

Heart's Desire

By Jane Tesh

"E.B.! Over here!"

Edgar Benedek had been searching the row of brownstone houses for the right address and now saw the tall dark-haired man gesturing excitedly from a door across the street. "Yo! G.M!" he called back, grinning broadly. "What is this? Another disappearing act?"

"Get over here, you little rat," said the other man cheerfully. He slapped Benny on the back. "How the hell are you, Benny? Ugly as ever; I can't believe it."

"Look who's talkin'," Benny replied. "The Amazing Markham, Nightmare on East 63rd Street. Why don't you use some of those magic tricks and fix your face, Mister Blackstone?"

Gerald Markham laughed as he showed him in. "It's been too long, Benny, way too long. I miss having you around to insult. And are you still as fumble-fingered?"

Benny made a quick motion behind the man's ear and pulled out an ace of spades. "Ta-dahh!"

"Not bad," his friend granted. "You'll excuse me if I show off?" With a similar motion, he produced a small bowl of goldfish from behind Benny's ear.

"Whoa! Nice goin'," Benny said admiringly.

"Nothing to it," said Markham. "I'll teach it to you. Come in, come in." He led the way into a living room comfortably furnished in black and white. Here and there were touches of red: a bouquet of red roses; a clown mask; framed posters and programs with "The Amazing Markham" written in swirling red and gold letters. "It's great to see you, Benny. It's been, what, almost a year now?"

"At least." Benny settled on the white sofa. "Nice little place you got here."

Markham bowed. "Glad you could come over, a busy, important man like yourself."

"Oh, I thought I'd squeeze you in today," Benny said. "Between Madonna and the Pope."

"Gee, thanks."

"So what's up? Last I heard, you were packing 'em in at the Magic Castle."

Markham nodded and poured two drinks from a crystal decanter. "Had a very good run there. Then I was in Vegas two weeks, and now, several dates here in New York. I knew I'd be in town for a while and hoped we could get together." He brought the drinks over and clinked glasses with Benny. "Let's make this disappear."

Benny took an approving sip. "You're lookin' good, Mark. Another trick, or have you got a picture upstairs nobody's supposed to see?"

"I'm doing really well, Benny, and you don't seem to be hurting, either. I saw you on the Late Show the other night. What was that story about a Babylonian fertility goddess? Pretty wild."

"I've seen things you haven't even dreamed about, bud. Which you would know if you read the National Register."

Markham gave him a pitying look. "Benny, you know I use only the finest newspapers for the bottom of my doves' birdcages."

"Yeah, well, I've been involved in some pretty hot paranoramal stuff here lately. Real magic. Not these cornball tricks you see on TV."

"Real magic," Markham repeated with a chuckle. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a small object. "Here's real magic for you, Benny. Have a look." Between his thumb

and forefinger he held a thick gold ring with a delicate heart design. "Curious little trinket, isn't it?"

"So what's it do?" Benny asked.

Markham looked mysterious. "It grants your heart's desire."

"Whoa, let me at it!"

Markham held it out of reach. "Notice, however, the little vines surrounding the heart. Thorns, my friend, and lots of them."

"Okay, so there's a catch. There's always a catch."

"No, not really. It works. It's accurate. Lots of people have tried it."

Benny was intrigued. "Where'd you get it?"

"Well, I'd like to say some strange wizened old gypsy woman passed it to me with a strict warning about always using it for good, but the truth is, I won it in a poker game when I was in Vegas."

"And it works?"

He nodded, idly smoothing the ring's shiny surface.

"What are you going to do with it, work it into your act?"

"I don't think so," Markham said. "It doesn't have quite the same effect as changing a girl into a tiger. Today's audience, you know. They like a lot of flash and dazzle."

"Tell me about it. Well, if you're not using it in the act, could I borrow it for a day or two? I want to show it to some friends of mine." He didn't think Markham would part with his treasure, but to his surprise, the magician tossed it to him.

"You can have it."

Benny caught the ring. "You mean it?"

"It's yours. But be careful, E.B."

"I will, thanks." He resisted the urge to slip it on right then and put it in the pocket of his star-patterned shirt. "Now show me how to do the goldfish trick."

"Hello, Benedek," Doctor Moorhouse said, glancing up briefly from her work as he walked past her office.

Benny paused in mid-stride. He walked back to the door and checked the name written on the glass. Yep, this was the right place. He entered, just to give her a fair shot.

"Did you want to speak to me about something?" she asked, still calm.

He eyed her curiously. "No, just stopping by."

"Jonathan isn't here at the moment." She winced slightly at the fluorescent glow of his tie. "He's in an interdepartmental meeting. Can I help you?"

"Nah, I'll just wait in his office," Benny said. "Though you might like to have a look at this." He dug the ring out of his pocket and presented it to her.

"How very interesting." She took a closer look. "What's this design? Ah, I see. A heart with vines wound about. Very decorative."

"A magician friend gave it to me. It's supposed to grant your heart's desire."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Really? Have you tried it?"

"Not yet. I thought Jonathan would like to go along for the ride."

She frowned. "Don't pester him, Benedek. His latest paper was rejected by the Quarterly Review."

"Rejected? Jonathan? Our resident genius?"

"Over a very slight technicality. I have written the committee to express my disapproval, but I'm afraid the damage has been done. You know he is extremely sensitive in this area."

She hadn't invited him to sit down, but she was in such an unusually agreeable frame of mind, Benny propped himself on a corner of her desk. "Yeah, still tryin' to catch dear old dad. I know."

"I don't think this would be a good time to spring one of your absurd notions."

"It's the perfect time," Benny said. He'd used all manner of schemes in the past to pull Jonathan out of his darker moods. "Just give me a few minutes, and I'll have him turning cartwheels in the quad."

Her frown deepened. "This is no joking matter. I would prefer you leave him alone and let him work this out himself."

He hopped off the desk. "No way, Doctor M. Jon-boy is an all-time champion brooder, and this won't wait. All he needs is a little paranormal shot in the arm. He'll be okay."

She shook her head. "He sees this as a major set-back in his research."

Benny stuck his hands in the pockets of his baggy trousers. "Dr. M, what would say Jack's chances are of becoming as famous as his father? Is that what he really wants?"

She sighed. "I think he could reach whatever goals he sets for himself; he's very bright. As to what he really wants -- what do you really want? Do you know? Does anyone really know?"

Benny indicated the gold ring lying on her desk. "There's the answer."

"If this belonged to a friend of yours, it's highly unlikely to be of any real use."

"I'm gonna check and see if Jonathan's back. Why don't you try it and see?"

He was gone before she could protest. Such an annoying man! Try it, indeed. As if there were anything to this chunk of dime-store jewelry. She glared at the gold band as if blaming it for her current troubles. Heart's desire. What nonsense. She had a department to run, funds to acquire, letters to write, tempers to soothe. She'd show that Edgar Benedek there was nothing to this.

Strange, she'd thought the ring too large for her finger, but it fit perfectly as she slipped it on . . .

. . . and found herself in a larger, more spacious office facing a peach-colored creature with little giraffe-like horns. In a clipped reedy voice, it read from a small sheet of plastic.

"And during the difficult years of the late Eighties, only one woman had the foresight and courage to insist on paranormal research. Thanks to Doctor Julianna Moorhouse, we have forged a link between our worlds to the betterment of both cultures." The creature's face crinkled into what could be interpreted as a smile. "What do you think?"

"That's fine, Lar-Z." Of course. One of her Tallancian contacts.

"My first speech to the Council of United Planets," the little creature said modestly. Its round green eyes looked at her for approval.

"It's very nice. I'm flattered."

Lar-Z looked relieved. "I know you've been given all sorts of honors, but this formal

declaration by the Council is long overdue and should be very special. That's why I want my speech to be perfect."

"It sounds fine." Full memory returned. Yes, she had actually seen UFOs, had proved the existence of alien creatures, had met with them and helped with the first treaties between Earth and Tallance. She had become a heroine on both worlds.

Yet the victory was surprisingly hollow. Gone was the thrill of the chase, the vicarious pleasure she had shared in her young colleagues' escapades. As she could have predicted, Benedek had been one of the first to hop on board a Tallancian shuttle, and to her amazement, Jonathan had gone with him. She knew she would miss MacKensie; oddly enough, she missed Benedek, too. Somehow, his annoying presence had served to spur her into action by proving him wrong at all costs. But, aside from his flamboyance, his obvious ignorance of social codes, and his habit of getting Jonathan into life-threatening situations, she had to admit his zeal and delight in the paranormal matched her own.

Now there was little left to explore. The Tallancians practiced ESP and telekinesis, proving both existed and could be mastered. With the aliens' help, a great many of Earth's mysteries had been solved. Not like the old days at the Georgetown Institute.

Lar-Z hurried off to practice his speech. She was alone in the elegant cream and gold office high in the crystal clear air -- the Tallancians had methods for removing all forms of pollution -- watching graceful gliders like striped butterflies and other private aircraft sail silently past the spires of the buildings. Beautiful. Peaceful.

Boring.

With a sigh, she sat back at her desk, a smooth expanse of glass. There were no papers on the gleaming surface, no folders, no ancient artifacts. There would be no exasperated outbursts from Jonathan, no toothy grins from Benedek. She had her discovery, though, her heart's desire.

Heart's desire.

Wait. Hadn't there been something -- yes! A ring Benedek brought her one day. She'd dismissed it as one of his outlandish stories. She stared at her hand. This ring.

No. This was ridiculous. That had been so long ago, it couldn't be the same. This must be a ring the Tallancians gave her, a gift from an admirer, a present from one of the grateful planetary societies. It couldn't be the same.

I'll prove it, she thought, and pulled it off.

She was back in her old office. She looked around the brown paneled room, stunned. The books, the bones, the plants, the cheerful voices of the students outside.

Good heavens.

And here was Benedek, bounding in. "He's back and were you ever right! Chief Thundercloud. It's gonna take all my considerable charm on this one." He paused. "You okay?"

She gave herself a mental shake. "Yes, of course. Perhaps you'd better take this with you." She handed him the ring.

"You try it?"

"Most certainly not."

He grinned. "Chicken."

"Leave."

Only when she was sure he was gone did she allow herself a relieved grin of her own.

When Jonathan saw him, he said, "Go away."

"Wait till you hear this, Jack. I gotta feelin' it's just the thing for those anthropology blues."

Jonathan's dark eyes met his. "Oh, all right," he said with a sigh. "Tell me. What does it matter? What does anything matter?"

"That's the spirit," Benny said, unfazed by Jonathan's mood. "I have a little ring here that will grant you your heart's desire. Since you already know what that is, you should leap at the chance to try it out."

"Benedek," he said, "I simply do not care."

"Hey, a quitter never wins."

"It's not a question of quitting. I'm obviously not fit for the work." He rubbed his forehead wearily. "I don't understand it. I tried so hard."

"Too hard, maybe."

The dark eyes flashed. "What do you know about it?"

"Ah, temper, a good sign. Brood all you like, Jonny, it won't change anything. Now, take this ring, put it on, and your problem's solved."

"Take your stupid toy and go away."

"Sheesh, one little rejection slip and he's ready to jump ship. Pal, you could paper the Washington Monument with mine. You think I just slid into the publishing world?"

"There is absolutely no comparison between your scandalous interpretations of the so-called facts and a work prepared for a scholarly journal."

"Oo-hoo, aren't we stuffy?"

"Just clear out."

"Okay, buds. I gotta make a phone call to check on some of my so-called facts. I'll give you time to climb down out of ivory tower. Then we'll start on this case."

"Out!"

Jonathan glared after Benny's retreating figure, emotions churning. He was sorely disappointed by his paper's rejection, furious with himself for letting it get to him, and now, guilty over being so abrupt with Benedek. If that weren't enough, Benny had left the ring on his desk, as if daring him to try it.

I don't need to try it. I know what I want. What I don't know is why and how it continues to elude me.

He picked up the ring, weighing it in his hand. I ought to throw it away, he thought. Does he think I'm going to believe such a story? Yes, put another one over on Jon, gullible as ever. It was just an ordinary ring, and he'd prove it. It slid onto his finger easily.

There was the sound of thunderous applause. He was on the stage of a huge auditorium and his name had just been called. Dazed, he came forward to shake hands with a beaming older man, and as he did so, he realized he's just won the Nobel Prize for Science and the man presenting it was his father.

Everything came back in a rush: the once in a lifetime discovery in Tanzania; the weeks of work; the publication of the paper and the stir it caused in the scientific community. An entirely new species. The missing link.

His father's voice was uneven with emotion. "I'm so proud of you, Jonathan."

Father. Jonathan had to blink rapidly to keep the tears from spilling over. His father wasn't dead. He was here, alive, gripping his hand, looking as though he might burst with pride.

He remembered very little of his acceptance speech, but it must have come out properly, for there was more applause and many people in the audience were standing. Afterwards, there was a galaxy of flashing cameras and dozens of hands to shake. Doctor Moorhouse was there to offer congratulations, as well as the entire faculty of the Georgetown Institute and many of his students.

He had a new office and a library containing all the latest research. This was where he and his father sat late that night, too excited to sleep, discussing the ramifications of Jonathan's discovery, as well as the psychological and religious controversy such a discovery had created.

Controversy didn't concern Jonathan. He and his father were talking as equals. Gone was the uncertainty, the feelings of inadequacy, the ever-present worry that perhaps he was not good enough. The love and pride shining in his father's eyes was unmistakable. Jonathan felt a great sense of relief.

The next morning, his secretary showed him his schedule. He was booked solid for the next year with guest lectures, speeches, and meetings with other anthropologists from all over the world.

"Looks a bit hectic," he said, and Miss Parker smiled.

"Well, Doctor MacKensie, you're quite the celebrity, you know. Oh, the luncheon at the White House is a week from Thursday. You wanted me to be sure to remind you."

"Yes, thank you," he said, looking through the letters she'd placed on his desk. Congratulations from some of the leading names in science. Invitations from the finest institutions. He realized that, in all the excitement, he'd neither seen nor heard from Benedek. When he asked Miss Parker, she said,

"Of course, I've been screening your calls, sir. There hasn't been one from a Mister Benedek." A slight frown crossed her face. "There was a very odd call from Vienna, however. I was certain it was a prank, so I didn't bother you with it."

"From Vienna?" Jonathan said, his heart sinking. "A Professor Von Heimlich?"

"Oh, dear," she said. "Then it was legitimate?"

"Not really," he said with a rueful smile.

"I am so sorry, Doctor MacKensie. Shall I call Vienna and see if I can get the professor for you?"

"No," he said. "He isn't there. It's a long story, Miss Parker. Please don't concern yourself."

She apologized again before she left. Jonathan sat back in his plush new leather chair, frowning thoughtfully. So, Benedek had tried to reach him and had been effectively shut out. This had never stopped the man before. Where was he? Surely he didn't think his old pal Jack was too good for him now.

On impulse, he tried the National Register.

"Sorry, Jonathan," Jordy said. "Haven't seen him. He said something about a lost civilization of frog men in the Alps. Guess I'll hear from him if there's anything to it."

Jonathan thanked him for the information.

"Yeah, sure, Doc, and congratulations. Finally hit the big time."

The big time. Jonathan hung up and sat back once more. And what did he have to show for it? No friends, no time, no unpredictable happenings. His life was mapped out for the next year, possibly for all the years to come. It was wonderful to see his father and talk with him as an equal, but now that he'd proven himself, he felt a strange emptiness. Was this what it was like to achieve your life's goal? Where was the challenge, the striving, the little victories along the way?

Where was Benny?

He put his chin on his clasped hands, sighing deeply. A sparkle of gold caught his eye. That ring . . . hadn't there been something. . . it was so long ago, he could hardly remember. Something about a wish? No. Your heart's desire.

And he had it. Or did he?

Here he was, trapped in this office, while Benny was mountain climbing. He would be giving speeches and lectures while Benny chased ghosts and monsters. He would be sitting here, dictating letters when Benny made another typical miscalculation and needed his help.

The decision was instantaneous. One quick tug on the ring and off it came.

Jonathan found himself in his old office, breathing hard, the ring in his hand. He quickly dropped it on the desk. He looked around cautiously to assure himself he'd returned to the present. Yes, everything was the same, the maps, the small bookcase, the recliner. The clock on the wall showed only ten minutes had passed. The ring winked in the light like a living thing.

Benedek can take it back to wherever he found it, Jonathan decided, leaving it where it lay. I'm not going to touch it again. I'm going to find him and give him a piece of my mind about such tricks!

"Jonathan?" Randy called softly, rolling into the office. "Here's that report you wanted." Finding the room empty, she placed the folder on his desk. Gosh, what a pretty ring. Who would've left it here? It looked too valuable to be lying out. She picked it up. It was really pretty, a little heart with vines. It looked almost like . . . a wedding band. She slipped it on.

"And do you, Jonathan Llewellyn MacKensie, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, till death do you part?"

Randy stared up in astonishment, meeting Jonathan's dark eyes. She was all in white lace, his hand clasping hers, the golden band warm on her finger.

"I do," he said.

A smiling minister pronounced them man and wife. Jonathan kissed her and then they were walking down the aisle. Walking! She was walking, her feet in white satin slippers. But, yes, of course. She'd had those successful operations just before they planned the wedding. Of course she could walk. It must have been the excitement of the day; how else could she have forgotten?

They went to England for their honeymoon and returned to Georgetown where Jonathan continued his teaching and research and she had a high level job with a large computer firm. Their life together began blissfully. Then, gradually, Randy began to sense something was very wrong.

It was true Jonathan was older and his friends and associates belonged to another generation, but she hadn't really noticed how out of place she felt when they were around. Now that she was no longer at G.I., she lost touch the academic world and sat somewhat forlornly when he had people over.

And the other women! It hadn't been this way before -- or had it? He'd been a teacher and a friend, someone she could go to for advice. Now that he was her husband, this seemed to make him fair game for any scheming woman who came along. And he was so busy. She lay awake nights, wondering when he'd come home. Was he really working on that paper, or was he in the arms of an older, more sophisticated secretary or colleague? She wanted to believe nothing was happening, yet these terrible waves of jealousy were overwhelming.

"Just a few people coming over tonight, dear," he said at dinner. "We need to discuss the trip to Kenya."

"Is Cassandra coming, too?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I thought you told me she was working on a separate project."

"We'll be able to save some time and a lot of money by combining to the two."

"Oh," Randy said. "I see."

He put his arm around her waist and drew her close for a quick kiss. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just -- well, she makes me uncomfortable. I get the impression she's always looking down her nose at me."

He laughed. "That's nonsense. She has a certain air, I'll admit, but that's just Cassandra."

Yes, that was Cassandra, Randy thought gloomily, and here was Cassandra, a long lean blonde in an expensive gold dress unbuttoned down to the third button, her sleek hair pulled back from a fine-boned face that made Randy feel as featureless as a Cabbage Patch doll. Cassandra radiated confidence and an alarming sexuality. This was the woman who was going to Kenya with Jonathan's group? She'd feel right at home with the lions and cheetas.

Randy smiled at everyone politely and sat back, listening to their excited plans and watching Cassandra watching Jonathan. It was all she could do to manage a civil good night when the guests finally left.

Jonathan waved good-bye and shut the door. "Well, everything's settled," he said, pleased.

"Jonathan," she said in a small voice. "I don't want you to go."

"Dearest, I'll be back before you know it."

"I mean, I want you to go, but not with Cassandra."

He held her at arms' length. "Look, what is all this? I'm not in love with Cassandra Roberts. I'm in love with you. I'm married to you."

"Yes, but --"

"You don't trust me, is that it? You think I'm going to have some sort of steamy affair in the jungle?"

That was exactly what she was afraid would happen. "Of course I trust you," she said. "I don't trust her."

He dismissed her fears. "That's nonsense. You can't seriously believe I'd have anything to do with her."

"But she'll be there! You'll have to see each other, work together."

"Randy, this is absurd. If you're so worried, why don't you come with me?"

She couldn't leave her job, and she did so want to prove she trusted him by staying behind. The quarrel took a turn for the worst and became increasingly bitter. She couldn't see

why he didn't understand. She loved him so much, she saw every woman as a threat to her happiness. In the end, Jonathan was hurt and angry, and Randy fled to the bedroom where she lay sobbing.

It's my wretched jealousy. I never dreamed it would be so strong. What am I going to do? It was never like this before.

She found herself longing for the days when she was a student, when she was useful to him, when he'd look at her with those warm brown eyes and smile so encouragingly. She wanted her friend back. How could things have gone so wrong?

"Randy?" Benny saw her wheelchair and heard her sobbing.

"Oh, my God -- the ring, Benedek! Get it off!" Jonathan ran forward and yanked the ring from Randy's finger. Tears were streaming down the young woman's face. "Randy, are you all right? It's all my fault. I never should have left that ring there."

"What did ya see, kid?" Benny asked, his voice sympathetic.

She accepted Jonathan's handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "W-what I thought I wanted," she said unevenly. "Only it wasn't, not really." She looked at Jonathan's face, seeing only familiar concern. "I'm so glad to be back."

"It's all right," he said. "Let me take you home."

"Okay." She glanced at the ring, which Jonathan had tossed on his desk. "Did that ring make those things happen?" she asked in disbelief.

With a dark look in Benny's direction, Jonathan said, "It's some sort of trick, and not a very good one."

She looked down at her legs and the silver wheels of the chair. "It all seemed so real."

Jonathan carefully steered her out. "I'll try to explain."

The office door closed behind them. Benny picked up the ring. Well, well. First, Doctor Moorhouse looking mighty strange, then Jonathan, pale and indignant, accosting him in the hallway with strong words about playing games with people, and now Randy, shaken and grateful to be back.

Heart's desire?

He tossed the ring from one hand to the other. What would it be? A Pulitzer? The story of a lifetime? Ten books on the best seller list?

He put it on.

He was standing in a meadow of green grass, surrounded by white daisies, buttercups, and violets.

"Benny!"

Cheerful voices called from a grove of oak trees near the center of the meadow.

"Come on!"

He walked slowly, carefully, shading his eyes against the summer sun, trying to see the figures under the trees. A long picnic table had been set up, covered with a lacy cloth and an abundance of food: fried chicken, biscuits, ham, potato salad, cherry pie, coconut cake. The delicious smells mingled with the clink of iced tea glasses and the laughter of many voices.

Benny slowed, recognizing the people seated around the table.

His mother.

His father.

His grandmother.

The others he didn't recognize at first, but gradually began to sense who they were. His Uncle Bill, whom he'd never seen, but had always heard about. "Just like Bill," his mother would say fondly whenever he got into trouble. His younger brother who had died in infancy, now grown and smiling, looking remarkably like their mother. His great-aunt Tess, who'd been a newspaperwoman out west; he'd read her diary over and over. His many cousins, all dimly recalled, but here, alive and in living color.

"Welcome! Come on! Have something to eat."

Benny sat down at the place they'd saved for him.

"Nice to see you again, son," his mother said, giving him a hug. She was no longer the faded image of his distant memory, but a vivid personality, her blue eyes sparkling, her dark hair cut in a fashionable Forties style. She was wearing a blue dress with a lace collar and tiny pearl buttons, the dress he remembered from the one small photograph he had.

"Lookin' good, kid," his father, a cheerful older version of Benny, said.

His grandmother pressed his hand. "I want to hear all about these adventures of yours."

Benny managed a nod. Here they were, his family, all at one big table, enjoying a Sunday picnic lunch. His mother filled his plate, but he knew he wouldn't be able to swallow anything.

"Thanks," he said, surprised to find his voice worked. She looked so beautiful, so serene, her face unlined by care or worry. His father -- somehow he'd lost all animosity toward the man -- looked healthy and kind. And his grandma . . . the last time he'd seen her, she'd been so frail and wispy, he thought she'd fade away in strong sunlight. Here she was, lively and talkative, beating his cousin Freddy to the last sugar cookie. The family, whole and secure.

It was so pleasant here, the murmur of friendly voices, the lazy motion of the leaves in the warm air. Everyone turned his way expectantly as he began to tell his grandmother about the time he and Jonathan escaped from a vampire.

Jonathan.

He was here, wasn't he? Benny looked around, but saw only members of his family. Guess not. Well, he'd stay a while and visit, then head back to G.I. Only, it was so restful here. .

"Something wrong, dear?" his mother asked.

"No, no, everything's wonderful," he said. "But how long does this picnic last?"

"Why, as long as you like," she said.

Benny began to perceive a flaw in this lovely afternoon. Just how long did he want this to last? It was absolutely the best experience he could imagine, but wasn't there something he should be doing?

There wasn't a shadow anywhere.

Jonathan found Benny sitting at his desk, hands in his lap, his eyes far away.

"Benedek?"

He saw the ring on Benny's hand and reached for it; then paused, halted by the expression on the man's face. It was the calmest look he'd ever seen, not dull or slack, the way it

had been when he thought Benny had become a zombie, but peaceful, utterly un-Benny-like.

Jonathan debated, remembering the pleasanter aspects of his own dream. But Benny couldn't sit like this forever, and he seemed content to do so. At some point, would his friend remember the ring and remove it?

A frown crossed Benny's face, followed by a look of intense doubt. Time to come back, Jonathan decided and pulled off the ring. Benny blinked rapidly and then stared at him.

"Jonny."

"You all right?" Jonathan asked.

He rubbed his eyes. "Yeah, sure."

"You shouldn't have tried this ring. Believe me, it has a nasty way of turning on you."

"Not me, Jack. I was just about to accept the Pulitzer for journalism."

Not looking like that, you weren't, Jonathan thought. Motioning to the ring, he said, "Sorry I interrupted. You can always go back."

"Nah, the thrill is gone." Benny got up, finding his legs rubbery. "Leg's asleep. How long were you gone?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe." Jonathan waited, but it was obvious Benny wasn't in the mood to talk. "I'm on my way home. Need a lift?"

"No, thanks." He stared out the window, seeing the meadow, the picnic, the dear smiling faces.

"What about the ring?" Jonathan asked.

Benny turned. "I'll take it."

Jonathan handed it over. After a moment, he said, "I'll see you later."

Benny nodded.

"E.B.! How's it goin'?"

"Brought you something," Benny said. "Catch."

Markham caught the ring. "Ah," he said with a wry smile. "You had me fooled there for a minute, Benny. Thought you might keep the thing."

Benny shrugged. "It's a cute trick."

The magician kept his smile as he tucked the ring into his pocket. "What did you see?"

"Nothing much."

"Your heart's desire?"

"Guess so."

Markham nodded. "Everybody brings it back. Everybody."

Benny looked at his friend curiously. "What did you see?"

"The Ultimate Trick," he said grandly, swirling an imaginary cape.

"Which is?"

"Ah, now, that would be telling." He was serious a moment. "But it does have something to do with life and death. And choices."

"Yeah, I think I know about that," Benny said. "Thanks for the loan, G.M. It was a trip."

“Any time.”

Benny paused at the door. “I may take you up on that,” he said.