

The House That Jack Built

by M.D. Bloemker

(previously published in *Shadow Chasers Express* #1)

"I don't know why you're fighting me on this."

Edgar Benedek, perched comfortably on the corner of Jonathan MacKensie's desk, paid more attention to the roll of mints he was unwrapping than he did to the person he addressed. He continued calmly, ignoring the snort of derision his comment had provoked. "Deep down in your heart of hearts, you know you want me to do this thing for you."

"How many times do I have to tell you?" MacKensie rose as he spoke, trying to keep the agitation out of his voice by covering with a nervous laugh. "I do *not* want a party for my birthday, and I certainly don't want you to put one together for me. End of discussion, all right?"

"Come on, Jack," Benny cajoled patiently. "You're going to be hitting the old milestone here. Thirty-five big ones—old enough to know better and young enough not to care!"

"Look, who told you when my birthday was, anyway?"

Benny took the time to peel off a mint, popping it into his mouth before answering. "I have my ways," he said around the candy clenched between his teeth, accompanied by a meaningful waggle of his eyebrows.

"You broke into the Institute's personnel records?"

"No—something even more dangerous," Benny mimicked Jonathan's dread tones. "I asked Dr. Moorhouse. So what's the big deal here? Are parties against your religion? Give me one good reason why you don't want me to do this, just one."

"Benedek...." He sighed, exasperated. "When have you ever needed an excuse to throw a party? Will you tell me that?"

"Excuse? Last time I play Mr. Nice Guy for you, pal." He hopped off the desk in a huff. "I don't know what your problem is, Jon-boy, but I'm telling you right now, you're passing up the chance of the lifetime. A genuine natal extravaganza, personally arranged and conducted by yours truly, Edgar Benedek, party impresario extraordinaire. I haven't even begun to tell you some of the plans I've made...."

"Benedek, I don't *want* to know any of the plans you made."

"Hey, don't worry, they're all G-rated. Well, PG-13 at the outside. I figured we'd start out with the fan dancers—"

"*Fan* dancers?" Jonathan exploded with an incredulous laugh. "This may come as a shock to you, but there are some people in this world, myself for one, who have a reputation to protect. I don't even want to think what the Board of Regents would say."

"So we'll invite them, they'll have a great time! Wait until I tell you about the cake...." He trailed off when it became apparent from the abrupt change of Jonathan's expression that someone had entered the room. He twisted his head back; his beaming smile failed to melt the icy glare of disapproval Dr. Moorhouse had fixed on him. MacKensie, red with embarrassment, gave his department head a stiff nod of greeting. "Dr. Moorhouse. Come in, please."

"This discussion sounded quite fascinating," she informed them with a taut, unamused smile. "Would either of you care to elaborate?"

Benny eclipsed Jonathan's attempt to explain, eyeing Dr Moorhouse from head to toe. "Have you had any experience jumping out of birthday cakes?" he inquired, all seriousness.

Jonathan sprang forward, clamping a hand on Benny's arm. "Benedek was just leaving, weren't you, Benedek?" he said pointedly.

"No, no," Moorhouse waved him off. "As a matter of fact, his timing couldn't be better. A pity the same couldn't be said of his manners." Another glare was directed at Benedek, and then she was all business, proffering a manila envelope. "Your new assignment, MacKensie."

"My new assignment," he murmured, mustering a smile in spite of the nose-dive his heart did within his chest. "How nice."

Benny trailed after Dr. Moorhouse, jumping back onto the corner of the desk while she spread out the contents of the folder. He snagged a large black & white photo and inspected it. "I hope this is some place kissed by a tropical wind," he mused as he turned the picture right side up for a closer look. "These D.C. winters are strictly for masochists and anthropology profs, know what I mean?"

"I wouldn't pack my tanning lotion just yet, Mr. Benedek," she said in a voice dripping icicles.

He flipped the picture over and frowned down at the scrawl on the back. "Rockville? Where's that?"

"About twelve or fifteen miles north on I-270," MacKensie said, studying yet another photo. "Historical landmark?"

"Not as yet." She adjusted her glasses as she read from a top sheet of notes. "The foundation which purchased the Crewshaw House has been trying to have the building and grounds certified for the past five years. There is evidence that a tavern called the...." she briefly consulted further into the depths of her sheaf of papers, "...the Wild Horse Inn existed on the site from 1752 until it was destroyed by fire in 1804. Apparently the establishment was a local rallying point during the Revolutionary War."

"I don't understand," MacKensie said, flipping through a few more pictures. "What has this to do with us?"

"I'm getting to that, MacKensie. The original house was built on the site in 1895 by one Isaac Horner, industrialist and railroad magnate. Upon his death in 1918, the property came into the hands of J. Elbert Crewshaw who had married Horner's daughter Olivia. The Horner House was destroyed by fire in 1921, and the new structure built in 1923. The Crewshaw House Foundation purchased the property from Olivia Crewshaw's estate six years ago."

"Wow." Benny, unimpressed, let the photo fall back onto the desk. "Wake me when the credits roll, wilya?"

"J. Elbert Crewshaw," MacKensie mused for a moment. "That name sounds familiar."

"It should, but only if you're into old scandals," Benny informed him, his interest abruptly revived. "J. Elbert Crewshaw was a congressman from someplace in New York—one of the finest Tammany Hall ever spit out, if you get my drift. Apparently this guy had it made in the shade—he had his own estates in New York, so he used his father-in-law's inheritance to set up his mistress. What was her name? Something Spencer? Oh, right—Rory Spencer. Anyway, the morning after a big shindig—at this place, as a matter of fact...." he picked up the photo again, "...they found the mistress lying in a couple of pieces on the back patio. Figured she either jumped—or somebody pushed her."

"They never found out?" Jonathan asked, intrigued despite himself.

"The only person who could have told them one way or the other was Crewshaw—and he was gone. Poof! Vanished right off the face of the earth. No one ever saw him again after that night. Pretty suggestive, wouldn't you say?"

"Suggestive of what?"

"Are you naturally dense or did you have to practice after school? He aced her, Jack. Got tired of the broad and helped her take a nose dive into the pool—only he hadn't gotten around to building the pool yet."

Jonathan winced. "Benedek," he pleaded, disgusted by the man's unflagging sense of the crude.

"This is all very interesting background information," Moorhouse interjected impatiently, "and I'm sure you may yet find it useful, but may we get on with the subject at hand? I've been in contact with the director of the Crewshaw House Foundation, and she'll be arranging for you to spend a night or two, however long it may take, in the house itself to complete your investigation."

"You haven't told us what we're investigating yet," Jonathan reminded her.

"The Rockville Historical Preservation Society began some preliminary excavations on the site a year ago to determine whether the Wild Horse Inn did indeed once exist there. They feel that conclusive evidence of that fact would cinch their efforts to have the house and grounds declared a national landmark."

"Why all the fuss over an old house?" Benny laughed, shrugging his disinterest.

"Land values have skyrocketed in the area over the past ten-twenty years, as have tax assessments," Moorhouse explained patiently. "It's becoming more difficult for people in the area to maintain the stately mansions the city has long been famous for, and many are being persuaded to sell these old homes to developers for the land beneath them. The Historical Society is attempting to stem the tide and save the houses by having as many as possible declared historical landmarks...."

"I get it—tax breaks, federal funding, yeah," Benny nodded. "Hey, if I knew it was that easy, I'd have gotten them to look at my apartment in New York—I think the Romans must have built it on a lunch break during the Gallic campaigns."

"It's not that easy," Moorhouse snapped. "That's why the Society is anxious to prove that the Crewshaw House has added historical significance. Now, will you let me finish, please?"

When he held up his hands in surrender, she drew a deep breath and began again. "There were several volunteer workmen involved in the first excavations, which took place near the foundations of the original Horner House. We have authenticated eyewitness reports of mysterious lights being seen in the windows of the new house, and all have sworn to hearing a woman's scream, three nights in row, at precisely 2:35 am."

"Whoa!" Benny said, wide-eyed. "I'll just bet you that's when you-know-who took her fatal swan dive off the balcony!"

"Why on earth were workmen there at two in the morning?" Jonathan wanted to know, narrow-eyed with suspicion.

"Apparently, because of extensive restoration work being done on the grounds, the hours between 10pm and 5am were the only times the Foundation would allow them to dig—something to do with insurance or some such thing."

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "This all sounds rather bizarre to me."

"Precisely why I'm sending you to investigate, MacKensie," she said, handing him the folder with a smile. "And if it makes you feel any better," she spared a brief glance in Benny's direction, "you have my permission to take your trained monkey with you. If you'll excuse me?"

"Hey!" Benny called after her as she strode out of the office. "Love ya too, Dr. M! The woman adores me, what can I say? I tellya, though—this one sounds like the amateur hour to me. I dunno...."

"No, wait, you've got to help me with this one," Jonathan pleaded when Benedek started for the door. "You know about the scandal, that's a help right there. And you know how to investigate ghostly lights and...and things like that, right?"

"Don't tell me you're becoming a believer?" Benedek turned back with his crooked grin. "Catch me, I feel faint!"

"I didn't say that," he returned defensively. "I need...advice, that's all. Come on, what do you say?"

"Well, since you ask so nicely—hell, who am I to refuse a friend in distress? And afterwards, we can discuss this party idea, right?" He overrode Jonathan's burgeoning protest. "Right?"

Jonathan deflated with a nod. "Right."

Benny gave him a clap on the shoulder. "Atta boy, Jocko, I knew you'd come around. Listen, let me call a couple of places and rustle up some top-notch electronic equipment."

"To monitor the ghostly phenomena?"

"Hey, now you're getting the hang of it." With a comradely arm hooked around Jonathan's shoulder, Benny escorted him out of the office, saying, "Infrared film—I think I know a guy in Foggy Bottom who's having a sale. Got some bucks on you? I'm a little strapped this month...."

"I don't understand this," MacKensie said as they mounted the steps leading up to a broad concrete plaza. "This used to be a shopping mall, I know it did." He scowled down at a small notebook produced from his overcoat pocket. "Are you sure this address is right?"

"For the third time, Jack, this is the place. Hey, watch out, there's ice there. What's the matter, your raskish past coming back to haunt you? Don't tell me, I see it all now—you and 'the gang' hanging out at the pinball arcade between showings of 'I Was A Teenage Brain Surgeon From Mars'."

"If you must know, we attended classical recitals at the Civic Center," Jonathan retorted, affronted. "There was an excellent Oriental restaurant here, as I recall; The Empress, I think."

Benny rolled his eyes heavenward as he swung up the last step to the outdoor concourse level. "Tell me something—at any time during your misspent youth, did anyone ever clue you in on the fact that it was okay to have fun? Hey, here we go—Rockville Historical Preservation Society. What do you say to a pupu platter for two?"

Jonathan gave him a brief sneer of disdain before referring to his notebook again. "Our contact is a Ms. May Flowers."

"You're kidding with that name, right?" Benny paused, waiting for the rim shot that never came. "Oh, sorry. I forgot. You don't have a sense of humor, do you?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't embarrass me with your crude remarks, Benedek," MacKensie warned as he pulled the heavy glass door open.

He threw up his hands, feigning innocence as he followed Jonathan in.

The office was a cramped affair; they reached the reception desk in three steps, sidestepping two chairs and several boxes in the process. The woman seated behind the desk looked up with a smile at their approach. "May I help you?"

"I'm Dr. Jonathan MacKensie from the Georgetown Institute and this is my c—" He choked on the word 'colleague', cleared his throat, and began again. "This is Edgar Benedek."

"Ah, yes, I've been expecting you." She rose, extending her hand. "May Flowers."

Jonathan exchanged handshakes with a polite smile; Benedek did the same, but with an oddly strained expression on his face. Her gaze lingered on Benedek a moment. "Well?" she said, mildly puzzled. "Aren't you going to say it?"

"Say...what?" MacKensie ventured carefully.

Benedek pointed surreptitiously at Jonathan. "He won't let me."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about annoying me, I'm used to it by now. What can I say? My parents had a sense of humor. In fact, my father used to call us kids his little garden." She chuckled lowly. "You think my name is awkward now? I used to be engaged to a man named George Day."

Benny's eyes went wide. "Hey, I like your style!" he grinned appreciatively. "Take me, I'm yours!"

Jonathan was ready to concede that it was entirely possible Edgar Benedek had met his soulmate. He had had to blink twice when she had risen, revealing a stylish tunic and skirt ensemble rivaling even Benny's exotic wardrobe for sheer exuberance of color and design. An array of plastic bangles hanging off one arm picked up every color in her suit as well as providing a clanky accompaniment to her broad gestures as she spoke.

"I'm sorry I can't take your coats, but as you might have noticed, we have no place to put them," she said with a deprecatory laugh, waving them to be seated. "And I'd love to offer you coffee, but the service we used was the first casualty of our budget cuts. We're non-profit, of course. Most of our operating funds come in the form of charitable contributions, which are, as a rule, chronically slim even at the best of times." She held up a hand, stopping herself. "But you don't want to hear my sad tale of economic woe. You're interested in the, ah...here it is. The Crewshaw House."

"Dr. Moorhouse indicated that you would be able to give us some more background information, as well as show us the house and grounds," Jonathan said.

"Well, there's a problem on both counts," she sighed, setting down the paper she had been referring to. "I thought we'd be able to get into the house this morning, but the director of the Foundation was delayed returning from a trustees meeting in New York. She won't be available until five or six o'clock this afternoon."

"That would be..." MacKensie consulted his notebook again. "Teresa Searles?"

"Yes, that's right. I apologize for the inconvenience."

"Actually, it's no problem at all. It will give me—us—time to do some research into the matter."

"That's the second problem," she told him with a sigh. "As you can see, we have something of a space crunch here. When we first moved in, we'd hoped to have over five thousand square feet of space in which to warehouse our archival material, but it seems that structural defects cause periodic flooding problems and, well...I'm doing it again, aren't I? Anyway, we've leased space from the public library as temporary storage for all our records and research materials. As a matter of fact..." She paused to begin a note on a piece of paper. "My sister Georgia works in administration. I'm sure she'll be more than happy to help you locate any material you want to look at."

"Man, that Georgia was a peach, wasn't she? Hey, be careful here, it's slippery. Doesn't this city believe in sanding anything?"

They were making their way gingerly down the steps of the public library after spending nearly two hours in the subterranean—and unheated—file rooms searching out old newspaper accounts and local history books. At least Jonathan had. With the sole exception of the newspaper accounts of the Crewshaw scandal in the twenties, Benny had taken no interest in Jonathan's struggle with the microfilmed files, and had instead engaged Georgia Flowers in extended conversation, hindering her effectiveness in locating specified material for him. He was still seething with irritation over that and over the fact that he didn't think he would ever be warm again.

"Losing your touch, Benedek?" he shot scathingly over his shoulder, grabbing the rail in time to keep from sprawling when his foot hit a patch of ice on the last step.

"Me? Never!" the man assured him confidently.

"You didn't get her phone number, did you?"

"Pal, I not only got her phone number, I got an address, birth date and social security number, not to mention a dinner date next Saturday night. All you got was a stiff neck from all that stuff you call research."

He bristled at the man's sarcastic tones. "I realize that the word research is not in your personal vocabulary, Benedek, so do remind me some time to explain its intrinsic value as regards a serious investigation, won't you?"

"I got no use for that microfilm, microfiche, micro-kaka," he proclaimed loftily. "I use tried and true methods, passed down to yours truly by the great journalists and writers of old. They knew there was only one way to get the real story."

"Make up your facts as you go along," MacKensie grumbled, slapping Benedek's arm to get him walking in the right direction.

"For your information, I get my facts the old-fashioned way—I talk to people. Face to face, not on some dusty old newspaper page. Where're we going, anyway?"

Jonathan pointed across to a sprawling brick complex a few hundred yards away across a busy intersection. "City Hall. I want to look at the old land records and deed transactions."

"You think we can just walk in there and ask them to trot out the old scrolls for us?" Benny asked incredulously.

"Georgia has a sister in data processing, she said she'd call ahead to expect us."

Benny frowned his puzzlement. "When did she say that?"

Jonathan gave him a sideways look accompanied by a sly smile. "When she was giving me her phone number. Come on."

Benny coughed, waving away the dust that had been kicked up when Crystal Anderson slapped another book onto the counter for them. "I shouldn't be doing this, you know," she said as she flipped through the index. "I could get fired photocopying this stuff for you without permission."

"Believe me, Mrs. Anderson, we do appreciate the effort you're making on our behalf," Jonathan said, using his most polished charm to wonderful effect. He had discovered very quickly that every time she exhibited nervousness about what she was doing for them, a warm smile and an assurance voiced in cultured tones made her agitation vanish in a instant. In fact, the worried frown melted as he spoke, a dreamy smile coming back to her face. "What was that you wanted again?" she sighed.

"The last deed transfer?" he prompted.

"Oh. Yes." She blinked, coming out of her mild trance again. "I suppose you want this photocopied, too?"

"If you would. Thank you."

"I'll be right back." She pulled the book off the counter, disappearing with it into another office.

Benny took advantage of her absence to shake his head at Jonathan, tscking sadly. "Flirting with a married woman. How low can you go?"

"Look, can I help it if she happens to have taken a fancy to me?"

"Don't flatter yourself. She's a sucker for a British accent, Jack; I've seen it before."

"The accent, eh? You refuse to give me even the slightest bit of credit...?"

Crystal poked her head around the door. "How many copies did you want?"

"One will do nicely," he assured her with a smile.

After she had gone again, Benny returned to the argument. "There, you see? How many times has she asked that same question since we've been here? The woman just wants to hear you talk!"

"Benedek, have I ever told you how tiresome your little fits of jealousy can be?"

"You can never admit when I'm right, can you?"

"Benedek." His tone was a warning.

"All right, all right. Look, can we blow this joint? I think I'm beginning to rust."

Crystal returned, holding out the new copy. "Anything else?" she said, giving Jonathan an expectant smile.

"No, no, I believe that's everything we need. Thank you so much, you've been a great help."

"Oh, anytime," she said breezily. "Anytime at all—I mean that."

"I'll just bet she does," Benny said, wagging his eyebrows suggestively. "Hey, Crys, sweetheart, I need to cash in a traveler's check—you wouldn't happen to have a sister who works in a bank, would you?"

"Do you believe this?" Benny said for the fifth time as they retraced their steps back to the Society office. "How many sisters does this gal have?"

"Benedek," Jonathan said, a plea for him to stop expounding on the subject.

"Georgia in the library, Crystal in City Hall, now Rose at the bank. Their parents must have been great believers in cross-pollination."

"Benedek." A stronger plea.

"I wonder if I can work this into the story somehow—you know: 'The Invasion of the Flowers Children—Floral Siblings Take Root In City.'"

"Benedek!" He stopped, started to say something, then exhaled abruptly. "Oh, never mind," he grumbled, making the last turn up the steps towards the Historical Society Office.

Benny persisted, hard on his heels. "Hey, did you notice how closely they all resembled each other? We could be on to something big here, buds—successful cloning experiments! The mind boggles!"

Jonathan held the door open, nodding him in with an insincere smile. "Boggle your mind in here and shut up, okay?" he suggested with mock sweetness.

There was another person in the tiny office with May, a tall woman who rose upon their entrance. Jonathan judged her to be approximately his own age, dressed in an expensively tailored business suit of muted colors, her strawberry-blonde hair drawn back into a stylish chignon. Benny reached over to shake hands first as May made the introductions, giving Teresa Searles an obvious once over. Then Jonathan extended his hand.

At her touch, a strange feeling washed over him. He found himself shuddering, as though chilled, despite the fact that the office was unusually warm. Something happened with his eyes; his vision distorted briefly, and the face of a stranger became for a moment as familiar to him as his own.

His reaction didn't pass unnoticed. Teresa frowned slightly, and Benny put his hand surreptitiously on Jonathan's lower arm, saying, "You okay, pal? Been in and out of the cold too much today, eh?"

Jonathan still clasped Teresa's hand, peering at her closely. "I'm sorry," he stammered, when he belatedly realized how he was acting. "It's just...the oddest thing. For a moment, I thought...have we met before?"

"I don't believe so," she replied calmly, slipping her hand out of his with a stiff smile.

"I could have sworn...." Again he caught himself, this time covering with a low chuckle. "Don't mind me, Benedek's probably right. It is rather warm in here."

"I've made arrangements for you to stay at the house tonight, as per the Institute's request," Teresa said crisply, breaking the moment of awkwardness. "The property is less than a mile away; if your car is nearby, you can follow mine."

Another few moments of negotiations found May slipping on her coat to join them; after securing the office door behind them, they separated, Jonathan and Benny heading for their car at the bottom of the plaza while the women disappeared in the direction of the underground garage.

As soon as the women were out of sight, Benny used the back of his hand to give Jonathan a sharp rap against the arm. "Hey, what's with you? You're not coming down with something, are you? I always knew libraries were dangerous to your health, someone's got to clue the Surgeon General in on these things someday."

"I'm fine," Jonathan muttered, keeping his head down, ostensibly to watch his footing on the ice-slicked concrete. The strange feeling of intense antipathy that overwhelmed him during his handshake with Teresa Searles lingered in the form of haunting disquiet. He could think of no reason for such a violent reaction; the woman was a complete stranger, and she'd certainly been pleasant enough. But then there was that other feeling that, try as he might, he couldn't shake: the feeling that she was not a stranger to him. The name Teresa Searles was completely unfamiliar to him, but her face...her face....

"Hey, buds. You got the keys, remember?"

Benny's voice snapped him back to the real world and to the fact that the other man waited patiently for Jonathan to unlock the car doors. As he fished through his pockets, Benny continued, leaning his elbow against the top of the car, "Man, you are a million miles away today. What's the matter—got yourself zapped by one of Cupid's little arrows?"

His lopsided grin faded with Jonathan's unexpectedly violent reaction to the facetious remark. The keys dropped to the ground as MacKensie stared at him, wild-eyed. "No!" He blinked, shaking his head as though to erase the sharpness of his cry. "I mean, no, that's...that's ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, huh?" Benny leaned sideways to follow Jonathan's progress as he bent over to recover the keys. "Why are you so jumpy all of a sudden?"

"I'm not jumpy."

"You're jumpy," Benny insisted. "Are you going to open this door or what?"

The keys slipped from his fingers again, but this time Benny snagged them, finding the right key and unlocking the door in one fluid motion. "Uh-uh. I'm taking the reins," he said, pushing Jonathan firmly into the passenger seat. "I don't know what's with you all of a sudden, pal, but I'm going to find out, that's for sure. Buckle up, we're outta here."

It didn't escape Benedek's notice that from the moment the car turned up the gravel driveway, Jonathan's gaze riveted on the massive four story mansion. He remained staring at it, hunched within the turned up collar of his overcoat, unblinking and unmoving, even as Benny stopped the car, jumped out and bounded around to the passenger side. "What are you waiting for, curb service?" he said, rapping the glass with his knuckles. "Come on, shake a leg."

Jonathan got out in no particular hurry, still staring up at the house. "I've been here before," he said in a curiously thick voice, his brow furrowing slightly. "I know this place."

"An all-night orgy after one of your wild and crazy Beethoven blowouts, right?" Benny scoffed, his laugh trailing off slightly when MacKensie didn't respond to the dig. "It's an old house, okay? Probably hundreds like it all over the place, don't sweat it."

"You're right," he decided after a moment, his hand dropping from where he'd been rubbing his temple. "Maybe we passed by here on our way to the Civic Center or...something."

"Come on, come on, let's get in where it's warm. Hope they've got something in the fridge, my stomach must think I died three days ago."

Teresa and May waited for them just within the front foyer, which Teresa explained was, like much of the rest of the house, only partially restored. That much was obvious—walls were stripped down to bare plaster, drop-sheets and paint buckets scattered willy-nilly everywhere as they passed from one room to another. Teresa

paused with her hand on one handle of a pair of double doors, turning back to tell them, "This is the main ballroom, the first room we decided to restore. The work was completed only last month."

The doors opened onto darkness; they waited for Teresa to step in to locate the switch. A few seconds later, light from a hidden source suffused the room, revealing a soaring ceiling, hung with a massive chandelier dripping crystals from one side of the room to the other. Thick velvet draperies hung from huge picture windows, punctuated by wall space hung with ancestral portraits. Delicate antique chairs lined two walls, a small curtained stage a third wall, and only a grand piano occupying floor space other than a collection of dropcloth-covered lumps pushed off into a far corner.

"Whoa, check it out!" Benny chuckled appreciatively, moving to the middle of the cavernous space with arms spread wide. "Did this guy know how to boogie down in style, or what?"

Teresa gestured apologetically at the corner containing the covered objects. "It spoils the effect, I know, but those pieces are valuable antiques, and this was the only place the workmen could store them while work progresses in other rooms."

"Are you apologizing?" Benny said, blinking surprise. "Listen, you could store my entire apartment in here and still have room for the Fifth Fleet, don't worry about disappointing me, okay? Hey, Jack, check this out. Hey. Yo, Jonathan, are you receiving me?"

MacKensie looked up blankly. He'd wandered over to the grand piano and was regarding it with a curious intensity. Benny's call seemed to snap him out of a mild trance. "What?" he said, blinking, watching Benny trot over to him with a slightly puzzled frown.

"It's called a piano," Benny said with feigned patience. "You make music with it. Wake up, MacKensie, you look like you've never seen one before in your life." He hesitated, studying the man closely. "Tell me again, and make me believe it this time—are you sure you're all right?"

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out; his gaze seemed irresistibly drawn back to the piano. This time he slid onto the bench, reverently lifting back the cover on the keys.

"Hey, I didn't know you played," Benny said with a surprised chuckle.

Jonathan, his fingers lightly brushing the polished keys, paused, his frown deepening. "I don't," he said, a puzzled whisper.

Teresa and May moved to join them, giving both questioning looks in turn. Benny checked out Teresa to determine whether Jonathan's presumption irritated her before turning back to the matter at hand. "In that case, don't you think it's a kind of an odd time to think about taking lessons?"

Jonathan did not appear to be listening; he struck several keys at random, then tried a few chords. "Has anyone tuned this thing lately?" he said, his voice taking on a flat, bombastic quality. "A fine instrument like this should not suffer neglect. See to it, will you?"

"Sure, I'll jot it down in the old appointment book," Benny agreed readily, leaning in to investigate the strange expression that had taken hold of the man's face. "You sound a little funny, pal—you wanna maybe come away from there so we can discuss this?"

This time it was more than obvious that Jonathan was in a world of his own. He began to play, tentatively at first. A smile grew on his face as his playing progressed, his head nodding in time to the lilting melody.

Benny watched, stunned, not knowing whether to be impressed or concerned. "Hey," he realized. "That sounds familiar." He looked over at May and Teresa for help. "What's he playing?"

"The *Sleeping Beauty* Waltz," May offered after a moment's thought. "From the Tchaikovsky ballet."

"Whoa. One minute he can't play, the next he's banging out Russian waltzes?" Abruptly, he sprang around to Jonathan's left side, straddling what remained of the piano bench. "Hey, Jack!" he said, a sharp whisper, leaning in to fix the man with a searching stare. "Who's in there with you?"

The chord fell apart, bringing the music to a discordant halt. Jonathan gasped, staring down at his hands as though they had just committed a horrible betrayal. Then, with an abrupt motion, he jerked them away from

the keyboard, tucking his hands securely under either arm. "I don't know how to play the piano," he insisted, confused.

"Well, somebody around here sure does," Benny persisted. "Come on, who's there? You can tell me, can't you?"

He bent forward slightly, as though trying to ward off a chill. "There's a logical explanation for this," Jonathan said flatly, jaw fixed with determination. "I am not possessed, Benedek, so don't even think it."

"Yeah? You just did a virtuoso turn on the old ivories, pal, explain that one to me."

"Benedek!" The man gave him a black glare of warning, serious enough for Benedek to hold up a hand in defense. "Okay, okay, if it makes you feel any better, I don't think you're possessed."

"Thank you," MacKensie retorted sarcastically. "I appreciate that, very much."

"What's going on here?" May interjected with agitated concern. "Does he need a doctor?"

Teresa enjoined, "Perhaps this would be best put off for another time. If Dr. MacKensie isn't feeling well...."

"No, no!" Benny waved her off. "He's okay. "t least he will be, if my instincts are right." He jumped off the piano bench, coming around to clap his hands to Jonathan's shoulders. "Come on, Jack, we're going to warm your scientific little heart with some down-and-dirty, honest-to-gosh research—Edgar Benedek style."

"What are you talking about?" Jonathan asked with weary exasperation, not moving despite Benny's prodding.

Benedek turned to address Teresa. "Do you think we could see the fourth floor now? That's where all the manifestations take place, right?"

She hesitated with a deepening frown. "Well...yes, but are you sure—?"

"I'm sure, I'm sure," he told her with his most ingenuous smile. "He's fine, trust me."

She acceded with a reluctant nod, her expression still clouded with doubt. "Will you need help bringing your equipment in from your car?"

Benny hooked one hand under Jonathan's arm, physically dragging the man to his feet as he smiled back at the woman. "Oh, no, no. If I'm right, we won't even need all those electronic gizmos. Come on, Jack—it's showtime!"

Teresa escorted them to an antique open ironwork elevator that creaked its way slowly up to the last level. Locating the light switch a few steps into the corridor, she turned back to usher them in the right direction, but Benny stopped her with a quick motion. "Wait, wait. First stage of our experiment commences." He gave Jonathan a clap on the arm like a coach sending in his best quarterback. "Okay, pal—show us the room where Rory Spencer took her gold-medal dive."

Jonathan stared at him in open-mouthed incredulity. "Are you crazy?" he hissed. "I don't know anything about this house."

"Yeah?" Benny challenged. "Prove it."

The sheer absurdity of the remark defeated his attempt to make a coherent rebuttal. All he could do was snap an irritated, "Benedek!" over his shoulder as the man prodded him out of the elevator cab into the hallway.

Benedek spread his hands. "Okay—which way?"

He sighed, about to start a new protest, when something seemed to catch his eye. Turning on his heel, he gave the walls a puzzled once over. "Has she been redecorating again?" he muttered, his voice taking on the flat, accentless tones of before. He spun again, facing down the corridor. "Hey! Why don't you warn a person before you start re-papering the walls?" He was moving as he spoke, striding down the hallway. Stopping at a closed door, he paused, arm raised as though to knock. It was then that he blinked, caught himself, and hurriedly stuffed his hand self-consciously into a pocket. "What am I doing?" he pleaded to the ceiling as the others caught up to him.

"Well? How'd he do?" Benny asked Teresa with an expectant grin. May managed to look mildly confused, but Teresa was distinctly uneasy as she glanced at both men in turn. To Jonathan, she said with a shrug, "You must have been doing your homework," before selecting a key from her ring to open the door.

"Batting a thousand, Jon-boy!" Benny crowed as they entered the room.

"I don't understand any of this," Jonathan protested weakly. "Benedek...?"

"Not now, okay? Trust me on this one, you won't regret it, I promise."

Teresa, her expression taut, gestured stiffly across the room towards the glass doors, beyond which lay a small terrace rimmed by a low, white sculptured marble railing. "This is where the workmen reported seeing the mysterious lights."

"This was Rory Spencer's room?" Benny wanted to know.

"Yes. The room was sealed pending the inquest, and it seems no one ever bothered unsealing it until we had the restoration people come in last year."

"That would be about the time the manifestations started?"

"As a matter of fact—yes."

Benny nodded, satisfied. "So, tell me—did they change the room much? The restoration people, I mean?"

"As I mentioned before, every effort has been made to keep the rooms as closely as possible to their original state."

Benny, while listening to Teresa, had also kept a close eye on Jonathan, who had been quietly looking over the elegantly furnished room. Now he was rewarded by the deepening frown on MacKensie's face.

"No," Jonathan said, softly at first, then in a stronger voice. "No, that's not right. This isn't..." He paused, looking around again. "What happened to the painting? And where's...?" Pointing, he tried to place non-existent objects. "The rosewood credenza. And the bed should be..." As words failed him, his hand went to his head, fingers pressing hard against his temples.

Benny made it to his side in time to help him ease down on the edge of the bed. "You're doing great, Jonny, just great!" he crowed.

"Don't say it," MacKensie groaned into the hands that now covered his face. "For the last time, Benedek, I am not possessed."

May joined them, bending down to see if the man was flushed. "You can't tell me he's not coming down with something," she clucked sympathetically.

"Oh, he's got something, all right," Benny told them, rubbing his hands together in delight. "He's got a full-blown, top of the line, raging case of *deja vu*!"

Both women registered varying degrees of confusion, but Jonathan's reaction was the most violent. His head snapped up preparatory to delivering a scathing comment on the deteriorating state of Benedek's sanity, but the words caught in his throat. Almost against his will, his eyes were drawn around the room again, the color draining from his face. Benny read his expression with a broadening grin. "I'm right, aren't I?" His fingers caressed the air as he went on in mock macabre tones, "*Deja vu*. That strange feeling that you've been somewhere, done something before, but you know not where—or when."

Benedek's brief spate of histrionics brought a flash of irritation to Jonathan's face, as always, but May was open-mouthed now, totally enthralled. "Does that explain why he could play the piano?"

"It could," Benny decided with a shrug. "But only if we take it the logical step forward. Unless I miss my guess, Dr. Jonathan MacKensie here is a walking testimonial to the validity of the time-honored theory of reincarnation."

Jonathan made a disgusted noise. "Now you've gone too far, Benedek," he said, a vehement protest that brought some color back to his face.

"No, no, hear me out!" Benedek pleaded, successfully stemming the rest of whatever the man was preparing to hiss at him. "Come on, I've got loads of experience in this kind of thing—I know whereof I speak, okay?"

Teresa interrupted, her voice hard with skepticism. "Reincarnation of whom, Mr. Benedek?"

"Crewshaw, of course," he said with a gesture that meant he thought that much should have been obvious. "He built this house, right? And he was the only one who really lived in it—and that was his grand piano Jonny here cottoned to, wasn't it?"

"Benedek, enough." Jonathan was calm now, though his voice still held a hint of weariness in it. "This is supposed to be a serious investigation. I won't have your bizarre penchant for outlandish theories interfere...."

"Hey," Benedek retorted, piqued; he held up a warning hand. "I haven't heard you come up with a better explanation, O Wise One." When Jonathan shook his head with an exasperated sigh, Benny pressed home. "Look—what's it gonna cost you to go with me on this one?"

It took a moment before Jonathan spoke again. "Just what," he said carefully, "does 'going with you on this one' entail?"

Benny beamed with the triumph of having scored a minor victory; MacKensie was at least willing to listen. "There's one person who knows what really happened in this house that night," he said, warming to his subject. "That's Crewshaw himself. If you're his reincarnation, we can glom onto the guy through you—using hypnosis."

"I get it!" May said, now thoroughly caught up in Benny's enthusiasm. "Like Bridey Murphy!"

Benny congratulated her with a clap of his hands. "Exactly! There's scientific evidence for this kind of thing, Jack, just the stuff to warm your little academic heart."

Jonathan was rubbing his forehead now, most of the fight drained out of him by the effort he was making not to look at anything in the room around him. "The generally accepted theory is that Bridey Murphy was a total fiction coaxed from the subject's subconscious memories by her hypnotist," he said in a tired voice.

"Hey—not bad!" Benny said, impressed, as always, by the unending fund of esoteric knowledge the man could exhibit at the oddest moments. He was also more than a little startled to find that Jonathan knew anything about the Bridey Murphy reincarnation case. As much as MacKensie might deride all things metaphysical, there were continuing signs that it had begun to get under his skin, which pleased Benedek no end. There was nothing he liked better than bringing a former non-believer into the fold.

"Let's look at this logically," he continued earnestly. "There had to be something rattling around in that woman's subconscious for the hypnotist to bring out, and even you have to admit that your subconscious is doing double time even as we speak. Go with me, Jack—let's find out what it's trying to tell us."

MacKensie stared at the floor, clasped hands pressed to his chin. Benny braced for another protest, fully anticipating another five minutes of argument for each second Jonathan remained silent. But the man startled him by finally sighing and nodding once. "All right."

It was the one reply he hadn't expected. "What?" he blinked.

"I said, we'll do it your way."

It finally sank in that he'd scored without a fight, and a broad grin burst out on his face. "Hey, this is getting easier all the time! Finally coming around to a better way of thinking, eh?"

Jonathan flicked him a brief, oddly strained look before saying quietly, "I want to find out what this thing in my head is, too."

The note of intense disquiet in the man's voice hit Benny like a physical jolt; it hadn't occurred to him until that moment how it unnerved Jonathan to find himself living two different lives at once. "Yeah," he said, clearing his throat. "Sure. Hey, uh—May! May, sweetheart, you wouldn't happen to have a sister who dabbles in hypnosis, would you?"

Less than a half hour later, they were in the ballroom again as May made another round of introductions.

Benny's eye traveled up the foot and a half that Denny Lowenstein towered over him, giving the man a forced smile as he pumped his hand in greeting. "So," he said, swallowing. "You're May's brother-in-law. Which sister did you end up with?"

"Violet," the man replied in a rumbling voice that intimidated Benedek even more than the excessive height.

"Violet, eh? Figures. I mean, ah...must have been some wedding with all those Flower girls, eh?"

To his relief, Denny laughed agreeably at his nervous joke. Encouraged, Benny took another stab. "So, let me understand this—you're a hypnotist *and* a garage mechanic?"

"Hypnotism is a hobby," the man said with the calmness of one who had answered the same question many, many times. "Fixing cars pays the bills."

"Right, gotcha," Benny nodded with an easy laugh. "Hey, do you think you could hypnotize my Toyota into thinking it's a Porsche?"

Jonathan appeared, having escaped May's ministrations; he tugged urgently at Benedek's jacket sleeve. "I've changed my mind," he said near Benedek's ear, his voice straining from controlled panic. "I don't want to do this."

Benny gave Denny an apologetic smile. "Excuse me, just one minute." With a firm hand on Jonathan's shoulder, he spun them both around to face away from the others. "You can't cop out on me now!" he insisted, a whisper for Jonathan's ears only. "No, wait, wait, listen to me, okay? Trust me, that's all I ask."

"It won't work!" His voice rose to a pitch his whisper could barely handle. "Benedek, I don't hypnotize."

"Do you know this for a fact?" the man challenged, suspecting that MacKensie was prevaricating to weasel out of an agreement made in a moment of weakness.

"I don't hypnotize, I tell you!"

"You got a note from your doctor?"

"Benedek, damn you—I can't do this!"

"You mean you won't." He made a disgusted noise, shaking his head. "Look, pal. You said you'd do it my way this time, and so help me, you're not going to back out on me now."

Jonathan blinked; Benedek's unexpected flash of temper put him momentarily off-balance. "And I'll tell you something else," Benny went on, stabbing his finger into Jonathan's shoulder. "We've gone too far for sorry-to-have-bothered-you. There's definitely something about this house that's messing up your head, and we got a guy here who can help—that's motive and opportunity, pal, get my drift?"

Jonathan's mouth worked for a moment, but no sound emerged. Then: "Just promise me one thing," he begged, his agitation fading into resignation. "Promise me I won't find this staring back at me in the supermarket next week."

It was Benny's turn to get thrown for a loss, and Jonathan jumped on his hesitation. "That's my final offer. Give me your promise that I won't find myself a color feature in the *National Register* and I'll...I'll...." He swallowed hard. "I'll go through with...this."

"I don't know," Benedek muttered, genuinely torn. "You're talking my bread and butter here."

"And I'm talking your life here, because if you don't give me your word, I'm going to *kill* you."

"Okay, okay, take it easy!" Benny held up his hands. "My word—no article. But if things work out, can we negotiate the novelization rights?"

Teresa interrupted then, her voice holding an icy note with which they were becoming increasingly familiar. "Mr. Benedek. Dr. MacKensie. Do you think you could get started on that explanation you promised us?"

Benny paused long enough to get a resigned nod from MacKensie; he then spun on one heel, hands upraised in mock benediction. "Denny, my man—are we ready?"

Enlisting May's help, Denny had commandeered five chairs, carefully supervising their placement. He looked up when Benny bounded over to him. "Ready when you are," the man shrugged.

"Did May give you the capsule news brief on what's going down here?"

For an answer, the man indicated they should each be seated. Jonathan he guided to a chair facing his; the others were delegated seats out of MacKensie's line of vision. "Let me get you all straight on what's going to happen," Denny said in his slow, careful voice as he settled his giant frame onto the ludicrously small antique chair. "If I understand this correctly, you want me to do something that's commonly known as regression. In all good conscience, I can't help you out. It takes a lot of intensive sessions before any trained hypnotherapist would even consider trying something like that. For one thing, the hypnotherapist should establish a solid rapport with his subject; more importantly, the subject's emotional stability has to be determined. Without first establishing those parameters, real damage could be done by attempting to go too far too fast."

Jonathan almost melted with relief. "Then we can forget this, right?" he asked hopefully.

"Well...." The hesitation in Denny's voice caused MacKensie to stiffen with apprehension again. "To tell you the truth, as long as I'm here, it couldn't hurt to test out how well you hypnotize. If nothing else, it's a good relaxation technique, and if you'll pardon my saying so, you look like you could really use one right now."

"I think I'd prefer a workout and a massage," Jonathan offered, without much hope for being taken at his word.

"Then we probably should forget this," the man told him, startling him with his ready agreement. "You won't be much good as a subject if you really don't want to go through with this."

"He wants to do it," Benny insisted from his awkward position behind Jonathan. "Tell them, Jonny, you want to do this."

Denny held up a warning hand. "Excuse me, Mr. Benedek. He's the subject, not you, okay?"

"No, he's right," Jonathan assured him hastily. "I'm just a little nervous about...everything."

"No need to be." Denny's smile was slow, and despite the man's otherwise intimidating bulk, oddly comforting. "All you have to do is listen."

Jonathan acceded with a long sigh. "All right. I'm listening."

Benedek settled his elbows on his knees, preparing to pay rapt attention to the proceedings. He was interrupted by an imperious tap on his shoulder, which, upon investigation, proved to be Teresa, her expression ominously stormy. Her crooked finger stiffly beckoned him out of his seat.

Benedek rose, stifling his protest with an effort. He'd been dodging this confrontation all along; now he had to face the music. He followed her meekly until they were well out of earshot of the others on the other side of the ballroom.

"Mr. Benedek," she swung around to face him, her eyes flashing with fury. "When I agreed to allow the Georgetown Institute to send a research team, I expected a serious scientific investigation, not a circus sideshow."

"I realize that, but...."

"Would you care to explain yourselves?"

"Given half a chance, yeah! Just relax, this all makes perfect sense, okay?" He paused just long enough to make sure that she wasn't going to explode on him again before continuing in his most reasonable tone of voice. "You've got to forgive Dr. MacKensie, he's a little new at this kind of thing. I mean, give him a computer and a stack of readouts and he's king of the hill, but when it comes to the more, shall we say, unorthodox methods of psychic investigation, he's still kinda shaky. But don't let that put you off. He's getting bet—...I mean, he's tops in the field. Really."

She still glared angrily at him, but seemed slightly mollified. "What is all this nonsense about Dr. MacKensie being Crewshaw's reincarnation?"

He instinctively modulated his voice to offset the strain of hostility coloring her overt irritation. "I'm not saying yes, and I'm not saying no—I'm only saying that the evidence is suggestive. No, wait, hear me out. Hypnosis has proven to be a very important tool in psychic research; before you decide what's nonsense, at least give us the benefit of the doubt, okay? Now, look, let's go back and see how things are going. We can get back to this discussion later, all right?"

He didn't give her a choice, moving away from her on his last words. Catching her exasperated sigh, he realized that he was playing with fire; she could toss them all out on a whim if she so desired. But he wanted to monitor Denny's progress more than he wanted to smooth ruffled feathers; with any kind of luck, if her patience held out a little longer, Benedek could always push Jonathan front and forward to cool her down. "s much as it irked him to admit it, his own innate charm and savoir faire never seemed to have as much positive effect as MacKensie's polished inflections and gallant manners when it came to dealing with the opposite sex.

With relief he noted that she took her seat next to him again, stiff but silent. Denny leaned back in his chair, a notebook open on his lap. Jonathan sat ramrod straight, his hands resting lightly on his knees, his head held slightly up, eyes closed, expression peaceful.

"Dr. MacKensie," Denny said, his deep voice carefully modulated, almost lilting. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," the man replied readily, surprising Benny with the normal conversational tone of his voice

"What is your name?"

Denny proceeded to take him through a litany of seemingly pointless questions about his place of birth, parents' names, and other personal information. Some questions he asked twice, others three or more times. Then, after asking his name for the fourth time, Denny made a long note in his book, nodding with satisfaction.

"All right, Dr. MacKensie. How do you feel?"

"Fine," came the ready answer.

"That's good. I want you to open your eyes and look around—that's it. Do you know where you are?"

"The ballroom." Again the answer came without hesitation, but as Jonathan looked up at the overhead chandelier, a flash of confusion marred the calmness of his expression.

"Is something wrong?" Denny said immediately.

"No," he said, but now there was marked hesitation in his manner. A frown deepened on his face. "Yes."

"Just relax. Now, tell me what's wrong."

Whatever had disturbed him was obviously slipping from his grasp; the frown faded. "Nothing," he said at length.

"Are you sure there isn't something about this room that bothers you?"

He didn't answer this time; his head snapped to the left as though something had caught his attention. "What is it?" Denny said, leaning forward with concern. "Do you hear something?"

"Music," he murmured, growing confused again.

"What kind of music?"

He concentrated. "String orchestra. 'Tales of the Vienna Woods'."

Denny snapped the notebook shut. "Dr. MacKensie, I'm going to start bringing you awake now...."

But Jonathan clearly had other ideas. A broad grin split his face as he leaped up out of his seat with a sweeping theatrical gesture. "Oh, come now, gentlemen, enough of this boring talk. The ladies glance longingly in our direction!"

Denny reached out to grab what proved to be empty air; Jonathan sidestepped him neatly, spinning around to give May a deep bow. "Mademoiselle!" he cried ebulliently. "May I have the honor of this dance?"

Benny leaped the distance between himself and Denny to prevent any attempt by the giant man to bring Jonathan back to his seat. "No!" he pleaded, eyes gleaming with excitement. "Come on, let him go with it."

Denny shook his head, torn; Benny seized on his indecision, gesturing frantically for a bewildered May to take Jonathan up on his bizarre offer. To his delight, the woman proved to be a sport; she shrugged, rose to her feet, and presented her hands to MacKensie in waltz position. In a flash, he had whirled her off into a spirited dance across the expanse of the ballroom floor.

"You did it!" Benedek exclaimed, slapping a hand against Denny's coverall sleeve. "He regressed, didn't he?"

"No, this isn't right," Denny muttered darkly, still shaking his head. "I don't like this; he's not in control."

"Hey, from where I'm standing, he isn't hurting much," Benny airily extemporized, one eye on Jonathan and May's sweeping traverse of the room. "Hell, he looks like he's having the time of his life! Besides, we told you there's something inside that guy's head that's raring to get out, and by golly, here it is—so let's at least find out what it's trying to tell us, okay?"

He would never know if his argument, closer to a heartfelt plea, had any effect on Denny, because at that moment, the phantom music in Jonathan's head apparently came to an end. Stepping back, he gave the breathless May another sweeping bow, raising her hand to his lips. Then his gaze fell upon Benny. "Morrie!" he roared, pouncing on the man to grab up his hand in a bone-jarring handshake. "Morrie, Morrie, you made it after all, you old goat! How'd you get out of your court case so fast?"

Benny thought quickly. "I was acquitted on all counts?" he guessed with a hopeful grin.

Jonathan's head went back in a totally uncharacteristic guffaw. "That's a good one, Morrie!" he chortled, giving the man a solid wallop on the back. "Hey, listen, belly up to the bar, help yourself, grab a partner, we're gonna dance the night away!" Still energized, Jonathan turned again, this time looking as though he were preparing to make some kind of grand announcement. His gaze fell on Teresa and he froze. Looking as though someone had struck him in the face, he staggered back, lowering his hand to point a shaking finger at the bewildered woman. His exuberant good spirits had become, in an instant, blinding rage. "What are you doing here?" he cried, voice hoarse with fury. "What are you doing here?!"

Denny finally decided that enough was enough. Jonathan managed to shake off his first attempt to restrain him, still staring wild-eyed at Teresa, who backed away from him in white-faced fear. "I told you never to come here!" he shouted, pounding the air with a clenched fist. "Get out!"

"Dr. MacKensie!" Denny said sharply, finally succeeding in pinning Jonathan's arms. "Dr. MacKensie, can you hear me?"

Benny was doing his best to calm his friend, trying to get him to meet his gaze. But when he did, the wrong light was still in the man's eyes. "Morrie," Jonathan gasped. "Morrie, what the hell is she doing here? Get her out!"

"No problem!" Benny assured him desperately. "You don't want her here, she's history. Old Morrie's going to take care of everything."

"This is my house, dammit! She has no right to be here! Get her out of here, or so help me, Morrie, I'll kill her. I'll kill her!"

There was enough real venom in the snarl to give Benedek cause for alarm; he now grabbed either side of MacKensie's head to keep it still long enough to look him straight in the eye. "There's no problem here, okay?" he said, unconsciously mimicking Denny's careful phrasing. "Do you hear what I'm saying? No problem. Calm down—that's it. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to go toss this dame out on her ear, and what I want you to do is listen to this nice gentlemen, okay? Will you do that for me? That's a good boy." He glanced quickly at Denny, beckoning for the man to take over.

Together they managed to get Jonathan, who was quiet now, but still shaking with agitation, back to his chair. Benedek backed off to let Denny take over, and it was then that he remembered Teresa.

May was with her, and they were talking in low tones; at least, May was talking. White-faced, Teresa listened, her expression taut and unreadable.

He was sure they were finished this time; he couldn't see how any amount of fast talking on his part could dissuade her from tossing them out. But he had to try—he was positive they were on to something big, and he couldn't let anything stop them, not when they'd come this close.

May stopped talking when she saw Benedek making his way over, quietly excusing herself to return to her brother-in-law's side. He hesitated when Teresa brought her challenging gaze up to meet his. There were two ways to go—he could either joke his way out of the situation, or he could pretend to be Jonathan MacKensie and impress her with his earnestness. He decided for something new and different, and went with the latter choice; since MacKensie was busy being someone else at the moment, he was sure the man wouldn't mind.

"Miss Searles," he began, putting enough abject apology in his tone to curl his own toes, "I'm really sorry about this, truly I am. You do realize that there's no personal feeling involved? I mean, he wasn't talking to you, you do understand that, don't you?"

She held up a hand for him to stop. "Mr. Benedek, maybe you could just try to explain what happened before you start apologizing for it."

Again he hesitated, this time in mild surprise. He had not expected her to be this calm, albeit still with some strain in her voice. "Sure," he agreed readily. "The way I see it, this house is all tied up with Crewshaw, right? I mean, he built it, he lived in it and...well, he disappeared from it. And his mistress died in it."

"But what does that have to do with—"

"No, wait, let me finish. I know that Dr. MacKensie is Crewshaw's reincarnation. The guy is trying to get through, he's trying to tell us something, something important."

"Tell us what?" she demanded, exasperated.

"What really happened the night Rory Spencer died!" Benny felt himself get carried away with the whole concept, fairly jumping with excitement. "Don't you see? Crewshaw never bothered Dr. MacKensie before; these flashes of *deja vu* started as soon as he stepped into this house! Obviously, Crewshaw has unfinished business. Maybe he wants to come clean, I don't know, but I do know that we can't stop now. We've got to find out what Crewshaw is trying to say! We've got to find out what happened the night of the murder, and he can tell us!"

She didn't say anything for a moment; something seemed to distress her deeply, but at the same time, she was making a great effort to suppress whatever it was. The distraction it cost her was evident in her voice and manner. "Why did you say murder?"

He blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You said murder. Rory Spencer's death was ruled a suicide, and it was reported that way in all the papers at the time. Why did you call it murder?"

"Can't believe everything you read," he assured her airily, still trying to figure out her strange edginess. It didn't appear as though she planned to oust them, so he decided to pull out the rest of the stops. "Listen, we're sitting on top of something really big here. We could blow this whole scandal out of the water."

"Then you propose to continue with this particular line of investigation?" she asked, pressing a hand to her forehead as though the entire episode were aggravating a headache. "I had been given to believe that you were here to investigate unexplained lights and noises, not to reopen an old police case."

"Don't you see? It's all tied in, it has to be. Look, if you've changed your mind about letting us stay here tonight, no problem." His marked hesitation couldn't be suppressed; the last thing he wanted to do now was pack up and leave, so it took effort to even suggest it. "At least now we've got a way to go without even having to be in this house—although, I have to admit, it would be a lot easier...."

"Let me understand this," she stopped him with a short, terse gesture. "You feel that your investigation can be best served by pursuing this reincarnation theory of yours?"

Her mixed signals were unnerving him. He'd already identified intense agitation, but had put it down to the leftover shock of finding herself on the receiving end of MacKensie's hypnotically-augmented rage. But now he sensed something new and confusing—fear. She was deathly afraid of something, and her last question to him had been a desperate plea for him to say no, to back off from the new direction the investigation was taking.

"Look, I'm not saying this will lead us to all the answers," he said as he searched her closed expression in vain for another clue to her mysterious edginess. "All I'm saying is that this is our best shot so far. It would be crazy not to pursue it when we've come this close!"

"Crazy," she sighed heavily, her eyes closing for a moment. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

"Great! Then we can stay?"

She seemed to be struggling for the right response. "You said something about believing that this course of investigation could be pursued independently—outside this house?"

Again she was hedging; her strange behavior was driving him to distraction. "Well—yeah, sure. We could start hypnotic therapy at the Institute if we had to, but we'd get much faster results here. By this time tomorrow, the whole world could know what really happened here that fateful night!"

Her head snapped up to fix him with a wild-eyed look. For a moment, the intensity of her stare caught him off guard. More than mere startlement; he had glimpsed real terror in her eyes.

"For the last time." Jonathan scooped up his discarded suit jacket, draping it over the back of a chair. "All I remember is waking up with all of you staring at me. What I want to know is why these things happen to me?"

Benny, half-seated on the edge of the canopied bed in Rory Spencer's room, gestured with the hand that held a drooping piece of pizza. "What can I say? It's a gift!"

"More like a curse, if you ask me," MacKensie grumbled, crossing back to stare down at the pizza box lying open on the vanity. "What are these little black things?"

"Olives," Benny said around a mouthful. "No self-respecting pizza should be without them."

Jonathan continued to peer distrustfully at the contents of the greasy box. "Are you sure you didn't forget anything?" he wanted to know, sarcasm edging his voice.

"I told May to have them hold the tofu and broccoli; thought that might be a little much," Benny said, all seriousness.

As much as he was inclined to turn up his nose in disgust at the tomato-sauced potpourri, his growling stomach put an end to all further thought of passing up what looked to be his only meal since lunch, more than

twelve hours before. "I'd almost rather the tofu and broccoli," Jonathan muttered, working loose a stubborn wedge.

Benny looked offended. "I'll have you know that it's been scientifically proven that pizza is a well-rounded, nutritious meal. Oh, you scoff, eh? Okay, look—you got your tomato sauce, that's a vegetable or even a fruit if you're really picky; cheese, dairy product, right? Crust, grain product; sausage and pepperoni and...and whatever this brown stuff is, that's from the meat group. Not to mention your basic mushrooms, green peppers and...oh, I did forget something. No anchovies. So, we don't get a basic serving from the fish group, we'll live another day, I suppose."

Jonathan, already chewing on a piece, gave him a dark look over his shoulder. "You've made your point, okay?"

"Besides," Benny shrugged, "May said that Armand's was the only thing open this time of night. It was either this or Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza Time Theater."

"Benedek...."

"And don't talk with your mouth full, okay? Where were we? Oh, yeah, right—your stellar performance down in the ballroom. I'm telling you, buds, you make the best argument for reincarnation to come down the pike in years. I could get you on Carson in a fast minute with this stuff!"

He snapped a warning finger in Benedek's direction. "And that's as far as you go with that thought, understand? This is one act I refuse to take on the road. Besides, there's a perfectly—"

"—logical explanation for all of this, yeah, yeah," Benny finished mockingly. "I think it's time you put on a new tape, Jack; this one's getting worn out."

"I prefer to think of it as keeping an open mind to all possibilities," Jonathan retorted in a huff.

"Yeah, all except the obvious one."

"And what's so obvious about this ridiculous reincarnation theory of yours?" He started to pace the room, pausing only to snare a napkin with which to keep pizza oil from dripping on the carpet. "It's more likely that I'm still feeling the aftereffects of Dr. Carver's memory experiment."

"Oh, yeah?" Benny scoffed. "That was over five months ago, Jocko. You could maybe blame Carver's little experiment for that escapade at the Glenbar hotel, but not this one, no sir, not after five months."

"And why not?"

"Because it makes no sense, that's why not!"

"It makes about as much sense as your idiotic theory; in fact, even more so. "All of the things that I've done are perfectly explainable if we take them in context."

"Oh, boy, here we go," Benny muttered under his breath.

"I know how to waltz," Jonathan, ignoring him, counted off on his fingers. "I may not have danced it in years, but I know how to do it. As for the piano...well, Dr. Carver reported a similar...."

"And this room? How did you know exactly which room was Rory Spencer's?"

He hesitated, thinking. "Process of elimination, I don't know—chalk it up to a very good guess."

"Okay," Benny said after a moment, giving Jonathan pause with the strange thoughtful turn of his expression. "So we'll say that everything you've come up with about this house and the night of the murder has been nothing but a very good guess...."

"Are you still on that murder kick?" Jonathan complained with a sharp exclamation of disgust. "The inquest specifically and unconditionally upheld the coroner's report—suicide. There's absolutely no evidence to support a homicide theory."

"Until now, you mean." Benny's eyes were glowing with an unholy light, which Jonathan knew all too well; he deflated with a sigh, knowing that it was useless to interrupt until the man had finished painting his headlines. "What do we really know about that night? There was a party here, a big party, lots of people, lots of Senators and Congressmen; some say even the Vice-President. Come the morning, there's a dead body on the back patio, and all of a sudden, no one can remember coming to this house for a party. If you believe the newspapers and the police report, over two hundred and fifty heavy-duty party animals had a headache and went to bed early that Friday night. J. Elbert Crewshaw vanishes off the face of the earth, and no one makes any real effort to find out where he might have gone. So what really happened here that night? Does anyone really know?"

"Does anyone really care?" Jonathan snorted derisively.

Benedek, in the throes of his discourse, continued unheeding. "Now, thanks to you and Crewshaw, we know there was some kind of argument between him and his girlfriend. It could have happened earlier that day, or even a couple days before, but he must have kicked her out of the house sometime before the big bash. She came back the night of the party, maybe to beg and plead her way back in, maybe to slap a subpoena on him, I don't know, and I gotta tell you, I'm more than a little annoyed at Denny for not letting me get a few questions in before bringing you out again."

Jonathan gave him a mirthless smile of mock thanks for that thought. "Is there a point to all this?"

"Don't you see? You—I mean, Crewshaw threatened to kill her if she didn't leave!"

"Oh, yes, I see now. She refused to leave, so he waited for all his guests to clear out before bringing her up to the fourth floor, to her bedroom, mind you, to drop her off the balcony. That's a wonderful theory, Benedek, truly a masterpiece of detection."

"I didn't say I had all the pieces to the puzzle, did I? For all I know, she snuck back up to her room, he found her here and bounced her off the bricks then; but I do know this: Dr. Carver or no Dr. Carver, you didn't absorb that scenario from any research. You were reliving Crewshaw's last night in this house, pal. You were Crewshaw—you still are!"

"All right," Jonathan said, deciding on another line of attack. "All right, suppose we say that you're right, that I was reliving an argument that happened in this house on that night. Who was this person you said I mistook you for—Morrie, was it? Who in heaven's name is Morrie?"

"If I find you a Morrie, will you at least admit that I could be right about this?" Benny shot back.

Jonathan hesitated; he hadn't expected such a positive response. "Well?" Benny challenged.

"Well...yes," he said reluctantly. "I'll admit that you could possibly be right, if you find a Morrie—but one that fits the parameters."

"Parameters—someone that Crewshaw was good friends with, obviously could confide in, since he trusted him enough to toss Rory out on her ear, and someone who has something to do with the legal profession, one way or the other...." Benny leaped off the bed and snared Jonathan's leather portfolio, dumping out the contents on the bedspread. "Here, you take those," he murmured as he divided a stack of photocopies in two. "Morrie, probably Morris, probably some kind of lawyer."

Several minutes were spent in silence as each shuffled through the photocopies MacKensie had made of the newspaper files in the library. Benny was the first to strike gold, holding the paper aloft with a whoop of triumph. "Next time, remind me to up the ante, okay? Morris Jackson of Jackson, Jackson and Whiting, noted Wall Street lawyers—and J. Elbert Crewshaw's personal friend and attorney. Read it and weep, pal."

With a black glare, MacKensie snatched the page from Benny's hand, scanning the close print. "Ah-hah!" he said after a moment. "He was in New York at the time of the mur—the suicide, he couldn't have been there that night!"

"Yeah, sure—him and two hundred and fifty other people were playing bridge with somebody's sweet grey-haired old grandmother. Haven't you got it yet, Jack?"

"I must have glanced at this while I was pulling up articles for the photocopy machine." He cleared his throat under Benny's chiding look, and tried again. "Well, it's possible...."

"Georgia did the pulling from that list of dates you gave her, and you know it," Benny told him smugly. "The only things you've had time to read are the inquest verdict and the coroner's report, you ghoul, so don't kid yourself, 'cause you sure as hell aren't kidding me."

Jonathan shook his head, but his eyes strayed back to the article in his hand. His conviction that this all had some reasonable explanation had been badly shaken; the truth was that he just didn't know what to believe anymore. It still went against everything he believed to accept for one moment that he was someone's incarnation, and yet the sane, logical explanation continued to elude him. At times like this he wished he could share Benedek's firm belief in the paranormal; how much simpler his life would be if he could blithely assign bizarre explanations to the otherwise unexplainable and let it go at that.

But for now his confusion was disquieting him enough to want to push it aside, if only to give his jangled nerves a much-needed rest.

"What I really don't understand is, if I did all the things you and Denny and May claimed I did, why are we still here? If I were in Teresa's position, I would have tossed both of us out long ago."

"I impressed her with our dedication, assured her that the direction our investigation was taking was firmly based in scientific methods, and I also promised that the results of the investigation could be kept strictly confidential if she preferred."

"Confidential?" Jonathan exploded, incredulous. "You promised to keep something confidential?"

"What's the big deal? I stretched the truth about everything else, didn't I? Come on, a true investigative reporter doesn't let anything stand between him and the truth, and the same should be said of the true scientist, right?"

"Benedek, you wouldn't know the truth if it came up and introduced itself. I won't have you compromising the reputation of the Institute, do you hear me?"

His last words caught, trailing off unexpectedly. A frown creased his forehead as his eyes darted left. "You did say that the others had all left, didn't you?" he said after a moment.

Benny came to full attention, swinging himself around to plant both feet on the floor as he leaned towards Jonathan expectantly. "They took off about an hour ago. You hear something?"

Jonathan's eyes moved right to fix him with a level stare. "You don't?" he said, voice filling with dread.

With a whoop of delight, Benny dove for the canvas bag he'd had May retrieve from the car when the pizza arrived. "Now we're cooking!" he said, digging out a tape recorder. "Come on, tell me what you—hey, where are you going?"

Jonathan had pushed off the bed, crossing the room to open the door. He peered out into the darkened hallway for a moment, then backed into the room again, shaking his head. "I could have sworn...."

Benny's attention went back to his struggle with the sticky record button for a moment; when he looked up, he found that Jonathan had frozen in mid-step. His gaze was fixed on a point to Benny's right, his mouth open in mild surprise.

Benny glanced over his shoulder, and saw nothing more unusual than a set of oak drawers. He turned back to give Jonathan a narrow-eyed stare of scrutiny. Unless he was badly mistaken, the curiously glazed look in MacKensie's eyes indicated another virulent attack of *deja vu*. As he'd hoped, they didn't need Denny's talents to pull this one off. Crewshaw came through all on his own this time.

He paused long enough to thumb the record & play buttons. "J. Elbert Crewshaw, I presume?" he ventured.

MacKensie gave no sign that he had heard or that he was even aware of Benedek's existence. Stiff movements brought him within two feet of where Benny crouched by the open canvas bag.

"Hey. Jon?" Balancing on one hand, Benny leaned over to peer up at the strangely benign expression that had possession of MacKensie's face. "You with me? Who's there?"

Jonathan blinked, some of the quiet smile becoming confusion. "What?" he said, distracted.

"You, ah—mind telling me what you're grinning at?"

A flash of impatience crossed MacKensie's face, then confusion again. His head tilted slightly, as though listening; then an unexpected laugh, warm and deep. His hands went up, seemed to grasp something, holding for a moment before releasing with an absent-minded pat. Then, with a backwards look, he started for the door again.

"Whoa-ho!" Benedek got to the door in time to keep Jonathan from going through it. "Snap out of it, Jon-boy, we've got to review what we've just learned here. Come on, I know you're in there—ah, there you are...." this last as MacKensie irritably slapped away the hand Benedek was passing across his line of vision. "Okay, come on, tell me what just happened."

Jonathan, his mouth opened to say something, instead stared hard in the direction of the set of drawers again. "I don't understand," he murmured, thoroughly discomfited. "There...there was a bed there. And a woman, she—" His eyes went wide with horrified amazement, which also sent his voice up an octave. "That was Rory. I saw—"

He swallowed convulsively, looking ill. Benny nodded, impatient for him to collect himself. "Go on, go on," he urged, with a quick glance to assure himself that the tape recorder was still running.

"She was sitting up in bed, she...she looked up when I came into the room. She said...something."

"What was it? What did she say?"

He pressed a hand hard against his forehead. "I'm losing it."

"Just take a deep breath, relax. Don't fight it, just let yourself remember. What did she say?"

"The party," he said after a moment. "She asked about the party, how it went. I didn't tell her about...about...." He broke off with a sigh, shaking his head. "Something. I don't remember. A feeling—I didn't want to worry her, so I didn't tell her about...something. I think I changed the subject, I asked her how she was feeling. And she said...she said," his expression changed slightly. "She said, 'Better. Much'."

Benny listened intently, brow furrowed. "I don't get this. You're saying she was sick in bed that night? That can't be right—we heard Crewshaw screaming at her downstairs!"

"No." Benny blinked at the sharpness in Jonathan's exclamation. "Not her. I'd never raise my voice to her. She's the—" He broke off again, lost.

"She's the *what*?"

"I don't know." In his voice was a plea for Benedek to back off. "I don't know, and I don't want to know."

"You can't get cold feet on me now," Benny protested as Jonathan pushed past him to make his way to the nearest chair. "We're on the verge of a break here!"

"The only thing threatening to break around here are my nerves," Jonathan told him, resting his head against his hand as he settled into the armchair. "Benedek, I don't think I can go through with this."

He started to draw in a breath to start in on another hard-sell, but stopped himself, reconsidering. "Okay, okay," he said, turning off the tape recorder as he settled on the edge of the bed. "Let's take this one step at a time. What exactly is it that you're scared of?"

"Scared?" The hand rubbing his forehead paused. "I'm not...." He swallowed, hard. "I am."

"Hey, nothing to be ashamed of," Benny assured him airily. "Fear is a primal response to dealing with the unknown, right?"

Jonathan glared at him from beneath the hand pressed to his temple. "Now you're an anthropology expert?"

"What can I say? I've been running with a bad crowd lately. So, come on—what are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid that this...this *thing* in my head is going to take over," he said, almost an explosion. His hand balled into a fist, slamming against the chair arm in frustration. "I'm not in control."

"So we assume for the moment that Dr. Carver's memory stimulation experiment has still got your brain cells in an uproar," Benny said, leaning forward intently. "There's nothing very mysterious about that, is there? All you're doing is exhibiting a tendency to re-live your research! Aside from an occasional bug-out here and there, there's no real damage done, right?"

"Oh, that's very easy for you to say," Jonathan growled. "You're not the one seeing people who aren't there."

"Believe me, pal, I wish I were. I could handle it."

For a moment, he seemed about to flare into indignation, but deflated just as abruptly. "All right," he said after a moment, wearily. "All right, so I'm not handling this very well, I admit it. I never said I was cut out for this sort of work, did I?"

"No, but you've got a shining-gold talent for it, Jocko," Benny said with a genuine smile. "Maybe Dr. M knew more than she told anyone when she slam-dunked you into taking on this job." He jumped off the bed, giving Jonathan's shoulder an encouraging rap. "She has faith in you, I have faith in you, how about a little in yourself? We can crack this thing, I know we can!"

"Jonathan peered up at him incredulously. "Win one for the Gipper?" he muttered sarcastically.

"Yeah, that's the spirit!" He slapped his hands together. "Spirit, get it? Okay, forget it. Look, if it makes you feel any better, if my theory is right and you are Crewshaw's reincarnation, all the guy is trying to do is resolve this thing once and for all; when that's done, he won't ever bother you again. I'm telling you, the guy took a lot of guilt with him when he passed beyond the pale, and in my book, that's real bad karma. Karma, I might add, that you inherited, and that means the ball is in your court, pal. Now look...." He settled again, using his hands to carefully illustrate his point. "I think you can handle this thing if you take everything one step at a time, and don't try to fight it. No, wait, listen to me. The only time you didn't come out on top was when Denny had you under. Every other time, you were there right along with Crewshaw; maybe just a little under the surface at times, but you were there. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Jonathan nodded reluctantly. "That's what's got me worried now," he said morosely. "You're actually starting to make sense."

Benny cracked a cheeky grin. "Hey, I've always made sense, pal. You're finally starting to listen."

"Now I'm really worried," he rejoined with a tired smile.

Benny drew a deep breath, rejuvenated by the feeling of triumph that flooded through him. Despite the tension that still etched the muscles of MacKensie's drawn features, the man's good humor was returning. His argument was as good as won.

As if to emphasize the extent of his victory, MacKensie made an impatient gesture. "All right, all right. What did you have in mind?"

"All you have to do is...listen," Benedek told him carefully.

Jonathan regarded him levelly for a long moment. "Listen? That's it?"

Benedek spread his hands. "That's it. If I'm right, and I know I am, Crewshaw's been jumping up and down trying to get you to listen all along. "If you have to do is stop fighting it and...listen."

"Listen," he repeated faintly, rubbing at his eyes wearily. His hand dropped, but his eyes remained closed. Drawing a deep breath, he willed his thundering heart to calm, but to little effect. He decided to abandon that effort, concentrating instead on removing the mental barrier he had erected, behind which lay the whispering, insistent voices he had been keeping at bay all along. For a moment he wondered how Benny had intuited that those voices had been plaguing him, and he experienced a brief flash of irritation that the man seemed to know more about what was happening inside him than even MacKensie did himself. But he couldn't afford the distraction even this brief digression cost him; the mind barrier was crumbling and he prepared to give the voices audience.

A picture formed in his mind, an image so clear and vivid that he emitted an involuntary gasp.

"What is it?" Benny's voice near his ear startled him into opening his eyes, and to his astonishment, the vision remained intact although he could also clearly see Benedek's frowning face before him. He froze, afraid to move or even to breathe for fear of disturbing his foothold in either of the two levels of reality in which he found himself co-existing. But his strained lungs finally forced a decision and he gulped in air, pressing back into his chair as he did. Both images stayed steady, only now Benedek had leaned in more closely, regarding him with narrow-eyed concern.

Jonathan's initial fear fast became fascination, and his scientific training kicked in reflexively. The first step was tentative experimentation; he decided to see if he could communicate on one level without disturbing the clarity of the other. "Benedek?" he ventured.

"Yo. You okay?"

The second vision did not so much as waver. "Yeah," MacKensie assured him quickly. "Yeah, I'm fine—I think. It's..." His voice abruptly lowered, filled with awe. "...weird. I can see you, I can hear you, and yet...I'm somewhere else."

"Somewhere else? Somewhere else where?"

"Another room." His voice changed again, less tense, more level. "My room. I'm...removing my cuff links. Humming. I feel better."

"Better than what?"

"Better than—" A frown flashed across his face. "—before the argument."

Benny barely stifled a triumphant cry. "Okay, now we're cooking, Jack. What about the argument?"

He shook his head stiffly. "I just want to forget about it. It was a wonderful soiree, I won't let her ruin it for me. Hell—even the vice president showed up!"

"That must have been quite a coup for you," Benny agreed readily. "But, ah—let's get back to this argument...."

"I said forget it." His voice had taken on the coarse, accentless tones Benedek associated with J. Elbert Crewshaw. "It's over, she's gone—" He made a sharp gesture of dismissal. "I've got more important things to worry about. I'm tired. I want to turn in."

"Okay, sure thing. But maybe you could answer a few questions for me first. It won't take long, I promise. Did you actually see Morrie throw her out?"

Jonathan blinked, startled. "Are you from the press?" he bellowed, his face clouding. "By god, if I see one word of this in print, you'll live to regret it, sir, that much I promise you."

"Hey, Jonathan, come on, slap this guy down a little, okay?" He grabbed the hand MacKensie waved threateningly at him, forcing it back down to the armrest. "Stay in control. You can do it, come on."

MacKensie stiffened, then sagged with a small, sharp gasp. "See what I mean?" he said, fear creeping into his eyes and voice again. "How do you expect me to stay on top of that?"

"Just the way you're doing it right now. Relax. Tell you what—see if you can get Crewshaw to back off some. See if he'll let you tell his story."

He was still struggling to keep from hyperventilating. "And just how do you propose I negotiate with him?"

"Pal, you *are* him—two sides of the same coin. You're the resident personality here, so just get him to stay on his side of the nickel, and you'll do the narration for him. Come on, now—deep breaths. That's it. Relax, already—you're leaving fingerprints in the wood. Okay—do you still have a fix on Crewshaw?"

It seemed to take a great effort for MacKensie to nod his head.

"What's he doing?"

"Dressing for bed." Jonathan paused, searched in the vision for detail. "But I'm...he's not going to retire immediately. I think he's putting on a smoking jacket. Yes...he's sitting down now. Picking up a book—looks like...*The Great Gatsby*."

"You can skip the book report, okay? Just tell me what he's doing."

Jonathan shrugged. "Reading."

"Reading," Benedek echoed hollowly. "I don't get this. I don't get this at all. What happened to that murderous rage he was in downstairs in the ballroom?"

"I told you to forget that," he snapped, eyes flashing. "It's over, and it's done."

"Whoa. Come up for air, Jack. Stay on top of this guy." He relaxed when Jonathan blinked rapidly, released from the momentary digression. "You're doing okay. Slow, now—what's over? What's done?"

Swallowing in a dry throat, Jonathan made another attempt to relax. "Morrie," he said at length. "Morrie threw her out, and...and it's over. It's...."

His words caught, choking him as he straightened, wild-eyed. "What—?" he gasped, clinging with whitened knuckles to the sides of the chair as he strained to listen to something only he could hear. "Rory? *Rory!*"

His last was a cry of terror; he sprang out of his chair, catching Benedek off-guard so that he barely managed to get to his feet in time to keep MacKensie away from the locked terrace doors. He intercepted him with what amounted to a full body-block, his heels digging into the carpet to block Jonathan's frantic attempts to get to the balcony. "Time out, Jack!" he cried with what breath his effort left him. "Touch those doors and you'll set off an alarm that'll bring the police from three counties, remember? Hey! Jonathan!"

The man struggled to free himself, staring in horror at the terrace doors. "Rory?" he cried. "Oh, my god. Rory!"

His shout became a full-throated scream of anguish, which seemed to drain his manic strength. He no longer fought to get past Benedek, who in turn sensed the change and straightened slowly, wary of any sudden moves on MacKensie's part, and any strained muscles on his own part. He opened his mouth to say something mildly reassuring, and froze to see Jonathan's expression of utter despair. Before he could think to say anything, Jonathan whirled suddenly, staring in the direction of the hallway door. "You!" he snarled in low-voiced rage. "*You!*"

Benny had to duck to see past MacKensie to the door, fully expecting to see that his friend was again addressing the ghosts of Crewshaw's past. To his complete surprise, the door was open, and just inside the threshold stood Teresa Searles.

Before Benedek could react, Jonathan shook free, advancing on Teresa with the broken gait of a man tortured by a towering, helpless rage. "Why?" he demanded brokenly. "*Why?*"

Benedek pounced on him, giving Teresa a nervous smile. "Jonathan—whoa, boy. You'll have to forgive him, Miss Searles, he's not having a good day. Jonathan, come on, snap out of it. Come on—"

There seemed to be a glimmer of response in the dead eyes when Benedek finally forced MacKensie's head away from Teresa to look at him, but it was gone the next moment when Jonathan's face convulsed. Both hands clapped to his head, he doubled over with a ragged cry of intense pain. Benedek grabbed him, sagging under the dead weight. "Help me get him over to the bed, willya?" he cried when he realized that he was able to do little more than keep Jonathan from collapsing completely to the floor.

It took longer than he might have expected for Teresa to respond to his call for help, but then she had Jonathan's other arm. With the added assistance, Benedek maneuvered the stricken man onto the bed. Teresa responded to a quick gesture, propping a pillow under Jonathan's head while Benedek worked to settle his friend comfortably. He kept one worried eye on MacKensie's pain-twisted face.

"What's going on here?" Teresa demanded tremulously as Benedek leaned over to check for visible signs of injury.

"I don't know," Benedek answered, shaking his head helplessly. "One minute he was fine, the next—" He waved his hand to finish the thought. "I think maybe I should call for help—this could be serious. Do me a favor and stay with him, okay? I'll be right—"

Backing away toward the door, he trailed off in surprise when the doorknob twisted halfway and froze. It took him only a few quick tries for him to realize why. The lock had been engaged. An inspection revealed that there was no latch on the inside of the door. Since Teresa had come through that same door only moments ago, and no one had been near it since, that left only one explanation.

He turned back to draw her attention to the fact of the locked door, but paused, thinking. Gradually he became aware that his journalistic sixth sense had kicked in, warning him to proceed cautiously. Jonathan's mysterious collapse had distracted him from the one question he should have asked himself the moment he saw her standing in the doorway—what was she doing back here at 2:30 in the morning, especially after she had taken great pains to emphasize that she could not return until the next afternoon?

Glancing over in the direction of the bed, he saw that she stood by the far side of the bed, looking down at Jonathan with a closed, unreadable expression. Conversationally, Benedek ventured, "You happen to have a key for this?"

Without looking over at him, she replied, "Yes."

He waited, but she said nothing more and made no move to produce the key. His caution was fast turning into dread-weighted suspicion.

Leaning against the doorframe, he took a moment to debate his next move. "Why did you lock the door?" he asked, careful to keep any hint of apprehension out of his light tone.

She didn't respond to his question immediately, but after a moment she looked up. "Why are you doing this?" she returned, matching his tone.

Despite the fact that he had been expecting the unexpected, her reply still caught him by surprise. "Doing what?" he replied carefully.

"Why couldn't you just leave it alone?" Her voice was thickening now; Benedek recognized the first signs of desperation in her tone, and his unease grew. "Take your photos, take your recordings and your readings, but leave the ghosts here in peace."

"But they aren't at peace." He took great pains to move carefully back toward the bed, hoping she would not consider his advance threatening. "You know that. You're the one who went to the Georgetown Institute for help."

"You were supposed to monitor phenomena." Anger cracked her rising voice. "Not...not resurrect dead memories."

He held up his hands, determined to keep her from losing control. "Listen, can we forget about the ghosts for a while? Okay? My friend here needs help, and I'd really like to get it for him. So can we discuss unlocking the door?"

She stared down at Jonathan again, and with a start he saw blind hate in her eyes. "He's beyond help," she said in a low, thick voice. "He's dead."

For the moment it took him to leap to the bedside, Benedek could have sworn that his heart actually stopped in his chest. A quick check told him that Jonathan was indeed still alive; his breathing was ragged and he seemed to be fighting to keep conscious, but the lines of pain had disappeared from his face. Benedek stared up at Teresa. "What the hell—?"

She met his accusing glare squarely. "You insist that he's reliving the night of Rory Spencer's death as J. Elbert Crewshaw? Fine. Then he's dead. Dr. MacKensie relived that, too. I hope he's satisfied. I hope you're both satisfied."

"Benedek?" MacKensie's weak call drew his attention. The man struggled for coherence, trying to gather strength to his voice. "It wasn't Crewshaw," he murmured, clutching at Benedek's sleeve. "He didn't kill Rory Spencer."

"I think that point's already been made," Benedek told him bleakly. His mind raced to rearrange all the new pieces of the old puzzle, but there was one piece missing, and it drove him mad to know that it was probably right under his nose, there for the taking if he could only think straight enough to find it. A movement from the bed distracted him again; Jonathan pulled on Benedek's arm in a vague attempt to sit up, and he turned his attention to discouraging him. "It wasn't Crewshaw," he insisted, trying to make a point that was threatening to get lost in his lingering disorientation.

"Okay, okay, it wasn't Crewshaw," Benny agreed readily, trying to get the man to lie down again. "Who was it, then?"

It wasn't a question he really expected an answer to at that point, so he froze in astonishment when Jonathan's gaze suddenly fixed clearly on Teresa. "Her," he said flatly.

"Huh?" Benedek blinked.

"It was an accident."

Jonathan's strange accusation startled him; Teresa's violent reaction stunned him. He stared at her, nonplussed, as her rage visibly mounted. "It was an accident," she hissed again, fists clenching at her sides.

"And Crewshaw?" Jonathan said, uncowed by her fury. "Was he an accident, too?"

"That was self-defense." Her voice rose, splintered by desperation.

Benedek roused his paralyzed senses with a quick shake of his head. "Quick, Jon-boy, give me the plot synopsis, you lost me somewhere," he whispered. "Are you seriously suggesting that someone who wasn't even born in 1928 killed Rory Spencer?"

Jonathan seemed more inclined to reply to Teresa, but he acquiesced to Benedek's harried request with a nod. "No...not her. There was a fight, here in the room. She..." He stared at Teresa, but suddenly stopped, blinking to clear away something that persistently clouded his thoughts. "Olivia."

The missing piece fell into place with a thud which echoed in Benedek's gut. "Olivia? Crewshaw's *wife*? Wait a minute, the papers said she was in New York the night of...?"

"They said Morrie was in New York, too," Jonathan reminded him. His voice was steady now, but still lacked strength; he sagged back against the pillow. "But they were both here."

Benedek glanced over at Teresa to see that the woman had turned away, her clenched fists pressed tightly against her mouth. Her reaction intrigued him, but not as much as what Jonathan was telling him, and he returned his attention to his friend. "That makes sense," he realized. "It wasn't Rory he was yelling at down in the ballroom—it was his wife. But why was she there that night?"

"Morrie served the divorce papers on her the day before," Jonathan told him, after a moment to search through the fragmented memories.

"Whoa. Stop the presses. He was going to divorce his wife? Why?"

A longer pause; MacKensie's eyes glazed as he struggled to remember. "To marry Rory," was the fading reply.

"That's a lie!" Teresa had whirled back, eyes flashing.

"No," Benedek shook his head, lightheaded with the exhilaration of having the mystery sort itself out before his very eyes. "No, it's true, all right, and you know it. You've known it all along. That's why you were so upset down in the ballroom when Jonathan re-enacted that argument. That's why you've been so afraid that we'd actually find out what happened here that night. But what I can't figure is why you care about it so much." Another thought struck him, lowering his voice with dread apprehension. "Or how you found out. Someone...must have told you. Someone who was there that night."

The answer was in the level look she gave him, in which he read calm insanity. "She made me promise," Teresa said softly. "She made me swear that no one would ever find out. No one."

"Olivia," Benedek breathed, more a statement than a question. "She told you what really happened. She was the one who pushed Rory Spencer off the balcony that night."

"It was an *accident*," she insisted. "If you want someone to blame, blame him. Nothing would have happened if he hadn't brought that...that woman into this house, if he hadn't betrayed my grandmother so publicly...."

"Grandmother?" Benedek whispered incredulously, the last piece clicking into place. "Olivia Crewshaw...was your *grandmother*?"

She tensed, aware that she'd admitted too much. Her wary stare revealed to him that she considered that a betrayal of trust beyond all words. There was real trouble brewing here, he realized, but a glance down at his friend presented a whole new concern. He had thought that Jonathan was recovering, but the hope proved false. MacKensie's eyes, partially open, were incognizant; his breathing was ragged and shallow.

"Jonathan?" He tapped the man's pale face lightly; no response. "Hey. Jack, come on. Don't do this." Chewing his bottom lip anxiously, he took stock of the situation. The skin still had color and warmth, which thankfully ruled out physical shock—for now. But Jonathan MacKensie was lost somewhere in the depths of his own mind, and faint muscular spasms detailed his internal struggle to find his way back. Benny experienced a flash of confusion over what could have caused his friend to fall into such a state so quickly—and then remembered what Teresa had said. Jonathan MacKensie had relived the moment of J. Elbert Crewshaw's death. Benedek was familiar enough with hypnotic regression case histories to know that that was a worst-case scenario—and it was his fault. He'd insisted that MacKensie allow Crewshaw to come through in the first place.

The bedspread was a full one, and he was able to pull up enough from the side to cover the stricken man. "I need blankets," he told Teresa urgently. "He should be kept warm."

"Don't bother."

Benny stopped, going cold. In those two quietly spoken words, he'd heard a death sentence.

He resumed his movements, doing his best appear unconcerned. "Look," he said reasonably. "This can all be handled very simply. I need to get Dr. MacKensie here to a hospital. If you unlock the door for me, I promise, I swear to you that no one will ever know what happened here tonight or sixty years ago. It won't go any farther than this room."

"Nothing will ever go farther than this room," she informed him softly.

The threat was implicit, emphasized by the produced from her jacket pocket as she spoke. Benedek barely suppressed a wince when a gleaming blade snicked out from the handle at a touch of her thumb.

"Whoa," he said, his cajoling laugh tinged with nervousness. "I don't suppose you brought that with you to audition for *West Side Story*, did you?" One glance at the stony hardness in her face, and he abandoned facetiousness as an offensive strategy. "Okay, look. Before we do anything hasty here, maybe you'd like to tell me how you plan to explain this to interested parties?"

"There won't be anything left to explain." Her voice was cold, emotionless; insane. "The fire will destroy all the evidence."

"You think they're going to buy a story about pyromaniac ghosts?" Benedek scoffed, already knowing it was a weak try. A touch of arson went a long way toward covering murderous tracks, and any anomalies that showed up later in the forensic evidence could undoubtedly be dismissed by paranormal doubletalk. Benedek knew, better than most, how easy it was to confuse the truth with a little creative fiction.

She didn't answer; he didn't expect her to. He was only trying to buy time to figure out his next move. His attention centered on the knife that Teresa held. If he could have detected the slightest tremor in her hand, there would have been a glimmer of hope; that there was a degree of uncertainty inside her, something that he could still reason with. But there was no trace of nervousness betrayed there or anywhere in her manner; her expression was set and implacable. Seeing that, he instantly dismissed the idea of trying to talk her out of her murderous course.

He briefly considered an attempt to physically overpower her, and he knew the odds were good that he would succeed with no worse than perhaps a minor laceration or two—certainly an acceptable risk given the alternative. But he quickly realized that that strategy would be practical only if he were facing this particular situation

alone. Like it or not, he found himself in the position of being responsible for another life, and with that realization, the idea of jumping her for possession of the knife was quickly shelved. The bed was the major obstacle between Benedek and Teresa, making any planned attack awkward at best; there was no way that he could move fast enough to prevent her from striking at Jonathan in retaliation. As it was, if she decided to make a move toward Jonathan now, Benedek could only be sure of preventing her from making a good first try. As for whether he could successfully defend them both against a crazed knife attack—he fought back a surge of real panic at the prospect.

In the space of a few seconds, he'd narrowed down his options to a single course of action, and that a long shot depending on a few very nebulous assumptions. His success hinged on whether his instincts about Teresa's deranged state of mind were on target. Trying to predict another person's reactions was an iffy prospect at best, but was another matter altogether given the light of pure insanity that glowed in Teresa's eyes. He swallowed around the lump that formed in his throat as he mapped out his moves quickly, praying that any miscalculation would not prove fatal.

He took one last brief glance at Jonathan, enough to assure him that the man was not conscious enough to help or even to save himself if events came to a head. And then he began to back away from the bed.

Teresa stiffened, her eyes narrowing slightly. Benedek took another careful step backwards, watching to catch any change that might cross her face with the hope he would be able to correctly interpret it and alter his tactics accordingly. Another step and he hesitated; if she suddenly decided to begin with an attack on Jonathan, one more step would put him too far away to do anything about it.

He froze, staring at her, willing her to make a move. After what seemed an eternity, she did.

To his vast relief, her movement was away from the bed. She stepped toward him, her manner like a wary cat, knife poised defensively. Benny hid the impulse to smile; his instincts hadn't failed him. She was doing exactly what he wanted her to do. By drawing her away from the bed, he was putting Jonathan out of the picture, leaving him free to deal with the woman on his own terms.

He kept his movements slow, careful not to betray any hint of his intent. "Look," he began. "Since you plan to off us anyway, maybe you could clear up a few things for me so that I can go to my rest a happy man, okay?" The back of his leg contacted the armchair; he sidestepped it, putting it between himself and Teresa's relentless advance. "What happened to Crewshaw that night?"

She didn't answer, taking another step forward, the hand holding the knife coming up threateningly. "Oh, come on," he said with a nervous laugh. "This is where they always make the big confession, right?"

She was within striking distance now; he backed away, dragging the chair with him as a defensive barrier. "What did she do with the body?" he tried again, taking a chance by making his tone challenging.

His words seemed to hit her with the effect of an electrical jolt. "No!" she hissed, a furious denial. "She didn't kill anyone!"

"Right—I forgot. It was an accident." He could afford the sarcasm now; he already realized he'd made a tactical error by pursuing the subject. Fury animated the woman, replacing the steely madness of before; she was now capable of lashing out blindly at any moment. The danger signals were up and he understood them; it was now or never. Firming his grip on the chair, he twisted, and, with a Herculean effort, hurled it full force at the closed terrace door. The glass buckled, disintegrating in shower of fragments; the icy arctic wind poured through, sending the light curtains into a manic dance.

Teresa, who had flinched in anticipation of the chair being tossed at her, stared in stunned disbelief, first at the shattered door, then at Benedek.

"Better think fast, sweetheart," Benedek told her confidently, pointing a finger at her. "In about twenty seconds, your security company is going to call the police to answer that alarm I just set off. You've got that long to find a phone to tell them it was all a big mistake, run down to the basement to shut off the whole system—" He paused for effect, turning his hands inward. "—or catch me if you can. Ready anytime you are."

He went to a crouch, daring her to make a move and hoping he'd provoked her enough to do just that; anything to distract her from realizing that Jonathan was a much easier target.

She fell back a step, bewildered by his bizarre move; then dark fury suffused her face. With a feral snarl, she sprang at Benedek, knife flashing. As he'd hoped, her wild attack was clumsy. He was able to anticipate her

move and duck, and in the time it took her to recover her balance, he'd scuttled out of range again, falling against the wooden frame of the terrace doors. One panicked glance told him the extent of his one miscalculation. By backing away toward the balcony, he'd put himself out of reach of anything he could use as a defensive weapon; a wardrobe and a set of oak drawers blocked any hope of sliding sideways past Teresa back into the room. That left him two options—offense or retreat. And the only escape was the icy blackness beyond the shattered glass.

He had a split second to figure the odds. Teresa had the knife in a grip that turned her knuckles white; wresting it from her would be difficult if not impossible, especially now that he'd effectively backed himself into a corner. The balcony afforded him a few more feet of room to maneuver, perhaps enough to even the odds more to his liking.

Teresa decided the matter for him. He dodged her stab, his backward leap foiled by the broken chair lying across the threshold. He fell hard, gasping as glass fragments nicked through his light jacket into his arm. A shadow fell across him, betraying Teresa's approach; he rolled, and scuttled on his knees to the farthest corner of the terrace, pulling himself up by the railing as he watched the woman turn again to advance on him.

For a moment, his journalistic instincts dispossessed every other thought. In his mind's eye he could see how a violent argument between two impassioned women could, in a blinding instant, turn to tragedy. The terrace was small but wide, the railing low. A move made in a blind rage, either deliberate or accidental; it would be very easy indeed. In fact, he sensed that he was very close to finding out just how easily it could happen.

He grew aware of a little mental voice chiding him for his smug assertion, made barely thirty-six hours before, that this investigation was routine and unworthy of his talents. This routine investigation was about to cost him his life and Jonathan's in the bargain, and all because he'd blithely ignored the warning signals. He offered Jonathan a silent, fervent apology for having realized, much too late, how just a little of MacKensie's staid, common sense approach to paranormal investigation would have prevented this from happening.

His gaze darted to the door and to the lighted room beyond, and the distraction cost him. In the dark gloom, he didn't see Teresa's move until almost too late. He dove to avoid her blow, but not fast enough; the blade slashed across his upper arm as he fell.

He felt nothing more than a brief flash of searing heat, but despite his best effort could not prevent himself from grabbing at the injured arm. Unable to break his fall, his shoulder hit the concrete with a jarring thud. He managed to fight through the red haze of pain, grabbing enough presence of mind to scramble as far away from Teresa as he could before allowing himself release in the form of an explosive gasp for air.

Blood seeped in icy streams through fingers clasped over the knife wound; he was fast losing all feeling in his arm, but couldn't tell whether from the injury or the freezing cold. All he knew for sure was that the fight was over, and he had only himself to blame. He tried to pull up, grabbing a sculpted bar of the railing with his good hand; all he could manage was to get to his knees before his strength failed. Leaning against the barrier to keep from sliding back to the icy concrete, he felt his resolve drain away, and gave himself up to a moment of self-reproach, cursing himself for getting cornered so quickly. What had failed him—his reflexes or his nerve? Or perhaps he'd just been done in by over-confidence, thinking that the moves that had kept him alive on the mean streets of his youth would serve him here, especially given the inescapable fact that he was no longer quite as young and elastic as he would have liked to believe.

Teresa stood over him, staring down. He couldn't make out her face in the darkness, but was sure that he knew the look in her eye. All she had to do was choose her moment, and that still left her enough time to cover her tracks with a little creative arson before the police arrived. He glanced out past the railing, out into the black void beyond the terrace, realizing that he had at least one option left. He could choose to follow Rory Spencer into yellow journalistic history. At least that way, he could make it difficult, if not impossible for Teresa to get away with their murders.

Glancing back, he saw her hand coming up and knew he had very little time to decide. The blade caught the light that spilled out from the room beyond, and for a moment he found himself transfixed by the bright gleam dancing across the metal. His grip tightened on the rail; he started to pull himself up. All he had to do was get one arm over, shift his weight at the critical moment, and gravity would do the rest....

The shadows behind Teresa changed; the metallic sliver of light winked out. She reacted with a sharp intake of breath, turning away from Benedek to stare in the direction of the bedroom. The hand holding the knife dropped to her side.

Benedek assessed the situation, thanked whatever god had taken pity on him, and lunged.

His hand closed on her wrist. With a shriek, she recoiled, trying to twist away. She succeeded in pulling him off balance; unable to keep himself falling, he braced for the inevitable. Still keeping a vise-like grip on her wrist, he toppled, landing on his injured arm.

To his grateful surprise, there was no pain; there was no feeling at all, leaving him free to concentrate on trying to wrest the weapon from her grasp by digging his fingers hard into the hollow of her wrist.

She fought, gouging at his hand with her nails. Then, just as he got his feet under him, her hand opened—and the knife fell securely into her other hand.

The blade flashed up; all he could do was watch its progress while wondering, with odd unconcern, whether she was going to try for his neck or for the hand that still gripped her arm.

Instead, her head snapped back suddenly, the knife slipping from her fingers to clatter to the concrete floor. With a shrill wail of mixed surprise and pain, she clutched at her head with clawed hands, stumbling to her knees.

The knife lay only a short distance from him, but he lacked the strength to reach for it. And it seemed no longer to matter, since whatever had happened to Teresa had reduced her to helplessness. She was huddled on her knees, cradling her head, emitting a low keening wail of pain and broken despair.

And then another movement caught his eyes. Tracking it, he saw the figure of a man silhouetted by the terrace doors. His breath deserted him. He had left Jonathan nearly unconscious in the other room—it didn't seem possible that the man could have recovered enough to get out of the bed, let alone walk. And it was too soon for the police to have arrived. So either Jonathan had performed a minor physical miracle, or—

Any other time he would have cheerfully embraced the possibility of a ghostly visitation, but he found himself fervently hoping that he wasn't going to have to explain to the authorities that the ghost of J. Elbert Crewshaw had just saved his life.

Unexpectedly, his throat tightened. If this was a ghost hovering before him, that could only mean that Crewshaw's spirit had been freed from the earthly bonds of his reincarnation, from....

"Jonathan?" he ventured tentatively.

"Benedek? Are you all right?"

Only then did Benedek allow himself to breathe. Jonathan's voice was not strong, but it was steady. "I'm okay," Benny said, letting relief color his voice. "You gave me a start there. I thought—well, never mind."

Jonathan gained his side. He took Benedek's arm, turning it towards the light. "You're hurt," he said, giving Teresa a horrified stare, which he then turned to the weapon lying on the ground nearby. "Benedek, she was going after you with that? What in God's name has been happening?"

"Just wait until I tell you what else you missed, pal," Benedek assured him. He was oddly exhilarated, light-headed with relief. "Let me tell you, this lady had—" He broke off as Jonathan faltered in his half-crouch at Benedek's side and failed to recover.

"Hey," Benedek said, offering Jonathan his good hand to steady him. MacKensie waved him off as though to tell him that he'd actually chosen to end up sitting on the frozen concrete. After a moment to recover his breath, he leaned over, reaching for the knife.

Benny stopped him. "Mind the fingerprints, pal. The police are going to have enough to sort out when they get here."

A blink betrayed the fact that Jonathan hadn't been aware that the police had somehow been summoned. But he paused long enough to pull a handkerchief from his pocket, with which he gingerly gripped the bottom of the knife handle. Settling back, he took a moment to look at the stained blade. Then, with a quiet sigh, he tossed the weapon over his shoulder. It flashed in an arc over the railing, disappearing into the night.

"Let them sort that out," he said tiredly, his shoulders slumping. "How bad is your arm?"

Benedek held up a restraining hand. "Forget it, it's nothing. No, really, I mean it. It's stopped bleeding, see? Just a scratch." His assurances had no effect, so he opted for changing the subject to distract Jonathan from his attempts to minister to his wound. "How about you? You were really out of it, pal, what happened?"

Jonathan blinked several times, rubbing at his forehead. "I...I'm not really sure, I...it feels as though something very large hit me very hard."

"Speaking of which, what did you hit her with, anyway?"

For the first time, Jonathan seemed to be aware that there was something he was still clutching in his other hand. His surprise and chagrin were genuine as he stammered, "Benedek, I'm sorry, I don't even remember picking this up...."

MacKensie reluctantly showed Benedek the remains of his tape recorder. Irrational anger flashed through Benedek, disappearing the moment he realized that a broken, albeit expensive, tape recorder was a small sacrifice considering that it had just been used to save his life. And the more important consideration was that the tape inside could still be salvaged.

"I left this on," he realized. "I've got everything on tape—I've got the story of the century right here!"

He reached out to snatch the recorder like the coveted prize it was, but his hand closed on empty air. Jonathan had pulled away, leaving Benedek to stare at him incredulously. "Hey," he challenged, affronted. "What's your problem now?"

"We have to discuss this," Jonathan told him in a cold, strained voice.

"Discuss?" He drew his head back, giving the man a long frown. "Discuss what? That's gold you've got in your hand there, Jack—my gold. This is the story that's going to do it for me. The mystery is solved, the secret is out—do I have to spell it out for you?"

With a quick nod of his head, Jonathan indicated Teresa, who still huddled brokenly where she had collapsed. "Is that all you can think about?" he hissed. "Can't you see what this thing has already done to her?"

Hot anger flushed Benedek's face. "Can't you see what she did to me?" he shot back. "What do I owe her for that?"

Jonathan's only reply was a long, searching stare that he broke off with a quiet sigh of exasperation. "All right—take it," he said flatly, turning away as he offered the recorder to Benedek.

Benedek could only stare blankly at the recorder for a long moment. He'd missed what Jonathan had been trying to tell him, and only understood it now. There was more at stake here than just his injured pride and body. This secret had spread like a disease over the sixty years that had passed since the night of its inception, destroying people's lives in the process, and Benedek proposed to capitalize on those tragedies to gratify his own ego. Less than six months ago, he would have done so without the slightest twinge of conscience.

Less than six months ago, he wouldn't have been able to swear that he even had a conscience. But he certainly had one now, and in tangible form, no less—a staid and starched anthropology professor whose sense of morality had turned out to be, to Benedek's everlasting dismay, contagious.

His choices were clear. If he took back the recorder now, he'd have his story. But he would also lose Jonathan MacKensie's respect for all time. Of course, Edgar Benedek wouldn't have cared a fig about that—less than six months ago.

His stomach twisted, echoing his struggle to make a decision. A low growl of disgust escaped him as he pushed Jonathan's hand back. "Just promise me one thing. Give it to the police. Otherwise we're going to spend the rest of the night trying to get them to believe us about what happened here tonight."

He nodded his agreement, then glanced up with a thin smile. "Thanks," he said quietly.

"Don't mention it." Benedek's automatic response didn't even hint at the warmth that spread through him despite the relentless chill piercing his thin clothing. Something caught his eye; he glanced up to see faint flashing light reflected in the night sky. Red and blue—the cavalry to the rescue. "Looks like our company's arrived," he remarked, letting giddiness take possession of his numbing senses. "Shall we meet them at the door or let the servants show them in?"

Jonathan leaned against the railing, and it was obvious that he could no longer summon enough strength to even lift his head. "What do you think?" he murmured, closing his eyes.

"I think they'd better hurry," Benedek agreed, closing his own eyes. "Dinner's getting cold."

Despite his determination to stay alert, he found it increasingly difficult to keep from slipping into the comforting grey fog lurking around the edges of his senses. He forced himself to open his eyes, to concentrate on the piercing cold that chattered his teeth and on the dull throbbing ache in his arm and shoulder, anything to keep him sharp and alert. Nevertheless, his vision went askew, light and shadow splitting and tilting. He swallowed hard against the nausea that welled up in his throat, and sent a sharp mental command to the police to speed it up.

The swirling fragments splintered again, drowning his sense of space and time. There were sounds that he thought he could identify in part; perhaps that was an insistent knocking on the door, maybe those were voices sharp with question. He tried focusing on the light framed by the terrace doors, but it spread and blurred, twisted and swirled. Now shadows darted through it and the murmur of voices grew louder.

A chill gust of wind stabbed him, jarring his senses and dispelling the fog for a brief moment. Someone leaned over him. A pale circle, a face; he fought to focus on it.

The face of a woman, luminous with an unearthly light. The image seemed to ripple like a reflection in water; he blinked hard to dispel the effect. Now the haze cleared a little; he saw the bright green eyes, the halo of copper hair that framed a sad, benign and eerily beautiful face. He recognized her with a thrill of awe.

The apparition seemed to know that he knew and did not fear her; her response was a gentle smile. Without knowing why, his hand came up, reaching out to her in greeting and entreaty.

A shadow eclipsed the light that glowed softly on her face, leaving behind only the dark silhouette of her head. He felt his hand being grasped, and gently forced back to his side as a woman's voice soothed, "Easy. Easy, now."

Sharp white light danced across his face, stinging his eyes. Somewhere near he heard quiet voices and the crashing static of what he recognized as a mobile radio, and it was only then that he realized that the police had finally arrived.

The strong beam settled on him, illuminating the policewoman crouched by his side, gently inspecting the extent of his injury. He was unsurprised to discover that she bore no resemblance to the copper-haired vision of moments before.

The woman's probe was deft and efficient, but it awakened damaged nerve endings and hot waves of pain crashed down him like a physical blow. She glanced up with a look of grim apology, and he managed to nod his awareness that she was only doing her job. He concentrated on fending off the hammer blows to his already frayed nerves. It took only a few more seconds for him to give up the effort as a bad job. With a quiet sigh, he resigned himself to the inevitable and allowed himself to slide into the grey fog, but not before one last image resolved itself—the policewoman's nametag glinting in the glare of the flashlight, illuminating the graven letters "FLOWERS".

"Yeah, Morrie was a talkative old bird," Benny was saying as he made himself comfortable on the edge of Jonathan's desk. "He's been in that Peekskill nursing home for over twelve years with some kind of liver thing, but there was nothing wrong with his memory, let me tell you. Sharp as a tack." He chuckled admiringly. "This guy knew Al Capone personally, can you beat that? He told this story about Meyer Lansky—" He caught the warning look on Jonathan's face and changed the subject quickly. "Anyway, you'll be happy to know that things went down pretty much the way we figured."

Jonathan leaned back in his chair, tilting his head questioningly. "He's been carrying this secret around with him all these years. How did you get him to open up to you?"

Benny shrugged nonchalantly. "Once he realized I had most of the story anyway, he knew there was nothing left to lose. And I wasn't about to blow the whistle on a ninety-six year old guy on a sixty-year old manslaughter rap, was I? Even I have my limits, you know."

He came forward now in interest. "Manslaughter?"

"Yeah—that's one of the things he set me straight on." Benny's nonchalant manner disappeared, replaced by the compact intensity of a man with a story to tell. "Okay—we start with Mr. and Mrs. J. Elbert Crewshaw, darlings of New York society in the 1920's. According to Morrie, those two got married because Crewshaw fell in love with his father-in-law's money, and that, apparently, was the only kind of love that ever entered the picture. Crewshaw got himself appointed a cog in the Tammany Hall machine, his wife got her mansion on Park Avenue and everything was right with the world. Enter one Aurora Spencer, widow of some D.C. socialite. Morrie swears it was love at first sight, and he also swears that nobody gave it much thought at the time. Even Olivia knew about it, but didn't much care as long as she kept the name and the social position, and he kept everything else out of the gossip columns. Everything would have been just peachy if Crewshaw hadn't suddenly decided to show some redeeming social value in his otherwise ethically devoid life."

Despite himself, Benny's story had Jonathan thoroughly hooked. "What do you mean?"

"Let's just say that Crewshaw found out that the rabbit didn't die in vain—catch my drift? He decided to make an honest woman out of Rory, but for that he had to ditch the wife. Think about that for a minute—in the good old days, you could flaunt a mistress, even set her up in a mansion and make babies with her, but divorce your wife to marry the other woman? You should have heard Morrie talk about it—you'd think Crewshaw had decided to moon the Pope." Benny shook his head in mild disgust. "Of course he did confide that he had one other reason for trying to talk Crewshaw out of the divorce, and you gotta give the guy credit—when he comes clean, he trots out all the dirty laundry. Then again, this guy has been living with a lot of guilt for a lot of years—he was probably itching for a chance to unload."

"Well?" Jonathan prodded, impatient with Benedek's philosophical digression. "What was his reason?"

"Money," Benedek told him as though that much should have been obvious. "The divorce would have screwed up a lot of investments Morrie had made rather, ah...quietly. Of course, he ended up losing everything the next year in the market crash anyway—said he always took that as some kind of divine retribution. Where was I? Oh, right—anyway, he couldn't talk Crewshaw out of the divorce, so when he served the papers on Olivia, he got to working on her. Only as it turned out he succeeded a little too well. She got so bent out of shape about having to hand over her name to a woman she considered to be on a social level with pond scum that she left New York almost immediately to confront her dear hubby. Morrie tagged along with her because he could tell he had a crazy lady on his hands, and he blamed himself for setting her off."

"And the rest of it we know," Jonathan put in. "The night of the party, Crewshaw ordered Olivia, not Rory, out of the house, and for some reason he didn't know that Morrie and his wife had arrived together. She must have sneaked back up to confront Rory, there was an argument—" He paused, frowning. "Do we know whether Rory's death was murder or accidental?"

Benny shrugged, spreading his hands. "We may never know. Morrie says he lost track of Olivia after he pretended to chuck her out; he didn't get to Rory's room until after Crewshaw had already burst in and found his dear wife standing there alone. He got a little vague on details after that, and I don't think he was hedging, either—I think he genuinely lost control for a moment. He remembers Crewshaw attacking Olivia, and the next thing he remembers clearly is standing over the guy's body, with a fireplace poker in his hand."

"Morrie killed Crewshaw," Jonathan realized, nodding to himself at how obvious it all seemed now.

Benedek became strangely quiet for a moment. "Imagine living with something like that for nearly sixty years. He kept telling me how Crewshaw was his closest friend, like he was still apologizing." His gaze flicked sideways and a crooked grin appeared briefly. "Maybe he should have been talking to you, eh?"

Jonathan gave him a sharp look of warning. "Explain to me why none of this showed up in the forensic evidence," he challenged. "There must have been blood stains from Crewshaw in the room. And there was absolutely no hint of a pregnancy in Rory Spencer's autopsy report."

"Such is the power of the green stuff, pal," Benny assured him. "Olivia and Morrie spread a lot of it around to cover their tracks. They managed to stash Crewshaw in the ruins of the old Horner House, and Rory might have ended up there too if a servant hadn't gotten up early and started screaming. So they covered up what they could and paid off other people to cover up the rest. If you've got a problem with that scenario, talk to Morrie, he'll set you straight about what money can or can't do. Trust me—the man knows whereof he speaks."

Jonathan held up a hand in surrender. "All right, I believe you. After all, the police did find human remains in the old foundations, right where Teresa told them they'd find Crewshaw."

"Weird, isn't it?" Benny said, suddenly reflective. "The way Teresa talked about Crewshaw, like he was something you find under a rock. It never seemed to enter her mind that the guy was her grandfather, did it?"

"Not so weird," Jonathan assured him. "Apparently her grandmother's obsession affected Teresa very deeply, especially through her formative years. She merely reflected Olivia's feelings for a husband she felt betrayed by and...."

Benedek waved him off. "Skip the lecture. I was making an observation, not a lifetime commitment."

Jonathan spared him a look before continuing, "Olivia entrusted her granddaughter with the secret. As long as the house stayed in the family, that would have been no problem, but...."

"Somebody screwed up," Benny put in cheerfully. "Crewshaw's disappearance put the estate in probate for years, and by the time they hacked through all that red tape, Olivia's estate was in probate. Once that got straightened out, Uncle Sam snatched the house for back taxes. Teresa couldn't cover the tax bill out of her inheritance, so she scrambled around all her New York connections to form the Foundation, and got herself appointed director in the bargain. Only now all the decisions were out of her hands; she got outvoted on whether the Historical Society would be allowed to poke around the Horner House foundations...."

"So she manufactured the ghostly manifestations to scare off the volunteer workmen, knowing that they might turn up Crewshaw's body if they continued excavating," Jonathan said, shaking his head to realize the full extent of Teresa's machinations. "And she even went as far as to send to Georgetown for experts she thought would lend credence to her deception."

"And she got us instead," Benedek nodded with a shrug. "No wonder she went nutty; we ignored her little lights to go after the truth, which is precisely what she was trying to prevent in the first place."

It was Jonathan's turn to become reflective. "She was even willing to kill to protect her grandmother's secret."

"You don't have to tell me," Benedek assured him with a short laugh, gingerly patting his bandaged arm. His expression changed slightly, becoming puzzled. "That reminds me—back there on the balcony, I got the distinct impression that you had no idea that Teresa was trying to make a shish-kebab out of me until after you put her out of commission." He paused, gleaning from the guarded look in Jonathan's eye that this much was true. "I don't get it, then. Why did you bean her if you didn't know what she was up to? How did you know I needed help if you didn't know why?"

"I don't remember," Jonathan said, but his manner was so marked by hesitation that Benedek knew instantly that the man was lying. "Ah, ah," he warned, brightening. "Come on, Jack, you know better than that. You won't get a moment's peace until you come clean."

"I don't remember," Jonathan insisted again, but his voice was weaker; he was in obvious struggle with his better judgment, finally giving in with a sigh. "I mean...I don't remember much after everything in my head exploded."

"But do you remember what woke you up? What sent you out to the balcony?"

He nodded with extreme reluctance. "I...thought I heard Teresa calling me."

MacKensie's anxious expression grew more strained to see the odd look that came over Benedek's face at that revelation. "Teresa wasn't calling me?" Jonathan realized in dread-filled tones.

Benedek glowed. "Rory Spencer," he whispered in delight. "Rory Spencer wakened you from your sleep of death!"

"Benedek." It was a heartfelt plea.

"She came to me, Jack—god's own truth. I saw her as clear as I see you now; she was there, making sure I was okay, making sure that no one else came to harm because of what happened that night. She sent you out to stop Teresa!"

"Benedek, I don't want to hear this," Jonathan insisted. Relief flooded his face. "I was dreaming. That's it. I must have dreamed it. It couldn't have been the ghost of Rory Spencer—the woman's voice I heard was calling me Jack. Why would Rory Spencer call me Jack?"

Benedek beamed triumph. "Who said she was calling you?" He leaned in with a conspiratorial wink. "What do you think the 'J' stood for, pal?"

MacKensie paled; his mouth worked, but no words emerged. Benedek let the man stew a moment longer before rescuing him. "But if it makes you feel any better, fine. You dreamed it. I got no problems with that, because I know what really happened. My editor is gonna dedicate a shrine in my honor for this story, let me tell you...."

"Wait a minute," Jonathan objected, snapping to attention in his seat. "Benedek, you gave me your word."

Benedek gave him an affronted look. "Hey, I never said I wasn't going to write the story, did I? I've got this great angle—wait till you hear this."

Jonathan stiffened, averting his eyes; it was more than obvious that he did not want to hear anything Benedek had to say. He did not notice that, while Benedek did not miss a beat, the man was watching MacKensie's reaction very carefully as he continued, "'Amateur Psychic Solves Sixty-Year-Old Mystery'—a little rough, but we'll let Editing worry about polishing it up. We follow with a blow-by-blow description of the events leading up to the discovery of Crewshaw's body, then we backtrack with a reconstruction of that last night in the house. Once and for all, the world will know the truth—how Crewshaw's bosses sent enforcers to have a discussion with the guy about his voting record in Congress, and the tragic consequences of that fateful meeting." He paused, beaming a smile at Jonathan. "Good, huh? We'll blow the lid off Tammany Hall with this one, pal—Thomas Nast, eat your heart out! Oh, and I changed the name of the 'amateur psychic' to Dudley Eggleston. If you don't like it," he shrugged, "too bad. This is my story, not a democracy."

Jonathan was now staring at him in open amazement. "You'd really write the story like that? Why?"

Benedek spread his hands. "Why not? Okay, look—I think I deserve to get some kind of story out of this. When the police finally release the news that Crewshaw's body has been found, I plan to be right on top of it with this feature spread in the Register, even if I do have to make up most of the facts. It makes sense—come on, think about it. If I don't hit print with some cockamamie theory, someone else will, and who's to say that someone else won't hit a lot closer to the truth?" He paused, his expression changing slightly. "Besides, Morrie's already gone through a lot over this. I think he deserves to be left alone."

He looked away when Jonathan's searching look proved too much for him. After a long moment, MacKensie said quietly, "That's almost human of you."

Benedek cracked a smile, picking up on the note of affectionate sarcasm in the man's voice. "Yeah, I suppose so. These character flaws are gonna ruin my career someday." He looked up, changing his expression and the subject simultaneously. "Speaking of creative fiction, Jocko, I paged through that report you gave to Dr. Moorhouse...."

MacKensie shot him a wary look. "How did you get hold of that?" he demanded.

"Why do you keep asking me these silly questions?" Benedek said, mocking incredulity. "You know, I really liked the part where you mentioned hooking up with—oh, what was his name? Alan Smith, that's right. Real clever, Jon-boy, lots of imagination there. Not as inspired as Dudley Eggleston, of course, but if we all had my kind of talent, the world would be a much more interesting place. By the time I got to the part where Alan claimed to be the reincarnation of J. Elbert Crewshaw, I just couldn't put the story down. I think I can get my publisher to offer you a five figure contract for the paperback rights on this one, whaddya say?"

Jonathan, looking ill, regarded Benedek for a long moment trying to figure out if the man had an ulterior motive for taunting him with his deception. He gave up, saying, "If you have a point, make it."

Benedek's grin said it all; he had a point, and intended to savor it. "It doesn't take a genius with a PhD to figure out that for some inexplicable reason, you don't want Dr. M. to know that you were the subject of Denny's hypnotic regression." He held up a chiding finger. "That's not quite fair, you know."

MacKensie bristled at Benedek's condescending tone. "I don't give that much for fair," he hissed, holding up a tiny space between two fingers for emphasis. "She is perfectly satisfied with the results, she doesn't need to know how those results were obtained. Do you have any idea what would happen if she found out that I—that—" He broke off mid-stammer, shaking his head furiously. "I won't. I can't."

"I could," Benedek told him with feigned innocence.

Jonathan stared at him in horror. "You wouldn't," he pleaded.

"I might," he shrugged.

Swallowing hard, Jonathan forced himself to nod. "All right. What is it you want?"

Benedek studied his fingernails a moment before answering airily, "You'll find that I'm a man of very simple needs and wants, Jack. But if I remember correctly, there's a conversation we never finished. Two words." He leaned over the desk to confront a wary MacKensie. "Birthday party."

Jonathan slumped, defeated. "Birthday party," he echoed hollowly. "Not a word to Dr. Moorhouse?"

He held up a hand with a strong nod of assurance. "My word, no word. Now—" He clapped his hands together, rubbing them together in anticipatory delight. "Let's talk fan dancers."

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