering numbers strategically placed.

“Great, huh?”

Jonathan just stared. Miss Ouija Board had a sparkly “Yes” over one breast and “No” on the other. “Good-bye” was printed in silver letters across her rear. Miss Bermuda Triangle was appropriately decked out in triangles of all sizes. All the young women beamed at him pleasantly, and he managed a wan smile. Elise, he noticed, looked very perky in her pink gown decorated with little tables.

“A lot of sequins died for this pageant,” Benny remarked. “Got your top ten picked?”

“The only thing I’ve got picked for you is a nice padded cell,” said Jonathan as he left.

“Does it have cable?” Benny called after him.

“Mrs. Gentry?”

The house was silent. Jonathan moved forward cautiously. “Hello?” he had found the front door unlocked and was now truly worried about the elderly woman. “Is anyone home?”

There was a sudden burst of clear song, as if someone had switched on a radio.

“Oh, come to me, love,

Let me kiss you again,

Under the flowering tree.”

Jonathan followed the sound, tilting his head to listen. It was coming from the little parlor, the room where they’d held the unsuccessful séance.

“Day time and night time

Will all be as one,
Nothing in this life is free.”

He stopped in the doorway. Mrs. Gentry was sitting in her rocking chair. Her eyes were closed, her head was thrown back, and her mouth was open. A gloriously clear soprano voice poured out.

“My heart knew you’d leave,
And my heart hoped you’d stay.
Can’t have it both ways, you see,
So for the moment,
Just hold me a while
Under the flowering tree.”

Jonathan stood with his mouth open, too. He had never heard Mrs. Gentry sing, but he knew she could no possess such a young and vibrant voice. “Under the Flowering Tree.” Wasn’t that one of the titles Elise mentioned? He searched his pockets for something to write on, but hadn’t a thing. Mrs. Gentry sat as if asleep, and then began another song.

“Jack O’Diamonds,
Jack O’Diamonds,
I know you of old.
You robbed my poor pockets of silver and gold.”

“Jack O’Diamonds.” That was another one on the list! Jonathan hurriedly searched the cluttered desk for a piece of paper and only succeeded in knocking over the lamp. He tried to catch it, but it fell with a crash. Mrs. Gentry gave a start. The song cut off in mid-tune. She blinked and stared at him.

“Dr. MacKensie?”

“I’m sorry,” Jonathan said as he picked up the lamp. “I didn’t mean to disturb you. It’s just that I heard music and--”

“Music?” she said. She sat up a little straighter. “Was I singing?”

“Yes, ma’am, sort of – that is--” He groped for words.

Mrs. Gentry nodded. “You heard the voice,” she said, pleased. “You heard John Buncombe.”

“No,” said Jonathan. “It was a woman’s voice, a clear soprano. It was beautiful.”

Her expression changed. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course. It was you, wasn’t it?” She slumped back in her chair, her face ashen. “Mrs. Gentry,” he said, alarmed. “Are you all right? Mrs. Gentry?” he bent over the frail woman and took her hand.

“I’m all right, young man,” she said faintly. “I just never expected – you see that picture?”

Jonathan glanced at the portrait of the dark-haired young woman. “Yes, your daughter.”

“Laura,” said Mrs. Gentry. “She died when she was eighteen. Drowned. She had the purest, clearest voice you’ve ever heard. It was like silver. . .” She seemed to drift off into memory.

“Mrs. Gentry,” said Jonathan gently. She blinked and looked at him, slightly puzzled. “Would you like to lie down and rest?” When she nodded, he helped her up and assisted her to

her bedroom. After a while, he saw she was sleeping well and decided it was safe to leave her.

Before he left, Jonathan took another look at the portrait. There had to be some explanation. How could a dead girl's voice return in someone else? It was a trick, ventriloquism, perhaps, though Mrs. Gentry's confusion seemed genuine.

"And you're certain it wasn't Buncombe?" Benny asked when he told him.
"There is no way. It was a woman's voice."

"And she was singing the missing tunes?" Elise gripped his arm.

"Yes, I recognized 'Under the Flowering Tree' and 'Jack O'Diamonds.'"
"Do you remember any of the tunes?" she asked.

He concentrated a moment and then hummed what he could remember. "That's the first one I heard. I was trying to write down the words when I woke Mrs. Gentry."

"Hum it again," said Elise. She listened and then said, "Oh, God, Jonathan, I've never heard that tune! It must be one of the missing four! Again, please." This time, she sang along. The words she knew fit perfectly. "I've got to get my recorder!"

"We've got a regular Spook Central goin' here," said Benny. "First Buncombe and now Mrs. Gentry's daughter. Must be Talent Hour upstairs."

"Something's not right," said Jonathan. He had taken a seat in the now empty auditorium. A few workers were making last minute adjustments to the overlarge pyramids and flying saucers that decorated the stage. "When Mrs. Gentry claimed Buncombe spoke to her, she was very superior about it, remember? Not just now, when she thought it was her daughter, she seemed quite upset."

"The daughter say anything?"

"No, she just sang. Or Mrs. Gentry sang. Somebody was singing."

"The spirits, Jack, and you know it," said Benny, pleased. "There's a big story here, Juanito, I can tell." He drew some headlines in the air. "Hits From Heaven. God's Top Forty. Buncombe With a Bullet."

Jonathan sighed. "Sometimes I forget just how crass you can be. Is that all you can think about, a story? Don't you care about Mrs. Gentry's feelings in this matter? She's lost a daughter."

"And gained a repertoire. You know how much this is worth? It's like finding a spare oratorio Bach stashed away. It's like a new Beatles record. This is gonna make Mrs. Gentry one rich old broad."

"Benedek, please."

"Heck, I can get her on all the talk shows, no problem. She can warble her way into America's heart. Jossie Gentry and Her All-Phenom Band."

Elise came running back with her tape recorder. "Okay, Jonathan, Show time." He obligingly hummed once more. "This is fantastic!" said Elise, thrilled. "We've got to get the rest, we've just got to. Let's go out there now."

"I don't think we should disturb Mrs. Gentry," said Jonathan. "I stopped by a neighbor's and asked them to look in on her. She's really not feeling well."

"We'd just stay a little while," said Elise. "She must be able to remember what her daughter sang."

"There isn't any proof it's her daughter," Jonathan insisted, but Elise and Benny were already well into wild speculation.

"The troubled spirit!" Benny realized.

"That must be Laura Gentry," Elise agreed.

"Now, wait just a m--"

"And she's trying to tell us something about these songs! This is great. We gotta have another séance, Elise."

"I know, I know! I want to go over there right this minute."

"Hold on!" said Jonathan. "You two are getting out of control. Mrs. Gentry needs to be left alone for a while. And I'm not sure we should bother her with this any more."

"Oh, Jonathan, don't be such a spoil sport," said Elise. "She said she didn't care if I took the songs."

"Yes, but--"

"We'll compromise," said Benny unexpectedly. "Jon-boy, go call Mrs. Gentry and see if she's up to a visit now. If not, we'll go over later, after the afternoon rehearsal. You really need to go over the Pyramid Power number, Miss Séance."

"I guess you're right," she said.

"Too much hanging around with a judge can cost you," he said with a grin. "Go see what she says, Jack."

Jonathan reluctantly went to the lobby to call. When he returned, Benny was alone. "Where's Elise?"

"Quick trip to the spirit world," Benny replied. "I convinced her to cool it for now. What did you find out?"

"Mrs. Gentry is resting, according to the neighbor. What's with the compromise business all of a sudden? This isn't like you."

"Somethin' peculiar going on here, bud," said Benny. "I'm all for ghost hunting, but little Miss Séance is positively crazed."

"She does seem a bit intense," Jonathan agreed, "but she stands to gain a lot if she finds those songs."

"What say we wander over to Mrs. Gentry's tonight after rehearsal?"

"Benedek, I don't think we should be pestering her."

"One more little visit isn't gonna hurt, chum. You can call her tonight."

Jonathan was certain he could not stand another evening of Moss Paranormal Phenomenon. He took one look at the opening number, got as far as "We're sending out vibrations to everyone," and headed for the lobby.

The auditorium was warm and stuffy, packed with friends and families cheering for their favorites. The lobby was cooler, with only a few people standing about smoking and exchanging comments about the various contestants. Outside, the fresh air was a welcomed change, and there, in the courtyard between the auditorium and the smaller community theater building, Jonathan found a quiet place to stroll away from the applause and blaring music.

"My heart you have broken,

'Tis of no use to me,

So bury it, Jack O'Diamonds,

'Neath the old willow tree."

Jonathan swerved. The same crystal clear soprano voice! Where was it coming from?

“Twill lie there all winter
And dream through the spring,
I loved you, Jack O’Diamonds,
More than any dear thing.”

He heard a voice say very lightly, “Jack,” and out of the shadows stepped a young woman in white lace, her dark hair spilling over her shoulders. Her eyes in her pale face were large, dark, and expressionless. Jonathan stared. He’d seen this girl. It was – My God, it couldn’t be! – the girl in the portrait.

Laura Gentry.

“Listen to me,” she said softly. “That song is mine. All the songs are mine.”

Amazed, Jonathan, could think of nothing to say. What was she doing here? What was she talking about?

“The songs are mine,” she repeated. “He stole them from me, my songs and my life.”

Laura Gentry. Jonathan could hear his heart beating thunderously. The girl moved closer. Her figure flickered as though she were an image on film. Then it steadied.

“In a moment of anger,” she whispered. “Of jealousy. He took my songs. He took my life. You must avenge me.”

Jonathan tried to calm his tendency to panic. “Miss Gentry, or whoever you are, I don’t understand why you’re telling me this. Why not Miss Whitman? She’s the expert. Why not your mother?”

The large dark eyes regarded him steadily. “You have been kind to my mother,” said the girl. “When I ran away with John Buncombe, I left her alone. I didn’t listen, and still she loves me.”

“And Buncombe m-murdered you?”

“In a moment of anger,” she said sadly. “His spirit is strong. Only briefly can I come to you. There is proof buried in a box near the edge of the forest where three trees meet. Find it, Jack. Please.”

“I’m Jonathan,” he said.

“The other man called you Jack.”

“He calls me a lot of things. Miss Gentry, I really don’t think I’m the one you want.”

For the first time, she smiled. “I called John Buncombe Jack in happier days.” Her smile faded.

“But I don’t believe any of this,” Jonathan tried to explain. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“That doesn’t matter. I know you will help me. Find the proof. The songs are mine.” He saw crystalline tears on her pale cheeks. “I loved him. I trusted him. How beautifully we sang together.”

Instinctively, Jonathan took a step forward. “Miss Gentry.”

She held up a graceful hand and then, very slowly, faded from sight. Jonathan stood, transfixed, staring at the empty air. After a long moment, he looked around, knowing he would see nothing, but still hoping to find some indication that a real solid person had been there. He might have stood in the courtyard indefinitely had the chattering crowd coming out of the auditorium not jarred him back to the present. Was the pageant over?

"Intermission," someone in the lobby informed him as Benny came bounding up.

"Yo, Jonny, where'd you go? Did you call Mrs. Gentry?" he frowned at his friend's expression. "What's the matter, pal? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Unnerved by Benny's perception, Jonathan made every effort to appear at ease. "No, of course not. Just something she told me – Mrs. Gentry, I mean."

"So it's okay if we go over?"

"What? Oh, yes. Yes, it's all right."

Benny gave him another curious glance and whistled the theme from "Twilight Zone."
"You make a hell of a lair, J.J. You oughta get in more practice."

"I leave all that up to you, Benedek. You're so much more creative."

Benny started to question him further when there was a loud fanfare from the stage.
"Whoops! Gotta go. We'll finish this later."

Jonathan knew he hadn't imagined the beautiful voice. He could still hear a faint clear echo of the sound, even over the tap dancing efforts of Miss Atlantis and the poetry reading by Miss Ouija Board. But a ghost? True, Laura Gentry had seemed to vanish, but it could have been a trick, like Miss Astral Projection's talent. Whoever the mysterious young woman was, he couldn't ignore her plea. She had seemed so certain he would help her. Mrs. Gentry would have some answers, surely.

Mrs. Gentry still looked frail, but she was up and about and glad to see them.

"Mrs. Gentry, you said your daughter drowned," said Jonathan. "Was it an accident?" She nodded. "Was she with Buncombe at the time?"

"Yes. He was very kind to her."

"And she left with him?"

"Yes." This was a whisper.

"Mrs. Gentry, I don't want to upset you, but it's important that we know everything that happened."

She was rocking slowly in her little rocking chair. Benny and Elise were sitting on the couch, and Jonathan had taken a set so he could see the picture of the sad-eyed young woman. There was no question. This was the same young woman who had spoken to him just an hour ago in the courtyard.

"Buncombe was here for a month, collecting songs," said Mrs. Gentry. "When he left, Laura went with him. I told her she was too young, but she insisted. She was always a bit headstrong." She sighed. "Several months later, I learned she had drowned in a boating accident. That's why Buncombe speaks to me. I'm sure he feels as badly as I do."

"Mrs. Gentry," said Jonathan. "I have reason to believe that your daughter and not Buncombe wrote the songs you are hearing."

"What?" said Elise. "Jonathan, that's absurd!"

"Now I know you've been talkin' to Laura, bud," Benny remarked.

"There's some proof buried out near the forest," said Jonathan. "I suggest we find it and settle this once and for all."

"Whoa! A treasure hunt!" said Benny. "I'm all for it."

"Me, too," said Elise, somewhat grimly.

Mrs. Gentry was gazing at Jonathan, puzzled. "My dear young man, whatever are you talking about?"

"I can't explain," he apologized. "I'm not really sure what to say."

"What's the scoop, Jonny?" Benny asked.

"I'll tell you later," he said. "Let's go see if we can find that box."

Mrs. Gentry had a flashlight and two shovels. As they walked across the fields to the edge of the forest, Benny said, "You can tiptoe around Mrs. Gentry all you like, Jon, but you ain't gettin' around me. You saw Laura Gentry's ghost tonight, didn't you? And she told you something really big."

"Is that true?" asked Elise.

"I saw a young woman who looked very much like Laura Gentry," Jonathan said.

"So why are we tramping across the moonlit fields like three of the seven dwarves after a hard day at the mines?"

"Because that young woman said some very disturbing things," said Jonathan, stumbling over a furrow and almost hitting himself in the nose with the shovel.

"Such as?"

Regaining his balance, Jonathan said. "She believed Buncombe murdered Laura Gentry and took all her songs."

There was a gasp from Elise. "That's impossible! I never heard of such a thing!"

"Now hold on, hold on," said Benny. "Ghosts don't just pop up for the fun of it. If Laura Gentry came back from the grave, this must be mighty important."

"Yes, because they always have a reason," Jonathan remarked wryly.

"I know why ghosts come back," Elise said, indignant. "But the idea of Buncombe having to steal anyone's songs is outrageous. He was a genius."

"Yeah, well, maybe his batteries were running low," said Benny.

"But murder? That's crazy."

"All we have to do is find the box and we'll have proof," said Jonathan. "Look for a place where three trees meet."

The forest looked black and mysterious in the moonlight.

"I hate to tell you, pal," said Benny, "but there are three trees meetin' all over the place." He shone his flashlight on the scene. Everywhere they looked, they saw groups of likely-looking trees.

"We'll be here forever," said Jonathan.

"You wanna ask Laura for a clue?" Benny suggested.

Jonathan ignored this. "Here," he said, deciding on a trio of evergreens. "We'll start over here."

This spot proved unsuccessful, so they tried another. After digging around several groups of trees, Benny said, "Elise, why don't you see if you can tune her in? I'm beginning to feel like a mole here."

"It has to be here someplace," said Jonathan, leaning on his shovel.

"Well, maybe this mystery woman of yours was having a little fun at your expense," said Benny. "It's not hard to do."

"She seemed so sincere," said Jonathan. Then he brightened. "Wait a minute. Look over there. Look at that tree."

"What about it?"

"See how the trunk has split and grown into three parts? Maybe that's the one she meant."

"Worth a try, Jon-boy. Let's get the Mole Patrol over there. Come on, Elise."

She gave a start, as if she hadn't been listening. "Oh, yes."

Benny began to sing, "Fifteen men on a dead man's chest," as he flung dirt in all directions while Elise stood by, oddly silent. Then Benny's shovel hit something with a clank. "This is it!" he said excitedly.

Jonathan took the flashlight and held it as Benny uncovered a small metal box. "You found it!"

Benny brushed off the dirt. "I know all about diggin' up stuff, J.J. Boy, is this shut tight."

"Can you get it open?"

Benny tugged. "No way, Jack." He snapped his fingers. "Louie can do this in a heartbeat. Let's get back to town."

"You've saved me a lot of trouble," said a strange harsh voice. "Hand it over."

Startled, Benny and Jonathan stared at Elise. Her eyes were glinting with a peculiar light. In the moonlight, her face looked hard and cruel, her graceful bearing now stiff and straight.

"Well, hel-lo, John Ashford," said Benny, impressed. "Hand it over nothing, pal."

"John Ashford?" said Jonathan. "What are you talking about?"

"John Ashford Buncombe, dead and in person," said Benny. "Talk about receptive! Miss Séance is livin' up to her name tonight."

"You mean, Buncombe's in Elise?" Jonathan said in disbelief.

"The perfect match, J.J. She's rabid about his music, and so is he."

"It is my music," Elise said angrily in the harsh unnatural voice. "Give me that box."

"Laura Gentry said the songs were hers," said Jonathan. He was not at all sure what was happening, but he didn't like the wild look in her eyes.

"Guess it all depends on which ghost you want to believe," said Benny. "Why don't we get this box open and find out the truth?"

Elise's face was almost unrecognizable. She had picked up Jonathan's shovel and moved forward menacingly, holding the shovel like a weapon.

"Wait, wait, there's no need for violence," said Benny. "Now look, Buncombe. My name's Edgar Benedek, and I'm music editor for Folk Lore Magazine. You tell me your side of the story, and I'll make sure America knows all about it. No need to get so steamed up over a couple of little ditties, now is there?"

"Stop stalling!" Buncombe said. "Hand over that box, or I'll kill you."

"Gee, it's kinda hard to argue with that, isn't it, Jack?"

"I think I'd hand it over," said Jonathan.

"I think you're right."

Jonathan shouted, "Catch!" and tossed Elise the flashlight. When she fumbled, dropping the shovel, Benny yelled, "Run!" and dashed off into the woods, holding the box under his arm

like a football.

As he ran after Benny, Jonathan heard Elise scrambling, heard her cursing angrily in Buncombe's voice. What in the world was going on?

Benny leaped over fallen logs and pushed through branches and briars. Jonathan was close behind and, so far, still on his feet. "This way, Jonny!" He slid down an embankment, and Jonathan came rolling after. "That's good," said Benny encouragingly, giving him a hand. "That's the quickest way." And angry shout near-by caused him to remark, "Whoa, she's fast for a beauty queen! You still with me, Jon?"

"Where are we going?" he panted.

"This way. We'll lose her in the woods."

"We'll lose us, too."

"Come back here!" Elise/Buncombe cried, thrashing around in the brush.

"Sure, lady," Benny muttered. "Jon, here! Quick!" he yanked his friend around a large tree. They stood still, trying not to breathe, as Elise came running by, her hair streaming behind her, the shovel still in her fist. "Okay, this way," Benny said, pulling Jonathan around the other side. "We'll double back."

"Double back? You don't even know where we are!"

"Details, details. Come on."

They ran until they came to a clump of large rocks, and Jonathan said, "Stop a minute. Let me catch my breath."

Benny agreed, slightly winded himself. "I sure wish we could get this box open. There must be something really hot in here, or old Buncombe wouldn't be in such a snit."

"I don't understand," said Jonathan. "You're saying he's in Elise? How can that be possible?"

"She's a medium, right? A channel? The minute he found a sympathetic spirit, he hopped on board. You remember what happened to you at that hotel – well, no I guess you don't," he amended. "Anyway, he's mad enough to kill. I think you'd better get in touch with Laura. Maybe she can handle him."

"Get in touch with Laura? Are you out of your mind?"

"Couldn't hurt."

"I don't believe in ghosts!"

"Well, one believes in you," said Benny. "And what's your theory about Elise? What, she's just feeling cranky tonight, is that it?"

"She's – upset," Jonathan said lamely. "The news about Buncombe's songs--"

"So she takes after us with a shovel? Oh, sure. Sounds reasonable to me. Come on, let's go."

They came around the rocks and hurried off in what Benny hoped was the direction of Mrs. Gentry's house. Running through the woods in the moonlight chased by an angry spirit was his idea of high adventure, but he knew it was only a matter of time until Jonathan tripped and broke something. Scarcely had the thought left his mind when a root snagged his foot and he fell sprawling.

"Ow!"

"Benedek!" Jonathan said, alarmed. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Benny sat up, holding his ankle. "Ow, ow, it's my leg. You'll have to shoot me, bud."

"Come on, I'll help you." Jonathan pulled him up.

"You'd better make a run for it, Jonny," said Benny, hearing the crash of footsteps nearby. "The mad musician's not far behind." He tried to put his weight on his injured foot and winced.

Jonathan had stooped to retrieve the box. "Put your arm around my shoulder. Okay, good. We'll go back to those rocks and hide."

"Easier said than done, pal," said Benny. "We've got company."

Jonathan looked up. Elise stood in their way, brandishing the shovel. She was dirty and disheveled, leaves and twigs caught in her hair. Her face gleamed with triumph.

"The box," she said, moving forward.

Benny found himself backed up against a large tree, which he held onto for support. Jonathan put the box down and started toward Elise cautiously.

"Elise – Buncombe – whoever you are, please put the shovel down. We can talk this over, come to some understanding."

There was a whish of air as the shovel narrowly missed his head.

"Jonathan, keep away from her," Benny said anxiously.

Jonathan made a grab for the shovel and almost succeeded in wresting it from her grasp, but the spirit within gave Elise added strength. The flat end of the shovel came round and smacked hard against his elbow. With a cry, Jonathan stumbled back, clutching his arm. The pain brought tears to his eyes and made him see little sparkles of light for a moment.

"You okay?" Benny asked, and when Jonathan nodded, dazed, he said angrily to Elise, "All right, sister, you realize this ruins your chances for Miss Congeniality."

"You can't fight me," the harsh voice said with a laugh.

"Elise Whitman!" Benny shouted. "We know you're in there! Don't let this guy push you around!" To Jonathan, he said, "This isn't working too well, Jack. I think you'd better call Laura."

Jonathan was leaning against the other side of the tree. "Call Laura? Are you still on that? That's crazy!"

"She came to you, didn't she? If we don't do something fast, Buncombe's gonna use that shovel to bury us."

Elise advanced, murder in her eyes. Jonathan felt incredibly silly, but what else could he do? Benny was injured, his own arm was probably broken, and the next swing of that shovel could be the last for either of them.

"Laura Gentry!" he called. "If you can hear me, we need help!"

"Yo, Laura!" Benny put in. "Come tell this creep where to go!"

"Laura, we found the box," Jonathan said. "We aren't going to be able to prove anything unless you help."

"Come to me, love,

Let me kiss you again

Under the flowering tree."

The clear voice came suddenly. Elise/Buncombe halted.

"John Ashford, please," said a soft sad voice. "If there is any love for me left in your heart, let go. Let go of everything. What can it matter now?"

A graceful young girl in white appeared. Benny stared at the beautiful ghost, recognizing

the girl in the picture. Her face was pale and expressionless, but something within those large dark eyes made him say, "Miss Gentry, you still love him, don't you?"

She nodded slowly. "In spite of everything."

Elise trembled. Gradually, the shovel lowered.

"I forgive you," Laura said. "Take the songs. I see now it was enough for me to have sung them with you. Please, Jack. Let go."

Slowly, Elise's body began to relax. The shovel fell from her nerveless hand. Jonathan caught her as well as he could with his uninjured arm and eased her to the ground. At the same moment, another shape appeared, larger and not as pale, a man's figure. It stood before Laura for a long moment; then they embraced. There was a sudden rippling of air and both ghosts were gone.

"Another happy couple reunited," Benny remarked. "Think I should go into the counseling business, Jon-boy? Dr. Edgar Benedek, Psychic Psychiatrist. Can this marriage be saved? If not in this life, then how 'bout the next?"

"Ooo," Elise groaned, sitting up. "What happened? Gosh, look at you two? What is this?"

"Are you all right?" Jonathan asked, helping her stand.

"I hope she is," said Benny, "'cause she's got to get both of us home. We'll fill you in as we go, Elise. You're gonna love it."

"All right," she said, stooping to pick up the shovel.

Jonathan caught her hand. "Just leave that, if you don't mind."

"So what's in the box?"

Louie put aside his small tools and intricate pieces of wire, flexed his pudgy fingers, and, with a flourish, opened the box.

"Some papers, Benny," said Elise. She carefully pulled them out. "And some music." She spread everything on the hospital bed where Benny was resting, his ankle propped on a pillow. Jonathan, his arm bandaged and in a sling, looked over Elise's shoulder. "First drafts of the four missing songs," Elise said, her voice uneven with emotion. "Original music with Laura's name."

"What do you think?" Benny asked her.

She stared at the papers for a long time. Finally she said, "As you would say, Benny, I think I've got my story. Buncombe and Gentry. It's a whole new chapter."

"The Phantom Partner," Benny intoned. "Laura Gentry, Woman of Mystery."

"I'm just sorry I didn't get to hear her sing," said Elise.

"Out of this world, eh, Jon-boy?"

"It was very unusual," Jonathan granted.

"And in the nick of time, too. Guess old Buncombe was still carrying a torch."

"I still don't understand why he chose Mrs. Gentry as a channel," said Jonathan. "If he felt so guilty about Laura's death, why did he come to her mother?"

"Maybe he wanted to be caught," said Benny. "Maybe it was his way of kicking himself in the ectoplasmic rear. You know, find me, uncover my secret. They always have--"

"A reason. Yes, I know."

"Besides, Mrs. Gentry was a big fan, even though Laura ran off with him. She never

blamed him. She never knew he killed Laura. And by being close to Buncombe's spirit, she could be close to Laura's."

The silence that followed was broken by the ringing of the telephone.

Jonathan answered. "Hello?" His expression changed. "Oh, hello, Dr. Moorhouse."

"What in the world is going on, MacKensie?" she demanded. "I fail to see how investigating simple harmless folk music led to you getting your arm broken and broken by a beauty queen, no less!"

"Well, I--"

"This is all Benedek's doing! I can see his fingerprints all over this one. What I'd better not see is any of this glaring at me from the supermarket!"

Jonathan held the receiver away from his ear, grimacing. Benny grinned, hearing Dr. Moorhouse quite clearly.

"Tell Benedek this story is off-limits, do you hear? And I expect you back in Georgetown as soon as possible!"

"Yes, Dr. Moorhouse." He hung up and gave Benny an expressive glance.

"On your case, is she?" Benny said. "Tell you what, Jonny. We'll save that sling and make sure you look good and pathetic."

"That doesn't work with Dr. Moorhouse."

"Oh, you've tried it, have you?"

"Many times."

"Goodness!" Elise exclaimed. "Look at the time! You guys kept me up all night running through the woods. I'll never be ready for the pageant. Are you going to be able to make it, Benny?"

"Are you kidding? I'd make it if I were in a body bag. Jon and Louie'll help me."

"I really think you ought to rest," said Jonathan.

"And have Louie's Miss Witchcraft win? No way! Come on, buds, let's see some glitter!"

"Hi! I'm Mary Susan Farnsworth, Miss Witchcraft, casting a big spell of love on all you wonderful people!"

"Hi! I'm Sandra Robin Lane, Miss Utopia, wishing each and every one of you the best of all possible worlds!"

"Hi! I'm Peaches Lee McCall, Miss ESP, sending out waves of warm and loving feelings to the whole world!"

Hi, I'm Jonathan MacKensie, wishing this were over so I could go home and lie down, thought Jonathan with a sigh. The pageant ambled on through Jordy's introductions, the presenting of the judges, the reading of the rules, the swimsuit competition – well, Miss Transylvania did look awfully attractive in black – talent competition, evening gowns, until finally, the moment they'd all been waiting for arrived. Louie handed Jordy the envelope. There was a long drawn out moment of suspense; then the winners were announced.

"Third runner-up: Miss Tibet!"

Screams of joy, cheers, and applause greeted this announcement. Miss Tibet, looking a bit disappointed, accepted her bouquet and small trophy.

"Second runner-up: Miss Poltergeist!"

More cheers and screams. Miss Poltergeist proudly accepted her trophy and several pieces of scenery fell down.

“First runner-up – and this is a very important position, ladies and gentlemen, for if for any reason Miss Paranormal Phenomenon isn’t able to fulfill her psychic duties, the first runner-up will take her place. First runner-up: Miss Numerology!”

There were louder screams and Miss Numerology sobbed happily as she grasped her trophy and roses. “I knew it! I knew it! Today is the twenty-sixth, my lucky number!”

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, aliens, ghosts, and all of you watching from the Other Side, your first Miss Paranormal Phenomenon.” Jordy paused for dramatic effect. “Miss Out of Body Experience!”

The auditorium exploded with loud cheers and applause. A beaming Miss Out of Body Experience paraded proudly back and forth on stage, waving excitedly to the crowd.

What a surprise, Jonathan thought wryly as Benny leaned back to give him a wink.

“I’m sorry you didn’t win,” he said politely to Elise, meeting her afterwards.

“Oh, that’s all right,” she said. “I got what I came for.” She chuckled. “You should’ve been backstage. The fur was flying.”

“I’ve often wondered what happens when the curtain comes down.”

“An out of this world cat fight,” said Elise. “Miss ESP just knew this pageant was fixed. There were sequins and false eyelashes everywhere. Where’s Benny? Didn’t you guys want a ride back to your hotel?”

“He’s sharing experiences with Miss Out of Body,” Jonathan remarked. “Ah, here he comes.”

Benny came limping up, swinging his crutches easily. “Big celebration tonight, J.J. Room 605. A paranormal bash. We’re bringin’ the Cheez Whiz.”

“That’s fine,” said Jonathan, “but I’d like to stop by Mrs. Gentry’s first.”

“Sure, bud. We got the Miss Séance taxi service available. We can go wherever we want, right, Elise?”

Elise agreed. “We told her about finding the box, Jonathan. You aren’t going to tell her about the ghosts and the murder, are you?”

“No,” he said. “Just something about her daughter.”

“Thought you didn’t believe in ghosts, Jack,” said Benny.

“I don’t.”

“Sheesh, you are impossible to convince, pal. Wait till I die and come back to haunt you. You’ll believe then.”

“You haunt me now, Benedek, so what’s the difference?”

He got out of the car at Mrs. Gentry’s saying, “Just wait here for me. I’ll only be a minute.”

Mrs. Gentry answered the door and smiled, pleased to see him. “Come in, come in. How’s your arm?”

“It’s fine,” he said. “Elise told you all about finding the box and the music. I wanted to talk to you, too.”

“Yes, I was so glad that Laura will get credit for her songs.”

They walked to the parlor and stood looking at Laura's portrait.

"I suppose she died before she had a chance to tell Buncombe," Mrs. Gentry said. "He would have been so proud of her writing such lovely tunes."

"Mrs. Gentry," Jonathan said, "I've seen your daughter."

The elderly woman's eyes were full of longing. "Seen her?"

"She came to me – in a dream," he said. "She sang a very beautiful song, and she told me to tell you she loves you very much."

Tears slid down Mrs. Gentry's wrinkled cheeks.

"She's sorry she ran away and left you. She knows you tried to help her."

"Yes," she whispered. "I had hoped that's what she was trying to say."

Jonathan took her hand. "I believe she's at peace now, she and Buncombe."

Mrs. Gentry nodded, smiling radiantly. For a moment, she looked as young and lovely as Laura. "Thank you."

Jonathan pressed her thin fingers gently before saying good-by.

Back at the car, Benny and Elise were having a lively discussion.

"You think you were possessed," Benny was saying. "Let me tell you, Jonathan here was seven different people, all in one afternoon. Yo, Jonny, what's up?" Jonathan had paused, looking out toward the mountains, his expression distant. "Hear something?" Benny asked hopefully. "More spectral voices?"

"No," said Jonathan, shaking his head. "No, it was nothing."

"If you say so, chum. Hop in! The girls are waiting. We gotta go console a lot of losers."

Jonathan got into the car, the echo of the silvery voice still in his ears, as clear as the stars above the dark mountains.

"Wherever you wander,

Wherever you go,

Remember, Jack O'Diamonds,

How I loved you so."