

JOE

by M.D. Bloemker

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The dull, insistent sound of the ringing telephone pulled him from the soft fog of lethargy. He tried to lift his hand to snag the receiver, but nothing happened; an invisible force weighted down his hand, his arm, his entire body. No feeling, no sensation save a deep ache inside him, throbbing with a pain that knew no physical source. He struggled to make a sound, any sound, just to prove he could do it, and the resulting groan absorbed into the rough carpet beneath him. From the far distance where reality sat apart from him, the answering machine clicked on, and his voice spoke, mocking him with the life he no longer had within him. Then another voice, shrill with exasperation, answered his recorded ghost.

"Benedek, I've waited for you to call me at the hotel all yesterday afternoon as well as the entire night. Your no-show this morning at the gallery was the last straw. If you don't get back to me in another half hour with a damned good explanation, I'm heading to the airport and you can forget about writing this little venture off on the G.I. expense account. Goodbye."

His thin cry of protest cut off with the loud click of the broken connection. *Don't go. Please...don't go.*

The telephone was silent, a million miles away. He released a breath, and the throbbing pain inside him flared, rising up into his throat to choke him. Forcing open his eyes, he stared up at the tilted, blurred shapes before him, making out the partially drawn curtains across the window. Light. *Morning? How long? What time is it? What day is this? What's wrong with me?*

Memory came, and in that moment he knew that it belonged with the ache inside him. He tensed, willing the sharp-edged thoughts to return to oblivion, but they merely fragmented into a mad dance, taking away what little cognizance he'd gathered to himself.

He stopped himself, barely in time. Teetering on the edge of darkness and madness, he gasped sharply at the fathomless depths into which he'd nearly been lost. Light, he needed light to drive away the blackness, heat to disperse the coldness in possession of his soul. From a place he didn't know existed, he found the strength to pull himself forward, seeking the mottled circle of sunlight spilling onto the carpet. Spent, he collapsed into its bright warmth, and with a long sigh curled up and drifted off, safe in a golden embrace.

"I don't believe I'm doing this. Why am I doing this?"

The cabby half-turned, looking back over his shoulder. "You say something, buddy?"

Embarrassed, Jonathan MacKensie cleared his throat as he sifted through the bills in his wallet. "I said, ah...thank you. Thank you very much."

Accepting his fare, the driver gave him a wary nod. "Yeah. Don't mention it."

MacKensie jumped back barely in time as the cab accelerated abruptly, diving back into the Greenwich Village traffic. With a rueful sigh for having almost become another taxi driver's anecdote, he turned to check the address against the scribble on his notepad. "Why am I doing this?" he muttered to himself, mounting the front steps to read through the tiny printed names under the mailboxes. "Why didn't I just go back to G.I.? Because I want to throttle him in person, that's why. Benedek, I swear that if you called me all the way up here only to take off on a lost weekend with one of your harem of floozies, death is going to be too kind a fate for you."

Leaning on the buzzer for five solid minutes produced no results. Blind with rage, he fumbled through his pockets, flipping through a key-ring until he found one etched 'E.B.—Front'. It fit, opening the security door with ease. Grim satisfaction made his step light on the three flights of stairs to Edgar Benedek's apartment. *You gave*

me those keys in case of emergency, and it will give me great pleasure to show you whole new meanings of the word.

He rapped on the apartment door sharply, listening carefully for the slightest noise which would give away Benedek's presence. Hand raised to knock again, he hesitated, a strange chill going through him. *If he's not in there, making a fool out of myself out here in the corridor isn't going to do any good. If he is in there, he must know he can't hide from me forever.*

Stepping back, he chewed his bottom lip as he eyed the closed door speculatively. *Benedek, I don't know how you feel about your 'space' being invaded, but you did give me the keys. And if you're playing some sort of asinine game, you deserve the unwelcome intrusion.*

He squared his shoulders, fighting back another chill as a little, unwelcome voice in the back of his mind added, *And if there's something wrong...*

The keys wouldn't sort out, and then he had difficulty fitting the right one into the top lock. *Calm down*, he chided himself, realizing that his anger had faded away, replaced by a cold surge of open anxiety. *Just calm down. What could be wrong? Benedek's just being...*

The key fit easily, but froze half-turn. Twisting the other way, he heard the lock snap into place.

He stopped breathing as he reopened the lock. Numb fingers sorted out the next key, slotted it into the middle lock on the fifth try. The key froze half-turn.

Stepping back, he stared at the door as though it had committed some horrible betrayal. *Maybe he forgot to...no, even dead drunk, he'd never...well, it's possible, I suppose...no, he's lived in New York all his life, he'd never...*

He ran an agitated hand over his face, then reached out for the doorknob. It turned easily. Letting the door fall open, he peered into the shadowed foyer. "Benedek?" he called, his voice weakened by growing fear. "Benedek? Are you there?"

No answer. He eased in, carefully leaving the door ajar in the event a fast exit became necessary. "Benedek?"

What am I doing? Maybe I should just go out and call the police. Maybe that's a very good idea. Maybe I'll do that.

A sound froze him in mid-turn. He'd heard that sound once before, long ago. And it had haunted his dreams and his nightmares ever since. In the middle of the night, an ordinary night at the end of an ordinary day in the middle of an ordinary week, he'd left his bed to fetch a glass of water. Passing his father's study, he'd heard a strange noise, and paused to investigate. He'd expected to find the elder MacKensie expressing non-verbal displeasure at some colleague's newest published work. What he'd found was his father slumped in his reading chair, clutching at his chest, his face chalk white and already tinged with blue.

No. Anger filled him, warring with panic. No, this isn't happening again. I won't let it. Benedek, don't do this to me, I can't take it. Don't...

He moved without conscious thought or feeling, entering the living room to peer cautiously around. And went cold to see the body sprawled on the floor by the front windows.

Sickness filled him, not the least of which was guilt as the little voice in his head screeched, *You bastard. I asked you not to do this to me.*

Shoving aside the thought as a selfish indulgence, he crossed the room quickly, dropping to his knees at the man's side. "Benedek?" he said in a voice with no breath. He glanced around, taking mental inventory. No signs of violence; no pools of blood. Not even an open bottle in sight. Reaching out with a trembling hand, he touched the man's raised shoulder, shaking lightly. "Benedek?"

A sharp, muffled gasp from the huddled form heartened him. He stopped short of asking whether Benedek was all right. Simple logic told him that if the man had been over two hours late for their scheduled meeting, he'd spent all that time, possibly more, just like this. "Look, I'm going to call for help. Don't move...no, come on, don't—"

Benedek shifted, stiffening as Jonathan took him by the shoulders in an attempt to calm him. He tried to pull away, making frantic, guttural noises of pure panic.

"Benedek!" he gasped. "Come on, it's me. It's Jonathan, come on, relax. Relax."

The stricken man's struggles faded as he slumped heavily, exhausted or unconscious. Jonathan forced himself to move, keeping one frantic eye on his friend as he made his way to the telephone. *What happened here?* The question became a pounding plea inside his head as he willed himself to calm, punching out the emergency number. *My god, what happened?*

"Hi."

The soft feminine voice startled him out of a half-doze. He blinked up at the white-clad woman before him, unable to remember where he was let alone who she was. Her smile widening in mild amusement, she offered a cup to him. "I was right. You need this."

Nurse. Hospital. "Oh." Clearing his throat, he straightened in his chair, wincing at the protest of his stiffened muscles. "Thank you, Miss, ah...Cerrone."

"Gina," she corrected him with a soft smile. "I hope you like it with cream and sugar."

"Cream and sugar are fine," he assured her, trying not to make a face as he sipped the too-sweet, too-milky concoction. "Is there news yet?"

She hesitated, her eyes seeking help from some nebulous place off to her right. "Um...."

His face fell. "Not yet?"

"No," she shrugged, embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

"Then when? When is someone going to talk to me around here?"

"How about now?" a new voice interjected. "Or would that be rushing things?"

Gina jumped guiltily. "Dr. Penner," she coughed, backing away from Jonathan's chair. "I was just, ah...."

"On your break," the young man smiled. "Yes, I see that. Very good, Nurse Cerrone. Carry on."

Her consternation twisted slowly into wry amusement as he gave her a sly, sideways glance. "Carrying on, Doctor," she murmured, giving him a flip, mock salute as she moved away.

The doctor settled himself on the low table facing Jonathan's chair, holding out his hand. "I'm Dr. Penner, Mr. Benedek's attending physician."

MacKensie introduced himself automatically, taken aback by the man's youthful appearance. The flaming red hair, wide blue eyes and splash of freckles wouldn't have been out of place on one of Jonathan's first year anthro students. "How is he?" he managed to get out around his surprise.

"I'm technically not at liberty to discuss his condition at the moment," he began with marked hesitation, flipping up some pages on his clipboard as he spoke. "But I did want to ask you some questions before I called the police in."

"The police?" He cleared his throat of the undignified squeak. "But there wasn't—I mean, I didn't see...."

"What exactly did you see, Dr. MacKensie?"

Something about the man's voice and the sudden, intense light in his eyes cut him like a cold knife. Swallowing, he said as steadily as he could manage, "I didn't see anything that would lead me to believe that the police should have been called."

Penner inclined his head curiously. "You didn't check for injuries?"

"No," he stammered. "I thought...some kind of collapse...*injuries*?"

A subtle change came over Penner's face, as though he partially accepted Jonathan's agitation as genuine. "Dr. MacKensie, your friend sustained a substantial loss of blood. Surely you would've noticed?"

"Blood?" he echoed without voice. "There was...there was no—the paramedics will tell you, there was no blood...." His voice trailed off again in faint horror. "...no blood anywhere."

Penner checked something in his notes and nodded to himself. "That leaves two possibilities. One, that the blood loss occurred elsewhere, and Mr. Benedek was then moved to his apartment. Possible, but improbable."

"And the second possibility?" he asked faintly.

He consulted more notes. "You told the paramedics that you found the door unlocked, nothing in the apartment disturbed?"

His voice failed him again, forcing him to nod. Penner glanced up, shrugging. "I'd say that, given the extent, location and certain...other peculiar characteristics of his injury, Mr. Benedek knew his attacker, and...."

"And?" Jonathan prompted when Penner trailed off into indecisive silence.

"And...." He sighed heavily, shaking his head over his notes. "He apparently has a friend who thinks he or she is a vampire."

Vampire. Jonathan hesitated at the door of the hospital room, his fist pounding the air in rhythm to the incessant chorus in his mind. *Only you, Benedek. Other people get run over by buses or fall off mountains. You invite vampires to tea.*

He aborted his third attempt to go forward, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. *I'm not going in there roaring. I'm not. Calm down. Dr. Penner says he's a mess, this isn't the time to take his head off, no matter how much personal satisfaction it would give me.*

The churning in his head and stomach remained stubbornly violent, and with a frustrated sigh, he opted for a quick trip down to the cafeteria and a long session with several cups of weak coffee. But no sooner had he turned than Nurse Cerrone appeared in the doorway, carrying a tray. "Dr. MacKensie," she greeted him with a smile. "You can go in now."

"Thank you," he said with a wan smile, realizing that unless Benedek were asleep or half-conscious from medication, the woman's voice had just betrayed his presence.

She exited the room with another smile. Straightening his shoulders and his resolve, Jonathan leaned in, rapping lightly on the door frame.

He started to speak, but his first look at Benny left his mouth hanging open in shock. He'd visited Edgar Benedek in hospital rooms before, and the memory of those past times in no way prepared him for this. Even recuperating from a near-fatal car crash, even medicated to the gills, Benny had never looked so...so....

Dull eyes turned towards him. "Hey," Benny greeted him, without even an attempt at a smile.

Jonathan approached awkwardly, forcing himself to breathe and swallow. "You, ah...." He cleared his throat, buying enough time to think coherently. "How are you feeling?"

He winced at his own fatuousness, but Benny didn't react at all. After a moment spent staring blankly at Jonathan, he shrugged almost imperceptibly, turning his unfocussed gaze to stare into the distance.

Pulling up a chair, he settled in, scrambling to put words to the tumult in his head and heart. Benny's drawn face was very nearly the color of the pristine white bandage covering most of his neck and throat, and it was all Jonathan could do not to stare at it in dread-filled fascination. "Are...are you all right?" he ventured.

No answer save a tiny nod of his head. Fear stabbed him. Dr. Penner had only described physical injuries, tangibilities. But this was something far worse, and far more insidious. Benny had suffered a blow to the spirit, and the damage ran deep. Too deep. Perhaps even a mortal wound.

He shook off the thought. "Look," he faltered. "Is...is there anyone you want me to call?"

Benny shook his head tersely, still staring blankly ahead. Wetting his lips, Jonathan tried again. "Well...then is there anything I can d—get for you? Magazines, books, your tape recorder?"

For a moment, there was no reaction. Benny interrupted Jonathan's sigh of defeat. "What time is it?"

"Time?" He blinked three times before remembering to consult his watch. "It's, uh...it's a little after seven."

Benny's head turned towards the window. The blinds were closed, edged with orange-red light. "Seven," he repeated thoughtfully.

Jonathan waited, but no further comment was forthcoming. "Maybe I should just let you get some rest," he said, getting up awkwardly. "I'll, ah...I'll come back tomorrow morning, and...uh...."

"Wait."

He froze at the sharp, almost panicked command. Benny's hand lifted slightly, half restraint, half plea, lowering as he fought to raise his eyes to meet Jonathan's. "You...." He cleared his throat, looking away again. "You're coming back. Tomorrow."

Hesitating, he tried in vain to study the shadow over the man's face, an attempt to gauge the source of the man's odd behavior. "Yes. I mean—if that's all right."

A flicker of irritation passing over Benny's face told him he'd guessed wrong, leaving more frustration in its wake. *Dammit it, Benedek, if you want to say something, say it. I'm not a mindreader.*

"Did you want me to bring you anything?" he ventured.

He shook his head, pulling inward again. Shoulders slumping in exasperation, Jonathan mumbled a good-bye, turning to leave. Again the voice spoke sharply. "Wait. Jonathan—wait."

Unclenching his fists, he forced the scowl off his face before turning back. "Yes?"

Benny spoke with obvious difficulty, but whether from exhaustion or something more emotional, Jonathan couldn't tell. "Before you go. Could you—could you do me a favor?"

Nurse Cerrone chewed her lower lip in an expression of uncertainty Jonathan MacKensie was beginning to know quite well. "I don't know," she murmured for the fifth time in as many minutes. "It really can't wait until tomorrow?"

He put effort into brightening his smile. "You said yourself that he seemed to be very depressed, and, well...it really means a lot to him."

She drew a deep breath and held it. Encouraged, he took a chance that he'd read her previous signals correctly and slipped his hand carefully over hers. "It would mean a lot to me, too," he suggested with a quiet smile.

Air leaving her lungs in a rush, she deflated with a shrug and a smile. "Okay. Just give me a few minutes while I check with the E.R. staff, and keep your fingers crossed that I can talk somebody into running it over."

He gave her a smile of complete faith, receiving a promising one in return as she crossed to the other side of the nurse's station. Only when she was occupied on the phone with her back turned to him did he allow himself to sag against the counter. *A favor.* With a low sound of growing disgust, he fished a small object out of his coat pocket. It had taken nearly ten minutes of searching, but he'd finally tracked down a silver cross in the hospital gift shop. And then he'd spent five more minutes squirming under the indulgent smile of the cashier. *She thinks I'm bringing religious comfort to a sick friend. And was I going to disillusion the poor soul? Was I going to tell her the real reason I bought this?*

His fist closed over the cross as anger overwhelmed him again. *And what is the reason I'm standing here embarrassing myself? An explanation. That's all I want, Benedek. A simple, coherent explanation. After what you've put me through over the past twelve hours, is that so much to ask?*

Leaning against the counter, he propped his head wearily in his hand and closed his eyes, letting the questions do a slow roll through his mind. *What happened last night? Why can't you look me in the eye?* The sharp edges of the tiny cross cut into his palm, adding fuel to his anger. *A silver cross. Get me a silver cross, he says. Doesn't matter why. Just do me this one little favor, he says. A silver cross.* His hand slipped down his face, dropping to pound, fisted, against the counter. Dr. Penner's voice echoed hollowly in his ears. *He apparently has a friend who thinks he or she is a vampire.*

You think so, too—don't you, Benedek?

"Your lucky day." Gina's bright voice startled him out of his bitter reverie. "I got someone to shoot it over, and it only cost me lunch tomorrow and coffee for a week."

He accepted the brown envelope with a smile of thanks. "Well, since you paid such a stiff price, I'll have to make amends somehow. Perhaps...dinner?"

Her eyes sparkled as she leaned against the counter towards him. "I'll check my schedule and let you know when I'm free," she smiled warmly.

For the first time in two days, his spirits lifted. And then the brown envelope caught his eye, deflating him abruptly. "I'd, uh...better get this to him."

"Okay," she said, pulling a mock pout. "See ya."

Stuffing both cross and envelope into his pocket, he left the nurse's station with marked reluctance, turning down the corridor towards Benedek's room. Near the door, he slowed, hearing voices from within.

Expecting Dr. Penner or one of the floor nurses, he hesitated at the door to see that Benny had a visitor. A tall man in a dark jacket and jeans stood at the bedside, speaking to Benny in a voice too low for Jonathan to overhear.

The stranger had his back to the door and blocked Benny's view, giving Jonathan the chance to quietly withdraw rather than risk interrupting what looked to be a private conversation. But he hesitated, suddenly struck by an overwhelming sense of wrongness. Maybe it was the way the man stood, his body inclined over the bed as he spoke in low tones. Or perhaps it was merely that the entire situation had finally pushed him over the edge into screaming paranoia. Whatever the reason, his next feeling was that of surprise, for without even coming close to pinpointing the reason for his unease, he succumbed into its urgency, rapping against the doorframe as he stepped into the room.

The stranger started violently, half-turning to stare at Jonathan in blank surprise. "Hello," MacKensie said, mustering his standard smile of greeting. It froze the next second as he caught sight of Benny's face.

"Hi." The dark-haired young man held out a gloved hand. "I'm Joe, Joe Casertano. I'm a friend of Benny's."

Somehow managing to hang onto his smile, Jonathan introduced himself with a handshake. Paranoia notwithstanding, something was definitely wrong. From the drawn, fear-filled look on Benny's face as he shifted his gaze between Joe and Jonathan, Casertano's assertion of friendship appeared to be a one-sided opinion.

Clearing his throat, Joe said, "I, uh...I heard Benny here was laid up in the hospital, so...well, I thought I'd stop by. Cheer him up."

"Did you get those things I asked you for?" Benny said sharply, interrupting Jonathan's reply.

Bewildered, Jonathan studied the two men, desperately seeking an answer to the strange tension smothering the room. Joe, hands resting in his jacket pockets, stood straight and still. Only his dark eyes moved, first measuring Jonathan, then delivering some kind of unspoken message to Benedek. Benny, on the other hand, still pale and shaken, averted his gaze from his 'friend', giving Jonathan an intense, almost desperate look.

"Yes," Jonathan managed to speak calmly despite the chill that went through him. "I have them right...."

Benny's brusque gesture distracted him with his hand halfway out of his pocket. It took a moment and another sharp motion to understand. With a glance of mounting suspicion at Joe, Jonathan moved to the other side of the bed, only then removing the contents of his pocket.

Benny plucked the envelope from his fingers, crushing it in his fist as he forcibly closed Jonathan's hand over the cross. And froze, still painfully gripping MacKensie's hand, half-turned towards Joe as if daring him to react.

Mouth opened in protest, Jonathan glanced up at Joe's sharp gasp. The young man paled, staring almost fearfully at Benny, whose taut smile grew in turn. Backing away a few awkward steps, Joe coughed nervously. "Look, I'd, uh...I'd better be going. You take care of yourself, Benny, and uh...remember what I said. Okay?" Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel, exiting the room.

"Ow!" Jonathan snatched back his hand the moment Benny relaxed his grip.

"Sorry," the man muttered without feeling as he tore open the envelope. A large golden Star of David medallion fell out onto the blankets, and he picked it up with a relieved smile.

Dropping the cross into Benny's lap without apology, Jonathan scowled, massaging his reddened hand. "Your 'friend' certainly left in a hurry," he growled.

"Yeah." Benny stared a long moment at the open doorway, something dark growing behind his eyes. "Took off like a bat outta hell, didn't he?"

Realization drove a hammer blow into his stomach. He found a chair just in time to keep his weakened knees from ungracefully betraying him. *Stupid. Stupid. Why didn't I see it? I didn't call anyone, Penner didn't call anyone, Benny certainly didn't. Who else knew he was in the hospital? Who else except—*

Unexpected anger took him full force. "Why didn't you let Dr. Penner call the police?"

Benny glanced at him sharply, studying him for a long moment. "No reason to," he said shortly, returning his attention to the medallion he turned back and forth in the light.

"No reason?" His voice shook with suppressed rage. "Benedek, were we talking to the same doctor? That 'friend' of yours nearly *killed* you!"

"Hey." Benny glared at him, cold and implacable. "Back off."

"Back off?" Jonathan hissed. "Back off?" Something snapped, shooting him out of the chair. What pounded in his head and his chest was no longer anger, but an emotion more violent, and much more destructive: betrayal.

"I'll back off," he said with forced calm. "No problem. Because there *is* no problem, is there? You cut yourself shaving. No problem. You donated two pints to the Red Cross Bloodmobile and crawled back home to take a nap on your living room floor. No problem. I spend the worst hour of my life convincing your doctor that I wasn't the kinky friend who put you here in the first place. No problem! You send me on a wild goose chase to hunt up your Star of David *and* a silver cross, 'make sure it's silver not gold', I come back here and find you having a tete a tete with your really good buddy who you can't even look in the eye, looking like you're about to drink a toast with the Borgias...." He paused, gulping air into his depleted lungs. "No problem," he finished softly, pulling a taut, bitter smile. "I don't even know what I'm doing here. Do you?"

Benny stared down at the medallion in his hands, immobile. A slight movement, an intake of breath, as though something inside him wanted to speak; but it faded, leaving him still and silent.

"I didn't think so," Jonathan growled, heading for the door.

"Wait."

He slammed the doorframe hard with the flat of his hand. "What?" he hissed, exasperated, as he whirled back.

"Joe...." Benny wet his lips, eyes seeking the safety of the medallion again. "You gotta understand. He...he's a friend. A good friend."

"A friend," Jonathan echoed with a mirthless laugh. "Benedek, I was right about you all along. You don't know the meaning of that word. You never have—and you never will."

"Wait!"

The plea echoed behind him as he strode down the corridor. At the nurse's station, Gina looked up with a smile, which dimmed to see the stormy look on his face. He slowed, consciously setting aside his irritation in favor of more pleasant thoughts. "Hello," he greeted her warmly, and her smile blossomed back.

"Saturday next?" she suggested with an arched eyebrow.

Calculating his schedule quickly, he agreed with a nod. A few moments spent ironing out the details drained away the last of the angry flush in his face, and by the time he'd left the desk, his good mood was well on its way back.

A soft noise interrupted him mid-whistle as he waited for the elevator. Joe Casertano emerged from a shadowed alcove, hands pushed into the depths of his jacket pocket. He stopped a few paces away, giving Jonathan a strangely intense look.

"Mr. Casertano," he acknowledged with a wary nod.

"You're leaving?" Joe said quietly, inclining his head slightly.

"Yes." His throat constricted on the word, tightening to see Joe raise his eyes to stare past him, as though he saw a clear path to something previously obstructed.

"Where are you going?"

Jonathan blinked at the odd, prying question. "My hotel, actually. I, uh...."

Joe's gaze was back on him, hard and challenging. "What did he tell you?"

His voice held an implicit threat; Jonathan barely suppressed a flinch. *He's a friend. A good friend.* Benny's pain-filled words mocked him in a relentless echo as he willfully returned the steel-hard stare. "That's my business," he said quietly.

Joe's eyes narrowed slightly, flashing with brief fire. At that moment, the elevator door opened, distracting him. Automatically, he stepped forward, but a sideways glance at Joe stopped him in his tracks.

He'd underestimated the man's age by about ten years. The tell-tale lines stood out in harsh relief on Joe's pale face as he inclined his head again, this time speculatively. "Goodbye, Dr. MacKensie."

The soft voice sent an unexpected chill down his spine. He forced himself to move, but to his own surprise, retracted the step forward almost immediately. The elevator doors shut with a hiss, and he stared at them in blank confusion. Something wouldn't let him go. Perhaps it was guilt. Perhaps it was....

He glanced back at Joe, and saw fury mount in the man's black eyes. "I really think you should leave," he said tautly. "I mean—you look pretty tired."

Jonathan considered his cold words warily, feeling the icy grip of apprehension close on his throat. "Are you, ah...are you planning to stick around?"

His expression went to stone. "That's my business," he replied softly.

With an awkward nod, he stepped away from the elevators, turning back down the corridor. Joe's imperative voice stopped him mid-step. "Dr. MacKensie. I thought you were going back to your hotel."

Jonathan turned slowly, meeting Casertano's hard stare as calmly as he could manage. "I changed my mind."

"I really think...." He paused, aware of the too-harsh note in his voice. More calmly, he said, "I really think you should. In fact, it would be very, very good idea."

"Thank you for your concern," Jonathan returned in a measured tone meant to convey his awareness of Casertano's implicit threat. "But that's my business—isn't it?"

And with that, he willfully turned his back, striding down the hall back towards Benedek's room.

Replacing patient charts at the nurse's station, Gina looked up in surprise. "Oh, you're back," she beamed. "I think your friend may be asleep."

"I, uh...I won't disturb him, then," he smiled. "I think I left something in his room, though...."

"My shift is over in twenty minutes," she volunteered suddenly, leaning expectantly across the counter.

This time his smile was genuine, brightened by the first pleasant prospect he'd had all day. But as he turned, intending to probe for more details of her proposition, he glimpsed a shadow halfway up the corridor leading towards the elevators.

Fumbling through a hasty excuse, he put Gina's disappointed pout out of his mind as he drew up to the open door of Benedek's hospital room. An overhead lamp gave him just enough light to see, with relief, that Benny was indeed asleep. And with luck would remain so until morning, sparing him the embarrassment of an explanation for his sudden return.

As noiselessly as possible, he made his way to the armchair near the window, noting in passing that Benny's hand, resting against the covers, clutched something tightly. The silver cross was prominently displayed on a bedside table, which left little doubt in Jonathan's mind where the Star of David was.

Sinking down into the chair, he rested his head in his hand, closing his eyes tiredly. *Why am I here? What am I doing? You didn't ask for my help. And you haven't given me any good reason why I should offer it, either.*

Pain stung the back of his eyes, and he massaged his temples in a futile attempt to ease the ache. Shutting down, he sought the refuge of mindless silence. No thought, no feeling, just a gray, amorphous nothing. Safe. Silent.

A quiet voice parted the grey shroud. "He didn't threaten you, did he?"

Without looking up, Jonathan forced the words out with a heavy sigh. "Not in so many words."

A long pause; then: "Damn."

Jonathan let his hand fall from his forehead, coming to rest against the chair arm with palm open in mute appeal. "Benedek...Benny. Talk to me."

The silence stretched until Jonathan closed his eyes, shaking his head in exasperation. Then a slight rustle of movement; Mackenzie glanced up just as a small object landed in his lap. His hand closed on the silver cross in time to keep it from slipping to the floor.

"That one was for you, anyway," Benny said, pushing himself up painfully to a sitting position. "He won't bother you if you keep that with you."

Incredulous, Jonathan leaned forward in his chair. "Are you—are you saying that he...he really *is*...?"

"No." Benny gave him a look of cold contempt. "Don't be ridiculous."

He swallowed back his first impulse, settling for a low, dangerous, "What did you just say?"

"Look...." Benny ran an agitated hand over his face, still unable to look Jonathan in the eye even as his fingers hesitated on the bandage covering his neck. "Look, Joe has a few problems, okay? No, don't—don't say

anything, let me finish. He's not...he's not a vampire." An short, incongruous laugh shook his words; he glanced at Jonathan in a silent plea for understanding. "Not in the traditional sense of the word, anyway."

"Then in what sense?" Jonathan challenged softly, holding up the cross. "Why will this keep him away?"

"Because...." His head went back, eyes seeking an answer from above. "Because *he* thinks he's a vampire. I mean...he really believes it. So he has to play by the rules."

"Rules?"

"Rules. You know. Stalking by night, sleeping by day, crosses, garlic, wooden stakes...the whole nine yards."

Numb, Jonathan rose slowly, moving to stand by Benedek's bedside. "Drinking blood?" he offered, voice faint with horror.

Closing his eyes, Benny managed a short nod.

"Benedek...." He gestured with all the helpless anger boiling inside him. "The man is *ill*. He needs help."

"I know," Benedek agreed tiredly.

"Then for pity's sake, tell the police!"

"No."

"*Benedek!*"

Flinching, Benny shook his head stubbornly. "Don't."

"Don't? Don't *what*? Beat sense into that thick skull of yours?"

"Dammit, I already told you once," Benny hissed. "He's my *friend*."

"Then prove it. Get him some *help*."

"I did."

Jonathan blinked, nonplussed by the soft, explosive statement and the faint gleam of light reflected in Benny's filling eyes.

"I tried to get him some help." Benny ducked his head in embarrassment, making a desultory effort to clear the hoarseness from his voice. "How do you think I ended up here?"

"We grew up together. Hated each other's guts."

Benny, sprawled in the depths of an overstuffed chair, glanced disinterestedly at the glass of orange juice Jonathan placed at his elbow before crossing to settle on the sofa opposite. Looking away with a mild grimace, he continued in his level, emotionless voice. "Nothing personal, you understand. Just the way it was. Same neighborhood, different turf. I knew his brother better, if only by reputation. Tony C, they called him. He got iced in a street fight. I'm not sure, but I think they were rumbling with my old gang. That was after I left for college, though."

Jonathan leaned forward, clasping his hands between his knees. "So how did you become friends?"

"Fate," he decided after bemused reflection. "We ended up in the same frosh dorm. Same floor, same washroom. Same courses, same major—" His smile broadened crookedly. "Same high school guidance counselor, I guess. Sure, we carried a few attitudes over with us, so we didn't get along like a house afire at first, but...it didn't take us long to figure out we weren't on the street anymore." He straightened a little, a frown deepening on

his forehead. "You gotta understand something up front about Joe," he continued, more intensely. "He's been hit pretty bad all his life."

"Benedek, I'm not sure your defending him to me is going to make a difference...."

"Just...just hear me out, okay?"

Sensing a deep urgency in the man's quiet words, Jonathan acquiesced with a nod.

Drawing a breath, Benny settled back again. "One day—Joe was seven or eight at the time, I think—his dad dropped by a liquor store for a six pack and got his head blown off by some sleazeball who cleaned \$36 and change out of the till. His mom—well, I never heard much about her. They say she flipped out, got carted off to the state hospital and was never heard from again. Joe didn't talk about her, and didn't have much to say for his aunt and uncle, either. Boozers and brawlers, he called them. Tony took to the streets and Joe took to the books." He lapsed into silence, searching the memory as though surprised and puzzled by how much it haunted him. When he spoke again, his voice was softer still, forcing Jonathan to lean forward to hear him. "He never really was the same after Tony's funeral. Second semester, freshman year—yeah, I remember now. He nearly failed mid-terms. And he wouldn't talk about it, except once...once he got drunk at a frat party and he started talking about his brother. See, Tony never had much use for school—ninth grade dropout. He used to give Joe a lot of crap; didn't talk to him for five weeks after Joe won a full scholarship. The only thing that was important to Tony was the street, his gang. So I think a lot of Joe's problem was guilt—like he thought he should've been on the street with his brother, backing him up, and maybe...just maybe...he could have saved his brother's life if he'd been there like Tony wanted him to be."

"And you think that might have tipped him over the edge?" Jonathan ventured when the silence stretched into long minutes.

"I don't know," Benny sighed tiredly. "Joe, he...he always *was* on the edge. He was always...*looking* for something. Answers. Questions. Something more than what he had in hand." He gestured with a mild grimace. "Hell, we all were. I never figured anything was really wrong. After all, he ended up with the woman of *my* dreams."

"Oh?" Jonathan arched an eyebrow in interest.

"Well...he went home with my date, let's put it that way," Benny said with a thin smile. "I forgave him after he asked me to be best man."

The light in his eyes abruptly died, as though a memory had drawn a black curtain. He closed his eyes, and for a time, only the slight fall and rise of his chest betrayed any sign of life.

Fighting back a surge of impatience, Jonathan settled back on the couch with a sigh. He'd waited this long, though—he could afford to wait for as long as it took Benny to gather enough courage to continue.

Gina's inopportune entrance into the hospital room last night had interrupted their conversation, and the medication she forced on Benny dashed all hope of further explanation that night. He'd managed to keep both Gina and her shift replacement from tossing him out of the ward, and spent a restless night dozing in the armchair. Twice he'd started awake, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. But no sound save Benny's raspy snore disturbed the silence of the room; the shadows remained solid and unthreatening. And the silver cross remained where he put it, safely tucked into the breast pocket of his jacket.

Dr. Penner signed Benny's release only after expressing much reservation, and even then took Jonathan aside to extract a solemn promise to keep an eagle eye over his recalcitrant patient. Benny put up a token fight when informed, in so many words, that the terms of his release involved Jonathan playing nursemaid for at least two days, but even that slight effort drained him. Jonathan, increasingly alarmed by his friend's depleted physical and emotional condition, held back his questions, hoping that Benny would, in time, volunteer the answers on his own.

Benny, almost chatty in the cab, went coldly silent after they returned to his apartment, gruffly shaking off Jonathan's attempts to help him get dressed into his own pajamas and robe, tersely informing MacKensie that he intended to take a nap. Withdrawing to the living room, Jonathan did his best to amuse himself with a large collection of esoteric magazines unearthed from behind an antique grandfather clock. Benny emerged less than an hour later, padding over to the armchair to spend another ten minutes in blank, staring silence as Jonathan waited, ever patient, for him to speak, even as he waited now for him to continue.

He almost missed Benny's wistful sigh. "Marjorie."

Benny lifted a hand to his mouth, as though he'd betrayed some confidence by speaking the name.

"Marjorie?" Jonathan prompted. "That's his wife's name?"

Benny nodded vaguely, still lost in bitter thought. "She called," he said, staring down at the fingers he drummed listlessly against the chair arm. "She left a message on the machine, asking me to call." He drew a breath, shook his head slightly. "Begging me to call."

Deep lines of strain etched into Benny's chalk white face, betraying the effort each word cost him. Jonathan leaned forward again as Benny continued, "I, uh...I hadn't seen them in a while. Maybe eight months; maybe more. A coupla phone calls, a card at Christmas, usual stuff. Anyway, three nights ago I got in pretty late, and I didn't bother to check my messages until almost midmorning, so...so I'm not really sure when she called. She sounded pretty upset, like she'd been crying. Or maybe she was still crying. All she said was that she wanted me to call. That it was really important. So...I called."

"What did she tell you?"

Benny shook his head. "No answer. Which got me worried, because she'd specifically said she'd be home all day, that she'd be waiting for me to call. I tried for about an hour, then called her boss, who said she was out with the flu for a couple of days and he hadn't seen or heard from her since. I called a couple of her friends, they hadn't talked to her either, nobody knew where she was or why she was trying to get in touch with me...." He hesitated, drawing in another long breath. "I couldn't find Joe, either. Fresh out of college he gets a job with *American Film Review* magazine, right? I can't count how many times he'd tell whoever would listen that they'd have to bury him at his desk, I mean—he *loved* that job. Come to find out he'd quit the place three months ago. Slapped his notice on the chairman of the board, refused to give anyone the time of day let alone an explanation, and walked out in the middle of a deadline. I shoulda known. I shoulda known something was really wrong when I heard that one. Especially when I double-checked with personnel and they said no one had called to check his job references. I don't know why I thought to ask, but—the gal in personnel said she'd talked to Marjorie on the phone the day before. Apparently Joe'd never bothered to tell his wife he didn't work at the *Film Review* anymore." Again he paused, this time looking down at his hand on the chair arm as he pressed his lips together briefly. "I didn't forget about calling you at the hotel," he said quietly. "The first time I tried you hadn't checked in yet and then...."

Jonathan interrupted him with a sharp sound and an erasing motion of his hand. Understanding, Benny gave him a grateful nod of his head before continuing, "I spent the whole day going through the city, hunting up anyone and everyone I could think of who might know what was going on or at least tell me where Marjorie'd gotten off to. Even her mother hadn't heard from her for a week, but she'd been on one of those Atlantic City bus trips around the time Marjorie had called me. So...I finally went over to the apartment."

The flatness of Benny's delivery and the emphasis he lent the words sent a strange chill of apprehension through Jonathan as he leaned forward still farther. "And?"

"I was going to break in there if I had to, but I didn't have to. Joe answered the door, all buddy-buddy and hey-how-are-ya. When I told him I'd been trying to call all day, he said the phone was out of order. But when I told him that Marjorie left a message for me to call her and it'd sounded important—he changed."

Benny sank his head into his hand, rubbing his eyes wearily. "He confused the hell out of me. I couldn't figure out why he was getting so jumpy and defensive. I finally decided that I must have landed in the middle of some stupid quarrel. Figured it was nothing more than Marjorie getting ticked at him for something and doing the old 'the man I should have married' routine on him. So when he kept asking me, over and over again, what she'd told me, I laid down a smooth line about maybe I'd misunderstood and maybe it wasn't all that important and hey it's good to see you again, we've gotta get together real soon, see ya around. And beat all hell outta there."

Another tense silence descended, during which Jonathan hardly dared breathe. The hand finally dropped limply from Benny's forehead. "He must have followed me, because he was leaning on my doorbell not five minutes later. I...I thought he was stoned, flipped out. I mean, okay, he always was fascinated with the supernatural mythos, the entire concept of beings possessing incredible powers, even over life and death. He could get real eccentric about it, but it was something that we accepted as being part of him. The glassy eyes, the strange voice, the whole Boris Karloff number, that was just something he used to step out of himself from time to time. We all had our own ways of leaving the real world behind for a while, and that was his. Only this time—this time I realized that it wasn't a put-on. He...he really believed. And he thought that Marjorie and I were plotting behind his back to destroy him."

A dull ache rose in his chest, threatening to cut choke off his breathing, and suddenly Jonathan wasn't sure he wanted to hear any more. "Look," he said, rising to his feet. "This can wait. You really need to get some rest."

Benny seemed about to protest, but lacked the strength. He acceded with a weak nod, letting Jonathan help him to his feet, but making it clear he could navigate on his own.

"The couch pulls out, you know," he said as he crossed the room to the bedroom door.

"I'm, ah...." Shrugging, he swept a magazine off the coffee table, pretending resumed interest. "I'm fine. Thanks."

Pausing, Benny half-turned towards him. "If it's any help, we got absolutely nothing to worry about for at least four hours." A beat, then: "Get some sleep, okay?"

He stared unseeing at the open magazine, unable to react even as the bedroom door closed softly. Four hours of safety—four hours until sunset.

The ordeal of the past thirty hours pulled at him, taking away first his vision and then his energy. Stretching out on the sofa, he promised himself a few minutes of light doze. And woke, hours later, to darkness.

Something echoed in his ears, and he frowned, trying to capture the memory. The telephone rang again, and instinctively he struggled up to a sitting position before remembering that Benny's machine would answer. He sank back with a relieved sigh as the cheerful voice recited a well-remembered request.

For a moment, he thought the caller had hung up, and offered a faint curse in their name for disturbing him. Then: "Benny. Pick up the phone."

His heart jumped in his chest, snapping his eyes open. Without conscious thought, he stumbled to his feet, reaching for the receiver with a trembling hand. "Hello. Who is this?"

"Dr. MacKensie?" The voice went hard. "You didn't go back to your hotel."

He swallowed in a dry throat. "What do you want?"

"Put Benny on."

"He—he's resting. You'll have to talk to me. What do you want?"

"Jonathan!"

MacKensie willfully ignored the angry hiss from the direction of the bedroom as Joe informed him coldly, "That's between me and him."

"Not anymore. I'm making it my business," he said stiffly, foiling Benny's attempt to snatch the phone away. "If you have something to say, say it."

"Don't *do* this!" Benny whispered fiercely, making another futile grab.

"Put Benny on the phone."

Torn, Jonathan opened his mouth to refuse, but his resolution disintegrated under Benny's warning glare, enabling the man to pry the receiver out of MacKensie's nerveless hand.

"What?" he demanded tersely.

Jonathan made his way to a chair just as the last of his nervous energy deserted him. In the darkness behind hands folded over his face, he listened to Benny's taut, one-sided conversation.

"Where is she? Joe, just tell me. Okay, what's the number there? Because I want to talk to her, that's why. Never mind that, just...dammit, will you *listen* to me? All right, all right. Just tell me if she's okay. Joe...." His voice rose, cracking with agitation. "Joe, I swear. You're wrong. You...what?" He listened in silence for a time, his harsh breathing the only sound in the room. "Okay. Okay, I'll be there." His voice hardened as Jonathan raised

his head in question. "I said I'll be there. Don't...don't do that, okay? When I say I'll be there, I'll be there." His next words broke off in an exclamation of disgust; he pulled the phone away from his ear, glaring at it before slamming it back into the cradle.

"You'll be where?" Jonathan challenged softly.

Head lowered, hand still resting on the phone, Benny made a slight, aborted gesture of dismissal before releasing a long sigh. "I...I gotta get dressed," he mumbled.

He anticipated Jonathan's move to block his turn towards the bedroom, raising a defensive hand. "I didn't ask you to answer the phone," he said warningly. "I didn't ask you to butt in at all. But I'm asking you now—stay out of this. Okay?"

Too numb to react to the sharp edge of desperation in Benny's too-calm words, Jonathan managed to shake his head. "Doesn't work that way anymore."

"I say it does," Benny said stiffly, making another move Jonathan successfully intercepted.

"You already tried handling this alone," MacKensie reminded him. "So tell me what would have happened if I hadn't come back with your medallion and that cross when I did?"

"Nothing," Benny muttered, the lie draining his voice. "Nothing would have happened."

"And nothing's going to happen now, because you're not going anywhere," Jonathan informed him flatly.

"Take your best shot, then." Benedek glared at him in blazing defiance. "Because that's the only way you're going to stop me."

This time Benny got past him, making it to the bedroom door before Jonathan found enough strength to put into his voice. "Just...tell me why."

He turned to see Benny, face hidden in shadows, paused at the open doorway. "Why what?" was the careful, non-committal reply.

"Why do you keep calling him your friend?"

He made a slight movement, as if he tried to look at Jonathan and failed. "That...that doesn't change," he said quietly. "Joe has, but...I can't. Not the memories, anyway."

"If those memories mean so much to you, then why can't you see that you can't help him?" He gestured, a helpless, tacit appeal. "Let the police handle this. *Please*."

"I can't."

Jonathan's patience splintered into a thousand angry pieces. "After what he *did* to you? Benedek, for god's sake, the man nearly *killed* you. The only thing you owe him is to make sure he gets help, professional help." He leaned on every word. "Call the police."

"I *can't*."

His jaw tightened with fury even as his shoulders slumped in defeat. "Then what kind of friend are *you*?" he demanded wearily.

The silence grew, and Jonathan, shaking his head, started to turn away. Benny spoke suddenly, his voice firm, almost harsh. "You don't understand."

"No." He laughed bitterly, making a broad mocking gesture. "No, I don't suppose I do. So...go on. Make me understand."

"I'm not doing this for Joe." Benny's shadowed eyes sought him briefly before he turned his head away again. "I'm doing it for Marjorie."

He entered the bedroom, slamming the door on the last word, leaving Jonathan to stare after him in bleak, bewildered silence.

Slumped wearily in the armchair, he didn't look up when the door opened again, ten minutes later. He heard footsteps pause, then cross to the closet. A seeking rustle, the clang of wooden clothes hangers and then a quiet, terse, "You coming or what?"

He looked up in open surprise. "You're asking me?"

Shrugging into a windbreaker, Benny cracked a thin smile. "Get real, Jack. As far as Joe's concerned, you're in this so-called conspiracy up to your neck, you'll pardon the expression. And besides—it's the only way I can be sure you won't set the boys in blue on my tail."

"Put that way, maybe I'll stay right here," Jonathan returned sullenly.

"Suit yourself." Benny kicked the closet door closed. "Lock the door after me, don't let anybody in, and if you don't hear from me by morning...."

"Stop it," he snarled, giving him a black look of disgust.

"Hey." Benny flipped back all three deadbolts with practiced ease. "I don't have time for this, okay? You're either coming with me or you're staying. I don't care, 'cause either way, I'm gone."

"Benny."

He yanked the door open, but made no move to leave. "What?" he asked, his voice holding a steely note of defiance.

"Let me get my jacket."

Without turning, he nodded stiffly. "Speed it up. I haven't got all night."

Collecting his suitcoat, he arranged it carefully over his arm, joining Benny at the door. One look at his friend's pallid face brought back all of Dr. Penner's dire warnings full force. "You're in no shape to even be standing," he pleaded.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I guess Joe took a lot out of me, didn't he?"

He winced. "You bastard," he muttered, shaking his head.

"Two for two, Jonno." He glanced at MacKensie, a hard light in his watery eyes. "Whaddya say we get this show on the road? We're going vampire hunting, Jack."

"The Met?" Jonathan echoed *sotto voce* as he settled into the back seat of the cab. "It isn't even open this time of night."

Benny, slouched in the seat next to him, shook his head. "The steps. It's kind of a...private joke."

His voice shook with suppressed incredulity. "Joke?"

"That's where I introduced Marjorie to Joe."

After an uneasy silence, Jonathan remarked, "At least he asked to meet you in a fairly public place."

"You read the *Times* lately?"

He hesitated over the abrupt change of subject. "Not lately. Why?"

Benny didn't answer immediately, staring out the window as their taxi maneuvered through city traffic. "Past couple of months or so," he said in a voice Jonathan strained to hear. "Page ten fillers, nothing spectacular. People attacked in Central Park. Happens all the time, right? Their own fault for getting caught in the park after lights-out, right? Nothing to write home about, let alone rate more than an inch or two in the *Times*. Except, of course, for the nature of the attacks." Glancing briefly at Jonathan, he made a sharp gesture near his neck.

Jonathan was beyond feeling anything anymore. Even the ache in the pit of his stomach felt like a permanent part of him now. He nodded numbly, only mildly surprised that he wasn't surprised at all.

"Joseph Casertano, the Vampire of Central Park." Benny chuckled lowly. "Great headline. Feature spread, color photos...."

His voice trailed off; when he said no more, Jonathan released his breath slowly, giving up to a wave of relief. For just a moment, the spirit of the old, normal Edgar Benedek had surfaced, but that spirit didn't belong here anymore, not in a world tilted sideways and turned inside out. To dust off that brash facade and use it now would surely mean that Benny was within a hair's breadth of breaking apart completely. And his own equilibrium was too badly shaken to allow him to keep that from happening.

The silence held until the cab pulled up in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Benny, either lost in his bleak reverie or too tired to initiate movement on his own, didn't budge until Jonathan opened the door on his side, reaching in to take his arm. Exiting carefully, Benny's knees buckled immediately. He leaned heavily against Jonathan's shoulder until his breathing eased.

"Don't say it," he muttered, straightening with an effort. "Just...don't say it."

"I wouldn't waste my breath." He shifted, taking Benny's arm to guide him over to the steps leading up to the museum's entrance. "Sit down. I said, sit down. I don't care how foolish you feel about it. *Sit.*"

He sat, clutching at the stone for support as Jonathan released him, straightening cautiously. When he was sure that Benny was in no immediate danger of passing out, he turned to scan the immediate area with a wary eye. No sign of the dark, intense stranger Benedek insisted on calling a friend. "What time?"

"We're early." Benny leaned forward, massaging his forehead. "Maybe...ten minutes. Don't worry, he'll be here."

He stifled a bitter laugh. Worry. That wasn't the word he would have chosen for the acidic churning in the pit of his stomach.

The night air was warm, but he shivered under the assault of a vicious chill. Slipping on his jacket, his hand lingered on his breast pocket. By some miracle, the silver cross had stayed put. And for some reason, feeling it secure in his pocket gave him a little comfort. He found himself hoping that Benedek had thought to secure the Star of David somewhere on his person, but couldn't quite bring himself to ask outright.

In the taut, expectant silence which fell between them, an unanswered question resurfaced, nagging him until he found the courage to give it voice. "What did you mean?" He tried to turn, but failed; he needed everything he had just to speak. "In the hospital, when you said you were there because you tried to help him."

Benny sighed heavily. "Do yourself a favor, okay? Don't ask unless you really want to know."

"I really want to know," he lied quietly.

Finally able to turn around, he saw that Benny cradled his head tiredly in one hand, a dark silhouette in the yellow half-light cast by the surrounding city lights. "My own stupid fault," he said after a long silence. "I forgot. I forgot that one someone's really sick like that, they're convinced that they're normal and everyone else is nuts. I kept going on and on about how I wanted to help him, when what I should have been doing, what I *would* have been doing if I'd had half a brain, was realizing that he was thinking...." He faltered, drawing a deep breath to continue, "...he was thinking like a vampire. And to a vampire, there's only one kind of help." He mocked a sharp driving motion to his chest.

"He thought you were threatening to kill him," Jonathan realized, his throat tightening in growing horror.

He nodded vaguely. "Two points."

The answer only fueled the burning within him, until he had to bite his lip against the growing physical pain. He searched desperately for relief, and a vision sprang into his mind: the memory of Benny's sprawled body in the midst of an undisturbed apartment.

He let his head fall back, staring blankly at the dull grey night sky as he sought, in vain, for some painless, oblique way to phrase the question he needed answered. "Benedek. You had the Star of David with you. Why didn't you use it? Why didn't you fight?"

The silence accused him and humiliated him, and he cursed himself roundly, wishing the words back. But then the answer he hadn't really expected to get came, in a quiet, measured voice. "Have you ever been in a situation so incredible, so completely impossible that your brain just got up and walked away?" He drew a deep breath, holding it for tense seconds before releasing it slowly. "Have you ever been so scared that you didn't even feel it anymore?"

His knees wobbled dangerously; he eased himself down on the step next to Benny, his breath gone under the sudden violent pounding of his own heart in his chest. "No," he said thickly. "No, I don't suppose I have."

"You're damned lucky, then," Benny murmured bleakly.

The roaring in his ears grew, pounding furiously at his temples and the backs of his eyes. "What the hell are we doing here?" he sighed, starting to realize that he'd inadvertently spoken aloud.

Benedek glanced at him, surprise flashing briefly in his eyes. "I know why *I'm* here," he said with a cryptic shrug.

"Marjorie?" Jonathan guessed, giving the man a searching look.

He nodded, his attention fixed on the hands he clasped between his knees. "I keep hearing her voice, that message she left on my machine. At the time, I thought she was just upset." He shook his head. "She was beyond upset. She was scared, really scared. I didn't understand then. I sure as hell understand now."

"You said these park attacks have been going on for a couple of months, right around...." He paused, swallowing. "Right around the time you say Joe quit his job. Do you think she only just recently figured out what was happening?"

"I don't know," he sighed with another shake of his head. "I just...don't know. I wish I knew where she was, I wish I could've talked to her, I wish...I wish I'd been there when she'd called. Damn."

Unable to muster words of comfort that wouldn't sound like he'd swiped them from a ninety-cent studio card, Jonathan stared out at the city street before him. He felt reality tilt sideways, watching the shift with vague fascination. *Maybe this is all a dream. That's it. I'm still asleep on Benny's couch. Of course. Jonathan MacKensie, sitting on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum at this time of night waiting for a vampire—what other explanation is there?*

He nursed the concept, using bemusement like an icepick, chipping away the dread and fear holding his soul in a cold prison. Lost in the comforting fog, he sensed rather than heard the stealthy approach.

Joe stood not five feet away on the pavement at the bottom of the steps, regarding them dispassionately. Jumping to his feet, Jonathan instinctively placed himself between Casertano and Benny, cursing himself for letting the man get so close in the first place.

Dismissing Jonathan with a glance, Joe gave Benny a look of dark fury. "What's he doing here?"

"I couldn't afford crutches."

Bewildered, Jonathan turned as Benny struggled to his feet and gave Casertano an almost friendly nod of greeting. "And he's also good for cab fare. Come on, Joe, don't look like that. He's harmless. Trust me."

"Why should I?" Joe challenged, his voice low and dangerous.

Reaching into his pocket, Benny removed his Star of David medallion, holding it up to catch the light from the streetlamps. Joe backed up a step, his lips drawn back in a soundless snarl.

Jonathan's sigh of relief froze in his throat as Benny tossed the object carelessly into the street.

"That's why," he told Joe quietly.

Casertano studied him suspiciously as he straightened from his defensive crouch. "What's your angle now?" he demanded tautly.

"No angle." Benny met his glare calmly. "Just simple logic. You and me, we've been friends a long time. That's got to count for something, right?"

Eyes narrowing, Joe inclined his head to study Benny more closely. "Depends on what you mean."

"I mean that I'm on your side now." He made his way unsteadily down two steps, ignoring Jonathan's frozen astonishment to approach Joe warily. "I was wrong. And you were right."

He returned Joe's steady glare without flinching, holding out his hand. After a tense silence, Joe glanced first at Benny's outstretched hand, then up at Jonathan. "What about him?"

"What about him?" Benny shrugged disinterestedly. "What can he do? It's just our word against his."

"No," Joe said stiffly, shaking his head.

"Okay." He gestured placatingly. "No sweat, he's easily dealt with. So—do you want to kill him, or shall I?"

Sick and dazed, Jonathan turned away, staring up at the museum's imposing facade; the massive sweep of the steps, the cold, shadowed stone—solid, real, distant, untouchable. Behind him, the voices continued, relentlessly dragging him back into the mad dream. But it wasn't a dream, was it?. This was real and this was insanity.

Joe broke the tense silence with a low, bitter laugh. "Don't play stupid games with me."

Listen to him, Benny. Don't play these games—my nerves can't take much more of this.

"Do you really expect me to believe you?" Casertano's voice rose, filled with anger and cracking with fear. "After what you said to me? After what I...what I—"

"I understand," Benny told him earnestly when Joe broke off with strange choking gasp. "Look at me. You said you could always tell when I was yanking your chain. Just look at me. I don't hate you, and I'm not afraid of you anymore, because I *understand*. It's...it's what you are. You only did what you had to do."

Oh, god. Closing his eyes, Jonathan shook his head ruefully. *Is this worth it? Is it really worth selling yourself out for his sake?*

"Benny—it's too late," Joe said, both a warning and a heartfelt apology.

"No. No, it's not. I won't let it be too late. Joe, I want to help you—no, listen to me."

"Listen to you?" he rasped. "Listen to you the way you listened to me?"

"You kept asking me to understand. You said that all you wanted was for somebody to understand. Well, I do now. Joe, we're friends. That hasn't changed. Nothing can ever change that."

"No," he said numbly, in pain. "No, not after...not after what I—"

"Okay. Let me prove it to you. Anything, Joe. I'll do anything. Just name it."

A long silence broken only by Joe's ragged breathing, then: "Even kill him?"

The question was phrased facetiously, but Jonathan's spine stiffened under the bitter hatred underlying Casertano's tone. And his blood ran cold at Benny's ready reply: "If it came down to a choice—yeah. You bet."

"I don't believe you," Joe informed him tautly.

Funny thing is—I do. So what does that say about me? And do I really want to know?

"What do you believe, then?" Benny challenged quietly. "Do you at least believe that I'm your friend?"

"I don't know," he faltered. For a moment, Joe's black and stony facade cracked; in his voice Jonathan recognized the desperation of a lonely, tormented man.

"Joe...."

"I said I don't know!" His shout dissolved into a broken gasp. "You...you're confusing me. Yesterday—yesterday you were afraid of me. You *hated* me. I saw it in your eyes, Benny. Don't deny it."

"I'm not denying it. I'm telling you that I didn't understand then. But I understand now. You did what you had to do. How can I hate you for that?"

Every muscle in his body stretched achingly taut, Jonathan waited for Joe's answer, suddenly sure that with those last pleading words, Benny's hand had been played out.

Joe made a single sound, a sharp sigh cut off by a convulsive swallow. His polished-granite poise had completely disintegrated, leaving him torn and frustrated. As much as Benny's obscure game plan distressed him, Jonathan found himself grudgingly admiring the net result. But the game was only half-finished. Every hinged on Joe now, and the tense, expectant silence was rubbing his nerves raw.

"You can say that?" Joe's voice was fragile, ready to break. "After—after what I did to you, you can still say that?"

"I can say it," Benny assured him. "And I can say it as loud and as long as it takes you to hear it—and believe it. Joe—I mean it. I want to help. And I'm not talking about trying to stop you, or any of that other nonsense I was spouting the other night. I mean help. On your terms. You don't have to face this thing alone anymore. Please. *Let* me help."

Jonathan thought the silence was only Joe caught in the grip of indecision, but Benny spoke again, more softly and less earnestly. "I told you, don't worry about him. I can deal with him—one way or the other."

Irritation rose like bile in his throat. Tired of being discussed like so much meat on the block, he started to turn, but his muscles betrayed him, leaving him still and silent. This wasn't his fight. And there was nothing he could offer to either side, either pro or con. All he could do was listen.

Joe drew a shuddering breath. "You...you keep saying you understand, but—you don't. You don't. You couldn't, no one could, not...not really."

"Then *make* me understand," Benny insisted earnestly, and the faint echo of his own voice in plea sent another chill through Jonathan. "Please."

"Okay." He spoke without breath, still in the grip of violent emotion. "Okay. Sure. You want to understand? We can start with something simple. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

Animated by a sudden surge of fear-spurred adrenalin, Jonathan turned to see Benny reaching out a hand to Joe, who glanced at them both before averting his face to the shadows. "I want to show you something. Something to help you understand. I mean, *really* understand. You coming?"

"Yeah," Benny said readily, although Jonathan didn't miss the hesitant beat. "Sure, I'm coming. Lead on, MacDuff."

Joe looked at Jonathan sharply, a fierce light coming briefly into his eyes. "He comes, too."

"He wouldn't miss this for the world—would you, Jonno?" Benny said hastily, stepping up to put a hand on Jonathan's arm.

MacKensie recoiled reflexively, and for a moment it seemed Benny's unwelcome touch would release all his pent-up anger and exasperation. But he held onto his composure with a massive effort, rewarded by the single, quick motion Benny was careful to shield from Joe: a slight lift of his hand and arch of his eyebrow that said, simply, 'trust me'.

And as they moved from the steps and across the street towards Central Park, Jonathan could only marvel at how easily and implicitly he could still give Edgar Benedek his trust.

And at how quickly his nerve gave out the longer they walked, following Casertano deeper and deeper into the park. At least the night was clear, and a quarter moon shed some light over the path they trod. But a deep sense of dread seized him as he realized that they had walked at least a mile into the depths of the park and Joe showed no sign of slowing. And Benny's breathing was becoming harsher and harsher with the effort of keeping pace.

"Hey!" Jonathan's shout was equal parts alarm and irritation as Benny stumbled against him. Grabbing the man's arms, he tried to steady his friend, but with a low gasp, Benny slumped.

"Whoa," he mumbled as Jonathan lowered him to a sitting position on the asphalt path. "Did we get on the carousel? Quit spinning, willya, Jonny? You're making me dizzy."

Jonathan glared up at Joe, who had turned back to regard them stonily. "Is this really necessary?" he demanded stiffly. "He's supposed to be home, resting."

Benny, clutching Jonathan's arm for support, dug his fingers in with surprising strength. "Easy, Jack," he whispered warningly. "I'm okay. Just let me get my wind."

"You're not okay." He shook with the effort of controlling his boiling fury. "Dammit, you're not okay. Benedek, this is insane. You're *killing* yourself, and you're forcing me to help you do it!"

"Chill out," Benny hissed, gasping sharply as the words took away what remained of his strength.

The note of pleading in the man's voice fazed him only a moment; his hand gripped Benny's, feeling the alarming iciness of the pallid flesh, and blind rage took over again. "No. No, this is as far as I'm letting this get. Casertano, listen to me. What's going on here between you and Benedek is one thing, but I'm responsible for what happens to him. I've let this insanity get too far as it is. If you're any kind of friend, then help me get him home where he belongs, before it's too late."

"Damn," Benedek sighed, his head dropping to his chest. Jonathan caught and braced him as he slumped sideways, barely conscious.

"Casertano!" Jonathan stared up at the man as he approached, no change in his shadowed, stony expression.

"It *is* too late," Joe said softly. "It's been too late for a long, long time."

He dropped to a crouch, tilting his head to regard Benny with a strange, mirthless smile. "I could end it for you now." His voice was sibilant, strangely seductive. "You could join me, Benny. Think about it. We'd be masters of the night. Invincible."

Jonathan's heart was ice, as cold as Benny's hand still gripped in his. In the bracing support of Mackenzie's arm, Benedek shifted, lifting his head to peer at Joe with glazed eyes.

The odd plea in Casertano's voice almost touched him, but again a more violent emotion held sway; Jonathan's voice hardened as he said, "Hiding in the dark? Living like an animal? Attacking people who only want to help you?"

"Jonathan, don't," Benny rasped, a sharp warning.

His patience finally snapped. "All right," he said stiffly. "I won't. As soon as you tell me why defending him is more important than listening to me."

Benny groaned, shaking his head. "You...you don't understand, do you?"

"What's to understand?" he laughed bitterly. "You've made your choice. I'm the stupid one, letting you go on kicking me this long. Next time, I'll buy you a set of crutches and mail you a check for the cab fare—if there *is* a next time."

Joe suddenly laughed, a chilling sound in the tense silence. "Don't look so upset, Benny," he said mockingly. "You haven't lost your touch. At least one of us believed you." He paused, the gleam in his eye changing. "And it wasn't me."

His head went back, laughter taking on a manic intensity. "But you were good. You were damned good," he chortled, rising to his feet. "Almost like old times. Almost—but not quite." The black mask dropped abruptly into place; the cold eyes accused them. "Not quite like old times," he murmured darkly.

"I told you the truth, Joe," Benedek said wearily. "I'm your friend."

"I have no friends."

Benny stared as Joe rose to his feet with a low chuckle. "Didn't you listen to yourself?" Casertano chided. "It's what I am, Benny. I walk alone, in darkness."

Under his hands, Jonathan felt a violent shiver go through Benny, as though the words taunted from a blacker memory. "It doesn't have to be this way," he protested weakly.

"Yes." Eyes sparking with confidence, Joe nodded slowly. "It does."

Only Jonathan heard Benny's despairing whisper: "Damn."

Even without that tacit confirmation, Jonathan understood the threat behind Joe's calm words, and hid his flash of terror under the guise of fierce defiance. "Benny, I'm taking you back to your apartment. Now."

Benny laughed once, the derisive note echoed in Joe's taut smile. "Sorry, Jonny," Benny rasped, his voice pitched only for MacKensie's ears. "Too late."

"No," he snapped, glancing up as Joe took a step forward.

"Do you need a hand?" Joe asked, his smile broadening. In the half-lit darkness he loomed over them like a lean cat in false repose, lazily contemplating its next fatal strike. The mental image struck ice into Jonathan's heart as he managed, "No, thanks. You've done enough as it is."

"Hey, hey," Benny protested as Jonathan tried to urge him to his feet. "Forget it. He's not going to let us go anywhere, okay?"

"It's still two against one," Jonathan informed him stubbornly, making sure he spoke loudly enough for Joe to overhear.

"Come again?" Benny coughed weakly for emphasis.

Jonathan met Joe's black eyes, saw the feral taunt there, and his breath fled to glimpse, for one wrenching moment, what Benny must have seen when finally confronted with the inescapable truth of his friend's deadly insanity. He nearly gasped to feel the threatened grip of enervating terror, and fought free of it enough to growl, "I've been spoiling for a good fight."

Joe inclined his head, studying him without expression for a long moment. Then, with a shrug, he stepped back with feigned nonchalance. "Now do you understand, Benny?" he said, his voice gilded with false sincerity. "This is my existence. This is what I am." Turning abruptly on his heel, he paused to deliver a taunting grin over his shoulder. "This is my turf."

And before they could react, Joe disappeared into the darkness.

Jonathan released a long breath, reveling in the cooling sensation of relief washing over his frayed nerves. *That was easy*, he thought, shifting to bring Benny to his feet. *Too easy*, he amended when his friend resisted, still staring at the black place between the trees where Joe had vanished.

"Benny, come on," he urged, growing apprehension weakening his voice. "I've got to get you back."

"Kickstart your brain, willya?" Benny said wearily. "Do you seriously think he's going to let us out of here alive?"

"Yes, I do," he said without conviction.

"Like you think you really could have taken him in a fight?" Benny snorted. "Jonny, listen to me. Are you listening? We are in big trouble here. Didn't you hear him? This is his turf." He gave Jonathan a pointed look. "Think about it. We don't know where he is anymore, do we?"

"And whose fault is that?" Jonathan pulled up, ignoring Benny's protests to haul his friend to his feet. "Benny, you got us in here. So shut up while I try to get us out."

"Two things," Benny gasped, clutching at Jonathan's shoulder as his legs wobbled dangerously under him. "First, don't hit a guy when he's down, okay?"

He made a disgusted sound, but no other comment as he maneuvered Benny's arm around his neck. "And second?"

"Unless you can do the fireman's carry for over a mile, you're on your own."

"Benny...."

"I'm serious," the man protested to Jonathan's warning tone. "I...I can't. I can't."

He collapsed heavily, his last word a sigh. Jonathan clung to him, teeth gritted against the aching strain in his arms which put the fireman's carry idea out of the picture right away. He fought to think coherently. The path they stood on was narrow, but suddenly too exposed for comfort. And Benny gave up after a few attempts to stand, letting Jonathan drag him off the path deeper into the heavy woods and underbrush without protest.

"Ow, ow," Benny hissed as Jonathan settled him as gently as possible on the ground behind a large outcropping of rock. "Geez, take it easy, willya?"

"I'm sorry," Jonathan said, an automatic response which irritated him enough to snap, "No, dammit, I'm *not* sorry. Benedek, you are easily the biggest idiot I've ever—"

"There's a rock sticking in my spine," Benny grimaced, squirming to reach under his back.

"Must have fallen out of your head," Jonathan muttered, grabbing the offending stone from Benny as he forced the man still with his other hand. "Do you have any idea what you're *doing* to yourself?"

"As a matter of fact, yeah. I got this lecture twice from Penner, once from your little nurse and about five times from you. It's getting a little old, so do you think we can leave it alone?"

The harsh plea almost silenced him, but one look around at their hiding place brought back his anger in a flood. "I'm not talking about that," he said pointedly, settling on the ground to rest his head in his hands.

"Well, for once—I am."

Jonathan looked up sharply at the strained note in Benny's voice and noted with a leap of fear that the man looked worse than he had in the hospital. His breath came in short gasps, and his skin appeared waxy, nearly as white as the bandage still covering his neck. Unfocused eyes strained to find Jonathan in the darkness. "I'll make you a deal. If I come right out and finally admit that you and Penner were right all along, will you do me a favor?"

Jonathan nodded, leaning forward anxiously. "What?"

"Go get some help."

Staring, he blinked twice before he was able to speak. "Are you crazy?"

"Look, you'll be fine. The park's just got some bad press, nothing to worry about. You're a big boy, you can handle yourself pretty well...."

"That's not what I'm talking about!" he hissed with a vehemence which surprised even himself. "Are you seriously suggesting I *leave* you here?"

"Yeah." Benny held his gaze with an obvious effort. "I am."

"Benny, forget it. You—"

"—really need to talk to the guys who drive those funny vans with the flashing lights on top." His fingers twisted into the fabric of MacKensie's jacket. "Jonathan. It's bad, okay? I'm...I'm serious. You were right, Penner was right. Do this for me, please?"

He shook his head, racked by indecision. To give in to Benny's heartfelt plea would be to leave the man defenseless, tantamount to callous abandonment. He'd never be able to reconcile it to himself, let alone the authorities should they find the worst upon their return. Yet Benny wasn't exaggerating the gravity of his condition. He couldn't last without getting help, and soon.

But what shook Jonathan to his soul was the light of sheer terror shining from Benny's eyes as he waited for MacKensie's reply.

Don't ask me to do this. Why are you asking me to do this? I don't want to do this. The desperate litany in his mind followed his hand as it dipped into his pocket, producing the silver cross. Without emotion, he took Benny's hand, alarmingly icy to the touch, and pressed the cross into his palm, closing his fingers tightly over it.

"Don't lose this one, okay?" he chided half-heartedly.

"Like my life depended on it." Benny's vague attempt at a smile wobbled and faded at Jonathan's flinch. "Before you go, could you push a few rocks my way? You know, just in case?"

Nodding, he rose to collect a few fist-sized stones, piling them near where Benny lay on the ground. As he straightened, he paused, suddenly inspired. Stepping over Benny's supine body, he dove into some underbrush clinging to several young trees, foraging noisily.

"What the—?" Struggling up on his elbows, Benny watched incredulously as MacKensie, bracing his foot against a rock, yanked at something several times until it gave way with a resounding crack. Gasping with exertion, Jonathan held up a broken tree branch, inspecting it with satisfaction.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Jonathan spared him an affronted look. "What does it *look* like I'm doing?" he grumbled, stripping off the leaves and smaller branches before brandishing the jagged point. "I think they call it fighting fire with fire."

A grudging smile cracked across Benny's face. "Jonathan MacKensie, fearless vampire hunter. He's a natural, folks."

His shoulders slumped as he glanced down at the makeshift spear, suddenly seeing the absurdity suggested by Benny's light taunt. With new eyes, he stared bleakly at Benny, realizing too late how ineffectual a few rocks would really be.

Benny's face reflected his awareness of the change coming over Jonathan's face. "Keep to the path, but not *on* it," he said earnestly. "Remember that left we took at the carousel, keep on that straight and that should take you out by the Met again. Don't try calling from any of the phones in the park itself, those are open targets. You got a quarter on you?"

He swallowed in a dry throat. "I don't need coins for an emergency call," he said quietly.

"Right. Forgot." Drawing a breath, he continued in a stronger voice. "Make sure you pay attention to how you got out so you can bring them back without them calling out the dogs...."

"Benny."

"What?"

"Shut up."

With a quiet sigh, Benny looked away. When he didn't move or speak, Jonathan shook his head wearily, settled the suddenly-fragile branch firmly in his hand and turned.

"Jonathan."

He paused, not looking back. "What?"

"Be careful. Okay?"

His reply stuck in his throat. He settled for a nod that he realized, too late as he moved away, Benny couldn't have seen in the darkness.

Picking his way cautiously through the trees, ready to dive for cover at the slightest sound, Jonathan found his way back to the path. He crouched behind a boulder, debating his options. He'd make better time staying on the walk, but Benny made a very good point for keeping a low profile. A cold shiver racked him to realize the situation Benny's stubbornness and his own blind stupidity had created. Here, crouched in the dark, clutching a frail weapon, the game began. Joe was the hunter; he, the prey.

He started at a rustle in the trees across the path, and raised the tree branch threateningly before he caught a fast glimpse of a squirrel darting through the underbrush. *Damn.* Leaning against the boulder, he waited until his panic drained away before rising to his feet, probing the darkness before him with the point of his spear. *This is ridiculous,* his mind protested petulantly. *I'm in the middle of New York City, for pity's sake. I'm a civilized man in a civilized country. Is it too much to expect some sanity in my life?*

Another rustling in the brush dropped him into a defensive crouch. He waited for tense minutes, not daring to think or to breathe. When no other sound disturbed the night silence, he rose again, more shakily. *Benedek, I swear to you, if we get out of this one alive, I'm going to have them lock you away for safe-keeping. You're dangerous.*

An unexpected twinge of guilt stabbed him as he fought his way through the dense growth and around the rocks along the path. *Always looking for someone to blame, MacKensie,* he chided himself sternly. *This is no one's fault but your own this time. You didn't have to come. It was your choice, your choice alone. And besides, there's no point putting this one on Benedek's head—he's already paid a stiff price for his mistakes.*

Why in heaven's name am I defending him? Irritation rolled back in a crashing wave. *This is his fault, all of it. And when we get out of this, it'll be a cold day in hell before I let him forget it.*

He froze as another suspicious sound came from just beyond the trees to his left. Listening, he scanned the darkness for any shadow that moved oddly, or seemed out of place. Just when he'd released his bated breath, deciding that paranoia was getting the better of him, something flew through the air inches from his head, smacking against the boulder behind him.

Instinctively whirling towards the sound with weapon raised defensively, he heard, too late, the sound of footsteps behind him. The blow caught him in half-turn, snapping his head back. For a moment, there was no pain, just an explosion of light and sound so intense that he stood, blind and mute, possessed only of one single, strangely calm thought which faded as he crumpled to the ground: *My fault this time. All my fault.*

The pain came, a thrust of agony which strangled him, pinning him down as he fought to breathe. His hands came up, feebly probing to claw at the source of his distress, but every movement fed the throbbing monster in his head. Behind tightly shut eyes, he forced back panic, concentrated on staying calm, and was rewarded by a sharp easing of the pain, enough to let him breathe again, and to open his eyes to the red-filmed fragments of reality.

A shadow loomed above him and he peered at it in vague interest. Something flicked near his eyes. Blinking, he focused on it, wincing at the splinters of pain which rewarded his every move. The images stabilized, but understanding was still mired in mud. It wasn't until a sharp roughness scraped the side of his neck that he realized that his own weapon was being used against him.

He gasped, subsiding with a low groan when his effort to raise his hands defensively threatened to take his consciousness away. The tip of the branch lifted away from his throat, only to press into his shoulder, pushing at the fabric of his shirt. Through blurred vision, Jonathan saw Joe leaning over him, his face lit by pale yellow moonlight, illuminating his tense half-smile as he continued to probe with the makeshift spear. Without warning, the expression on Casertano's face hardened at the same moment he thrust down with the branch.

Jonathan's panicked gasp eclipsed the sound of ripping cloth; his convulsive jump was thwarted by something pinning his shoulder to the ground. Choking, he fell back, unable to breathe or to move except for the un-

controllable shaking in his numbed limbs. Above him, Joe pushed and twisted, again and again, driving the branch through Jonathan's shirt and jacket, anchoring it deeply into the ground.

The pain in his head, deep and insistent, finally eased enough to let air into his lungs, but at a cost. Half-conscious and completely drained, he watched as Joe straightened with a low chuckle of satisfaction. Another laugh rocked him as he studied his 'catch', and Jonathan closed his eyes against the taunting sound.

A touch at the base of his neck jolted him. Dropping to his knees at Jonathan's side, Joe bent over him, pulling his tie free of his collar.

No.. The desperate cry echoed in his mind, but he had no strength to give it voice as Joe deftly undid the knot. *Not like this. Not like this.*

Coiling the tie up in one hand, Joe pulled sharply on either side of Jonathan's shirt collar, laying it open. His fingers lingered briefly at the base of MacKensie's throat, and his smile grew to feel the shiver of revulsion Jonathan was unable to control.

Another laugh, deep and mocking. "Not yet," he said softly. "Not just yet."

Gathering Jonathan's limp hands, he used the tie to bind his wrists, pulling until MacKensie's hiss satisfied him that the bonds were tight. Pushing up to his feet, Casertano looked down at Jonathan with a soft, mocking smile. "You really should have gone back to your hotel, you know. Well—too late now. You'll have to stay for dinner." Laughing at his own macabre joke, Joe leaned over to test the branch pinning Jonathan to the ground. "Where's Benny?"

When Jonathan looked away, Joe chided him with a click of his tongue. "Well, no matter. I'll find him soon enough. After all—I have all night."

The Canadian Rockies. I'm in the Canadian Rockies, camping under a starlit sky, my faithful husky at my side, not a care in the world...

Benny sighed wearily, pressing his hand more tightly against his chest, feeling his heart galloping out of control. *So much for a vivid imagination. This is Central Park, this burg hasn't seen a starlit sky in over sixty years and as for my faithful husky...*

The absurd thought brought a snort bursting forth, met a split-second later by a violent muscular spasm that ripped the breath from his lungs. *Easy. Easy, Benedek. Let's leave something for the paramedics to save.*

Bio-feedback. He closed his eyes, consciously relaxing his taut muscles. *You banged out at least a dozen articles on that crap, Mr. Big-Shot Writer. Practice what you preach. Get the blood circulating. Get the heart to stop revving for the Grand Prix. And stop worrying. He's fine. He'll be fine.*

His heart jumped wildly, mocking him for a liar.

Deep breaths. Don't think. Breathe. He blanked his mind with conscious effort, setting himself adrift in grey nothingness. For just a moment, panic yanked him back, but a tightening of his right hand brought reassurance; he still had the silver cross clasped against his chest.

Back in the fog, he sought for calming images: the warmth of sunlight, the whisper of a summer breeze, the distant laughter of children. He felt tenseness drain away and sighed to feel his throbbing heart begin to subside. But without warning, his consciousness tilted, breaking his hold on reality. He slid into exhausted sleep.

And into a morass of writhing colors and sounds he lacked the strength to control. Drawing back to safety, he watched apprehensively until the images began to coalesce of their own volition.

Joe. His gasp shook his own soul. Joe loomed over him, face suffused by the dark light of insanity. And Benny's voice came from the pit of a black memory: *Joe, don't do this. Please. Don't do this!*

You don't understand. The sad, taut voice stung him with every word. All I want is for someone to understand. But she didn't. And you don't. You never will.

Joe. No. No.

Benny, I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry...

Joe. He tried to reach out, but the image slipped from his grasp, dissolving in a red, throbbing mist. Another shadow formed, taking shape in the haze. Joe again, his eyes wide and haunted, staring down at him with an expression of mingled fear and grief. His trembling hand wiped away the blood streaming down his chin. Joe. My god. What did you do? What did you do to me?

No. With every bit of strength he could muster, he tried to deny the memory. The scene fragmented, only to reform from a more distant perspective. Joe stood above a sprawled, bloodied body, erect in triumph save for shoulders slumped in weary defeat. You don't understand. Joe's voice beat at him, a desperate shriek. It's what I am, Benny. I walk alone, in darkness. And it's too late. It's been too late for a long time.

Something touched him, thawing his fear. He turned, ready to welcome his benefactor, and froze in open surprise.

Marjorie?

Her sad eyes glowed like jewels in the sunlight, reflecting back his last horrific image of Joe. Her lips didn't move, but he heard her voice like a sigh on the wind. *Help him. Benny, please. Help him.*

He tried to touch her, but somehow she'd moved just beyond his reach. *Marjorie, what happened? Tell me what happened, I have to know. Marjorie, please. Make me understand.*

Hurry, Benny. Before it's too late.

I want to help him. I can't. Marjorie, I can't.

She shook her head pityingly, showing him the bleak vision once more. And with a start, Benny realized that the body at Joe's feet was not a personal memory. It was Jonathan MacKensie.

Help him, Benny. He reached for her, but the image faded with her despairing voice. Please. Help him.

Marjorie! His cry dissolved into a threatened sob as the mist claimed her, leaving him alone with his silent, desperate plea: *Don't leave. Please, don't leave me.*

He shivered awake, a cry of protest still in his throat as he stared up into the yellow grey sky. *Damn. Oh, damn. His heart was doing triple time against his ribcage. Damn and damn. Here lies Edgar Benedek, whose only goal in life was to expire on his personal yacht in the Mediterranean in the arms of an Italian movie star. This doesn't even come close.*

Guilt twiggd him as he felt tears welling in his eyes. *Oh, well. I guess I'm entitled to a little self-pity under the circumstances. He squeezed his eyes shut, willfully forcing the wetness and the emotions behind it back. So who am I kidding? Self-pity ain't the half of it. MacKensie, so help me, if you make a pre-cog out of me, I'll...I'll...*

I'll never forgive myself.

The bleak image fragmented. He sagged with a low moan. *Marjorie. Oh, god. Marjorie..*

His retreat took him back to the grey mindlessness, but this time he stood guard, refusing entry to the tumult of dream images threatening to overwhelm him.

"Benny. Rise and shine."

His eyes came open slowly, and he marveled at the strange calmness with which he turned his head to see Joe standing by the largest boulder. Gripping the silver cross more tightly, he squinted to make out detail in the heavy shadow, noting with vast relief that Joe didn't appear to be covered with blood.

"What took you so long?" Benny said without emotion as Joe ventured a step nearer. He took the cross between his fingers, letting the moonlight strike the gleaming metal. Stiffening, Joe pulled back, regarding him through narrowed eyes.

"Don't kid me." Benny struggled up to a sitting position, keeping the cross in plain view. "You wouldn't have rung the doorbell if you didn't suspect I had this. Where's Jonathan?"

"Right where I left him." A smile edging onto his face, Joe leaned casually against the rock. "So much for spoiling for a fight. He'd last two seconds on the street."

"If that long," Benny murmured, his heart taking a sickening plunge. "Okay, what's the deal?"

"How about I give you a chance to prove that any of that garbage you were handing out is true?"

Benny glanced at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've been thinking about it." He edged out of the shadows. "About what you said, us being friends for a long time. You're right. That doesn't have to change."

"But?"

"But you do."

Benny held his breath. "Change, you mean."

"Yeah. That's what I mean."

"And...how does that work exactly?"

"Exactly?" He glanced away briefly, shrugging. "I think you know."

"You're saying that we can only stay friends on your terms," he said, fighting hard to keep his voice even. "No other way."

Joe shook his head meaningfully. "No other way."

"And Jonathan?"

"What about him?"

"That's my question. What about him?"

Pursing his lips, Joe exaggerated interest in the tips of his fingers. "One way or the other, you won't care what happens to him. So forget it, okay?"

He stared at Joe bleakly, suddenly feeling the frailty of the tiny piece of metal in his hands. "I care now," he managed past the growing thickness in his throat. "Joe, listen to me. Show me where he is—no, wait, hear me out. Show me where he is, let me...let me at least say goodbye. Let me do that and...." Opening his hand, he stared down at the cross for a moment before continuing, "I'll toss this away."

Joe didn't answer for a time, regarding him stonily as if weighing all the scenarios for possible subterfuge. Then he nodded tersely. "Okay. Okay, it's a deal."

Benny struggled to his feet, keeping one eye on Joe, who made an instinctive move to help before pulling up short with a hiss. Leaning against a rock to regain his breath, Benny studied the man, fighting back the teasing memories of someone he'd once been proud to call friend.

Why, Joe? Why did this happen? And why did it happen to you?

Every breath was fire. More than once he had to pause, and although his entire body begged him to sit down, he dared only lean against the nearest tree or rock until he found enough energy to move again. Joe met each delay with increasing restiveness, but said nothing, watching him through cold, veiled eyes.

A sneaking look at his watch gave Benny part of the reason for Joe's unease, along with a rude start—less than two hours remained until sunrise. He'd spent longer in his half-dream than he'd thought. If he harbored any doubts whether Joe was telling the truth about Jonathan, that just took care of them; MacKensie would have been back with reinforcements hours ago if he'd gotten out of the park safely.

The thought added just one more painful twist of guilt to his gut. Stumbling over to a tree at the side of the path, he clung to a low-hanging branch, gulping air into his over-taxed lungs. His mind cleared a little, allowing him to sift frantically through alternatives. He could milk his weakness, gain the advantage of time. But would Joe, faced with the threat of dawn and his own obsessive hunger, merely abandon him here in favor of the bird-in-hand? That was a risk Benny wasn't willing to take.

A violent chill went through him, nearly dislodging his one-handed grip on the branch. In his other hand, clenched so tightly that his fingers had long lost all feeling, was the silver cross. *Should've had you keep this, Jonny. It's not doing me a whole lot of good. I didn't figure that I was going to get out of this mess anyway, one way or the other. At least you would've been long out of it.*

He shivered again, swallowing back the nausea rising from his roiling stomach. Resting his forehead against the hand clinging to the branch, he was only dimly aware of Joe's cautious approach.

"You don't have to suffer like this." Joe's quiet voice was almost sad. "I could help you, Benny. I can take the pain away. Let me help."

Let me help. The words mocked him as he stifled a low moan. And to his horror, he found himself drawn to the seductive promise. It was all he could do to rasp out the single word, "No."

As though sensing Benny's weakened resolve, Joe ventured a step closer. "It's not like you think," he urged softly. "All those stories, all those legends, they've only got it half right. Because they don't know. Benny, they don't understand. For the first time in my life—I'm *alive*. And you could join me, Benny. Think about it." Another step. "Masters of the night, Benny. No one could stand against us. No one could touch us."

He held his breath, determined not to lose his grip either on the branch or his resolve. Joe sounded so normal, so reasonable, as if he were merely offering some wildly exciting business partnership. Benny fought hard to remind himself that it only pointed up the full extent of his friend's insanity.

"Where did you leave Jonathan?" he managed. "How far from here?"

Disappointed, Joe shook his head, backing off a step. "Not far. You don't look like you'll make it."

"I'll make it," he said, more for himself than for Joe as he straightened, not releasing the branch until he was steady on his feet. His first attempt to walk sent him grabbing desperately for support again.

"Benny," he heard Joe say through his frantic gasps for air as he clung to the branch. "Let me help. Please."

He had no choice. Joe knew it, too; Benny could tell by the confident way he held out his hand. If he denied Joe's offer, morning would find him slumped by the side of the path, still clutching a tiny silver cross that, in the end, had saved no one.

Forcing open cramped fingers, he stared down at the object, allowing himself only a moment's regret. Then, working it to his fingers, he gave Joe a long, searching look as he flicked his wrist back. With a slow, deliberate motion, he held his empty hand out in mock surrender.

The tenseness melted from Joe's shoulders. He stepped forward to take Benny's arm, his smile fading when Benny recoiled.

"You promised," Benny said warningly. "Show me where he is."

Joe gave him a disparaging look. "I keep my promises, Benny. I'll show you. It's not far. Come on—lean on me. That's it."

Benny closed his eyes as Joe placed a bracing arm around his shoulders to take his weight, letting the man guide his steps. For a moment, time skidded back into a half-forgotten memory, and his old friend, drinking buddy and fellow college prankster was at his side. They were staggering back to the dorm after a marathon frat party, an English Lit mid-term stared them in the face less than two hours away, and all was right with the world.

All's right with the world. The chorus in his mind faded into the mist dropping over his senses. He held onto a shred of cognizance long enough to slip his hand into his jacket pocket, determined not to lose the silver cross he'd so carefully palmed for Joe's benefit and still held tightly in his fist.

He fought back to awareness when he felt Joe's grip loosen, enough to keep himself from collapsing completely to the ground. Joe held onto his arm, helping him settle into a sitting position against a tree trunk. The world swam around him, and fighting to focus only made it worse. When his breathing eased, the fragments coalesced; Joe released his arm, moving away to stand near the dark form on the ground a few yards from where Benny was sitting.

"Jonathan?" His first attempt to speak had no strength; he drew in a deep breath, ignoring the throbbing pain which greeted his effort. "Jonathan? You with us, pal?"

Silence drove fear into his already-abused heart. Joe, glancing over at Benny, dropped into a crouch at Jonathan's side. Even in the half-light, Benny saw the tremor go through MacKensie's body when Joe touched his shoulder.

"Jonathan." Benny's voice grew shrill with agitation. "Come on, buds. Talk to me."

He heard a low moan, then another, more irritated. And then a sharp gasp, as Jonathan tried to pull away from the hand Joe still rested on his shoulder.

"Easy, Jack," Benny urged, glaring at Casertano. "Easy. It's okay. For now, anyway."

"Benedek?" MacKensie's puzzled voice quavered. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Heard you got lost in the woods," Benny said, alarmed by the harsh slur in Jonathan's voice. "Where's it hurt, pal?"

"Everywhere."

"Yeah. I bet." Swallowing in a dry throat, he studied Joe's reaction in vain. Casertano remained motionless, his hand still on Jonathan's shoulder, his face hidden in the shadows. Something about the almost-proprietary attitude froze his heart. "Joe. Joe, listen to me."

A slight movement of Casertano's head encouraged him enough to continue, "You don't need him. Just me. All you really need is me. So let him go, okay? He...he won't come back. He won't try to stop us. And even if he does—we'll be ready for him, won't we? Two against one?"

"Benedek?" He sensed rather than saw MacKensie's bewildered eyes turn on him.

"No," Joe said thickly, shaking his head as he moved his hand, pulling at Jonathan's open collar. "No more deals, Benny. No more time."

"Benedek." Jonathan's unsteady voice held a faint plea.

"Easy, Jack." He kept his voice calm with an effort. "You've got nothing to worry about from him." The odd feeling in his stomach grew with the certainty forming his words almost of their own volition. "He's not planning to have you for dinner tonight. He's saving you for her."

And his heart broke to see his wild guess confirmed in the quiet, sad eyes Joe raised to him.

In the silence, Jonathan spoke the words echoing bleakly in his own aching head. "Oh, my god."

"Tonight." He drew a breath to repair his cracking voice. "She rises tonight, doesn't she, Joe? She's coming here to join you. And you'll be together...."

"Forever," Joe whispered. "In the night."

Squeezing his eyes shut, he fought the tightening of his throat, and mustered the courage he needed to continue. "But where is she, Joe? She's late. Where is she?"

"She's coming." He lifted his eyes almost beseechingly to the night sky. "She's coming."

"Maybe she's lost. Maybe...."

"No," he snapped. "She's...she's coming. She'll find me. She knows I'm waiting. She...has to come."

His harsh voice broke, the last words catching in his throat. Hating himself, Benny seized his advantage. "Is that why it took you so long to find me, Joe? You were waiting for her, weren't you? You figured I'd keep while you welcomed her, only she never came, did she? And after you went to all the trouble of getting dinner ready for her, too."

Joe made a sound, harsh and wrenching as he bowed his head in his hands. "She has to come," he rasped. "She has to. She has to."

Breathing, let alone moving, was agony, but Benny willfully straightened his position. From his new perspective, he winced to see how Joe had immobilized Jonathan. "She's not coming," he said when his labored breathing subsided enough to let him speak. "Joe, she's not coming."

"No."

"Listen to me...."

"No." His voice rose dangerously in pitch as he lifted his head, revealing eyes aflame with grief and madness. "She's coming. She has to come. Don't you see? She has to. She *has* to."

"Listen to me!" Benny growled harshly. "I'm telling you that she's not coming. She told me so herself."

Joe stared at him, eyes shimmering with spilling tears. His head moved once as he whispered in disbelief, "No."

"I'm telling you the truth," he said earnestly, reaching out a pleading hand. "She came to me, Joe. She begged me to help you because...because she wasn't coming to join you."

"No!" he shrieked, hands clawed threateningly near Jonathan's averted face. "You're lying! You—you're lying to me!"

"I'm not," he insisted. "I'm not. You know I'm not. Joe, if she was coming, she'd be here by now. She's not coming. She's *not coming*."

With an animal snarl, Joe rose, leaping over Jonathan at Benny.

Expecting cold hands to close on his throat, Benny interrupted his own flinch with a gasp to feel Joe's fingers drive into his shoulders. His eyes flew open, staring at the dark face before him in stunned bewilderment.

There was no hate in Joe's eyes anymore, only torment that tore at Benny's heart. "Benny," he breathed, a desperate plea. "She has to come. Tell her, she has to come to me." Tears spilled freely down his face. "Tell her I'm sorry. I didn't mean...I didn't want to scare her. All I wanted was for her to understand. Tell her I'm sorry. Please...Benny? Tell her?"

"She already knows," he said softly, closing his eyes in pain.

"Then...she'll come?"

It took everything he had to shake his head, and to keep his eyes closed at the wrenching sound of Joe's soft cry.

"It was an accident," Casertano said, his voice that of a grief-stricken child. "A stupid accident. You believe me, don't you? Why won't she forgive me? I didn't mean...I didn't, I swear, I didn't. All I wanted was for her to understand. Benny, why? Why couldn't she understand?"

"I don't know," he sighed, barely able to speak at all. "I don't know. But...maybe she understands now. Maybe that's what she was asking me to tell you."

"No." The madness faded suddenly; Joe's eyes were as dull and listless as his voice as he shook his head. "No. If she understood, then she'd come to me. She wouldn't leave me alone like this. She wouldn't."

He brought his hand up, gripping Joe's arm tightly. "She didn't," he whispered.

Joe stared at him, not breathing for a long moment. "You meant it then?" he said in a voice that hardly dared hope. "You'll join me?"

Indecision tore him. How easy it would be to fan the flame of hope flickering in Joe's tortured eyes, and how desperately he wanted to do just that. The recent memories of pain and fear meant nothing; the arm under his hand belonged to a friend, and nothing could ever change that.

"Benny." Joe's face lit up with joy. "You and me, it'll be just like the old days. And Marjorie, she'll have to see that I didn't mean to scare her. She'll join us, too, you'll see." His expression changed abruptly, becoming tense and expectant.

Benny stiffened as Joe touched trembling fingers to the bandage covering his neck. "I didn't mean to hurt you," he faltered. "I really didn't. I was scared, Benny. I thought you...I thought...."

"I know," he said, managing to keep his voice quiet and even. "I know."

"It'll be different this time," Joe assured him with a serenity which sent another chill up Benny's spine. "It won't hurt, I promise. There won't be any pain."

Easy. It would be so easy. Just close my eyes, and they'll be no more pain. No more pain...

Jonathan's hoarse cry shivered through him like a cold knife. "Benedek!"

Benny's hand flew up, grasping the one Joe held on the bandage. "Joe," he gasped. "If you do this—you'll kill me. Is that what you want?"

"You said you understood." Joe's eyes shimmered with almost childlike hurt.

He shut out the image behind closed eyes, willfully shaking his head. "You don't have the power to bring someone back from the dead, because you aren't...."

"No."

Benny firmly overrode Joe's soft, vehement protest. "...because you *aren't* a vampire, Joe. You aren't...."

"No!" He tried in vain to yank his hand free of Benny's surprisingly strong grasp. "You said you understood! You...you...." He broke off, dissolving into choking sobs. "You lied to me. You lied, you lied."

"You lied to yourself, Joe. Look. Look at me. Look at the truth. Please."

He raised tear-filled eyes and stared in horror as Benny released his hand to reveal the object he'd surreptitiously fished from his pocket and had pressed against Joe's hand the whole time—a tiny silver cross.

With a strangled cry, he fell back, but Benny somehow managed to snag his jacket, preventing his escape. "It didn't hurt you, Joe," he cried desperately. "It didn't affect you at all because you're *not* what you think you are."

"I am. I am," the man gasped, almost pleadingly. "I *have* to be. Don't you see? I *have* to be!"

He froze mid-gasp as he looked at Benny, searching in vain for hope. And, despising himself for being unable to give it, Benny shook his head once, deliberately placing the cross Joe's trembling hand, folding the man's fingers in a fist around it.

The last of the insanity drained from Joe's face as he stared at his hand and the one Benny clasped tightly over it, but nothing claimed the void, leaving his eyes empty and lost. His mouth worked helplessly, seeking a word that finally came as a dry, lifeless whisper: "Marjorie."

His face crumpled. Cradling his head in his arms, he whimpered once and slumped forward.

Benny caught him as the first sobs racked the man's thin body, clung to him as he wept, violent, heartbroken cries muffled in Benny's shoulder.

He held on until his sobs quieted, until Joe went still in his fierce embrace. And still couldn't bring himself to let go, even as a quiet, insistent voice chipped through the fog. "Benedek. Benedek?"

Opening his eyes, he saw nothing but a grey blur, and only then realized that his eyes were filled, his face chilled by streams of wetness. Blinking rapidly brought the scene back into focus; he saw Jonathan lying on his side, noted vaguely that the man had somehow managed to dislodge the tree branch pinning him down. MacKensie's face was creased in pain, but the concern in his eyes was clearly not for himself. For a moment, Benny puzzled that he could make out such detail in the moonlight. Only it wasn't moonlight anymore.

The long night was finally over.

"How did you know?"

Jonathan MacKensie glanced at the silent man next to him, debating whether his was an opportune question under the circumstances. But it produced the desired effect. Benny's head came up, some of the greyness leaving his face as he considered his answer. "Marjorie, you mean?"

At Jonathan's nod, he drew a breath and shrugged. "I didn't. And I did. I...I dunno. A lot of things came together, and maybe I just didn't want to see them until it came up and hit me in the face."

The crowd in front of them shifted; he nudged Benny to get his attention, then watched as the man moved away. Although Dr. Penner finally pronounced him fit, there was a part of Edgar Benedek which never completely recovered from the events of the past week. It reflected in the somber clothing Benny chose for this funeral service, in his tired eyes and voice, and in the way he moved, curiously stiff and leaden.

He continued watching as Benny stood by the side of the open grave, staring down into the depths where the polished coffin had already been laid to rest. He saw Benny glance to the side, and guessed he was envisioning the site in a month's time: covered in new grass, perhaps a fresh wreath or two propped against the headstone Benny had selected just yesterday, with its simple inscription, "Marjorie Gill Casertano - 1948-1986 - Beloved Wife".

"She would have wanted it just like that," he'd said to Jonathan's unspoken question. "Some things don't change."

Benny dug something from his jacket pocket, holding it between his fingers. Light reflected briefly off the object as he made an odd flipping motion, holding up an empty palm, then removing the piece of metal from its hiding place between his fingers with a tiny, strained smile. Jonathan caught his breath, eyes narrowing to make out the simple shape of a cross just before Benny tossed it lightly into the open grave.

"MacKensie, right?"

Jonathan turned at the address, taking a moment to recognize the portly, slightly seedy-looking man behind him. With a sudden smile, Jordan Kerner held out a hand. "Yeah, I thought that was you. Been a while, eh?"

He agreed non-verbally, returning the man's handshake. Glancing over Jonathan's shoulder at Benny, still standing motionless by the side of the grave, Jordy gave MacKensie a narrow-eyed, searching look. "Yeah. You and me, just like old times, eh?"

His gesture took in the cemetery, provoking an unpleasant memory of stealth and subterfuge, the two of them with pick and shovel in the night, frantically digging up a coffin in which they thought Benny had been buried alive. The analogy turned Jonathan cold. "Not quite," he replied stiffly.

"Yeah?" Jordy lifted his head slightly. "Then why are you here?"

His indignation melted into embarrassment to recognize the meaning behind Jordy's oblique comment. What he thought was callous insensitivity was actually Jordy's strange way of saying that he realized they were both here for the same reason, as they had joined forces in another cemetery not so long ago—to help a friend.

"Hey, listen," Jordy said, his grin broadening to see the abashed change coming over Jonathan's face. "I'm, ah...I'm gonna tell you something, and if you breathe a word of this to you-know-who, I'm gonna tell the reading public that G.I. anthropology professors sleep with Bugs Bunny nightlights. You got it?"

"I got it," Jonathan said, suppressing a smile.

Kerner studied him a long moment, his expression softening. "Thanks," he said quietly.

Warily, MacKensie eyed him. "Thanks?"

"For...." Jordy gestured helplessly. "For everything."

At Jonathan's dubious look, Kerner sighed, exasperated. "Okay, okay. The bottom line is this. There aren't too many people in this world who woulda gone storming over to Benny's apartment like that just because he didn't return a few phone calls. Me, I'd'a just thought he'd bounced off on one of his last-minute jaunts to who-knows-where. Maybe a month down the line I'd think maybe something was off, but...." He grimaced, shaking his head. "Wouldn't have done him any good, would it?" he finished bleakly.

Jonathan hesitated, uncertain whether to agree or disagree. Embarrassed, Kerner made a dismissive motion with his hand. "So," he coughed. "Do I sit on this Bugs Bunny expose or what?"

Nodding, he shook Jordy's hand again, with a genuine smile of thanks. "My secret's safe with you," he said warmly.

"Great. That's great." Pausing, Jordy eyed him speculatively. "You know—I wouldn't change a thing about Benny, but...well, maybe you're good for him. I mean, maybe you can get him to...I dunno. Think? Know what I mean?"

He nodded carefully. "I think I do. And all I can do is try."

Jordy shrugged philosophically. "That's all anyone can do, right?" He glanced over Jonathan's shoulder again, started slightly, then mouthed, "Remember what I said," as he moved away.

"What did Jordy want?"

Jonathan turned as Benny joined him. Seeking an innocuous reply, he smiled as one came to him with ease. "Nothing, really. We were...reminiscing."

"Yeah." Benny eyed him suspiciously. "Right."

Maintaining his expression of innocence under hard scrutiny, Jonathan gestured toward the car waiting at the top of the hill. "Ready to go?"

"How's the head?" Benny asked casually as they made their way up the path.

Grimacing, he touched the tender spot at the base of his skull. "Better. And I'll thank you not to say that I'm lucky it wasn't a concussion again."

"Okay. Then it's lucky you have such a thick skull. How's that?"

He winced, not so much from irritation as from probing too hard with his fingers. "I seem to remember Dr. Penner making a similar observation when I told him about being in Central Park after dark."

"Penner?" Benny blinked in surprise. "He wasn't your attending physician."

"No, but he was in my room like a shot when he found out you were back."

"Oh." His shrug of embarrassment led Jonathan to suspect that Benny had been subjected to a tirade at least as high-decibel as the one Penner gave him. "Sorry."

At the car, Jonathan paused to locate the keys, studying Benny surreptitiously as he did. There was room for hope, he decided. After all, he'd paired the alarmingly somber shirt with a fuschia and chartreuse tie, even if it was for the most part hidden by his buttoned jacket. And there was enough of his old jaunty manner creeping back to assure Jonathan that it was only a matter of time before the good humor and bad jokes would flow naturally as the emotional wounds healed.

A tumult distracted him. Three or four cars down, a horde of reporters and cameramen descended on a small group of people returning from the gravesite. One woman in particular drew back, holding up trembling hands defensively.

Jonathan's mental debate on the advisability of interfering became moot as, with a low growl, Benny sprang.

"Hey!" Laying hands on the first shoulder he came to, he spun the astonished man around to face his threatening finger. "If you like your nose where it is, Carpenter, then beat it."

Following on Benny's heels, Jonathan hesitated to see his friend plow into the crowd, sending tape recorders and cameras flying as he reached for the woman, putting a protective arm around her. Most of the displaced reporters had the good sense to back off sullenly, but several seized on Benny's distraction to press in closer. "Mrs. Gill! Mrs. Gill, how does it feel to know that your son-in-law...?"

Benny cut the offender off with a fierce glare. "One more word, Futrell, and it'll be your last. That's a promise."

Amid the low mutters around him, Futrell laughed incredulously. "What's your problem?" he snorted. "Figure to keep this story all to yourself, huh? Well, it doesn't work that way, Benedek."

The woman cringed into the shelter of Benny's arm, crying softly as the questions began again. Seeing the helpless fury on his friend's face galvanized Jonathan into action. He leaped onto Futrell, grabbing the man roughly by the lapels. "Would you like me to show you how it *does* work?" he snarled, pushing the reporter away.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Benny guided Mrs. Gill to her car as Futrell advanced on Jonathan, eyes blazing. He faltered, seeking help from his compatriots. Most were already falling away, swooping down on other funeral attendees for whatever quotes they could wangle for their stories. Deserted, Futrell settled for a black glare, nodding after Benny. "Tell Mr. High-and-Mighty I owe him one," he spat, turning on his heel.

Shaking with helpless rage, Jonathan glared at the man's retreating back. Then, with a sharp sigh, he turned to see Mrs. Gill standing by the open door of her car, in low conversation with her savior. Lowering his head, he waited patiently, watching out of the corner of his eye as the two embraced, the only sound that of the woman's quiet weeping.

The newspaper accounts already had more than he or Benny felt comfortable with, although they'd successfully kept their own names out of print. Reading the more ghoulish versions made him sick to his stomach, more so because he knew most of the facts that the writers so gleefully embellished and exaggerated. Keeping Benny from reading the lies proved impossible. He resigned himself to an incessant stream of invective and curses, all muttered under Benny's breath, all adding deeper lines to the man's already strained face.

"Dammit, he wasn't a monster," he said more than once, and more heatedly each time. "Why the hell can't they see that? He wasn't a monster." Staring down at a 'graphic recreation', complete with 'artist conception' illustrations of the shallow cave in Central Park in which were found two makeshift coffins and a woman's body laid carefully in one, he shook his head numbly. "He loved her. Not one of them put that in. I mean—damn, she wouldn't have freaked so badly, right? She wouldn't have called me for help. And she wouldn't have gone after him *after* calling me." He broken off with a sharp intake of breath, covering his face in his hand. Jonathan had to look away, realizing not for the first time the enormous guilt Benny still carried for not having been around to receive her desperate call. As Benny admitted much later, he realized that by the time he played back the messages on his machine, Marjorie was already dead.

"She must've followed him to the park," Benny had decided after digesting the news of the autopsy results. "Okay, you figure she called me after she found out that he'd been lying to her about putting in massive overtime at his job. She put that together with all the other lies and freaked. She probably just figured that he was in trouble, drugs or something. Or maybe she knew he was slipping; I dunno. From what her mother told me,

it sounds like Joe came home every night, all nice and domestic, but always left an hour or two before sunrise. When he came home that night, she...I don't know. Did she confront him? Or did she just wait for him to leave again? Maybe she hung on, hoping...hoping I'd call her back and tell her what to do. Whatever happened, he left again, only this time she followed him to the park and...." He'd paused, turning his head away, but not fast enough to prevent Jonathan from seeing the tears filling his eyes. "Blow to the head? She slipped and fell. You can see it, can't you? If she was scared of him—scared *for* him? All those rocks, and if she wasn't careful about.... It must've happened that way. Because he wouldn't. He just wouldn't."

Jonathan said nothing, as usual, sensing that his part was to listen without comment. Benny answered his unspoken question after a long, tense silence. "Because he wanted her to be with him," he said, his voice soft and hoarse. "Because he thought he had the power to bring her back. You were there, you saw him. He...did what he thought he had to do. Because he loved her."

And even Jonathan had to admit to himself that it sounded right.

He looked up as a car engine revved. Benny moved back to his side as Mrs. Gill's limousine pulled out onto the road. "She'll be okay," he said tiredly, rubbing at the side of his nose.

"How about you?" Jonathan asked quietly.

Jaw tightening, Benedek glared angrily at a camera crew interviewing two or three eager people standing by a row of tombstones. "Joe was right about one thing," he muttered. "Vampires *do* exist. Only they walk in daylight and carry cameras."

Nearby, Futrell glanced sullenly over at them, looking away when Benny stared him down.

Laughing shortly, Benny shifted his gaze to Jonathan almost speculatively. "That was me, wasn't it?"

Unwilling to get caught out in philosophical semantics, MacKensie settled for a shrug. "I didn't say a word."

"No. No, you didn't." Benny nodded, a strangely appreciative light dancing in his eyes. "In fact, you haven't said a whole hell of a lot lately. But damned if you haven't been underfoot the whole time."

Jonathan flinched away from the suddenly uncomfortable scrutiny. "Well," he muttered, mocking irritation as he turned back for the car. "Excuse me."

His heart lifted to hear a low chuckle behind him. "Wait up, wait up," Benny said, matching his stride in two bounding leaps. "You in the mood for Italian? I know this great place. I swear, the entire restaurant just came off the boat from Roma. The woman who owns it, see—"

He broke off suddenly, as though he'd reached the abrupt end of his energy. Leaning against the car, he stared back at the cemetery, a shadow passing over his face. "Did I hear those guys right?" he murmured bleakly.

Unlocking the door, Jonathan paused with his hand on the frame. "Specifically?"

"First degree murder charges. At the very least, manslaughter." He glanced at MacKensie, the lines in his face deepening. "And assault?"

Unwilling to tell the whole truth, he hesitated, settling for what he could bring himself to say. "It's not likely any charges will be pressed." He gave Benedek a meaningful look. "And less likely that he'd be brought to trial even if he were charged."

Mouthing a silent 'o', Benny dropped his head in reflective thought. Desperate to give the stricken man even a small amount of reassurance, Jonathan leaned against the top of the car, holding out a hand for emphasis as he said, "Benny, he's where he should have been all along. They'll help him...."

"What? Help him what?" Benny's intense stare held no malice, only a bitterness from which MacKensie flinched. "You think he's gonna wake up one day and say, hey look, I'm all better? Then what happens? They tell him, well, you were sick, so nothing that happened was your fault. No problem. Except how do they expect him to live with the fact that it happened at all?" He shook his head, closing his eyes with a weary sigh. "They can't help him with that. No one can. Besides—maybe he wasn't all that crazy after all. Maybe we were wrong and he was right. Maybe he really was a vampire. After all—he died when the sun rose, didn't he?"

In the awkward silence, Jonathan said, "Benny, I...."

He snapped up a warning hand. "If you *dare* say you're sorry, I swear I'll give you the instant nose job I already promised Carpenter." His glare softened with a small laugh that grew unexpectedly into a full-throated chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Jonathan demanded suspiciously when it became clear that Benny's mirth was genuine.

"Nothing, nothing," he lied, bursting out laughing again. "I swear. I was just thinking about, um...dogs."

"Dogs?" Jonathan echoed, not really sure he wanted to know.

"Yeah." Still chortling, Benny opened the car door, sliding into the passenger seat. "Siberian huskies, as a matter of fact."

"Siberian huskies." Shaking his head, Jonathan adjusted his seat belt and started the engine. "I get an explanation, don't I?"

"Maybe." Nodding to himself, Benny took a last, lingering look out the window as Jonathan guided the car up the road leading to the cemetery exit. "Maybe over a very, *very* large plate of tortellini. So, tell me. When's the last time you went camping in the Canadian Rockies?"

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