

Benita

By M.D. Bloemker

The pounding beat of a cheerful reggae tune reverberated throughout the hallway, seeping out of the confines of what was supposed to be a soundproofed room. Hand on the doorknob, Jonathan MacKensie paused long enough to draw a deep, steeling breath. Then, teeth gritted, he flung the door open and plunged fearlessly into the depths of chaos.

There were no more than a dozen or so people in the room, but their frenzied activity and the booming music almost drove him right back out the door. A comely young woman, bouncing up and down on an exercise trampoline nearby, gave him a cheery wave. Her mouth formed the words, "Hi, Jonathan!", but the greeting itself dashed to pieces against the wall of sound.

Both hands pressed tightly against his ears, he managed a nod in her direction as he kicked out with his foot, snagging an electrical cord and sending the plug flying out of the wall outlet. In the abrupt silence, everyone in the room paused briefly to stare at him as he stalked past. "Dr. MacKensie's here," called a bored voice as each person returned to their individual pursuits.

Stepping around a tall young man lying flat on his back on the floor, chanting unintelligibly, Jonathan spotted his quarry in a far corner of the room, in animated discussion with an irritated older gentleman who was beligerently shaking his head.

"Look, what do I have to do to convince you?" Edgar Benedek's voice held a wheedling note that sounded familiar to Jonathan's ears. "This is strictly scientific research. Charlie, Charlie, *listen* to me. No one's going to laugh at you, I *swear*."

Charlie's head swung back and forth, his jaw jutting out firmly.

"Benedek, I'd like a word with you?"

Benny looked up, his face brightening as he grabbed Jonathan's arm, pushing him forward. "See? This guy is an anthropologist, a real, honest-to-by-golly scientist. He's got papers and everything to prove it. Charlie, come on. We're pals, we're buddies, we've known each other a long time, you gotta do this for me. You know I wouldn't ask you to do this if it wasn't important. Jocko, talk to him."

"Me?" Jonathan protested shrilly. "We haven't even been introduced!"

"Charlie, Jonathan. Jonathan, Charlie. Talk."

"Hey, man." A breathless, disheveled young man bounced up to them in a highly agitated state. "This ain't workin' man, you know I need my tunes. I gotta have my tunes... "

"In a minute, Pedro," Benedek waved him off impatiently. "Chill, willya? Go take a Valium, or eat a Twinkie or something. You kicked the cord out of the wall again, didn't you?" he sent the accusation aside to Jonathan as he turned back to the older man, who was still stubbornly shaking his head. "Charlie, Charlie, old buddy, old pal...."

Exasperated, Jonathan snagged Benny's arm, pulling him away. "I said, I would like a *word* with you. *Now*."

"Okay, okay, ow! geez, I said okay, didn't I?" He scowled, rubbing his elbow.

"Benedek... "

"I'm telling you, you gotta see Charlie in action. He is the best short-term precog I have ever met. His limit is thirty minutes, so he's kinda useless on football pools, but he really cleans up at the track. That is, he *could* clean up at the track, except, well—there's this problem."

In spite of his better judgment, Jonathan found himself drawn to ask, "What problem is that?"

"Well...." He leaned in, lowering his voice. "Seems that he can only pick winners when he's, um...dressed for it."

"Dressed?"

"Yeah. With matching accessories, if you get my drift."

Jonathan closed his eyes, praying for patience. "Benedek," he began in a tone of sweet reason. "I didn't know you'd been married."

The man glanced up in surprise, but to Jonathan's disappointment, it was not quite the depth of astonishment he'd been hoping for. "Yeah," Benedek replied with a diffident shrug. "Yeah, I tried it once. Cut into my social life, though, so—" He finished with another shrug, dismissing the point entirely. Then a frown of confusion flashed across his face. "Wait a minute—who changed the subject to matrimony?"

"Your ex-wife," Jonathan told him, letting irritation color his tone. "She called me at six o'clock this morning, looking for you. Would you mind telling me why you bother reserving a hotel room if you never spend any time in it? And for that matter, have you gotten into the habit of giving out *my* phone number for people to track you down? What am I, a subsidiary of Pinkerton's?"

"Whoa," Benedek said mildly. "O.D.'d on grouch pills today, did we?"

Jonathan sighed, defeated. "Aren't you even going to ask what she said?"

"What did she say?" Benedek returned obediently and far too cheerfully.

"She wants you to call her immediately, if not sooner."

"Okay. Pedro! Time out, man! Amy can achieve another plane of existence just fine without your help, all right?"

Despite his aggravation, Jonathan's curiosity was getting the better of him. "So," he cleared his throat, debating the most innocuous way to proceed. "What's her name, anyway?"

"Whose name? Tanya, sweetheart!" Benedek grabbed the young woman who had danced up to him trailing an unburst printout, planting a quick, exaggerated kiss on her before he eagerly scanned the flapping pages. "I hear you peaked three times this morning. Whoa! Look at those range curves, willya?" he exclaimed.

"Your ex-wife," Jonathan pressed, determined. "She hung up so fast that I didn't get her name."

"Losing your touch?" Benedek cracked an easy smile, barely taking his eyes from the lengthy graph, and not budging his arm from around Tanya's waist. "Or do women call you at six in the morning all the time? Hey, look, if you're really interested, Benita's a great cook, and—"

"Benita?" Jonathan broke in incredulously. "Your ex-wife's name is *Benita*?"

"Well...." He made a rocking motion with his head. "To tell you the truth, she isn't exactly my ex-wife. We never really got around to the divorce."

Tanya made a sudden, pouting noise, looking at Benny mournfully before pulling away with a disappointed sigh. Distracted, Benny's attention went from her to the paper in his hand, back to her. "Great runs, Tanya! Really great! Keep up the good work!"

"Oh, man," Pedro whined, shuffling up to them with his hands tearing at his scraggly hair. "This is killin' me, man. The stuff just don't happen without my tunes."

"Okay, okay, just hold on to your toenails. Jonny, don't take this too personally, but could you take a hike? You're really cramping Pedro's style."

Jonathan stared at him incredulously. "It seems to have slipped your mind that this entire research project is under *my* supervision. My name is on the door, much to my everlasting chagrin, and I'll cramp more than his style if you ever.. "

Unperturbed by the rising pitch of Jonathan's voice, Benny made a messy pile of the printout and shoved it into the professor's hand. "Dr. M'll want to see this, it's Tanya's strongest showing yet. Oh, and tell her that I fi-

nally got through to Prague and as soon as Laslo can get his passport and visa in order, he'll be on the next plane over."

"Laslo?" Jonathan's eyes widened over the armload of paper. "Laslo Ludkiewicz? I tried to contact him for weeks! He wouldn't even talk to m—"

"My tunes!" Pedro wailed mournfully, sinking to his knees with his hands held up in desperate supplication.

"I think Liz said there were some messages for you," Benny said suddenly, guiding Jonathan by the arm toward the door. "On your desk. In your office."

Jonathan managed to keep the door from closing on him by wedging back in, long enough to growl, "Which is where I expect to see you in fifteen minutes."

"An hour?"

"One second over fifteen, and I promise you you'll lose more than your visitor's pass, do I make myself clear?"

"Just like you do every time. Check you in thirty!"

The door slammed shut, sending Jonathan stumbling back a step. Two seconds later, the booming music resumed, louder than ever. Jonathan sighed in defeat to hear Pedro's unholy shriek of delight rise on the down-beat.

Stalking back to his office, Jonathan tossed the rumpled graphs on to his desk, scowling. He should have given in to his initial gut reaction when Benedek had gleefully offered to help scrounge up subjects for the Georgetown Institute's Paranormal Research labs, all those weeks ago. He should have tossed the muckraking, parasitic, and thoroughly annoying tabloid reporter out of the third story window.

"Laslo Ludkiewicz," he muttered, shaking his head. "How does he do it? Can someone *please* tell me how he does it?"

"Excuse me?"

He whirled at the sound of the timid voice, embarrassed to find that someone had caught him talking to himself. A young woman stood at the door, leaning in with a waving hand to draw his attention. "Excuse me, hi. Are you Dr. MacKensie?"

He instinctively straightened his jacket and his shoulders, trying not to stare. The woman was small, almost fragile-looking, with a pointed, elven face and huge green eyes framed by a roiling mass of the reddest hair he had ever seen in his life. When she smiled at him, he found himself hoping that she was about to introduce herself as new faculty, so that there would be a chance in the very near future that he could further investigate that smile and those eyes by candlelight, over dinner.

"Yes," he coughed, finally remembering to speak. "I'm Jonathan MacKensie."

"Oh, good." With an excited giggle, she slipped into the office, then leaned out to peer carefully down the hallway.

"Could I help you with something?" he offered, confused.

"Um..." She glanced at him, then back out the door. "Yes. As a matter of fact....ah." Abruptly, she skittered backwards, then whirled to face him with a beaming smile.

"Dr. MacKensie," she proclaimed breathlessly. "I can't tell you what an honor it is to finally meet you."

Nonplussed, he took the hand she offered to him. "Thank you very mumph....!"

Instead of shaking his hand, she yanked on it, pulling him off-balance. Throwing her arms around his neck, she planted a big, wet kiss on his lips and hung on for dear life.

Just as he'd managed to get a grip on her shoulders to push her away, a new voice rang out. "Whoa! Just in time for the side show!"

With a gasp, Jonathan disentangled from the woman, falling back against the desk. "Benedek!" he croaked. "Don't you ever knock?"

Unembarrassed, the woman waggled her fingers at Benedek, giving him a bright smile. "Hi, Benny."

Brows still arched high, Benedek's gaze went between them appraisingly. "I see you've met my wife," he told Jonathan with a short laugh.

"Your...wife?" MacKensie stared at the woman in complete disbelief.

"Benita," she announced, hand extended. "Benita Schwartz."

Automatically reaching out for the proffered handshake, he balked, eyes narrowing in suspicion. She inclined her head to the side, comically grimacing an assurance that she would behave herself this time. Not entirely convinced, he tentatively gave her his hand, relaxing when she gave it a good, solid shake and promptly released it. "It really is a pleasure to meet you. Benny's told me so much about you—but I honestly don't think he did you justice."

Benny sidled up to her, striking her back lightly with the manila folders he held in one hand to get her rapt attention away from Jonathan's reddening face. "Possibly because our priorities are in a slightly different order," he growled. "What are you doing here?"

Reluctantly pulling her smile into a mock scowl, she replied, "My job. Allan is screaming for the galleys."

"I told him I'd Fed Ex them tonight," he protested.

Her lips twisted in a badly stifled smile. "Allan says to tell you that if he had a dollar for every time he's heard that from you, he and I would be sunning on the French Riviera right now."

"Yeah?" Benny bristled. "Well, you tell Allan...." He trailed off as Benita hooked her fingers under his shirt collar, looking up at him with a ingenuous smile as she tugged him closer. Staring down into her widened eyes, Benny sighed, defeated. "Tell Allan to send Bruno next time. I can *deal* with him. The galleys are back at the hotel."

"Great! Let's go."

He successfully held his ground despite her effort to tug him out of the office by the hand. "I can't leave now! Pedro's in the middle of a very tricky phase of an experiment and Tanya needs me to go over her curves."

"And he calls this scientific research," Benita sighed.

"Look, here's the room key," he told her, digging a plastic card out of his pocket. "The galleys are in the top drawer of the desk...."

"Have you finished looking them over?"

"Let yourself in, order room service if you like, have a blast...."

"Benny, did you look them over?"

"Jonny, I'll be back in a few minutes, I swear. I just gotta check in on Ta— Pedro."

"Benny, can't we at least get together over lunch to discuss this? *Benny!*"

Benita's exasperated scream synchronized perfectly with the slamming of Jonathan's office door.

Throwing her head back, she growled in unbridled frustration. "Give me that dollar, I'll get to the Riviera myself," she grumbled, giving the plastic room key a curiously mournful look.

Jonathan cleared his throat, bringing her head up and a rueful smile to her face. "Sorry about that," she sighed. "Can we try this again?"

"Which part?" he asked warily.

"I'll leave that up to you this time," she said with a small laugh. "You're not *too* upset with me, I hope?"

He inhaled deeply, letting out his breath slowly as he shrugged his uncertain answer. "Miss Schwartz...."

"Call me Benita, please. My friends call me Benny, but, ah...."

"I understand," he assured her hastily when she completed the comment with a meaningful gesture toward the office door. "Benita, ah...it's not that I'm upset about what you did, it's just, well—I do prefer to know the woman's name first."

Her worried look disappeared as she shared his amused laugh. "I'm not like that, really," she told him. "I mean, I don't make a habit of attacking good-looking men on the spot—at least, not without introducing myself first."

He inclined his head, picking up on the hint of a forlorn sigh in her voice that made her breezy smile look slightly forced. "Should I be flattered that you made an exception?" he asked.

She made a clicking noise with her tongue, shrugging uncertainly. "It was just a silly joke, really," she admitted with another faintly unhappy sigh. "Not that you aren't worth making an exception for, mind you, but...oh, well, what does it matter?"

He watched, confused, as she turned to look back at the closed door again, a wistful look in her eyes. Before he could decide whether to give in to his curiosity and ask the reason for her distress, or mind his own damned business, she turned back with a resolute smile back on her face. "I've never seen Benny so wrapped up in a project before. At least, not for longer than a few days at a time. He's been ducking Allan for over five weeks, and it's not like him to let his book deadlines slide."

"Are you saying he's been using the research program as an excuse?" Jonathan asked, baffled.

"Well, not in those words. It's more like he's letting his new book slip his mind because he's got more important things to think about, and Allan's not taking that at all well."

Jonathan's brow furrowed as he considered Benny's behavior over the past five weeks, which precisely matched the length of time that the paranormal research labs had been in full swing. He'd assumed that Benny's insistence on becoming an integral part of labs' ongoing experimentation process had been because he'd provided dozens of close personal friends for testing purposes, as well as the fact that he'd be gathering reams of research material for future books without raising a sweat.

"How long have you known Benedek?" he asked conversationally, disguising the intense curiosity that had prodded the question out of him.

"About three years," she answered readily. "I'd just started my internship at his publishing company, and we met at the Christmas party. Some mutual acquaintances thought it was really funny, you know—Benny and Benny? In fact, Benny thought it was so funny that..." She paused, a strange smile coming over her face. "Well, after a half-dozen trips to the punch bowl, everything was pretty funny."

He nodded, intrigued. "So you still work for his publisher?"

"Assistant editor," she told him with a mock swagger. "And part-time Edgar Benedek baby-sitter, with compensatory hazard pay. Although I have to tell you, this is the first time I've ever had to come after him with a stick. Oh, I forgot to apologize for this morning. Benny told me you were an early riser, and he hadn't answered any of the messages I'd left at the hotel, and I knew he was practically living here at the university and I thought...well, I'm sorry."

"It's quite all right," he told her, surprising himself with how much he meant it.

"You know, I'm really curious now," she told him, almost confidentially. "What is it that Benny's doing? This work he's involved with, paranormal research—I mean *real* scientific research—it sounds fascinating. I'd like to hear more about it."

He took a moment to consider the puzzle: a woman, supposedly estranged from her husband, who went just a little bit misty each time she mentioned his name, which seemed to happen rather frequently. His curiosity was working overtime. "I'd be more than happy to explain it to you—over lunch?" he suggested carefully.

"I'd better get over to the hotel," she told him, almost regretfully. "Allan needs those galleys first thing tomorrow morning."

Picking up on the reluctant note in her voice, he ventured a gamble. "There are still the afternoon commuter shuttles, and if he really doesn't need hand-delivery—overnight mail?"

She regarded him speculatively, gripped by indecision. "That's why you have a Ph. D, isn't it?" she decided finally, laughing. "Lunch sounds wonderful. I'll meet you back here—in two hours?"

They parted with a handshake, both dissolving into laughter at the chiding look Benita gave Jonathan's split second hesitation. The smile was still lingering on MacKensie's face ten minutes later when Benedek bounded back into the office and began throwing folders, one by one, onto the desk.

"I'm telling you, Tanya's on a roll. Better than 50% on three out of four and get this—86% on the last run. I'm still working on Charlie, but what can I say? He's shy, y'know? Amy's got her weekly predictions all sealed up and ready to give to Dr. M—which reminds me, I've got to call my bookie, she had some real strong flashes about the World Series. And I sent Pedro home; his karma is shot and he's useless...."

"Tell me something I don't know," Jonathan sighed, leaning forward to gather up the folders. "What about Kevin and Hamid? Where are their dailies?"

"Lorraine's writing them up. She's taking care of Yon-Jin and Chris, too."

Jonathan flipped through the folders without interest. "Lorraine is supposed to be observing, not monitoring," he chided. "And *you're* not supposed to be showing favoritism, either."

"I'm not, I'm not, it's just that, well—some of the subjects needs a little extra attention...."

"Never mind." Stacking the folders, he held up his hands in surrender. "As long as the dailies are handed in on time and done correctly, Dr. Moorhouse will be happy."

"Listen, I need you to come by and talk to Charlie again. I think we can get results from him that will blow the socks off the skeptics, but we've really got to handle him with kid gloves."

Jonathan nodded, consulting his watch. "How about later this afternoon, around three?"

"Three? What about now?"

"I have a meeting with Dr. Moorhouse."

"After that?"

"I have a lunch date."

Normally, he would have left it at that; his personal affairs were certainly none of Benedek's business. But the memory of the uneasy look in the woman's eyes when she'd accepted his invitation caused him to hesitate. Curious to see the other man's reaction, he added nonchalantly, "With Benita."

Benny's surprised eyes followed him as he rose and began gathering papers to place in his briefcase. "Wait a minute, wait a minute," he said when his breath came back to him. "You're going to lunch with my wife?"

"I'd appreciate it very much if you would make up your mind," Jonathan told him, unruffled. "I distinctly remember you offering to fix me up with her—yes, you did, you assured me she was a great cook—and now you're getting upset because I asked her to have lunch?"

Benny huffed, looking distressed. "You could have talked to me first," he muttered.

"Why? Did you want to make it a foursome with Tanya?" he asked pointedly.

"Okay, okay." It was Benny's turn to strike an attitude of surrender. "Have a nice lunch."

Jonathan closed the briefcase, surreptitiously studying Benedek's unhappy expression. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" he ventured.

"When have I ever minded?" He paused, considering. "Then again, when have you ever asked?"

"Why on earth did you ever let her go?"

It was obvious that he'd both anticipated and dreaded the question. With a quick grimace, he shrugged. "Mostly because I never really had her."

"I...don't think I understand."

"It was just...a real stupid thing, y'know?" He tried unsuccessfully to disguise his unease with a nonchalant smile. "We were at this party, and, um...well, things got a little crazy. I remember people telling me that I had to meet this new girl whose name was Benny, too, and I think I remember actually meeting her, but there were a few trips to the punchbowl in between and the next thing I *do* remember is waking up in a hotel in New Jersey with Benita in bed, and the marriage license lying next to me on the floor."

"New Jersey?" Jonathan frowned in confusion. "Wait a minute. I happen to know that it takes three days to get married in New Jersey."

"Yeah," Benny sighed, smiling wistfully at the memory. "That was a helluva party."

Jonathan took a moment to shake his head slightly and regain his composure. "I would think that under those circumstances, it wouldn't have been difficult to obtain a divorce."

"Well..." He exaggerated indecision, languorously scratching his nose. "I guess we just got busy. Besides, it's kinda hard to take a divorce seriously when you can't even remember the wedding."

Jonathan stared at him a long moment with a bemused smile. "You amaze me sometimes, you really do."

"What can I say? I've found my purpose in life," Benny proclaimed with an easy grin.

"Your purpose, my curse," Jonathan muttered, picking up his briefcase. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Oh, and about lunch?" Benny called after him, causing him to pause in the open doorway. "No seafood. She keeps forgetting she's allergic. And nothing with a lot of eggs or cheese, she's supposed to be watching her cholesterol. Not too fancy, now—she's a New York City working girl; her stomach is tuned to Nathan's Famous, not Sardi's. And about the wine—"

Jonathan slammed the door shut, expelling air in a slow, bewildered rush. There was not one word in that conversation that made the slightest amount of sense to him. Everything out of Benedek's mouth seemed to mean something entirely different, as though his body language were completely out of sync with his words. Jonathan sighed again, taking a moment to rub his eyes before heading toward Dr. Moorhouse's office and trying not to entertain the growing suspicion that this minor attempt to twig Benedek's nose might just turn out far differently than he could ever imagine.

"Oh, this is lovely," Benita enthused as Jonathan held out her chair for her. "I love these garden patio—style restaurants. It's such a refreshing change from burgers and beer at Charley's On The Corner. That's where all the editors go for lunch, which means that's where I end up, too. I couldn't drag those old fogies into a place like this without full police backup and then some." She paused to accept a menu from the waiter. Jonathan watched her over the top of his own menu as her eyes lit up, then just as immediately dimmed in disappointment. "Chesapeake oysters," she pouted. "Life just isn't fair."

"Benny mentioned that you were sensitive to seafood," Jonathan remarked, watching for a reaction.

Her eyes widened. "He did?"

"I was supposed to look out for you, in the event you forgot."

"He told you that?" she asked incredulously.

Jonathan paused, baffled. "I'm sorry, was he telling tales of out school? I didn't mean to—"

"No! Oh, no, no. I'm just...surprised, that's all." Under her breath, she murmured, "Really surprised...."

"Pardon?"

She recovered, drawing a deep breath before continuing, "It's just that I didn't think he knew that. Remembered it, actually. It's been a while since the last time I, uh, forgot, although it was the entire company's favorite water-cooler story for weeks. I'm just amazed that..." She shut her mouth abruptly, a wary glance at Jonathan's intrigued expression telling him that she'd caught herself saying just a little too much. "What else did he tell you?"

"Cholesterol?"

She blinked, even more surprised. "How on earth could he know that?" she wondered aloud.

"And something about wine—I didn't give him a chance to finish."

"Wine?" she echoed, cringing under the impact of the chord he'd apparently just struck.

"I think this conversation hasn't gotten off to a very good start," Jonathan hedged with a nervous laugh. "They serve a very nice filet mignon here."

"I'm not that much of a red-meat eater, I'm afraid—all those burgers at Charley's, no doubt." Her deliberate attempt to appear outwardly calm dissolved as she leaned across the table to fix him with an intent look. "What else did he tell you about me?"

Flustered, Jonathan gestured weakly. "Nothing else. Honestly."

"Nothing," she repeated, not quite accepting his answer. "Hm. That's, um...hm."

He stared at her, baffled, as she buried her nose in the menu. "I'm sorry, I embarrassed you...."

"No, no, really! You haven't." She smiled warmly, gripping his forearm for added reassurance. "In fact, you've, um...made my day."

Her last words abruptly faded, as though she became belatedly aware that the thought shouldn't have been spoken aloud. Jonathan leaned forward. "Pardon?"

"Nothing, nothing." She tried to concentrate on the menu again, but was obviously having a hard time regaining her composure. Suddenly, she folded the menu onto the table and fixed Jonathan with a surprisingly earnest look. "He's never mentioned me before?"

"No," he replied hesitantly, completely uncertain of what the safest answer might be and until he figured it out, sticking to the truth seemed the safest bet.

"And he's been working with you for how long?"

"I wouldn't call it working," he hedged. "At least, not until recently. Well, even then...actually, um..."

She rescued him with a wise smile. "How long has he been driving you crazy?"

"Nearly two years," Jonathan replied, relieved.

"Two years. And my name never came up once?"

"You have to understand, we rarely if ever discuss our...our personal lives," he stammered, mindful of the growing distress on her face. "On the very few occasions that I've actually tried, he turned the attempt into a punchline. I have no idea whether anything he's told me about himself is true or merely a well-crafted joke."

"Yeah, that sounds familiar," she muttered, relaxing a little. "Well, I guess I should be glad I never became one of his punchlines."

Her laugh was half-hearted, increasing Jonathan's suspicion as he watched her once again retrieve her menu to shield her face. He sat back in his chair to consider the puzzle, but then caught sight of a brief flurry of activity near the cafe's entrance. A sly smile mirrored the revelation breaking down over his confusion.

He leaned over to Benita. "Give me your hand."

She blinked at him over the top of the menu, then blinked again when he repeated his request with a cajoling waggle of his fingers. Hesitantly, she complied, eyes widening when he leaned still closer, as though he in-

tended to impart a confidence near her ear. "Now laugh," he told her. "As if I've just said something charmingly humorous. Go on."

She managed a few chortles, still dazed with confusion. Just as she was about to demand an explanation of the odd look Jonathan was giving her, Edgar Benedek arrived at their table in what seemed to be a bounding leap. "Whoa, check out this action!" he crowed as Jonathan and Benita flinched apart. "Dessert already?"

"Benedek," Jonathan sighed, both greeting and warning.

"Gotta hand it to you, Don Jon, you sure don't let grass grow under your feet."

"Why don't you join us?" The invitation came through gritted teeth.

"Three's company, pal. Just thought I'd make sure she was still on her feet, that's all."

Jonathan winced, shaking his head in exasperation. "Then I'll reduce the company by one. I have a phone call to make. I'm sure you won't mind keeping the damsel in distress company for a few minutes?"

Benny hesitated, a strange flash of anxiety crossing his face. Giving the man no time to think about it, Jonathan rose, and, crossing to Benita's right, leaned down to whisper something near her ear. She gasped softly, eyes opening wide as she stared up into his smile. Then, with a suppressed giggle, she grabbed his hand and squeezed, a gesture he acknowledged with a wink before moving away.

"What was that all about?" Benny said, following Jonathan's progress out of the dining room with narrowed eyes. "Hot plans for dinner, maybe?"

Benita smiled coyly, pretending greater interest in the contents of her water glass.

"You two sure got friendly fast."

"You told me that he was stuffy," she scolded mildly. "That is the unstuffiest man I have ever met."

"Really," Benny murmured non-committally. "Exactly how much research have you done on the subject?"

"Not nearly enough," she told him, eyes sparkling mischievously.

"Hoping for a hands-on practical soon, eh?"

She leaned across the table, regarding him through lowered eyelids. "Now what possible concern could that be of yours?"

"Well..." He gestured to accompany words that didn't come out of his open mouth. "Because...I mean...you're my wife, that gives me the right to..."

"Nothing," she told him emphatically.

"To be concerned about you," he retorted, stung. "You don't know that guy like I do."

"I should certainly hope not," she sniffed.

"I've seen the trail of broken hearts he's left behind, and believe me, it's noisy back there. Why, just last week...."

"Time out, time out," she interjected. "This conversation contains material I usually reserve for the powder room, okay?"

"I'm just trying to..."

"Just trying to what? Run my life?"

"No!" he protested. "OK, look, forget it. Forget I said anything. Just don't come running to me when he throws you over for the next flavor of the week."

"Oh, is that what you think of me? I couldn't possibly attract a man on my own, there has to be some evil ulterior motive at work?"

"I didn't say that," he pleaded as she threw down her napkin in disgust. "All I said was...oh, forget it, forget it."

"I'll give it my best shot," she muttered darkly.

"Excuse me." A young waiter appeared at her side. "Dr. MacKensie asked me to tell you that he has had to leave unexpectedly, and hopes that you will not be too inconvenienced."

"Oh, no, not at all," she assured the young man, suppressing a smile. "Thank you."

"Not at all?" Benny exploded in a whisper as the waiter departed. "The guy dumps you in the middle of your first date, and you're 'not at all' inconvenienced? Of all the....Well, I'm not gonna let him get away with this. You deserve to be treated better than that."

"I do?" she said hopefully.

"You're damned right you do. Let's go."

She protested as he attempted to drag her from her chair, finally giving in to his insistent tugs and doing her best to keep up with his angry stride on her three-inch heels. To her relief, Benny stopped on the sidewalk outside the cafe, scanning the area and giving her a chance to catch her breath. "Did you guys walk or drive?"

"Walk, of course," she said, trying to catch her breath. "The Sciences building is only three blocks—"

"I know where it is," he said, setting his jaw and tightening his grip on her hand. "Come on, I'm gonna give this guy a little lesson in etiquette."

She finally got him slowed down by the time they reached the edge of the campus green. "Stop, stop," she begged. "Benny? We've got to talk about this. Benny! I said, *stop*."

The emphatically shouted command stopped Benny in his tracks. He turned to her just as she stumbled against him, gasping for breath. "There's no reason for this," she told him, accepting his help to steady herself on her feet. "I don't need you to fight any battles for me, all right? Especially when I don't think there's a battle to fight in the first place. What is it with you, anyway? I thought you said that he was your friend."

"Some friend," Benny seethed.

"Why are you talking like that?" she said, exasperated. "This *is* the guy who saved your life from those body-snatchers, isn't it? And that teenage cult gang in St. Louis?"

"That doesn't give him a right to—" He broke off suddenly, out of breath.

"To what, Benny? To *what*?"

"To treat a friend of mine like that," he ended stubbornly.

She stared at him in disbelief. Then, suddenly, a strange look entered her eyes, causing Benny to regard her warily. "That does it," she said, teeth gritted in fury. "I've had it with you! Do you hear me? Had it, up to here!" With a low growl, she suddenly reached out, grabbed his tie and yanked him toward her. To his wide-eyed, startled expression, she snarled. "I do *not* want to be your friend anymore."

"Okay, okay," he gulped, making a frantic, placating gesture. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you cared so much, I'm sorry."

She released him roughly, and for a moment appeared to consider introducing her right fist to his chin. "If you only knew," she muttered, shaking her head.

"Wow." Subdued, Benny took a moment to straighten his tie and his dignity. "You fell hard, didn't you?"

She brought her downcast eyes up to meet his directly. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess I did."

"Well...I guess I can let him off the hook for today, but I swear, if he ever treats you like an afterthought again, I'll...I'll...."

He blinked to find that she had closed the distance between them, practically leaning against his chest as she continued to stare at him eye to eye. "You'll what?" she whispered huskily.

"Make you forget all about him," Benny sighed, meeting her lips for a long, heartfelt kiss.

"Whoa!" He broke away abruptly, hands held up to keep her at bay. "Oh, no. No, I can't do this again, I'm sorry, no, no, no, no...."

"Can't do what again?" she demanded, flustered and frustrated.

"I took advantage of you, I almost ruined your life," he said, backing away when she tried to catch his arm. "'Nita, after what I did to you, how—?"

"After what you did to me?" Eyes wide with astonishment and pure fury, she stalked him into a tight circle. "After what you *did* to me? You actually think that *you* ruined *my* life? You arrogant, conceited *pig!*"

She connected on the last word, her closed fist landing on his shoulder to send him sprawling to the grass. He held up crossed arms to shield his face from her angry advance.

"Is that it?" she cried, trembling with emotion. "Is that what you think happened? Is that why you've been treating me like this for the past three years?"

"Treating you like what?" he begged, hopelessly confused.

"Like...like some naive little country bumpkin who couldn't handle her first taste of spiked fruit punch and fell hopelessly under your dazzling spell? You incredible little...."

"'Nita!" He cringed as her fist drew back.

"Well, here's a news flash for you, Mr. Over-Inflated Ego. I'm a New York City girl, born and bred, not some little delicate wallflower fresh from the convent. And for your information, I wasn't even drunk that night."

His arms lowered slowly, revealing Benny's slack-jawed expression. "You...you...."

"You heard me." Her anger drained abruptly upon seeing Benny's hopeless confusion. "I wasn't drunk. I...I knew exactly what I was doing the whole time."

When Benny merely blinked in response, she lowered herself to the ground, wearily leaning over to rest her shoulder against his. "You didn't callously seduce me," she told him in a voice that held a little more sympathy for his dazed condition. "You didn't ruin my life, you didn't take advantage of me. You didn't do anything I didn't want you to do. Benny? Are you listening to me?"

He swallowed, easing his ragged breathing slightly. "You—you weren't drunk?" he said faintly.

"I've always known my limit," she assured him. "And that night, I wasn't even close."

He said something under his breath that she couldn't quite hear. But from what she could hear, she realized that it was important. She took his chin, pulling him to face her. "What did you say?"

Still dazed, his mouth worked for a moment before he finally said in a bare whisper, "I said...neither was I."

Her eyes narrowed as she struggled to comprehend. "You...you're saying...what are you saying?"

"I'm saying," he said carefully, "I wasn't drunk. Two beers, that's all. I learned a long time ago that some of my best stories come from intoxicated people who think I'm just as sloshed as they are and I was working two of Allan's newest published Hollywood celebrities that night. Before I met you, that is. Do you think I would have gotten behind the wheel of a car to drive to New Jersey with you beside me if I'd been tanked? When and if I ever do decide to get drunk, I get happy, not suicidal."

"Then why?" She went to her hands and knees, leaning close with eyes shining with hope. "Why did you get behind the wheel of that car?"

"It just seemed like a good idea at the time," he said, making the mistake of finally looking into her eyes. "Sort of like...now, actually."

"Do you mean to tell me that we've wasted three years of our lives pretending that we were four sheets to the wind that night just so we wouldn't embarrass each other?" she asked ominously.

He summoned a weak smile. "I kinda figured you hated my guts...and...."

Benita moved closer, giving Benedek no other choice but to flop back on the grass. He looked up at her in surprise and growing interest as she bent over him, arms on either side of him. "Let me demonstrate the exact state of my feelings about your guts," she told him lowly, a second before her lips sought and found his.

Off-guard, Benny flailed briefly, but then his arm went around her shoulders. A moment later, he broke free with a gasp. "Wait, wait!"

"What?" she demanded, almost a petulant wail.

"What about—I mean—you and...and Jonathan...."

She grimaced, rolling her eyes heavenward. "Do you want to know what he said to me just before he left the cafe?"

He didn't seem certain that he did, but nodded anyway.

"He said, 'keep him sober this time.'"

Benny's mouth fell open as realization slowly sank in. "You mean..."

"He played you like a violin," she nodded, chuckling. "And let me tell you, he's a better friend to you than you seem willing to give him credit for, believe me."

"Yeah," he said, a smile widening on his face as though he'd just received a revelation from the depths of her eyes. "I guess you might just be right about that. What say we go find him so that I can tell him just that—*after* we pick up where we left off. Deal, Mrs. Benedek?"

"Deal, Mr. Benedek," she sighed as they dissolved into a long, this time uninterrupted kiss.