

Slightly Poisonous

By Jane Tesh

It wasn't the first time Benny had been stiffed on a story, and he knew it certainly wouldn't be the last, but still, it rankled to be left dangling at the corner of Main and 43rd like a two-bit spy, trying to appear nonchalant when all he really wanted to do was beat in Delgado's head. His contact had promised a solid lead on the latest Congressional scam, and Benny, tired of the National Register's seemingly inexhaustible supply of two-headed neon wolf babies, jumped at the chance to snag a real story. But Delgado was a no show. Benny gave the nearest trash can a kick. He'd been hoping for something to really get the old juices flowing, something dark and sinister and sexy.

Not today, he thought. Today I get plain, stupid, and dull. A chicken that can predict the weather. A giant deadly crystal glowing with atomic power. A woman who can knit with one hand while she crocheting with the other. Big deal. Who cares?

He was more than ornery when he returned to the Register office. One of the other writers tossed a paper on his desk.

"When you're through sulking, Benny, have a look at that," she said.

He glanced at the article. It was from their main rival, the Globe. "Black Widow Claims Third Victim," he read. "not another one of these," he said to Barbara.

"You said you wanted something sexy," she said. "It's either that or Frieda the Bat-Faced Girl."

Coaxed out of his mood, Benny had to grin. "Been there, done that," he said. He read the rest of the article. Well, this black widow chick was a looker, no doubt about that, but exotic and untraceable poisons were nothing new.

"She was last seen in D.C.," said Barbara. "The next time you visit Jonathan, you two can go out web slinging."

"I'll pack my portable can of Raid," he said.

It had been several months since he and Jonathan had uncovered spooky doings at a video dating service and had a close call with a vampire, an incredibly beautiful vampire, Benny recalled, even if Jonathan never admitted the woman had real fangs. Now that was a story. But lately, the supernatural well had been dry. Maybe it was time to call on Jonathan and rustle up some shadows.

He prepared his best most cajoling speeches, so he was nonplused when Jonathan greeted him warmly in his office on the campus of the Georgetown institute.

"Well, hello, Benedek. Haven't seen you for a while."

Benny grinned. "This is new. Thought you'd scream and run the other way."

"Nonsense," said Jonathan, as if he'd never considered such a thing. "I've been up to my neck in exams. I need a break. You are here about the science fair, aren't you? I told Dr. Moorhouse you'd be glad to help."

Benny didn't want to admit he'd never heard of a science fair, but as he was an expert at rolling with punches, he said, "Hey, sure. Why else would I be here?"

"Good," said Jonathan. "We can go by right now. We're to meet a Miss Thomas."

"Fine by me," said Benny."

The science fair, Benny discovered, was a collection of kids' projects all laid out on tables in the gym of the Millard Filmore Elementary School. Students were gathered around, making last minute changes and improvements. For the most part, the kids had on oversized tee shirts patterned with brightly colored surfboards and cartoon characters, long baggy shorts, and expensive sneakers. Jonathan looked a bit bemused by their outfits. He probably wore a suit and tie to school when he was a kid, too, Benny thought.

"The students certainly look--"

"Comfortable," Benny supplied.

"I was going to say sloppy," Jonathan said. "Which ones are the girls?"

"The ones with the bows in their hair," said Benny.

"Well, at least we'll be able to tell who the teachers are," said Jonathan.

Benny knew his friend had a typical teacher in mind, horn rims, cardigan sweater, gray skirt, sensible shoes, so when the young woman in the aqua jogging suit and matching sneakers introduced herself as Miss Thomas, he enjoyed the look on Jonathan's face.

"Hi," she said cheerfully. "You must be two of our judges. Thanks for coming. I'm Frances Thomas."

"Jonathan MacKensie," Jonathan said, "and this is Edgar Benedek."

"Just call me Benny," Benny said as he shook Miss Thomas' hand. "What would you like us to do?"

"Everything's all set up," she said, giving them sheets of paper. "You score the projects on a point system. I have it all written down. We really appreciate you taking the time to help us out."

"No problem," said Benny. "Since I wasn't doing anything anyway."

They met the other two judges, a dour-looking woman from the school board and a businessman from Tecknilabs. As they moved from table to table, grading the displays, Jonathan was impressed by the variety of projects and the work that had gone into them. There were the inevitable model volcanoes that erupted and solar systems made of Styrofoam and ping pong balls, but there were also projects that showed more originality, like the home made incubators full of new chicks, and the collection of spider webs that had been spray painted silver onto black cardboard to reveal the different designs. There were dioramas and posters, rubber lungs that filled with air, plastic hearts that circulated fake blood, and many stalks of celery sucking up red, blue, and green food coloring.

Every time he heard shouts of laughter, Jonathan knew Benny had snapped a picture or pulled a card out of someone's ear. He caught a glimpse of his friend, completely at home in the sea of multicolored shirts. Some of the older children had recognized him and were asking for autographs. Benny gladly complied, signing notebooks, cards, and, in some cases, the backs of tee shirts.

Benny was certainly in his element. Jonathan was enjoying himself, as well. It was relaxing to be away from the rigid demands of G.I., if only for an afternoon, and encouraging to see these children put so much hard work into learning and following the scientific method. He gave his full attention to the next display, an involved experiment on using litmus paper to test for acids. When he looked up to write his score on his paper, his attention was caught by a dark haired woman one row over. She looked oddly out of place in the colorful gym, dark and slight, with eyes that glinted violet as she turned her head. He was wondering if she could possibly be a teacher when he saw her place her hand on the shoulder of a little dark haired girl. Ah, a parent, he thought. Has to be. For the child had the same oddly colored eyes.

"Checking out the local talent?" Benny said, and he gave a slight start. He friend grinned and inclined his head toward the dark woman. "Nobody I know has a mom like that."

"Have you finished your sheets?" Jonathan asked, feeling annoyed to have been caught staring.

"Here you go," Benny said, handing them over. "I gave high marks to the plants that grew to music. And the dino diorama's pretty cool."

Jonathan looked through Benny's results. "You didn't score the spider webs? I thought that was clever."

"I just kept thinking how pissed the spiders must be," Benny said. "I mean, you spend a couple of hours getting that web just right, and some kid with a can of spray paint fixes it so you can't even snag a flea."

Despite Benny's objections, the web display scored high enough to win second place. Jonathan was pleased to discover that the project belonged to the little violet-eyed girl. Her name was Dolores Rappachini, and her exotic mother's name was Anita.

"I am so happy for you!" her mother said to the little girl. "Didn't I tell you all that hard work would pay off?" She smiled at Jonathan, a beautiful glowing smile. She was even more striking up close, with white skin and violet eyes with fleck of gold. Her perfume was heavy and musky. "She almost didn't finish it, but now she'll she that it is worthwhile to complete your tasks."

"She did an excellent job," Jonathan said. "Her project was unique." Like you, he wanted to say, but not in a gym full of noisy kids and bustling parents. First prize went to a display of homemade rockets, and third prize went to the better of the two volcanoes. There were several honorable mentions, speeches, applause, and then the bell rang, scattering kids and parents on all directions.

"Thanks so much for your help," Frances Thomas said to Jonathan and Benny. "I thought your choices were excellent. Dolores is a little shy, and winning this ribbon should help her self confidence."

"She's a lovely little girl," Jonathan said.

Frances Thomas grinned. "Guess you got a load of Mama, too. We call her Morticia. She's really very nice, but you have to agree she stands out in this crowd."

"Is there a Gomez?" Benny asked.

"You know, I don't think so," said the teacher. "Seems like Anita is a single mother. She's doing a great job with Dolores, though, and this is really going to help."

She moved on to thank the other two judges, and Benny gazed around the gymnasium. "Actually, pal, I saw quite a few single mothers I wouldn't mind helping out. I never knew a school outing could be so educational."

"I think it's time we left," Jonathan said.

"What, you're not going to see if Morticia would care for some nightshade tea at Denny's?"

"How shall I put this?" Jonathan said. "No."

"Then stand back," said Benny.

He had already decided that Mrs. Anita Rappachini was Ideal Candidate Number One for the role of Black Widow. It was too perfect. She was a single mom – natch, if she'd eighty-sixed all her husbands – she was drop dead gorgeous, pardon the pun, and she was here in D.C., just as Barbara had said. Perfect.

Her address was on Dolores' science fair project registration card. He gave her time to get home from school and then called, explaining that he wanted to get a few more pictures of

Dolores for the National Register, if she wouldn't mind. Mrs. Rappachini said this would be fine and gave him directions to her home.

From the minute he walked in, Benny knew he was on to something. The house was dark and cold with eerie old-fashioned furniture, gloomy portraits in heavy frames, dark burgundy curtains, a grandfather clock ticking solemnly in one corner, a stuffed bear looming in another. There were some large marble statues of seated figures and white flowers in marble bowls. Although Anita Rappachini didn't glide soundlessly like Morticia, she dressed all in black, her long black hair flowing to her shoulders. Little Dolores, a perfect miniature, gazed up at him with her mother's same odd violet eyes. The heavy fragrance of Anita's perfume hung like a cloud in the dusky rooms. It wasn't a scent he recognized.

"This is so nice of you, Mr. Benedek," she said. "I'm so proud of Dolores and thrilled your paper is interested in her accomplishment."

"My pleasure," Benny said. "Just call me Benny. Dolores, I'd like you to stand over there by the window. Can we open the drapes a bit?"

He thought she'd say, "No, the sunlight is deadly to us," but she smiled and said, "Of course." She drew back the heavy draperies, allowing the late afternoon sun to brighten the dreary room. "I keep them closed because we have some very curious neighbors," she explained. "I don't like them looking in whenever they please."

"Yeah, can't be too careful in the big city," Benny said. "Dolores, if you'd just perch on the arm of that chair. Great!"

In the sunlight, Dolores looked like a little marble statue. Aside from vampires, Benny had never seen two people so white. "Where you folks from?" he asked, anticipating "Transylvania" or "The Old Country."

"Burbank," said Anita. "We just moved here about a year ago. The heat and smog were too much for Dolores' allergies. We find the weather here much more agreeable."

This is some house," Benny remarked. "Decorate it yourself?"

"My husband enjoyed the Gothic style," she said. "I think the house belonged to a movie director. A lot of the things were props for his films. We're used to it now, aren't we, Dorrie?"

She has an answer for everything, Benny thought as he maneuvered around, taking a few more pictures of Dolores. I'm running out of questions. There has to be a clue around here somewhere. Maybe her husband's ghost is prowling in the attic.

Almost before the thought left his head, a thump sounded from above. Little Dolores looked up in alarm, but her mother shook her head, exasperated.

"Dolores, I told you we couldn't have the dog inside. If Mr. Benedek is through, you go take care of Dixie right now."

"Yes, ma'am," said Dolores.

"I'm all done here," Benny said, wondering if there really was a dog, and if so, what kind? The Hound of the Baskervilles would feel right at home in this creepy mansion.

"Can I offer you something to drink?" Anita asked.

Still hearing loud thumps, Benny said, "Sure, thanks," before he thought. Whoa! Did he want to have a drink in the Black Widow's parlor? Well, he could fake it. He had to know more about this woman.

The liquid in one of the glasses was an odd purple color. Seeing his expression, Anita laughed. "That's grape Kool-Ade for Dolores. I have some soda for you, unless you'd rather have Kool-Ade."

"No, thanks," Benny said, feeling foolish. "Excuse me if I'm being too forward, but what happened to your husband?"

"She shrugged. "Ran off. Left me and Dolores high and dry."

"I can't believe that," Benny said.

"Actually," she said, "I've been married three times. I thought third time's the charm, this one's it. But I guess I'm just unlucky." There was another loud thump from upstairs. Anita gave him an exasperated look and said, "Excuse me. I'd better go see what's going on."

"Sure," said Benny.

As soon as she was gone, he scoped out the room. The drawers in the old furniture had the usual household items: ashtrays, candles, batteries, place mats, holiday decorations. Everything was so old, though, musty and odd smelling, like Anita's peculiar perfume. It permeated the house. Though he thought it smelled pretty good at first, no Benny found it overpowering. He was getting a headache.

When Anita came back, he talked with her a while longer, then thanked her and left. Once outside the dark house, he took several deep breaths of air.

I'll have to ask her what that perfume is, he thought. I'd call it Oppression.

Jonathan was amazed when he learned about Benny's visit to the Rappachinis. "And you suspect her of being what?" he said incredulously. "Have you completely lost your mind?"

"Jack, I'm telling you, something weird is going on," Benny insisted. "The two of them live like a couple of vampires; she's had three husbands, all of whom are dead; and that perfume of hers! Too much!"

Jonathan spoke through his teeth. "You can't be serious."

Benny was not going to let go of this. He plopped himself down on Jonathan's sofa. "I know there's a story here, pal. I got somebody at the Post looking through the obits for me. I want to know how her husbands died. Plus she lied to me about husband number three. She said he left them. Well, he left, all right, and he probably had a little help from Anita."

Jonathan gripped the back of a chair. "Benedek, all you had to do was come help me judge the science fair. I should have known you'd try to make something sensational out of it. You can't accuse that child's mother of murder! We just met the woman!"

Benny held up his hands. "Relaxovision, Jon. None of this is gonna reflect on the Georgetown Institute. It's all National Register business from here on in."

"It's utter nonsense!"

Benny got up. "I'll call you when I have more info."

"No," said Jonathan firmly. "Leave me out of this."

"I might need your help," said Benny.

"No," he repeated. "Forget it. I don't want any part of your ridiculous schemes, whatever they are."

"Okay," said Benny with a shrug. "But you're missing a great story here."

"Leave," said Jonathan. "And for heaven's sake, go easy on the aftershave or whatever it is you're wearing."

Benny smelled his shirt. "You can smell that?"

"You smell like an opium den."

“Oh, yeah,” Benny said, grinning. “I’m sure you know what Opium smells like.” He took another whiff of his shirt. “Wowzers, this stuff is really strong. Wonder what it is?”

“Whatever it is, it’s giving me a headache,” said Jonathan. “Would you please leave?”

“No, wait,” said Benny. “This is what Anita Rappachini was wearing. It was all in her house. You think maybe this is how she kills her victims?”

“If that’s the case, why aren’t you dead?” Jonathan said.

Benny paused to think. Jonathan had a good point. If this perfume were poisonous, why wasn’t he dead?

“Everyone at Dolores’ school would be dead, too,” Jonathan added. “Everyone in the neighborhood, as well. Do you see how ridiculous you are? Go home and take a shower.”

Benny pondered this all the way back to his hotel room. He was still pondering when his pal at the Washington Post called.

“Got your news, Benny,” he said. “Husband number one died in a car accident, but husbands two and three were poisoned.”

Benny’s hopes soared. “Poisoned? How? What was the poison?”

“Deaths were ruled accidental,” his friend said. “Paint fumes for number two, and carbon monoxide for number three.”

“Was Anita Rappachini ever suspected?” he asked.

“Nope. She was out of the country when her second husband inhaled too much Dutch Boy, and there was talk that husband number three may have been a suicide, but that was never proven. So the deaths stand as accidental. What’s up?”

“Looks like a big bunch of nothing,” Benny said, disappointed. “Thanks, George.”

He hung up the phone and stared at the flower prints on the wall. Something tugged at his memory, but he couldn’t call it up. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Anita and Dolores Rappachini were just eccentric – lord knows he’d met enough of those in his life. Maybe Anita really was just unlucky in love. He could identify with that. Maybe there had been an unfortunate series of accidents, and maybe she just liked wearing heavy perfume. But he couldn’t let go of the story. The Black Widow. It was too intriguing.

He sighed and lay back on the bed. Maybe you need a break, he told himself. You can’t want a story that badly.

Yes, I do, he argued. And I think I know how to flush this spider woman out of the bushes.

He made a few phone calls and found out the school was having an awards assembly to honor all the science fair winners. He volunteered his services and told the secretary he was certain that Dr. MacKensie would be happy to give out awards, too. Then he called Jonathan to tell him the school would be asking for his help. Predictably, Jonathan agreed.

“And Benedek,” he said, “I’ve been thinking about what you said.”

“Which part?” Benny asked jokingly.

“Something about that perfume,” Jonathan said, and Benny realized MacKensie was talking about Anita.

“Are you serious, buds?” he said. “You agree with me?”

“Just hold on.” Jonathan’s tone was stern. “I still think you’re crazy, but something has jogged my memory. There was a story I read when I studied American Literature. It was by Nathaniel Hawthorne, I believe, and it was about a scientist who made his daughter poisonous by feeding her small amounts of a poisonous flower over the years until she was immune, but everyone she came in contact with died.”

The flowers, Benny remembered. The big bunches of white flowers in the house. They had that same sickly sweet smell. “Great!” he said enthusiastically. “This could be the same thing.”

He waited for Jonathan to protest and argue, but MacKensie said, “Ordinarily, I’d be violently disagreeing with you, but there’s one other thing.”

Benny was almost hopping up and down. “What? What?”

“The title of the story,” said Jonathan. “It’s ‘Rappachini’s Daughter.’”

Benny stared at the phone for so long, Jonathan said, “Are you still there?”

“Can’t be a coincidence, chum,” Benny said. “This is too much.”

“Well, it certainly bears further investigation,” said Jonathan. “Perhaps during this awards assembly, I could have an opportunity to talk with Mrs. Rappachini.”

“Boy, you have read my mind, J.J.,” said Benny. “I was hoping to get you two together.”

“Oh?” said Jonathan. “And when were you going to let me in on your little plot?”

Benny laughed. “You been hanging around me too long, Jack. You’re picking up all my bad habits. But why all the interest all of a sudden? You never care if I get a story or not.”

“I was thinking of Dolores,” said Jonathan. “If her mother is trying the same experiment on her, it has to be stopped.”

Leave it to Jonathan to think of the kid. “Well, of course I care about Dolores,” Benny said defensively. “See you in school.”

He hung up, and his flash of annoyance soon passed. It sure would be a lot easier now that Jon was on the case! Between them, they’d squash this spider woman.

The awards assembly went smoothly, with Jonathan making a short speech about the importance of science in today’s world. Benny made some remarks about creativity and did a few magic tricks. They gave out ribbons and certificates. Afterwards, in the milling crowd of parents, kids, and teachers, Benny saw Jonathan in earnest conversation with Anita Rappachini. His attention was caught by Miss Thomas, who wanted him to sign her class scrapbook, and the next time he looked up, Jonathan and Anita were gone.

Uh-oh.

He pushed through the crowd, looking around frantically. He hadn’t meant to lose sight of them. Where had they gone? Back to her house, to her parlor?

Then he saw Dolores with a group of kids. Anita wouldn’t have left her behind, would she?

He sauntered up, trying to remain calm. “Dolores,” he said, “where’s your mom?”

The child’s eerie violet stare was unnerving. “She and Dr. MacKensie are talking. Over there, by the door.”

There they were! Benny’s heartbeat returned to normal. Jonathan and Anita were standing by the front door. Apparently, they’d moved so they could hear over the noise of the kids.

"Thanks," he told Dolores. "By the way, how's your dog?"

"My dog?" she said as if he'd lost his mind.

"Yeah, the dog upstairs."

The child's face cleared. "Oh, you mean Dixie. She's fine."

If you've got a dog, I'm the Queen of England, Benny thought, only nowadays, who'd want to be part of the royal family? "Catch you later," he said, and went back towards the stage, keeping an eye on Jonathan.

In a little while, Jonathan came over to him, his expression serious. "Benedek, I'm not sure we should pursue this."

"Why?" said Benny. "She put a hex on you?"

"She's really quite charming, but that's not the point."

"Okay, what is?" He's had time to think about this, and now he's gonna back down, Benny thought. Somewhere along the line, somebody gave him a double dose of ethics, and if I ever catch the sucker—

"It's just too far-fetched," Jonathan was saying. "Three husbands murdered?"

"Not counting whatever's in the attic," Benny said. "Listen, buds, I'll understand if you want to back out, but I'm not letting this one go. Can you get yourself invited to her house?"

Jonathan was reluctant to admit he already had an invitation. "She's asked me to drop by later today.

"Perfect!" said Benny. "I just need a few minutes upstairs, that's all."

Jonathan stared at him. "You want me to keep her busy while you poke around in her house? I won't do it."

Benny made a face. "Big deal. I'm not going to steal anything! Just a few minutes to convince myself there's nothing shady going on, okay? Then I promise I'll drop the whole thing."

Jonathan's gaze was suspicious. "I have your word on that?"

"Yep."

"You'll forget this nonsense, leave Washington, and leave me alone for at least a week?"

"You got it."

"All right," he finally agreed, "but if you come crashing through the ceiling and land in our laps, you are on your own."

Benny grinned. "No problem."

But it was a problem. There was nothing upstairs.

Benny wandered about, sneakers in hand, careful to avoid one creaking board in particular. There were bedrooms and a bathroom on this floor, but, other than furniture, he found nothing. He opened closets, expecting bodies to fall out, opened drawers, expecting to find piles of severed limbs, peered into hallways and peered out of windows.

Nothing.

It had been an easy matter to climb up the back of the house and get in. Jonathan and Anita were in the living room, sharing a Kool-Ade, no doubt, and little Dolores was with them.

Well, what next? He asked himself. You've made a complete fool of yourself. You have absolutely no proof, and if you get caught, you might be spending the night in jail. Just sneak on out and admit defeat.

He climbed out the back window and carefully climbed down the sloping roof to the gutter. He lowered himself to the backyard and was turning to go when he heard a dog bark and a voice said, "What are you doing?"

It was Dolores, giving him the wide-eyed stare. A large Saint Bernard-like puppy barked and wiggled beside her.

"Oh, hi, there," said Benny. "I was just checking your gutters. Your mom asked me to see if there was a broken one on this side."

He would have been very surprised if she bought this story. She didn't.

"You're not supposed to be climbing on our roof," she said.

"I know, I know," he said with a laugh, "and I won't ever do it again, I promise. Say, that's a great dog you've got there! Is this Dixie?"

She nodded, still solemn. "Mother asked me to bring her outside. She was making Dr. MacKensie sneeze."

"Well, I'll just slip on off, and you don't have to tell your mother about this, okay?" said Benny. Sheesh, he thought How could I have been so wrong? There really is a dog. I must be losing my touch.

Dolores was giving him a look that chilled him. She had every right to be angry, but she was glaring as if he'd run over her puppy. "Mother was right about you," she said.

"Oh, yeah?" he said, his interest caught.

"She's right about all men," Dolores said. "You can't trust them."

"You're a little young to be this cynical, aren't you?" he asked.

Dolores shook her head. "Mother knows all about men. She knows what they can do. She's teaching me, so I can survive." Odd choice of words, Benny thought. "What exactly is she teaching you, Dolores?"

She gave him a superior stare. "When I'm older, I'll know what to do. I'll be prepared, like Mother. Men won't be able to harm me. No one will."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm special," she said proudly. "Like Mother."

"You mean you're poisonous," Benny said, his pulse on the rise. Was it possible he was right about this, after all? He took a few steps closer. "She's been feeding you little bits of that flower that grows in your house, a poisonous flower, right? Then, after a long while, you can poison things on your own. How will you do that, Dolores?"

She stood her ground, facing him defiantly. "By breathing on them."

"Gee, that sounds like fun," said Benny. "Is that how your mom does it? Just breathes on people?"

Dolores smiled a cold quite inhuman little smile. "No," she said. "She gives them a kiss. She's probably kissing Dr. MacKensie right now."

Heart pounding, Benny had to know more before he made his move. "Hey, this is a great story, kid," he said. "You should get a prize ribbon for storytelling, too."

"It's not a story," Dolores said haughtily. "It's true. She's taken care of all the men who try to run our lives. Nobody could ever tell."

"I think your mother has just met her match," Benny said grimly and ran for the back door. It was locked. Dolores laughed as he threw all his weight against it, praying it would give way. Damn it, was he going to be too late? He hurled himself against the door again, hearing wood splinter and hinges creak. One more time oughta do it. I've got to get in there!

With a crash, the door fell inward, and Benny leaped over the debris. "Jonathan!"

A flicker of black caught his eye, and he halted, seeing Anita, silent as a shadow in the depths of the dark house. He moved forward cautiously, wanting to grab her, shake her, put his hands around her neck, but not until he knew for certain what had happened. She was gliding toward the living room – luring him? His pulse was thundering in his head, not only from his frantic efforts to break the door, but from the lurid headlines dancing in his imagination: Black Widow Spins Web of Evil. Mysterious Spider Woman Poisons Four. Or Five, if he wasn't careful.

She led him into the dim room. Jonathan was lying on the sofa, limp and still. Anita leaned over him and then moved back, turning slowly in Benny's direction. Her violet eyes were opaque, unreadable, insane.

Benny realized he'd been holding his breath. He let it out shakily. Come into my parlor. "Why don't you just move away?" he suggested lightly.

"You didn't have to break my door," she said. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'll bet you are," he said. The tension in him broke. "Back off!"

She slid gracefully out of his way. Benny approached the sofa, keeping wary eyes on her, but she merely watched him. He put his hand on Jonathan's throat and was surprised to feel a pulse. His knees almost buckled with relief.

"What's the deal?" he said, his voice uneven. "I thought you had the kiss of death."

She regarded him with a slight smile. "I'm really quite fond of Jonathan," she said.

"Yeah, I can see how fond you are," Benny said, tensing for an attack. "So you're going to murder him, like you murdered your husbands?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm going to save him. I'm going to make him last a long time."

Lady, you are one nut bar, Benny thought, countering as she stepped closer, keeping himself between her and Jonathan. "I don't think they make Zip Lock freezer bags that large."

She laughed. "It will be a good lesson for Dolores. She can practice on him. You, on the other hand, are in the way."

She lunged for him. Benny had been waiting for her to make a move. He caught her wrists as she slashed downward, trying to keep her face from his.

"Just one little kiss," she panted angrily. "Can you think of a better way to go?"

"Of old age, in my bed," he replied, struggling with her. Her breath was the musky sweet smell of the deadly flowers; his head began to ache. He tried to shove her away. "Any particular reason why you've become such a feminist?" he asked.

"Men are scum!" she said, emotion throbbing in her voice. "You can't be trusted. We have to use any means possible to survive in this world you created."

Her lips came dangerously close to his. "That may be true for you," he said, "but why make Dolores into a killing machine?" The child had been watching their struggle dispassionately from a corner of the room. "What if she wants a husband and kids?"

This, he discovered, was not the politically correct thing to say. "So that's all she's good for?" Anita hissed. "Being a wife and a mother?"

I can't win, Benny thought. This one is over the edge. No more Mr. Nice Guy. "Well, this has been fun," he said, "but it's time for me to show you why men rule the world."

With all his strength, he gave another shove. Anita went tumbling across the room and collided with one of the marble statues. It fell on her with a crash, and she lay still.

"Upper body strength," Benny told her. He turned to Jonathan and shook him anxiously. "Come on, Jon." Jonathan's forehead was cold; his pulse seemed slower. His jacket and shirt were in disarray, his tie twisted and undone. My God, what had she been doing?

He grabbed the phone and dialed 911. As he gave the information, he watched Dolores huddle by her mother. Jonathan was his primary concern, but there had to be some way to save the kid, too.

Dolores raised her head and gave him a long violet stare that made him shudder.

Then again, maybe not.

"Mr. Benedek?"

"Yeah? What?" Benny said groggily, unfolding himself from the waiting room chair.

"Your friend is going to be all right," said the doctor, smiling. "It wasn't poison, but a very strong sedative. Your spider woman must have had other plans for him."

Relief and revulsion battled in Benny, and relief won. Jonny, if I could bottle that charm, I'd be a millionaire. "What about Mrs. Rappachini and Dolores?"

"Mrs. Rappachini has a concussion, but she'll survive," said the doctor. "If what you say is true, she'll be spending some recovery time in prison. As for her daughter, I don't know. We'll see if we can reverse her dependency on the poison. She's not as far along as her mother. There's a chance."

"Great," said Benny. "Can I see Jon now?"

"Yes. It may be a while before the drug wears off, though."

Benny entered the hospital room. Jonathan looked pale, but his breathing was slow and even.

Well, looks like your luck's still holding out, Benny thought. You must have one hell of a supply. Or maybe it's like that fortune teller once told you, you got friends in high places.

His legs felt shaky, so he sat down in the chair near the bed. "You know, I gotta quit doing this," he said lightly. "Nurses love it, but it's hard on my nerves. Didn't know I had nerves, did you? Neither did I. But when I saw Dolores stare like that – it was pretty sick. I wanted something dark and sexy and mysterious, but I think I reached my limit."

He kept his eyes on the sleeping man. "Want to take a break for a while, Jack? We've had some fun, solved some mysteries, helped some people, but no more tracking crazy females, huh? It's not worth--" He had to stop and swallow the rising emotion. "Not worth the aggravation, long hours, low pay. . ." his line of fast talk ran out.

I think I'm the poison here, he thought. I didn't think it would go this far. Hell, I just didn't think.

He was roused from his gloomy thoughts by a weary sigh. He saw a slight glimmer of Jonathan's eyes. "Hey, Jon, nap time's over." He spoke with forced cheerfulness, bracing himself. Jonathan was going to be furious. Once again his crazy schemes had landed Jon in the hospital. Benny was ready for the worst, so what he heard didn't register at first.

Jonathan's voice was just audible. "Did we get her?"

"What?" Benny wasn't certain he'd heard correctly.

"Anita," he said sleepily. "The Black Widow."

Benny was almost speechless. "Yeah," he said finally. "Yeah, we got her, only she nearly got you."

The dark eyes refocused. "As usual," Jonathan said. He didn't sound angry. "Dolores?" he questioned.

"They'll do what they can," Benny said. He couldn't believe Jonathan wasn't angry. Maybe he'd be angry later. "You, ah, feel okay?" he asked.

"Sleepy," said Jonathan. "But I feel better knowing another evil creature is off the streets."

Benny felt his mouth flop open. Then he noticed Jonathan was grinning. Just when I think I've got you figured out, MacKensie, you pull something like this. How much of this did you really believe? And yet you went along anyway. "Very funny," he said, getting up. "If you'll excuse me, I've got a story to write."