

Fair Exchange

By Jane Tesh

Trapped.

There had to be some way out. If only she could push free of these confining walls, heave this ceiling off her shoulders, leave this dreadful prison.

Prison. She never thought she would call her beloved home a prison, but that was what it had become, all because of her foolish greed.

Oh, God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Let me out!

"Jon, have I got a haunted house for us! Hop in!"

Jonathan MacKensie had seen the brightly-colored object during the Subaru, but had chosen to ignore it. Now the car blocked his way, and Edgar Benedek grinned broadly from behind the wheel, beckoning him to enter.

"Benedek, I'm very busy."

"This won't take a minute, Jack. I've got an exclusive on this one. Come on."

Jonathan tried to explain. "I'm working on a very important speech. I was on my way to the library to--"

"You can do that later. Get in."

Past experience had taught MacKensie that Benedek would hound him for the remainder of the day, driving the car up the steps of the library, if necessary, and playing tunes on the horn until he gave in.

"I really don't have time," he protested, one hand already on the door handle.

"This'll only take a minute, I promise." Benny adopted his most persuasive grin. "Then I'll drop you off at the library."

Jonathan sighed as he got into the car. "What now?"

"This is great," said Benny, pulling back into traffic. "The Carlyle House on Jones Street has popped its cork. Seven people injured last night by flying furniture."

"Is this going to take long?" asked Jonathan, looking through his stack of papers. "I need to work on my speech. It's a great honor to be asked to speak at the annual meeting of the Tellenbrook Society."

"Congratulations." Benny continued his spiel. "About this house. Seems it's always been haunted, but recently, things have kicked up pretty fierce. It's one of those historical landmark houses built around the turn of the century, you know, and they tours and stuff. Anyway, this tour goes through last night and all hell broke loose. Chairs dancing, mirrors cracking, the works."

Jonathan was not impressed. "We've been through this sort of thing before," he noted. "There's always some logical explanation."

"Whatever it is, I've got an exclusive for the Register.

I made sure of that when I called the caretakers this morning."

After a short drive, Benny pulled up before a large, elegant two-story house. Grey, with white trim, the building seemed to contain hundreds of clean shiny windows. Graceful columns

supported the wide porch roof, and daffodils and pink tulips blossomed in thick clumps around the stone steps.

"This house is supposed to be haunted?" asked Jonathan doubtfully.

A man and a woman met them at the door. The woman's cheek was bandaged, and her arm was in a sling; the man had a dark bruise under one eye.

"Whoa, you guys have been going ten rounds with a champ," Benny observed. "You're sure it's safe to come in?"

"Oh, yes." The woman took charge. "She's fairly calm during the day. You must be Mr. Benedek. I'm Catherine Bateman, and this is my husband, Nathan."

"Just call me Benny." He shook hands. "This is my associate, Dr. Jonathan MacKensie. So, your ghost isn't active now?"

"So far," answered Mrs. Bateman. "of course, we don't know how long she'll remain that way since we don't know what set her off. Please come in and look around."

Large airy rooms branched off from the wide foyer. A graceful staircase led up to a sunlit second floor. For the most part, the interior of the house reflected the beauty and cleanliness of the outside, but here was an overturned chair, there a cracked mirror and torn curtains. Two of the stair railings were splintered, and a vase lay shattered on the floor.

"We left everything just as it was so you could see it," announced Mrs. Bateman.

Benny busied himself taking photographs of the damage. "And you say the ghost never did anything like this before?"

"No, never. We knew we had a ghost, or liked to joke about it, anyway. Nate says he's seen her."

"Just glimpses of her now and then," said Mr. Bateman. "In that largest mirror. Looked like a woman dressed in an old-fashioned outfit. But this is the first time she's been violent."

"Something drastic happening to the house?" asked Benny. "Something she might not like?"

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Bateman. "In fact, we just received word from the Preservation Society that they have funds for further restoration. There's absolutely no danger of the house being torn down or left to neglect."

Benny took a few more pictures. "Can we go upstairs?"

"Help yourself. We cancelled today's tours for obvious reasons."

"What exactly happened here?" asked Jonathan.

"Yesterday, around five-thirty, I was taking the last group through the house when things went crazy. That chair was thrown from the second floor." Mrs. Bateman pointed to the overturned chair. "The walls shook like there was an earthquake. One man fell down the stairs, but, thank God, he wasn't hurt badly. Then I saw that vase come straight up in the air and come toward me as if someone had thrown it. It crashed into my arm, and a piece of it cut my face."

"I don't understand," added Mr. Bateman. "We've kept this house in tip-top condition. Why is she so angry all of a sudden?"

"She?" asked Jonathan.

"Amanda Carlyle," he replied. "Our ghost."

"Found out some mighty interesting facts about Amanda Carlyle, Jack," said Benny as he drove back toward the Institute. "Seems like she was willing to do just about anything to keep

that house, even murder.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Jonathan. Too preoccupied with the finer details of his upcoming speech to pay much attention to Benny’s excited investigation. “She murdered someone?”

“Well, Catherine Bateman said nothing was actually proven, but there’s some pretty strong evidence to suggest she may have had a hand in the accident that carried off old Farnsworth Carlyle, her husband.”

“Why would she want to kill him?”

Benny’s eyes shone with triumph. “He wanted to sell the house! Her dream home. No way she’d let him do that. Oh, and another thing, the big donation she was supposed to make to the Potomac Shore Children’s Home never materialized. They never saw a penny of that money, but the house got a new roof.”

It never ceased to amaze Jonathan the way Benny could fabricate entire stories from the barest hints of evidence. “Benedek, this is all highly circumstantial. And it happened years ago. How can you prove any of it is true?”

“Why else would the Carlyle House be troubled by her spirit?”

“Maybe it’s Farnsworth,” suggested Jonathan sarcastically. “Perhaps he’s upset because his wife murdered him.”

“Good thinking, Jonny, but I’m convinced it’s Amanda.”

Jonathan heaved a sigh. Once Benny got an idea into his head, it was practically impossible to dissuade him. “Why do I bother?” he asked the sky.

“I’m gonna have a little chat with her. See what’s up. Interview her for the Register.”

“Well, you can manage that on your own, can’t you?”

“Ah, come on, pal,” said Benny. “Ghosts love you, you know it.”

“Just drop me off at the library.”

“You’ve got that speech in the bag, J.J. I’ve heard you speak. It’s cake. Come on, I think Amanda Carlyle will flip for that sincere sympathetic look of yours and spill the whole story.”

“Benedek--”

“We just need to stop by Theo’s first.”

“No!” Jonathan’s reaction was swift and violent. “No. I refuse to have anything to do with that madman.”

Benny was unfazed. “You can wait in the car.”

“You can let me out.”

“Jon, it’ll only take a minute. He’s got some ghost detectors for me. I lost my ectometer stone.”

“This is nonsense! There aren’t any ghosts. There must have been an earth tremor last night, or perhaps the Batemans have been working too hard lately.”

“Typical MacKensie theories, chum. I say we scare up Amanda Carlyle and see what she says.”

“She won’t say anything because there are no ghosts,” Jonathan insisted stubbornly.

Despite his continued protests, Benny drove to Theo Goldberg’s. When they arrived at the small white stucco house, Benny hopped out.

“I’ll only be a moment,” he said, hurrying up the path to knock on the door. “Yo, Theo!

Candygram!” There was no answer. Benny rattled the doorknob and was surprised when the door swung open. “Theo?” He stepped inside. There was a long table covered with bottles, tubes, strange twisted roots, powders, and liquids, but no sign of the lanky alchemist. “Jonathan, come here a sec. I think something’s wrong.”

Jonathan joined him in the doorway. “Wrong? What do you mean, wrong?”

“Theo’s not here. No note, nothing. I’m gonna look around.”

There was a rumble of thunder, and for a moment, Jonathan thought one of Theo’s ghastly concoctions was boiling over. “We really shouldn’t be snooping around in here. God knows what he’s got in these bottles.”

Ignoring Jonathan’s caution, Benny inspected a large machine he’d found in the corner. “Wow! Look at this!”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a beaut.” He carefully smoothed the slick metal sides. “Maybe it’s a Brambleweeny 57; you know, an infinite improbability machine.”

“I don’t think Theo has the skills or the intelligence to create something like that,” Jonathan said, not exactly sure what Benny was talking about.

“Sure he does. He’s a genius.” Benny inspected the many knobs and toggle switches. The machine hummed softly, giving off a bluish glow. “Hey, it’s running.”

“Have you found what you need? We ought to be going.”

“I don’t get it.” Benny looked worried. “Theo was supposed to be here. He poked at the machine. “Wonder what this does?”

“I wish you’d leave that alone,” said Jonathan as another clap of thunder sounded nearby. “Come on, let’s go. You can call him later.”

Benny placed his hand on one of the oddly-shaped handles of the machine when a bolt of lightning ran in, causing him to gasp, his body jerking uncontrollably.

“Benedek!” Horrified, Jonathan ran to his friend and in a frantic attempt to pull him away, received a similar jolt that knocked him off his feet. The world crackled and went up in a blaze of blue light.

Benny opened his eyes and watched the ceiling rotate. Gahh. Where was he? Was it Slam Dance Night at Elvira’s? Oh, lord. There were all those little cartoon stars that looked so funny. He put his hand to his forehead and immediately pulled it back in surprise. Whoa! Where’s all this hair come from? The hand was different, too. He stared at it, confused. Wait a minute. Everything felt different. He cautiously felt at his face, touching his nose in wonder. This was not his nose. And the hair – longer and thicker – I gotta find a mirror, he decided.

He rolled over and pushed himself onto his hands and knees. Odd the way his body didn’t seem to want to respond, feeling much heavier somehow. A dangling tie of plain blue came into view. Disturbed, he checked out the rest of his clothing. These aren’t my clothes. This jacket, this shirt, they look like something Jonathan would wear.

He staggered to his feet, fanning away blue smoke. “Jonathan? Where are--?” My God, what’s happened to my voice? He tested it again. “Hello?” It was deeper. Sheesh, what’s going on here?

Searching the gradually clearing room for Jonathan, Benny stopped short in shock when he found himself lying on the floor. Am I dead? Or having another out of body experience? A quick inspection assured him he was in a solid body. But if I’m there on the floor, who’s this I’m in?

Uh-oh.

He knelt beside the still form and patted himself on the cheek. “Jonathan? Jonathan, are you in there?”

His eyes opened slowly, blinking at him. “Benedek?” he heard his own voice say.

“Jon, it’s me, Benny. I know it doesn’t look that way, but something really strange has happened. I think we’ve changed bodies.”

“C-changed bodies?” stammered Jonathan. “What are you talking about? That’s impossible.”

“Oh, yeah? Who do you think you’re talking to?”

He watched his own blue eyes focus and widen. “What am I doing over there?” asked Jonathan, bewildered.

“I’m you,” said Benny. “Look.”

Jonathan sat up, feeling strangely small and light. He gaped at the man beside him. “That’s me,” he whispered.

“What’d I tell you?” his voice said.

Jonathan stared into his own face. “Benedek, what are you doing in there?”

“I could ask you the same question, buds.”

Jonathan shook his head, appalled. “No. It can’t be.” He held out his hands, gazing at them in dismay. He noticed the baggy trousers and floral patterned shirt. Then he slowly felt his face, feeling the high forehead and narrow jaw. The room dimmed.

“Hold on!” exclaimed his voice, alarmed, and he felt a supportive arm at his back. “Hey, it’s not that bad, Jack. I’ve kept myself in great shape.”

“H-how did this happen?” Jonathan asked, trying to regain control of his shattered nerves. He watched in horrified fascination as his real self pushed back his tousled hair and loosened his tie. “How can you be me?”

“Must’ve been that gadget of Theo’s,” his voice replied, oddly flat. “I remember grabbing some kind of switch and then the lights went out. You okay?”

“I think so.” Jonathan put his head in his hands, trying not to think about the fact that it was Benedek’s head and Benedek’s hands. “I can’t – I don’t think I can handle this.” His voice rose. Benny’s voice, screamed his panicked mind.

“Jon, just hang in there. We’ll figure this out. Calm down. Things could be worse.”

“How?” Jonathan demanded. “How could it be worse?”

“You could’ve ended up in the cat.”

“Do something!”

“All right, all right. Take it easy. You’ll give me a stroke.”

Jonathan leaped up and almost fell over, having miscalculated his strength in the smaller, lighter body. “Damn it, Benedek! I’ll give you a broken head! ‘Just stop by Theo’s,’ you said. ‘It’ll only take a minute,’ you said. Fine! And here I am, stuck in your scrawny little body!”

“Is that how I look when I’m angry?” asked Benny, fascinated.

Jonathan had to take a firm grip on the edge of the table to keep from attacking himself. “Get me out of here,” he ordered, gritting Benny’s large and somewhat uneven teeth.

“I’d love to, pal, but first I gotta figure out how you got in there. Let’s check out the machine.” He found movement difficult in Jonathan’s body; his movements were slower, more

deliberate. The more he moved, the easier it got, but it was truly bizarre to have himself – and a very annoyed self, at that –glaring at him.

The odd machine was silent, blue smoke spiraling up in little whorls. “Doesn’t look like this is going to be much help.”

“Where’s Theo?” asked Jonathan. “Would he know what to do?”

“Beats me, chum.”

“This is crazy!” Jonathan continued to fume. “This is insane! Why did I ever come in here?”

“Jon-boy, there is endless potential in this situation. Just think of the story this is gonna make! Beats out of body all hollow. I’m gonna rack up on this one.”

“Don’t do anything with me,” warned Jonathan. “That’s me you’ve got there.”

“And I don’t want to haul you around, buds. This is some heavy package.”

“Well, this can hardly be called a body,” he returned heatedly. “A couple of toothpicks, maybe. And your heart rate is too fast!”

“That’s you doing that. Calm down,” urged Benny.

“Calm down? You’re telling me to calm down?”

“I’d really like to avoid an ulcer if at all possible,” said Benny. “Look, Theo’s gone off somewhere, so there’s no sense hanging around here. We can call him later. Let’s go.”

“Go?” Jonathan echoed. “What if someone sees us?”

“So what? We look the same.”

“We most certainly do not! I mean, we do, but not – you know what I mean!”

Benny found himself intrigued by how he looked when agitated. Never thought I’d be talking to myself. Sheesh, Jon’s gonna wrinkle my forehead permanently. “Jack, aside from your usual hysteria, you’re okay, right? Let’s see if we can find some help.”

“But – to go out – like this,” the other man stammered, leaning against the table for support.

“You look great, trust me! I never looked better.”

“But these clothes. . .this shirt. . .”

Benny gave his new self a sad look. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“I think we should wait here for Theo.” Desperation made Jonathan willing to consider the alchemist’s help.

Benny disagreed. “I don’t know what you had for breakfast, but whatever it was, it’s gone. I’m starving.”

“How can you think of eating?”

“Gee, I dunno. Maybe you thought of eating. After all, I’m only a guest here.” He watched himself sputter incoherently. “Come on, Jonny.” He took himself by the arm. “Just try to act like me. Can’t be too hard. I’m a fairly simple guy. Relax. Loosen up.”

“There is no way we can pull this off,” said Jonathan faintly as the implications of Edgar Benedek running around as Jonathan MacKensie sank in. “You can’t be me. It’s not possible!”

“You think I like the idea of you being me? My reputation will be shot,” said Benny with a grin, leading his friend out to the car.”

“Your reputation? What about mine? My heavens, if you go off on one of your wild

tangents—and my classes! What about my classes? You can't teach them. Even if I coached you for months--"

"Down, boy. You can call in sick, can't you? Think about me and my deadlines. It's a good thing I don't have an interview scheduled. I don't think you could put in that extra Benedek sparkle."

"Deadlines," Jonathan gasped. "Oh, my God, Benedek, my speech! It's tonight!" he sank down onto the front seat, his head in his hands.

"Jon, you're gonna pop every blood vessel I own," Benny complained.

"But I can't give the speech looking like this! I've got to be back in my own body before eight o'clock tonight."

Benny slid into the driver's seat. "Relaxovision, pal. If worst comes to worst, I'll do it for you."

Jonathan stared at his own face which seemed unbelievably and unreasonably cheerful. "I've died and gone to hell," he moaned.

Dr. Julianna Moorhouse entered her office to find Edgar Benedek seated properly in a chair, and Jonathan MacKensie leaning on her desk, grinning.

Up went one eyebrow. "Gentlemen," she greeted them calmly. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"We got a real eye-opener for you this time, Dr. M," MacKensie announced.

"What did you call me?" she asked in a quelling tone.

"Dr. Moorhouse, please ignore him," said Benedek. "He's not himself. He's me. Or rather, I'm not – I mean – I'm over here."

She stared at him, then at MacKensie. "April Fool's was weeks ago," she informed them frostily.

"This is no joke," stated "MacKensie." "It's me, Edgar Benedek. We had a body transfer. Jonny's over there, trying to make me look respectable." He gave "Benedek" a sympathetic grin. "Can't be done, pal. Sorry."

"You're trying to tell me that the two of you somehow switched bodies?" Dr. Moorhouse sank into her chair, looking from one man to the other, astounded.

"Yes," said Benny.

"It's true," said Jonathan miserably from the chair. "I'm here."

"Is this a great story, or what?" Benny paced the room excitedly. "I'm getting the hang of it now, Jon. Sort of like learning to drive a semi."

"Very funny."

"I don't understand why you're not more coordinated. There's a lot of muscle here. Needs work, but it's not too bad."

"Benedek, sit down. You're going to wear me out."

"Well, I'm gonna rot if you don't give me some exercise. I'm not used to sitting still."

Dr. Moorhouse watched and listened with growing apprehension. She wasn't certain which was more unnerving, seeing Benedek so quiet, or Jonathan so animated. "Dare I ask how this change came about?"

"Benedek was playing with one of Theo Goldberg's hellish machines," said Jonathan

irritably.

She noticed that he'd retained his accent, which sounded extremely odd coming out of Benedek's mouth, as odd as the New Yorker's quick slangy speech sounded in Jonathan's deeper tones. "I might have guessed," she said, annoyed. "but if that's the case, then why aren't you there now getting yourselves untangled?"

"He's disappeared," answered Jonathan wearily rubbing his forehead.

"Can't find him" Benny chimed in. "I tried every place I could think of."

"We have to do something." Jonathan looked up again. "My speech for the Tellenbrook Society is tonight, and if I'm not myself. . ." he trailed off, dismayed.

Dr. Moorhouse glanced from Benedek's amazingly worried face to MacKenzie's incandescent grin. "I see what you mean. You'll have to cancel."

"I can't do that!" he protested. "It's an honor to be asked, an opportunity."

Benny clapped him on the shoulder. "I told you, Jack, I'll do it for you. Just tell me how to pronounce all those pitecuses and you're home free."

Jonathan groaned and dropped his face into his hands once more, feeling the unfamiliar features. To have his speech ruined was one thing; what if they never found a way back into their proper selves? Would he have to spend the rest of his life as Edgar Benedek? He'd never considered himself overly concerned about his body, but the consequences of looking like his friend were enormous. Benny was well-known in certain unsavory circles, as well as being a regular on the talk show circuit.

I'll never be able to keep up this charade – not to mention the hordes of his bizarre friends who will descend upon me and expect me to party down at a moment's notice.

His own voice broke into his jumbled thoughts. "Come on, Jonny. Why don't we go have a look at that speech? Where is it?"

"I left it in the car," he replied, raising his head with a sigh.

"Let's go get it and go to your office. I can practice there."

"What if some of my students drop by?"

"We'll play it by ear. Let's go." Benny paused, glancing back at the woman who sat staring at both of them still. "Dr. M, if Shelley calls, take a message, will ya? She's hunting Theo for us."

"Very well, MacKen—I mean, Benedek," she agreed, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Yo! This is all blurry," said Benny.

"You need my glasses," Jonathan explained. "They should be in the top pocket of my jacket."

"Whew!" Benny squinted, staring around the office. "This is sad, Jack. Must have been all of those books you read."

"Will you stop making disparaging remarks about my person?" Jonathan glared. "This is hardly a top of the line model I'm stuck in."

"Hey, it gets me where I want to go." He found Jonathan's glasses and put them on. "It's a miracle! I can see again."

"Just read and let me explain."

Benny didn't have as much trouble as Jonathan had feared he would. "Slow down a bit, though," he coached. "And it's Von, not Van, Koenigswald."

"Jon, this is cake." Benny flopped into the recliner, smiling. "No problem. I don't know why you're so worried."

"Because I want to do it myself. As myself."

"Yourself will do just fine," said Benny, his smile stretching into a grin.

"Benedek, if you screw this up, I swear I'll throw this puny little body off the nearest bridge." Jonathan paced the office nervously.

"Calm down, Jack. I can do this, easy. You forget, I make my living doing the talk shows."

"This isn't Merv Griffin, for heaven's sake. This is very important. Please, just read my speech the way I've written it. No stories. No magic tricks."

"Unwind a bit, Jonny," Benedek remained undaunted. "I can play to any sort of crowd."

"Just remember you're me up there. Me," Jonathan finished unhappily.

"Isn't the voice gonna throw them? I don't think I can quite manage the accent. I've tried it and I sound like Ronald Coleman on a bad night."

"If you read the speech slowly and carefully, I doubt anyone will notice. If you'd just--"

"Dr. MacKensie? Oh, sorry." A bright-eyed coed paused at the door. "I didn't know you were busy. I just wanted to know when midterms will be posted."

"Uhh," Benny stalled, shooting an anxious look at Jonathan.

"Weren't you just telling me the twenty-fifth?" Jonathan attempted Benny's casual style.

"Oh, yeah – I mean, yes, the twenty-fifth," Benny repeated for the girl's benefit.

"Thanks." The girl paused, then asked. "You okay? You sound funny."

"Bad cold," Benny improvised, indicating his throat. He coughed convincingly.

"I guess so. Hope you feel better soon," she said, giving him a sympathetic smile as she left.

"Thanks, I mean, thank you," he called as the door closed. He caught Jonathan's eye and they both heaved a sigh of relief.

"Let's get out of here," Jonathan suggested.

"I'm with you."

They walked outside, Benny suggesting that Jonathan put his hands in his pockets, and Jonathan cautioning Benny about swaggering.

"Just walk like a normal person. And don't look at the girls that way. I could lose my job."

"Okay, okay."

"Remember, you're me. You have to act more--" he searched for the word.

"Stiff."

"Dignified. Particularly on campus."

"I'll make a deal with you, Jack," said Benny, straightening his tie. "You relax and have fun being me, and I'll try not to do anything to embarrass you."

"This isn't going to work," Jonathan sighed. "We could barely manage to fool one student."

"We can do it! I heard you just now. You can sound like me. I've heard you do lots of voices."

“Benedek.”

“No really – just flatten those a’s and shorten a few verbs. No sweat. Can we eat now?”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“Well, I’m caved in. I’ll grab a few dogs.”

He started off, but Jonathan caught his arm. He had grave reservations letting Benny wander around campus as him in his current state of mind. “Where are you going?”

“Just to the hot dog stand. Want one? You’re getting one anyway.”

“I’ll wait for you over here.” Jonathan motioned to a bench that seemed safely out of the way.

“Be right back.”

“And don’t swagger!”

Benny did his best to walk at a sedate pace to the hot dog stand. He was almost there when he heard a light voice calling.

“Jonathan! Yoo-hoo! Jonathan!”

It took him a moment to realize that the woman was calling him. “Oh, hi,” he grinned, pleased.

“Jonathan, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten,” she said with a chuckle.

Uh-oh. “Forgotten? No, of course not. What’s there to forget?”

“You have forgotten. I can tell.” Instead of going off in a huff, she smiled. “Well, I forgive you. It was sort of sudden.”

“Yes, it was,” Benny agreed, finding Jonathan’s tie somewhat tighter all of a sudden.

“Then we’re all set for tonight?”

“Tonight?” he repeated. “Oh, yeah, sure. Your place or mine?”

She laughed in delight. “Well, you’ve certainly changed since I saw you last.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Benny replied, then coughed, remembering how he was supposed to sound. “Excuse me. A little sore throat. Nothing serious.”

“I thought you sounded different.” She returned to the topic of their discussion. “My place would be fine.”

“You won’t believe this,” said Benny, willing to take a risk. “I’ve forgotten where you live.”

“A genuine absent-minded professor,” she teased. “608 Point boulevard, apartment E. E for Elsie. Now I know you can remember that.” She gave him a kiss. “That’s for starters. See you later.”

Hoo, boy, thought Benny, beginning to realize the advantages of his situation. This is a whole new experience, all these women giving me the eye. Haven’s been chased so hard since I tried Theo’s love potion. All I have to do is wiggle my little finger – well, Jonathan’s little finger – and I’ve got them all over me. This is great!

“Benny, wow, am I glad I found you!”

Jonathan looked up at the young man approaching him in bewilderment. Who on earth was this?

“Man, you’re not gonna believe who blew into town. Old Dirty Dan himself. He’s after your scoop, pal. Thought I’d better warn you.”

“Dan? Dan Wagoner?” Jonathan’s heart sank as he recognized that particular name.

“None other. I’m in town for the Senate talks and got this urgent call from Jordy. He said you’d be hanging around GI. Better get on that story pronto,” advised the other man. “Need any back-up?”

“Uh, no, no, thank you.” Jonathan stumbled over his reply. “I have some help. MacKensie, you know.”

The younger man frowned. “What’s with the accent?”

Jonathan concentrated on giving Benny’s voice a close approximation of his friend’s extremely American sound. “Nothin’. Just kiddin’ around. Thanks for the tip. I’ll get right on it.”

“No problem.”

“Kent! So what’s up?” Jonathan heard his voice as Benny returned, carrying two hot dogs and a Coke.

Kent glanced at Benny, puzzled by the greeting. Benny caught his mistake at once and tried to cover. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Jonathan MacKensie. Benny’s told me about you. Kent Edwards, right? You’re a reporter for the Register.”

“Yeah, nice to meet you,” replied Kent. “I was just telling Benny that a rival of his is out to steal his story. You know Dan Wagoner?”

“Trash from the past,” muttered Benny, and at Kent’s curious look, added, “I mean, yes, I’ve run into him. A very nasty character.”

“Right.” Kent lost his suspicious look. “So you know how important it is to move fast. You better get jumping on your story. I gotta go. Good luck!”

Jonathan remembered to call thanks after the young man. To Benny he remarked, “Just what we needed.”

“As soon as I finish these, we are heading for the Carlyle House,” stated Benny around a mouthful of hot dog.

“What are you eating?” asked Jonathan, concerned. “That looks like sauerkraut.”

“It is. Good for you.”

“It is not!” Jonathan looked alarmed. “Good lord, I’ll never get my stomach back to normal.”

“Your stomach is laughing with delight over something new and tasty, Jon-boy.” Benny licked his fingers. “Trust me.”

“Trust you? I’m stuck inside your body and you say trust you?”

“Look at this face. Have you ever seen anything so sincere? Look at these soulful eyes. Is this the face of a liar?” He swallowed the last of his drink. “I may look like a mild-mannered anthropology professor, but underneath, I am still Edgar Benedek, ace reporter, and nobody’s getting my story.”

“Where are you going?” asked Jonathan, staring in amazement as Benny started to walk away.

“To the Carlyle House,” Benny replied over his shoulder.

Jonathan ran after him, grabbing his arm. “benedek, you can’t! You’ve got to deliver my speech.”

“And let Wagoner ruin the scoop of a lifetime? No way!”

“You promised! You said you’d do this for me. What does it matter if he does go in the house?”

“What does it matter if you miss your speech?”

Jonathan took a deep breath to steady himself. “Benedek,” he said warningly.

“This story means a lot to me, pal.”

Staring into his own eyes, Jonathan knew there was only one way out of this dilemma. “What if I go?”

“Go?”

“I’m you, aren’t I? What if I go to the house and get your story? I think that’s fair.”

“Gee, I dunno, Jonny,” Benny hedged uneasily. “It’s great of you to offer, but--”

“Oh, you don’t think I can handle it, is that what you mean?”

“Chill out, pal. I didn’t say that. We don’t know what’s in the house. Could be anything.”

“Which is precisely why you were going, correct?”

“Well, yeah, but--”

“And it could very well be nothing, which is much more likely,” said Jonathan. “I’ll go have a look. I promise I’ll search everywhere and give you a full report.”

“Jack, I appreciate this, I really do, but the last time we met up with D.W., he was taking shots at me.”

“I’ll be careful,” Jonathan promised. “I’ll be . . . a shadow.” His hands sketched the air.

“Very good,” said Benny admiringly. “How’s this?” he stood straight and schooled Jonathan’s features into their usual serious expression. “Benedek, you idiot, you have absolutely no proof of anything.”

“Do I look that stern?” Jonathan hadn’t imagined he could look so grim.

Benny wagged a finger. “Get outta here and leave me alone!”

“‘Out of,’ Benedek. ‘Out of.’”

“Okay, Jack,” he grinned. “And you gotta loosen up. Relax! Don’t you enjoy being a celebrity?”

“As of yet, I’ve not been mobbed by screaming fans,” said Jonathan wryly.

“Give it time, give it time.”

“Speaking of time, do you have any idea when we can get back to being ourselves? Has anyone located Theo?”

“I’m working on it, pal.”

“I don’t think you’re working hard enough.” Jonathan looked accusingly at his friend. “I think you’re enjoying this.”

“How often do you get the chance to really be someone else?” asked Benny enthusiastically. “Jonathan MacKensie: The Inside Story!”

Hoping to stem the tide of the man’s rhetoric, Jonathan tugged at his arm. “Come on, you’ve got to get ready.”

“Can I wear my fish tie?”

Waiting his turn to speak, Benny gazed across the room of dark-suited, serious-faced men and women and felt a surge of true doubt. This was some heavy-duty meeting. At times like this he wondered why Jonathan wanted to be a part of anything so somber and stuffy. Jonathan,

the same guy who gleefully hopped on moving sofas and delighted in model trains, the same guy who had a real flair for dealing with the paranormal, even if he'd never admit it. Benny poked at his chicken and green beans, typical banquet fare. He had other things on his mind just now.

"If you never do anything else right in your life, do this," urged Dr. Moorhouse from her seat across from him, elegantly severe in black dress and pearls. "Jonathan is depending on you. Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, I – yes, I do," Benny corrected himself. "I will do my very best, Dr. M – Dr. Moorhouse, I promise."

She gave him a hard look. "Straighten your tie—I mean MacKensie's tie. And for heaven's sake, try to look serious."

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

"Where is Jonathan, by the way?" she asked. "Isn't he coming?"

Benny toyed with telling her the truth. Right about now, he's sneaking around in a haunted house. There's a real scumbag of a reporter trying to get in, plus a mighty mean ghost. Instead, he replied, "He couldn't bear to watch."

"I don't blame him." Her gaze went beyond Benny, and her expression changed. "Oh, dear."

"What?"

She lowered her voice. "Dr. Peterson from Elmhurst Academy."

Benny took a quick look. "What's the deal?"

"He is highly critical of Jonathan's research."

"How does Jon handle him?"

"With his usual courtesy.," she said in a warning tone. An alarmingly mischievous sparkle had appeared in the dark eyes. "Benedek!" She had time for only one hiss before Dr. Peterson arrived at their table.

"Well, MacKensie, this is your big night, I see," he said with a thin smile.

"Yes, it is." Benny gave Peterson a brief going-over. I don't think much of your competition, Jon-boy. The professor was sarcastic-looking, balding, fiftyish, probably jealous as hell. "Very kind of you to come," he said in his best MacKensie manner.

"Oh, wouldn't miss it." Peterson looked more cheerful. "I'll have some questions for you, I'm sure."

"New questions or the same old stuff?" asked Benny politely, aware of Dr. Moorhouse's repeated attempts to catch his eye, which he ignored. Peterson, he was pleased to see, looked taken aback.

"You'll find out soon enough, won't you?" he said stiffly. "Anyone who persists in the theory of language development over tool construction has to be ready for questions."

Benny had been over Jonathan's speech enough times to be able to rise to the occasion. "You're ignoring Pilbeam's findings, then? Well, not everyone can be an expert, can they, Peterson? I myself tend to think man had the capacity for speech long before he picked up a chainsaw. How else was he gonna tell someone to back off?" With a grin, he added, "Of course, a chainsaw makes a pretty definite statement, too."

Peterson's eyebrows had risen steadily throughout Benny's speech. "You think this is some kind of joke? He began icily.

"New evidence suggests a great deal of language development occurred among the Paelopithecus," said Benny glibly. "Journal of Comparative Anthropology, volume sixty-five, page

one thirty-three, May, 1984. Or check Ralston and Purina, 1986, in their landmark series, Language and Early Man: an Overview. I may have a copy somewhere I'll be glad to lend you."

"That won't be necessary," said Peterson between his teeth.

"You've already read it? Great. I think they have plans to make a movie out of it soon."

"This isn't funny, MacKensie."

"Oh, I think so," said Bennym putting on Jonathan's most serious face. "I think it's highly amusing we have all these theories no one can agree upon. So instead of working together to prove something, we spend all our spare time sniping at each other." He smiled. "Snipe away, Pete."

Peterson's face turned bright red. Without another word, he spun on his heel and stalked away.

"Benedek," said Dr. Moorhouse, shocked.

"He asked for it," said Benny with a shrug. "you want to tell me you didn't enjoy that?"

She looked uncomfortable, as if she wanted to smirk and didn't dare. "Well, he does need to be put in his place," she granted, "but you must remember you're Jonathan. What will this sort of thing do to his reputation?"

Calmly, Benny cut another slice of chicken. "maybe people will see they can't push him around."

"Benedek, I think this is all a mistake." Dr. Moorhouse folded her napkin decisively. "I think we should leave."

"Not now," Benny protested. "I'm just getting warmed up."

She put a hand to her forehead. "I am beginning to sympathize quite heartily with MacKensie." An announcement from the front of the room made her raise her head with a jerk.

"And it is our pleasure to welcome as our guest speaker this evening, Dr. Jonathan MacKensie of the Georgetown institute of Science and Technology. Dr. MacKensie."

Benny gave Dr. Moorhouse a wink as he got to his feet. "It's show time!"

In the dark, the cheerful Carlyle House looked grim and foreboding. The flowers had closed for the night, giving the house a desolate air. Jonathan fumbled in his pocket—Benedek's pocket – for the key the Batemans had given him. Why not do this right and pick the lock? Was one of the many thoughts whirling around in his head. After all, that's what Benedek would have done. What was he doing here? This was crazy. Benedek had better appreciate this. And he'd better not ruin my speech, either.

That thought was more frightful than anything that might lurk in the house. I worked on that speech for weeks. I was so looking forward to presenting it, fielding any questions – oh, my God. I didn't prepare Benedek for the questions! I was so busy making sure he knew all the words, all the terms. What will he say? How far back will he set my career? I'm giving this house five minutes and that is it.

The large old-fashioned key turned in the lock and the door opened. Jonathan switched on the lights. Everything looked perfectly normal. I'll give these rooms and quick run-through and then I'll leave.

The damaged furniture and broken vase had been removed. The house looked pleasant in the golden light from the foyer chandelier. What does Benny expect me to find? He knows I don't believe in ghosts.

He checked the dining room with its red velvet chairs and long polished table, the parlor, the upstairs bedrooms with their short canopied beds, washstands and bureaus, marble-topped and covered with china knickknacks. Everything was quiet and undisturbed.

All right. I've done my part.

He'd gone back down the stairs when he heard the noise. A crashing, tinkling sound like breaking glass. More flying vases? He peered around the corner apprehensively. A hand reached inside the broken parlor window and found the latch. A burglar? He watched a man climb in, a wiry, dark-haired man with a sharp-featured face, a face Benny had described as a face only a weasel could love.

Dan Wagoner.

Jonathan started to back away. What now? Come on, MacKensie. Remember, you look like Benedek. For all intents and purposes, you are Benny. Get cocky.

"What's the big idea, hornin' in on my turf?" he demanded and had the pleasure of seeing Wagoner jump in surprise and whirl about, clutching his heart.

"Dammit, Benedek! What's with sneaking up on me?" the man snarled. "You coulda given me a heart attack."

"I can dream, can't I?" Jonathan retorted. "Get outta here. This is my story."

"Since when is this private property?" Wagoner replied with an unfriendly grin. "I got as much right to be here as you."

"This is an exclusive for the Register and you know it," said Jonathan, remembering to use more expansive gestures than usual. "Clear out."

Wagoner stood his ground, crossing his arms. "Make me."

Make him? How the hell was he supposed to do that? Benny would have been ready with a spiel, a trick, something. His mind went blank. Before he could arrive at a response, something in the house gave a deep groan.

"What was that?" asked Wagoner, eyes alert.

Jonathan started to say, "I'm sure there's some reasonable explanation," but caught himself. "Whatever it is, it's talkin' to me first."

"Oh, yeah? We'll see about that." Wagoner pushed past Jonathan into the foyer. Several of the chairs were quivering, as if readying themselves to take flight. "Say, what is this?" He took out his camera and started taking pictures. A moment later, the camera was snatched from his hands and flung against the wall. "Hey! Did you see that? We got ourselves a poltergeist here!"

Jonathan ducked as a picture left the wall and narrowly missed his head. Thank goodness I'm shorter than usual, was his fleeting thought. That would have brained me. What's going on? What's causing the disturbance?

Wagoner ran up the stairs, clinging to the wobbly banister. "Okay, spooks! Show yourselves! I ain't afraid of no ghosts!"

Something caught the reporter squarely in the chest, shoving him down the stairs. He rolled and tumbled, falling heavily. As Jonathan hurried over to see how badly the man was hurt, he was smacked on the ear with a china shepherdess.

"Ow!" The fact that it was Benny's ear didn't diminish the pain. When he could see straight again, the lights in the house had gone out. The only remaining light was a faint blue glow from the street light. All was quiet. Cautiously he looked around. There was an eerie sound echoing in the dark room. For a moment, it puzzled him. Then he recognized it. The sound of a woman crying.

"Who's there?" He half expected to see a transparent woman in a long nightgown or a hooded figure.

"Leave this place," came a whisper. "Leave me alone."

Whatever it is, it's talking to me first. I didn't really mean that! "Who are you?" asked Jonathan. "Where are you?"

"This house is my tomb," the sad voice continued. "I am trapped within. Leave now."

"No, wait." Jonathan tried to locate the source of the voice. "I want to help."

"No one can help," said the whispery voice. "I'm trapped."

"But I understand," said Jonathan. "I understand better than you think I do." He put his hands to his chest. "This isn't my body. This isn't me. I know what you mean about being trapped."

The voice wavered. "Is this true?"

"My friend and I exchanged bodies by accident," he explained. "I'm trapped, too." The voice seemed to come from above, so he spoke to the ceiling. "I want to help you. If you'd just tell me what I can do."

There was a long pause as if the owner of the voice was considering his request. "Destroy this house."

"D-destroy it?" Jonathan stammered.

"The house is my punishment, my tomb. Destroy it, and I am free."

"But I can't do that," he protested. "The house is a landmark, a famous building."

"Then I shall have no peace," the voice said. On the opposite wall, in the floor-length and faded mirror, a woman's face appeared. Not an attractive face; the jawline was square, the nose aquiline, the brows arched and haughty. But the eyes were sunken and tragic. Jonathan felt a rush of sympathy. He realized with a start he could see his own face superimposed over Benny's features and knew this was how he appeared to her, just as her true self could be seen in the glass.

"Mrs. Carlyle?"

"Love for this house destroyed me," she whispered. "It destroyed my family. I didn't care for my husband as I should have and he died. I used all our money for the house, nothing else. You must get rid of it."

Jonathan was at a loss. "But, I can't – I don't know how to go about--"

"Then there will be no peace for me or for anyone who comes here," she replied in her sad whisper.

"I'm sure we can work something out," he said. "There must be some other way."

"No," she said. "No."

"Mrs. Carlyle, I have a friend who knows all about this sort of thing. Maybe he can help you. We can't destroy this house. It's about to be renovated." The walls began to shake. Jonathan grabbed the hall table to keep his balance. "Mrs. Carlyle, please listen!"

The face in the mirror didn't change expression. Gradually the trembling stopped. "If I could bring this house down, I would," she said. "But I am trapped within its walls. Help me."

"I will," Jonathan promised. "I'll do whatever I can."

There was a groan beside him. "Who the hell are you talking to?" asked Wagoner, sitting up and holding his head.

The image in the mirror faded. “No one,” answered Jonathan. “Come on, let’s get out of here before the roof caves in.” He pulled the reporter to his feet.

Wagoner jerked free. “I don’t need any help,” he said, still holding a hand to his bleeding forehead.

“Buzz off,” snapped Jonathan. “And tell those other creeps at the Standard to keep their noses out of Register business.”

Wagoner made a rude suggestion that was anatomically impossible as he staggered out.

“MacKensie,” the house whispered.

“I won’t forget,” he said.

Dr. Moorhouse gradually relaxed as Benedek carefully made his way through Jonathan’s speech. He’d started with a brief apology for his sore throat, and then, without any of the ghastly jokes or puns she’d dreaded, he had begun.

He was doing well, she had to admit. All the interviews and talk show appearances he’d done gave him a decided stage presence, and he certainly had no qualms about speaking before a group. If she hadn’t known better, she might have believed him to really be Jonathan MacKensie. A shame that MacKensie had been forced to miss this opportunity to press his own work, but Benedek had proved a worthy substitute. Now if he could only sidestep the mine field of questions that possibly lay ahead.

There. He’d finished. She joined the other spectators in a long round of applause. Drat! Peterson’s hand had gone up.

“If Dr. MacKensie would condescend to entertain a few questions?”

“I’ll make them as entertaining as possible,” said Benny, getting a laugh.

Annoyed, Peterson continued. “You state that language is a useful moderator of aggressive behavior. Australopithecines were too small-brained for language development, MacKensie. I find your entire thesis amazingly fanciful.”

Did you know you were amazingly fanciful, Jonny? Benny smiled pleasantly. “I am not ignoring the importance of tool construction, Peterson. The purpose of conflicting theories is, as you well know, to jar standard conservative thinking.” Lay it on with a trowel, Benedek. Remember that article you did for the Register last month about the monkey boy. “In a current scientific journal – I’m sure you’ve read it – there was documented evidence concerning language development in primitive tribes and in autistic children that shed new light on the function of language in society.”

Someone else chimed in his agreement. “All the evidence isn’t in. We can’t say exactly when and where language begins. I find MacKensie’s theory as reasonable as any other and certainly an interesting premise.”

A lively argument followed, threatening to get out of hand, before Benny tapped on the microphone for silence. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for aptly demonstrating the importance and diversity of language development.”

There was general laughter at this sally and another round of applause. As Benny slid back into his seat, Dr. Moorhouse gave him an approving smile. “Benedek, you were absolutely splendid.”

He grinned broadly. “Thanks, Dr. M. Didn’t go too badly, did it? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I gotta split.”

“Why are you rushing off? Stay and mingle for a while.”

“No, I can’t.”

"Of course you can. You held your own very well up there."

Obviously Dr. Moorhouse had mistaken his reluctance to remain. "No, I can't stay," Benny tried again. "There's something I've got to check up on."

This time she got his meaning. "Benedek, where is Jonathan? Don't tell me he took one of your assignments while you were here!"

Benny looked sheepish. "Something like that."

"What was it?"

"Later, Dr. M," he promised, getting to his feet and escaping before she could ask any more questions. So intent was he on getting away from the woman, he nearly ran into himself outside the banquet room. "Jon-boy, you were a hit. I had them eating out of my hand. How'd you do at the house?"

"You were right," replied Jonathan, catching his breath. "Wagoner was there. You were right about the story, too, and I may have the inside track."

"Way to go!" Benny beamed. "See what being me does for you?"

"How did my speech go over? I forgot to prepare you for the question session."

"I slayed 'em, J.J. I bowled them over. Dr. M's already talking tenure for me. Now, what about the house? What about Dirty Dan? Did you have any trouble?"

Quickly Jonathan filled him in on Wagoner's break-in. "Then everything started shaking, and he fell down the stairs."

"Multiple fractures, I hope."

"No, nothing serious." Jonathan hesitated before continuing. "But while he was out, the house – I mean, Mrs. Carlyle--" He stammered to a halt, flushing.

Benny hadn't realized just how disconcerted he could look until now. "You saw her?"

"Um, yes. Sort of."

"Whoa, this is great! See what happens when we trade places? I put you in the history books, and you find a ghost!"

"Could we talk somewhere else?" asked Jonathan, unnerved by the sight of himself looking so pleased.

"Yeah, sure. I've had enough of this rarified air."

They walked out into the balmy spring evening. "There was a woman's face in the mirror," Jonathan explained. "She said she was trapped in the house, that it was her punishment. The only way she can be free is to destroy the house."

Benny whistled. "Wow! Amanda Carlyle for sure. She was always nuts about the house, and now she's doomed to wander it forever."

"We can't destroy the house, but there must be another way to free her."

"She really meant that? Destroy the house?" Benny snapped Jonathan's fingers. "That's why she's been so restless lately. She learned about the restoration plans. I'll bet that put a kink in her sheets."

"She said no one would have any peace." Jonathan frowned, trying to recall her exact words. "I thought maybe if you had a talk with her. . ." he trailed off.

Benny stopped in his tracks and swung around to face himself. "I don't believe this. I'm dreaming. Jonathan MacKensie, high priest of the Loyal Order of Skeptics and Unbelievers, wants me to come talk to a ghost."

"No more incredible than you actually getting through my speech," Jonathan returned testily.

"It's got to be the body. You become me and you can't help but be transformed. I become you and suddenly I'm a genius. What say we go have a chinwag with this phantom right now?"

"No, Benedek, not tonight," said Jonathan wearily. "I've had enough paranormal nonsense for one night. Your metabolism must be incredible," he added. "I'm worn out."

"I understand, buds. Hasn't been easy for me, either, lugging an extra fifty pounds around."

Jonathan looked offended. "Thirty, perhaps, but not fifty. You aren't that scrawny."

"And what did you do to my ear?"

Touching it gingerly, Jonathan winced. "A little accident at the house."

"Be careful, willya? I've got ten thousand more miles on that model." He checked Jonathan's watch. "Tell you what, Jack. Why don't we call it a day? I'll meet you at the house tomorrow night."

"That sounds fine," said Jonathan, glad that for once, Benny seemed to be in a reasonable state of mind. "And find Theo," he called after him.

Jonathan had just gotten to sleep when the shrill ringing of the telephone work him. "What?" he snarled into the receiver.

"Benny! Glad I found you, kid." The familiar voice of Benny's editor boomed into his ear. "I been phoning all over."

"I'm not Benny," Jonathan tried to explain, but Jordy rolled on.

"You clear up that problem with Wagoner? Watch your step with him, Benny. I got another problem here. Where's that story you promised me?"

"Story? What story?"

"What story, he says. The one about the haunted house. I need something, and I need it now."

"Oh, that," Jonathan sighed. "Can I call you back? It's not quite finished."

"Benny, I'm losing patience here. You said you'd have something by today. I'll take anything, kid."

Good grief, what now? Jonathan sat up in bed and tried to think. "Okay," he said in his breeziest Benedek. "I've got a little info, but it's not much."

"I'm listening."

Jonathan briefly relayed the night's events. I have reached rock bottom, he thought, reporting for the National Register, of all things!

"That'll do," said Jordy. "Thanks."

Jonathan hung up and lay back with a sigh. How did Benny keep up with such a frantic lifestyle? He'd been his friend for a single day, and he was exhausted. On impulse, he sat up and tried Theo's number. No answer. The lunatic's probably blown himself to bits. If I'm stuck like this forever, I'll have to find a hiding place in the country. Possibly Siberia.

In the morning, wincing at the sight of Benny's face in the mirror, he wondered if his friend had stirred up any trouble and how soon he could expect to find his own face plastered across all the scandal sheets in America. He looked at Benny's clothes, which he'd folded neatly on a chair.

I refuse to wear that shirt a second longer. The trousers are all right, but I must have a shirt that I've outgrown here somewhere.

After a frustrating rummage through his closets, he satisfied himself with a blue shirt and modestly striped tie. His smile lasted until he reached the porch of the Carlyle House. Waiting for him, he found Benny wearing a white shirt decorated with bright orange-gold pineapples and green leaves, baggy green pants, and fluorescent green sneakers.

"Benedek! My God, you can't let me be seen like that!"

"Look at you," Benny retorted. "You've made me all but invisible."

"Get inside, hurry." Jonathan pushed him through the doorway. "Where are my real clothes?"

"Safe and sound, don't panic. I just stopped by K-Mart and picked up a few things. You shouldn't carry so much cash, by the way." He looked around. "So where's our ghost?"

Jonathan turned on the lights. "Over here." He led Benny across the room to the huge dim mirror. "This is where I saw her. Mrs. Carlyle? Hello?"

"I can't believe you're doing this," Benny chuckled.

Jonathan tried to explain. "She looked so unhappy."

"This is great. Makes it worth while lugging this body of yours around."

"Will you shut up?" Jonathan gazed anxiously into the mirror.

"What's the matter, Jon-boy? Nobody home?"

"I told her I'd be back."

"Maybe she's off haunting another house." The walls began to tremble. "Uh-oh," said Benny. "No offense, Amanda."

Amanda Carlyle's sad face appeared in the mirror. "be polite," Jonathan cautioned Benny. To the image, he said, "Mrs. Carlyle, hello. This is the friend I was telling you about, Edgar Benedek."

"Just call me Benny," Benny said with a smile. "Even though I don't look like one." Jonathan had been right when he described her. She was the saddest ghost he'd ever seen. "I'd like to help you out, so to speak."

"No one can help me," she sighed. "Only by destroying this house can I be free."

"Mrs. Carlyle, we can't tear this house down." Benny spoke seriously. "There's got to be some other way to set you free. I know lots of people who've had experiences with spirits like yourself, and I'm sure one of them can take care of this."

She shook her head. "No."

"But I know some really good exorcists."

Again she shook her head. Something in her eyes made Benny take Jonathan by the arm and pull him aside. "We got a real problem here, Jack. She seems pretty definite, and usually these ghosts know what they're talking about when it comes to curses."

"What do you propose we do?" asked Jonathan. "Start chopping away with an ax?"

"Maybe if we just tore part of it down."

"Are you mad?" Jonathan stared at himself. "This building is part of history. The Preservation Society would never agree to any sort of damage."

Benny's gesture took in the debris from the night before. "What do you think Amanda's doing? Spring cleaning?"

"Well, which of your bizarre friends can help?" sighed Jonathan, exasperated. "Of course, the only bizarre person we should be looking for is Theo."

"I don't think anyone can do anything," said Benny. "I say the house goes."

"Benedek!" Jonathan stared at him, astonished.

"You want to help the lady, don't you?"

"But-but this house is more than a hundred years old!" Jonathan protested.

Benny shrugged. "Time to build a new one. You know," he observed, "I look real funny with my mouth open like that."

The floor trembled slightly, and the few paintings still on the wall swayed.

"She's getting impatient," Benny remarked, glancing back over his shoulder at the mirror.

"Damn ghost owes me a camera," said a harsh voice from behind them.

"Oh, good," said Benny, turning with a grin. "I've been waiting for a chance to smash in that ferret face of yours."

"Huh?" Wagoner stared. "Didn't know you'd become the violent type, MacKensie – or were given to loud shirts."

Benny's grin widened as he realized he could have a little fun. "It's Benedek's influence," he said, advancing on his rival. "I've been taking lessons."

Jonathan grasped the sleeve of the pineapple shirt. "Benedek," he warned.

"Just one punch, Jonny. With my reflexes and your fist, it oughta connect real well."

Wagoner's eyes darted from one face to the other nervously. "What's going on here?"

"Your brain couldn't possibly handle it," said Benny. "No way."

"Yes, it's much too complicated for you," added Jonathan, for once in agreement with his partner.

"Wait a minute," protested Wagoner. "What's with the – you guys sound funny," he said accusingly. "Something's not right."

"Yeah, and it's you." Benny grinned maliciously, realizing how it must look to the other man: MacKensie in charge, grinning, while Benedek stood quietly in the background, seriously regarding the proceedings.

Wagoner shook off his uneasiness. "I'm sure there are enough ghosts in this place for two, Eddie," he said to Jonathan with a tight smile.

A quick glance in the blank mirror told Benny that Amanda Carlyle had decided not to let Wagoner see her. "Look, you had fun playing burglar, so clear out."

"Since when do you give the orders, MacKensie?" he retorted. "Getting kinda uppity, aren't we?" His curious gaze swung to the other man. "And what's with you, Eddie? The professor's stealing your act."

"Why don't you just leave?" suggested Jonathan. "There's nothing here."

"What about all that action last night? You trying to tell me that wasn't a ghost?"

"You fell down the stairs. Can I help it if you're clumsy?"

"I was pushed!"

"Then take the hint and leave."

Wagoner's features hardened. "Oh, no," he said, his voice full of soft menace. "I owe you in a big way, Benedek. You've ruined more than one story for me; I figure on returning the favor."

"Don't tell me you've brought along your little pop gun," said Benny with feigned weariness. "Always waving it around."

"Shut up, MacKensie!" snapped Wagoner. "This is between Eddie and me. And yes, as a matter of fact, I did bring it with me." He pulled a small revolver from his jacket pocket. "Should have taken care of you last night," he said, aiming the gun at Jonathan.

"Whoa, hold on there!" Benny exclaimed. "Are you nuts? You got a witness!"

"So?" Wagoner looked completely indifferent.

"This isn't what you think!" Benny protested. "I'm over here!"

Wagoner gave Jonathan a sympathetic glance. "Finally flipped, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he has," Jonathan replied. "Chill out, Jack."

Benny gaped at his friend. "Oh, no, you don't," he said, recovering quickly. "Don't even think about it, pal. You're not getting away with this. I'm Benedek, remember?"

"What's he babbling about?" asked Wagoner.

Jonathan grinned. "Beats me," looking and sounding frightening like Edgar Benedek. "Must be all those hours sitting at a desk. Tends to slow the brain cells. Take a hike, Jonny. I'll settle this."

"No way," said Benny emphatically. "Wagoner, I'm Benedek. I'm over here. If you're gonna shoot that thing, aim it this way."

"Sad, isn't it?" Wagoner gave Jonathan another look. To Benny he added, "Do what your friend suggests and take a hike, MacKensie. I'm just gonna add a few holes to this guy. You'll never notice the difference."

"This is crazy!" cried Benny, aware just how much he sounded like Jonathan at that moment. "You can't go around shooting people!"

"Wanna bet?" Wagoner looked pleased with himself. "Ever hear of self-defense? You two broke in here and tried to steal my story. And I haven't forgotten that trick you pulled in Bayville, Eddie."

To Benny's horror, Jonathan chuckled. "One of my better efforts. Glad it stuck with you." He glanced at Benny. "You still here?"

"Jonathan, don't do this." Benny gauged the distance. If he had time, he could jump forward and grab the gun. He was comfortably attuned to the larger body now. With its added strength, he should be able to. . .

Vibrations hummed underfoot. Atta girl, Amanda! Give me a diversion! Help us and maybe you can pay back some of that debt you owe. Save a couple of lives and see if that doesn't count for something.

Disconcerted, Wagoner's attention strayed just long enough. Benny leaped forward, knocking the reporter off-balance. He felt a fleeting pleasure in the solid whump his larger body made when it connected. Wagoner went sprawling.

"Didn't expect that from MacKensie, did you?" he asked triumphantly. His grin faded as the house lurched.

"Benny!" Jonathan cried.

Benny looked up to see the chandelier swaying dangerously. "Whoops. No need to overdo it, Amanda. Look out!" He leaped up to give Jonathan a push as the chandelier gave one

last creak and fell. Light bulbs popped and crystals shattered. The live end of the wire snaked furiously, a jagged piece of light. Benny still had his hand on Jonathan's shoulder when he felt a thrum of electrical current. He jerked back as a persistent tugging sensation started, as if he were being pulled from his body – no, pulled from Jonathan's body! Hey! Whatever this was, it was getting him back.

Don't make me land in Wagoner!

He had a blurred vision of himself sagging and falling to the floor; then another view of his own body which he seemed to be racing toward at a terrific speed.

I'm gonna crash into myself, he thought, just before he did.

Benny opened his eyes. Whoa, what a jolt. He managed to haul himself to a seated position, rubbing his aching forehead. What happened? The chandelier lay in a glittering pile near by. Out of the corner of his eyes, he caught the flicker of flames, and a strong smell of smoke assaulted his nostrils. But before he could react to that, he noticed his hands and began a careful probe.

"I'm back!" he cried happily, hearing his own voice. He jumped up, almost hitting the ceiling in his excited lighter state. "Man, I gotta get out of these clothes." The clothes reminded him he hadn't been alone when he made the transition, and he looked around anxiously, fanning away the smoke. "Don't get so fired up, Amanda. Or at least wait until we're out of here." He crawled over to his unconscious friend. "Hope you made the return flight, Jonny." He patted MacKensie's face, trying to bring him around. "Jonathan, are you back?" Jonathan finally opened his eyes, and Benny tried to haul him to his feet. "Come on, Jack. Move it!"

"What's happening?" asked Jonathan groggily.

"The house is on fire. Get up!"

"What house? Where are we?" He stared around in bewilderment. "Is this me?"

"We're back to normal, Jack, only we're about to be fried."

"I am me," Jonathan realized, pleased to feel his own face.

"You're gonna be barbecued you if you don't get up."

"My God, the house is on fire!" The smoke and flames finally registered with Jonathan. Scrambling to his feet, he cried, "come on, we've got to get out of here!"

Coughing in the thick smoke, they groped their way to the door and out into the night.

"Where's Wagoner?" asked Jonathan, gasping for breath.

"I don't know," wheezed Benny.

Horried, Jonathan stared at the blazing structure. "Are you serious? He could still be in there?" Despite his streaming eyes and aching chest, Jonathan started back, but Benny caught his arm.

"Nope. If I know Dirty Dan, he slipped out before the fun began. Or maybe he started the fire. That's his style. Let's get outta here. I'm dying of thirst. Must be all this bodyswapping mixed in with the smoke."

Jonathan stared. "Benedek."

"Jon, the man is grade A pond scum. He tried to kill you. He tried to kill me. He tried to kill you and me at the same time. And he tried to steal my story besides. I'm not wasting any concern on him, and neither are you. Come on."

Jonathan watched as flames engulfed the house. The wail of sirens told him that the fire department was on its way. At least the neighborhood wouldn't be threatened. "What about Mrs.

Carlyle?”

“Gone, Jack, I’m sure of it.” Benny looked back at the house, feeling a rush of gratitude for the long-dead woman. “I think she helped us back, pal.”

Smoke billowed in the air as many of the windows burst into sparkling fragments of flame-colored glass. In the spirals of gray and white, Jonathan thought he saw a woman’s figure, transparent and elongated, wavering up into the night sky. He blinked, not sure if the vision had been real or imagined.

As the firemen arrived and took control of the scene, Benny tugged Jonathan out of the way. “I got to admit, Jack, you took real good care of me. My fingernails have never been this clean.”

The off-hand comment snapped Jonathan’s attention from the house and the fate of Amanda Carlyle back to his newly recovered body. A quick look told him he was indeed wearing loose trousers and a shirt emblazoned with tropical fruit. “Let’s get out of here,” he said in alarm as more sirens heralded the arrival of the police. “Quickly.”

“This is a change of pace for you, Benny, but I like it. I like it.”

Benny cradled the telephone receiver under one ear as he scanned the latest issue of the National Register. True, the story lacked his colorful phrasing, but it was a competent piece of reporting. Jonathan had clearly saved his bacon.

“Thanks, Jordy. It was nothing. Wait till you read the next installment. Bodies flying, houses going up in smoke, personalities transferred.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jordy sounded interested.

“‘Trapped in Another Man’s Body.’ ‘Life From the Inside Out.’ ‘I Lived Two Lives,’” Benny grew more descriptive as his enthusiasm burned higher. “‘Beyond Sybil.’”

“So write it already,” snapped Jordy, losing interest in anything not already in black and white. “By the way,” he changed the subject. “Some guy named Goldberg’s been calling here for you. I’m not your answering service, Benny.”

“Theo’s back? Where’s he been?”

“How should I know? Do I look like a mind reader?”

“You look like a walrus, but I love ya anyway,” said Benny before hanging up and dialing Theo’s number.

Upon hearing Benny’s voice, Goldberg began a tirade. “Benny, you’ve been tampering with my matter transfer machine.”

“I was not tampering,” said Benny defensively, trying to head off a major argument. “I was just taking a look when lightning struck.”

“And you and Dr. MacKensie changed bodies? How utterly fantastic!” Theo’s mood changed without warning. “You, ah, wouldn’t consider repeating the experiment, would you?”

“No way. I’m glad to be back in my own self,” laughed Benny. “Although I have to admit there are certain advantages to being Jonathan I hadn’t considered before.”

“Advantages of a particular nature, Benny?”

“You could say that. And where were you? I tried every place I could think of.”

“Sorry, dear boy,” replied Theo. “I would have been there, but the most extraordinary thing happened. You remember Mwunga, don’t you?”

“The witch doctor? Yeah, sure. What about him?”

"Well, he called at the last minute to ask me to speak at his convention. Seems his original speaker had some sort of crisis in his village and couldn't make it, after all. Naturally, I had to drop everything and fly to Fiji. Such a wonderful opportunity," he added in a superior tone. "a wonderful opportunity to enlighten those poor souls. They are so backward, you know."

Benny chuckled. "I'm sure you knocked 'em dead."

Theo apologized again for his absence. "But you know how it is when you're called upon to speak at an important gathering, I'm sure."

"I know," Benny replied. "Believe me, I know."

"Great to be back, right, Jon?"

"It is quite a relief," Jonathan agreed, too relieved to mind the fact that Benedek had parked himself in his office where a stack of papers awaited his immediate attention.

"Am I hearing things?" Benny gave a pleased chuckle. "are you actually admitting this happened?"

"It's over with." Jonathan bent his head over his work. "I don't think there's any need to discuss it further."

"Just like that, huh? Just like that, it's over." Benny got to his feet and leaned on the desk. "I was you, pal. You were me. That doesn't happen every day."

"Thank goodness. And I wasn't you," he clarified. "I might have been in your body, but I was still me."

"I dunno, J.J. That story you gave Jordy was not too shabby."

Jonathan looked up with a smile. "There's also the matter of a certain professor who seems to be avoiding me."

"Guy name of Peterson? Orner? Obnoxious? What, you want him back?"

"No, thank you. I'm glad to have him out of the way."

"Hey, no problem," said Benny. "I'm used to handling his type." He straightened up. "Come on. Let's go have a drink to celebrate."

"No, Benedek, I can't." He gestured to the stack of papers. "You see for yourself how far behind I am."

"Come on. At least get a little air."

Jonathan reluctantly agreed to leave his work for a short while. They strolled around the campus, pausing for a moment by the fountain that dominated the area when a young woman spotted them.

"Oh, Jonathan," she sang.

"Elsie," he replied, pleased. "Hello."

To his amazement, the blonde flung herself into his arms and kissed him. "The other night was wonderful," she murmured into his ear.

"It was?" he asked, puzzled.

"Oh, yes." She tweaked his nose playfully. "You naughty boy."

There was a pause; then Jonathan shot a dark look in Benny's direction. "Benedek?"

The reporter backed off, hands raised defensively. "What can I say, pal? Can't disappoint the ladies. I had your rep to think of."

Jonathan would have charged after him if Elsie had not had a firm grip on his tie. "You rotten little--"

"Just be glad I didn't take up all the offers, Jack. Would've been quite a scene. Hell hath no fury, ya know."

"Speaking of hell--"

"Jonathan," Elsie interrupted the exchange. "I was hoping we could continue our . . . conversation?" She looked up at him with large blue-green eyes.

"Well," he hesitated, feeling himself weaken.

She traced the line of his jaw. "You were telling me the most interesting story."

Interpreting Jonathan's expression, Benny prompted, "Killer plants."

"Oh," he stammered. "Yes, of course. The, ah, Clark case."

"You didn't finish," said Elsie, pressing closer. "and I really want to know what happened."

He smiled at her. "I'll tell you all about it," he promised. To Benny, he growled, "I'll settle with you later."

Benny grinned. "No need to thank me, Jack." He cupped a hand to his ear. "Gosh, I think I hear Jordy calling. I better run." As he jogged off, he called back over his shoulder. "You'll do fine, Jonny. Just be yourself!"