

# After All

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(previously published in *Crazy Quilt #2*)

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Liz rapped on the door, leaning close to listen for noises from within. "Jonathan? Mail call." A moment's silence convinced her that the office beyond was empty. Flipping through the pile of envelopes in her hand, she captured a few to slide in the wall pocket next to his door, then turned down the hallway on the last leg of her afternoon rounds.

Seconds after her footsteps had faded around a corner, the door of a utility closet cracked open. An eye peered out, then two; then a dark-haired head cautiously eased through the opening. "All clear!" the woman whispered. "Come on."

She held the door open for her companion, who emerged wincing and stretching. "Gee-za, that was a close call," he grumbled. "I'm getting too old for this stuff."

"Well, you shouldn't have come," she scolded, glancing up and down the hallway nervously. "I told you, I could handle this myself."

"Oh, yeah, and you'd have never found the maintenance room on your own, would you?" he snorted, plucking at her sleeve meaningfully. She pulled at the uncomfortable neckline of the uniform coverall, the twin of the one worn by her companion, and grimaced as he continued, "And you were the one who thought his office was clear across campus. Face it, sister, I'm saving you a lot of time and trouble."

"Which I appreciate, as long as you don't end up causing me even more trouble. The last thing we need is for her to get a good look at you, you know."

"Didn't anybody ever tell you to respect your elders, young lady?" he grouched good-naturedly, chuckling when she slapped away the hand he placed on her hip.

"Oh, I hope this works," she muttered with an exasperated groan. "I'm really looking forward to liking you again."

"Hey, what's not to like?" he protested with an expansive grin.

"Don't get me started," she warned between gritted teeth. "And keep your hands to yourself or I swear, I'll cut them off at the shoulder. Now, come on. Help me figure this out, okay?"

He shrugged, suddenly cool. "Since you're the one who can handle this yourself, you can figure it out yourself, right?"

"Don't go zero on me now," she moaned. "This is important, remember?"

His expression sobered abruptly as he drew his fingers through steel-gray hair. "Yeah. Yeah, I remember."

"It didn't look like he was in his office. Where do you think he might be?"

He looked around, finding the hall clock. "Okay, it's almost three-thirty, on a Wednesday...he'd be between classes. He should be here."

"Well, he's not. Think, okay?"

"I'm telling you, he should be here, getting ready for the four o'clock class."

She sighed, stepping hard on her rising agitation. "We've got to find him."

"Yeah, I know, I know. Look, you stay here and keep an eye on things, and I'll scout around a little, just do a quick tour of this floor. Maybe he went visiting, you know?"

She nodded reluctant agreement. "Don't go too far and keep your head down, okay?"

"Got it," he winked. As he turned, he hunched his shoulders slightly, to become an elderly, weary maintenance worker trudging the last few miles toward retirement.

After watching him shuffle down the corridor, she faded back into a recess formed by two facing doors. This gave her the perfect vantage point if Jonathan MacKensie approached his office from either end of the corridor. She had a dead-on view of his door, but by the time he reached it, his back would be turned to her and so her presence would remain undetected. And that would give her the time she needed to figure out what their next step would be.

Tense minutes passed without a sign of either Jonathan MacKensie or her companion. She fidgeted, growing more nervous with each minute that passed, another minute in which they risked discovery, casting frequent worried looks down the corridor. "Come on, come on," she urged under her breath.

Shuffling footsteps drawing near her hiding place sent a wave of relief through her. "It's about time...."

She stepped forward to angrily confront her cohort as she spoke, and, at the same moment, the office door in front of her opened. With a sharp gasp, she stared, wide-eyed, at a startled Jonathan MacKensie as he reached over to remove his mail from the wall slot.

From the top of the hallway came a disgruntled voice saying, "I looked all over, I couldn't...."

Panic shattered her shock-induced paralysis. Exploding with a loud hiss, she gestured wildly, and her companion responded instantly, darting back up the hallway and around the corner. The sudden exertion sent her reeling against the wall and she clung there as she looked up to see Jonathan MacKensie still reaching for his mail, still frozen in an attitude of utter, complete shock.

She swallowed, mustering a weak smile. "Uh...hi."

His arm lowered slowly as he continued to stare. When he spoke after a long moment of silence, it was without breath or inflection. "Laurie."

Her heart broke to see the impassive expression on his face, giving her no clue whether she should approach him slowly, collapse at his feet babbling a litany of explanations and apologies, or give in to a wild, overwhelming impulse to fall upon him, wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him until they both turned blue. As she vacillated, she heard the unmistakable sound of someone whose curiosity was far stronger than his common sense trying to get her attention in sharp, beckoning hisses.

She sprang forward as Jonathan turned toward the odd noises, grabbing him by the shoulder and pushing him into his office. He stumbled when she released him long enough to slam the door behind them, and recoiled when she reached out to steady him. The look of shock and incredulity on his face stung her. She stepped back quickly, hands raised in truce. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean...I didn't want...I was trying to...oh, gee-za." With a growl of raw impatience, she shook her head. "This never gets any easier, does it?"

He eased sideways, putting the desk between them as he continued to stare at her. "You, ah...you're back," he stammered. "You said...he said you...."

"Benny explained everything to you, yes, I know," she said, keeping her voice calm and reasonable. "He also said he didn't think you believed a word of it. Is that true?"

"You've talked to him, then?"

The hurt, accusatory tone was slight, but enough to make her wince. "No, I haven't...I mean, yes, I have, but not here. Not in this time."

She stopped herself from saying more when he closed his eyes briefly, as though her words had hit the limit of his credulity. "He was right," she murmured unhappily. "You didn't believe him, did you?"

"Believe?" He uttered a short laugh that held no amusement. "You mean that story about how you came here from the future to avert global catastrophe in the year twenty...twenty...."

"Twenty-sixteen."

"Whatever. Oh, he did a marvelous job, he really did. Very sincere, very convincing. But really, my dear...." His hard-edged sarcasm dropped away into quiet anger. "What kind of fool do you think I am?"

She opened her mouth, but words refused to emerge, locked in mortal conflict between the Laurie who wanted to fall to his feet and beg abject forgiveness, and the Laurie who wanted to land a punch where it would hurt the most. "Look, we don't have a whole lot of time here, so I'm not going to argue this with you," she said, seizing the middle ground. "We cut things real close before because I spent most of my time trying to convince you that I was telling the truth." She faltered slightly, remembering too late what she had really spent most of her time doing, but steamed on, "And that's because you don't believe anything or anyone without proof, do you? Well, Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, PhD--I've *got* proof this time."

She turned on her heel and, striding to the door, opened it, managing to catch her companion as he tumbled into the room.

Dragging him forward by the arm, she presented him with a terse flourish. Aware that he had just become the abrupt center of attention, the old man pulled on a bright smile. "Long time no see, Jon-boy," he crowed.

Jonathan's tense expression melted into open-mouthed disbelief as he stared at the gray-haired, bearded man. "You have *got* to be related to Benedek," he breathed.

"Closer than brothers," he nodded, earning a sharp nudge in the ribs from Laurie's elbow and a hissed, "You are *not* helping."

Jonathan sank into his chair, shoulders sagging. "What is this all about?" he pleaded, hopelessly confused.

She moved carefully, approaching as close as she dared while saying, "You have to believe me, Jonathan. Benny was telling you the truth. I told you the truth."

"The truth?" he quavered, pressing a hand to his forehead. "You came from the future to save one troubled student, to save the entire world from destruction. That's what you want me to believe? And what about now? What do you want me to believe now? Who did you come back to save this time?"

She crouched by his side and reached for his hand, smiling in relief when he didn't draw away from her. "You," she said quietly, willing him to see the truth in her eyes to replace the confusion in his own. "We came back to save you."

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"I knew something was wrong when I couldn't find my friend Gary--he's the one who got me into the lab. He said he'd wait around for me--and I didn't recognize the two people who were there and they'd never heard of Gary and they definitely didn't know who I was anymore than I knew who they were. These are great, what are they?" Laurie reached over to scoop up another handful from the bowl on the coffee table.

"Cheeseballs," Jonathan said, his voice as flat and vaguely grumpy as it had since they persuaded him to ask Liz to find an emergency substitute for his four o'clock class and return to his apartment with them for an explanation that promised to be long and, from the expression on the professor's face, torturous. His eyes went from Laurie, who was enthusiastically licking her salty, orange fingers, to her companion, sprawled in the easy chair next to the sofa, engrossed in a battered Rubik's cube; his face never changing expression from its faintly bemused grimace.

"Anyway," Laurie said, swallowing. "They called the campus police on me, and said I was in a lot of trouble because I didn't have the security clearance to be there. Not only that, I wasn't even registered as a student at G.I. and that's when I really knew that things were really hyper-ki, because I took my undergraduate degree at

G.I.. I should have been in their records for at least six years. So I told them that if they talked to you or Doct-- Benny, either one of you could vouch for me."

"And could we?"

She ignored the subtle sarcasm, popping another few cheeseballs into her mouth. "Maybe you could have, if anyone had ever heard of you."

His head inclined, straining forward slightly as though really trying to understand something that might have been better off left beyond his ken. "So what you're trying to tell me is that, because you changed the past, no one at Georgetown Institute knew who I was?"

"Oh, they knew. Once they looked it up in the records, that is." She swallowed with a wince, as though the cheeseballs had suddenly lost their taste. "You, um...you disappeared, Jonathan. Twenty-nine years ag--before."

"Disappeared?" he echoed faintly.

"Biggest 'bloid story of 1987, Jocko," the old man crooned, twisting the Rubik's cube with an exaggerated flourish. "I got headlines out of you for months. Why, you were featured on *Unsolved Mysteries* for five years running, with yours truly providing color commentary. Me and Robert Stack..." he lifted his hand with fingers crossed. "...closer than that."

Jonathan rose from the sofa so suddenly that Laurie, seated on the opposite end, squeaked in surprise. Two quick strides brought him in front of the recliner; he stared, narrow-eyed, at the grinning man seated there.

"Here." The elderly man leaned forward, flicking his fingers at his neat, salt-and-pepper goatee. "Codge this, eh? You can pull on it if you want, it ain't glued on. No stage makeup here. I earned every crow's foot, the hard way. Every wrinkle you see represents an ex-wife; every gray hair an alimony payment."

Open-mouthed, he shook his head as he emitted a breathy sound of incredulity. "It's...it's not possible, it can't be, but...it *is* you."

"After twenty-nine years, pal, I think that's my line," Benny said, leaning back in the chair to return his attention to the cube.

"Jonathan." Laurie rose to take his hand when she sensed that he was on the verge of losing his balance to confusion. She guided him back to the sofa, sitting down close to him and keeping his hand in hers as she watched his pale face carefully. "Is this really so difficult for you to believe?" she asked quietly, with a touch of regret for the turmoil they were obviously causing him.

"I'm not sure what to believe," he murmured, looking ill. "But...but even if I were to believe that everything you're telling me is true, then why didn't you tell me about this the first time you were here?"

"Because it wasn't true the first time. I mean, it wasn't...." She closed her eyes briefly, gathering composure. "The world I left behind when I came here was on the brink of destruction, but you were there. Dr. Jonathan MacKensie, chairman of the G.I. Anthropology Department for eleven years, was facing the same crisis as we all were in 2016. Not to mention Dr. Edgar Benedek, director of Paranormal Studies...." She spared a dark glare in the direction of a derisive hoot from the recliner, then cold-shouldered Benny, leaning closer to Jonathan to continue, "The world I came back to no longer faced that threat. But you weren't there. And Benny...well, I found him in a motel room in upper state New York, drinking his sixth marriage off his mind."

"Seventh, but who's counting?" Benny interjected cheerfully. "The minute she walked into the room, I was wide-awake and ready for eight, but she's only got eyes for you, Jonny."

She shushed him sharply, but not before Benny winked and Jonathan gave her a strange look. "He told me everything he knew--how you'd disappeared sometime between the evening of April 7, 1987 and the next morning...."

"That's today," Jonathan realized.

"...and that you left absolutely no clue as to what might have happened. Your bed hadn't been slept in, there was nothing disturbed here in the apartment, you didn't make any phone calls, you left no note...."

"I'm supposed to disappear tonight?"

She paused, sensing the touch of fear that tinged the ostensibly calm words. "Jonathan...."

"And when you say disappear, you mean...I was never heard from again? Ever?"

"Depends on who you talk to, pal." Benny dropped the Rubik's cube back onto the end table, then planted his interlaced fingers behind his head. "I found dozens of reliable witnesses who swear they spotted you and Elvis doing the cross-country thing in a Winnebago. A few people said that the Justice Department plopped you into their witness relocation program, but I got hold of those records in 1998 and you weren't even a blip on their scope. Then there were the Mafia connection rumors, the 'runaway from the rat-race to a Polynesian paradise' theory, the amnesia hypothesis, even the criminal-on-the-run speculation, although they never did figure out what crime you were supposed to have committed. And then there was...." He paused, then directed a mirthless smile at the ceiling. "Then there was the most popular theory."

"Which was?" Jonathan prompted when Benny made no effort to continue.

Laurie squeezed his hand gently to get his attention. "Benny didn't have much of an alibi for the night you disappeared...."

"I had a great alibi," he retorted. "I was at a party in Greenwich Village. Can I help it if all the witnesses were too blasted to recognize their own noses? Hey, that party's probably starting right now, isn't it?"

Jonathan gaped. "They thought...he..."

"He was their prime suspect right up until the day they dropped the case for lack of evidence."

"They only dropped it because they couldn't prove there was a crime committed in the first place," Benny corrected, jaw set in a hard line. "But everybody just kept on believing what they wanted to believe. Hey, don't look at me like that. I told you, I was--hell, I *am* in Greenwich Village, right now. If you don't believe me, we can get Hercule's number from directory assistance and you can talk to me. Do it quick, though, because once Herc drags out the tequila, you'll get more a intelligent conversation by calling the Great Ape exhibit at the Bronx Zoo."

Jonathan closed his eyes, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I...I just can't believe any of this. It's ridiculous, it's...it's absurd, it's just not...possible."

His words ended in a faint plea as Laurie forced him to meet her steady gaze. "Then you have absolutely no idea what circumstances might have caused your disappearance?" she asked carefully.

"I think that much is pretty obvious," Benny offered. "Too bad. My pet theory was that you took off to Tahiti on your own just to watch me squirm for thirty years."

"Benny," she snapped, eyes blazing. He looked at her, then glanced away, tight-lipped. "Jonathan, I'm sorry, he didn't mean that...."

"Are you sure about that?" Jonathan asked quietly, watching Benny trying to pretend he was unaware of the scrutiny.

"Jonathan, please. Can you think of anything at all that might have caused your disappearance?"

"No," he said with a distracted, irritated sigh. "I have classes tomorrow, a weekend seminar in Baltimore, and next week Dr. Moorhouse expects me to investigate phantom lights in British Columbia."

"I was looking forward to that trip," Benny murmured, engrossed in a study of his fingertips.

"Do you, well...do you have any enemies?"

He blinked, startled. "Sure you don't believe...."

"I told you, I don't know what to believe. Benny says he spent years investigating everyone who knew you, even people who hadn't seen you in years."

"I don't have any enemies," he stammered. "Do I?"

"What about Michael Tipton?"

"What about him?" he returned warily.

"Drop kick that idea," Benny interjected. "Tipton was the first guy I drew a bead on. His alibi was so airtight that NASA could have launched it as a space station. He's still under court-ordered psychiatric care for that little contretemps from, uh...what, six months ago now? Between that and his legal problems, he's gonna be under a microscope for at least ten years, after which he becomes a college professor at UCSF and a noted peace activist. Strictly pacifist, by the way."

Laurie snapped her fingers. "Then how about the people who tricked him into doing their dirty work for them?"

"They took off for East Germany the day after we foiled their little scheme. The Polish government nailed them a couple of months after the Berlin Wall came down."

"The Berlin Wall came down?" Jonathan echoed, eyes widening.

"I also checked into the possibility that someone involved with them would have taken it upon themselves to exact retribution. I must've gone through every document in the KGB archives. They weren't involved with our incendiary pals, by the way, but they sure knew how to keep tabs on troublemakers."

Jonathan gaped. "You gained access to KGB files?"

"Not one of them was in the country at the ti--tonight, that is. And the ones I did get to talk to had no kind words for the suggestion that they'd waste their time and energy on petty revenge."

"So that leaves us back where we started," Laurie sighed.

"This is all...a bit much for me," Jonathan murmured, weakly.

Concerned by the pallor of his skin and the dazed look in his eyes, Laurie leaned in closer, searching his face. "Jonathan, you do believe us, don't you?"

"Believe you?" He swallowed with difficulty. "What should I believe? That for some unfathomable reason, you persist in prolonging this cruel and pathetic practical joke at my expense? Am I supposed to marvel at how adroitly you've manipulated my reactions, my...my emotions, do I applaud the incredible effort that you must have expended searching out a dead ringer for an elderly Edgar Benedek and, my god--if you taught him everything he knows about Benedek, you must know him better than he knows himself."

Pain speared through her, sharpened by his words, thrust deep by his anguished expression. "No," she pleaded.

"Is that what I believe? I don't know. I just don't know. Because if I do believe that, then I need to know one thing. Just one thing. Tell me why. Tell me what it is that you want from me."

"I don't want anything from you," she insisted, eyes brimming. "I just want you to be safe."

He stared at her intently, uncertainly still flickering in mad dashes across his taut face. "Tell me again."

Her mouth opened, but emotion stole the words. With a single cry, almost a sob, she placed her hand on his shoulder, drawing close to place a soft kiss on his cheek. His fingers lifted to test the stain of tears she'd left

behind. Then he reached out to cup his hand to the side of her face as he gazed into her eyes, one last search for the truth. "Then I suppose...I do believe you," he murmured.

She gripped his hand, as much in excitement as to prolong the delicious warmth of the contact. "Do you, honestly? Do you really believe me?"

"I...have to, I think. I have to believe that only the truth could have compelled you to these lengths. Because I can't believe anything less of you. Not you."

"Gee-za, do you think we can punch up an old western on another channel?" Benny drawled, bored.

Laurie muttered an imprecation under her breath as MacKensie pulled away self-consciously. "Jonathan, listen to me. Listen." She gathered up both of his hands, holding them tightly. "Since none of us has any idea what is going to happen tonight, we're going to stay here with you."

He drew a breath, collecting himself. "That's not a good idea," he told her as he rose from the sofa, breaking free from her without apology.

"That wasn't a suggestion," she protested, jumping to her feet to follow him and pulling up short when he stopped pacing after three steps. "Don't you understand? What happened here tonight isn't supposed to happen, and I've got to make sure that it doesn't."

"Why?" he challenged, keeping the hand she tried to recapture out of her reach. "Because you genuinely care about what happens to me, or because you think that it's your fault?"

She stared, in shock. "I do care," she managed in a faint voice. "How could you possibly think I didn't?"

"Listen to her, Jonno," Benny piped up in a voice of droll unconcern. "She went ballistic when I broke the news about you to her. Those weren't guilt feelings I was trying to sedate before the motel manager called the cops on us."

"And what happens tomorrow?" Jonathan asked after a moment spent watching Laurie's embarrassed expression as she rubbed the bridge of her nose tiredly. "Tomorrow morning, when I'm still here and you feel your job is done. What happens then?"

It took a great deal of effort for her to lift her eyes and meet his expectant gaze. "Then everything will be all right," she said, forcing a smile. "Everything will be...."

She gave up with a pained sigh when he looked away. "I can't stay," she whispered, begging him to understand. "I can't. I want to, oh...you don't know how much I want to. But I can't."

"Then perhaps my disappearance isn't so much of a mystery after all," he told her quietly.

Her confusion melted into wonder as he took her hand, squeezing it gently. She searched his eyes, not daring to believe what she found there. "You mean...."

"Perhaps everything is happening the way it's suppose to happen. Perhaps you came here to take me back with you."

He leaned close as he spoke, and Laurie, mesmerized, tilted her face up. Her half-closed eyes snapped open when a sudden noise nearby distracted her. Both she and Jonathan turned to see that Benny had come out of the recliner in a leap and was staring at them, fists clenched at his side.

"Can I use your phone?" he said, the cold light in his eyes belying the casual tone. "I need to call Greenwich Village and tell myself to sober up an alibi or two."

Laurie broke away from Jonathan, brushing the hair from her face to cover the nervous tremor in her hand. "Um...Benny, look, why don't you go into the kitchen and see if Jonathan's got any beer in the refrigerator?"

"You made me take a Dri-Up, remember?" he returned with exaggerated patience.

"Oh, right. Orange juice, then, or maybe some mineral water...."

"I have some soft drinks on the top shelf," Jonathan offered, without enthusiasm. "Help yourself."

"Thanks. I will." With that, he turned and with only a moment's hesitation to dredge up a thirty-year-old memory, headed off in the direction of the kitchen.

"What did you make him take?" Jonathan wanted to know, genuinely curious.

"It's a drug, non-prescription. It affects the taste sensors in the mouth, so that alcohol ends up tasting like sulfur. He was pretty bad off when I found him, and since he insisted on coming back here with me and the last thing I needed was more problems, I decided to take a few precautions. Jonathan, you weren't serious, were you?"

"I think I was," he assured her solemnly.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" Her voice shook with incredulity. "Jonathan, you'd be throwing away thirty years of your life!"

"I'd be sharing those thirty years with you."

She shook her head helplessly, unable to take her eyes off him. Every silly daydream she'd ever had, every fantasy she'd woven around the neatly trimmed gray head of an oblivious Jonathan MacKensie whirled in a mad spin behind her eyes, a tantalizing, teasing kaleidoscope. "Oh, don't do this to me," she moaned.

He spoke each word carefully, a challenge. "Why not?"

"You have to live your life as it was meant to be lived. Those thirty years were filled with incredible accomplishments, Jonathan. You can't forsake that. I won't let you do that to yourself." She touched his arm, leveling a determined look at him. "And I won't let you do it to Benny, either."

Jonathan spared a look in the direction of the kitchen. "He's fine," he said, but conviction drained from his words even as he spoke them.

"Not compared to the Edgar Benedek I know. I'm not sure how, and I'm not sure why, but he needs you, Jonathan. He needs you to become the person he's supposed to be--a respected educator and world-renowned paranormal researcher and theorist, not a retired writer." She snorted. "Retired. You know what that really means? It means that he's spent so much time in the bottle and prowling for a new wife before the ink's even dried on his last marriage license that he's forgotten *how* to write."

"You can't expect me to believe that I could have had that much of an effect on his life."

She gave him a narrow-eyed look, smug. "Why not?"

When he looked away, she placed a hand on the side of his face, gently drawing him back. "I appreciate the offer, more than you'll ever know," she told him lowly. "But some things that are worth having just aren't worth the price that we'd have to pay."

He carefully placed his hand over hers, moving it to clasp between both of his. For a long moment, he stood silent, head bowed. Then, with a deep breath, he raised his eyes to meet her apprehensive gaze. "You're right. You're right. I'm not even sure why I said it."

"I'd like to think I know why," she said, eyes filling over her tremulous smile.

"It's just that...you're here. You came back, the way I hoped you would despite everything Benny did to convince me otherwise. And now...now you're telling me that tomorrow we have to say goodbye again."

"Oh, Jonathan," she murmured, stung by the pain he could no longer manage to suppress. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I would have given anything to have things turn out differently. I tried so hard not to give in to my feelings. I tried, but...."

"But I pushed you too hard," he murmured, abashed.

"No," she protested firmly but gently. "No, you didn't, not at all. You were just too easy to fall in love with."

He finally smiled when she freed her hand to poke lightly at his chin. "How do you feel about older men, then?"

Her lips pursed thoughtfully as she assessed the glint in his eye. "The same way I feel about younger ones. Why?"

"How do you feel about long engagements?"

She stared at him, searching his face until she finally dared to realize that he was serious. But her hesitation caused him to frown. "I'm already married?" he guessed, dismayed.

"That, um, would be telling, wouldn't it?" she stammered, clearing her throat and covering her mouth with one hand in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to suppress a joy-filled laugh. Giving in, she threw her hands around his neck, hugging him fiercely.

He returned her embrace, then pulled her away from him just far enough to seek her mouth for a fervent kiss. When they parted, long moments later, he traced the lines of her face with his fingers until her eyes opened dreamily. "I'll wait for you," he promised in a low whisper.

It took all her strength to do it, but she shook her head. "No. That's one promise I don't want you to keep. No, I mean it. There will be...someone. Someone who'll make you very happy, Jonathan. I have no intention of being the one who stands in the way of you finding her. Please, promise me. Don't live your life for something that won't happen for thirty years. Just remember--you don't have to wait for me. I'll be waiting for you."

A loud commotion from the kitchen startled them out of their kiss. "Benny?" Laurie called warily.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," the distant voice floated back. "Gee-za, whoever heard of stacking the canned peas on top of the spaghetti?"

"He's remembered where I hide the chocolate-chip cookies," Jonathan realized with a sudden laugh.

"I think a raging chocolate craving is a side effect of that medication," Laurie chuckled, easing back into Jonathan's warm embrace.

"Dr. Benedek," he mused with another laugh. "The concept defies imagination."

"Defied his, too. Oh, he remembered what I'd told him when I first came here. But when you disappeared, he wrote the whole thing off as a con job on my part. I really had my hands full when I finally tracked him down to that motel. He didn't recognize me at first--he thought he'd forgotten an appointment he'd made with the local escort service. Seeing him like that broke my heart, and not just because he's nothing like the Edgar Benedek I know. It took me a while to get him calmed down enough to tell me the whole story. And then he had to calm me down," she added ruefully.

"He must blame me for the mess he's made of his life," Jonathan said, without rancor.

"He doesn't blame you. He doesn't blame anyone, except himself." She leaned her head against his shoulder, reveling in his close warmth. "He's supposed to do such wonderful things. Both of you are. And I'm going to make damned sure that you do."



































































