

TITLE: Gray Light

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RATING: T

WARNINGS: Adult language

DISCLAIMER: Characters belong to their corporate parents. I'm just playing with them and I have no money worth going to court over, though the zine collection might be worth something.

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## One

When I woke, I heard voices. I became reluctantly aware that it was daylight and probably getting close to the point where I'd be unceremoniously dumped from my bed. Then the voices wove into a single tone and I realized that it was only one voice, one I'd recognize even if I was asleep.

Shuffling from the bedroom towards the bathroom, I paused in the doorway of the lab, rubbing sleep-bleary eyes and scraping one hand against a stubbled jaw. No question about it, I needed a shower pretty badly. I blinked against the brightness of the lab's overhead lighting. The guys may tease me unmercifully about sleeping in but they keep the blinds down and the bedroom darkened until I awake, or until one of them decides it's time for me to get up.

"Mother, it would make infinitely more sense for us to fly to Cleveland and meet with Mrs. Grayden. We can hardly take readings of her house if she meets with us in New York."

Egon, on the other hand, was already showered, dressed, shaved and perfectly groomed; there was not one hair out of place, and that was saying something with that coif of his. He had one hip slung over the corner of his desk and was staring out the window as if he could see Ohio. He might be an early riser but it sounded like **somebody** woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

"Yes, yes, I understand," Egon said calmly though his fingers tightened on the phone's receiver. "However, it **is** possible to meet with her discreetly in Ohio." He paused, head tilted.

"I see." He fingered his suspenders, stretching them out a little. "Then perhaps you can have us all to tea."

That flat tone was a dead giveaway. I stuffed a fist in my mouth and turned away. If I cracked up now it was only gonna provoke him even more and I couldn't remember the last time Egon sounded this annoyed with his mom. They were both stubborn in the same way and knew how to push the other's buttons. Not that either of them would admit to it for a second. Spenglers never raised their voices. They didn't have to; you knew when they were getting irritated by the way their jaws tensed, by the sudden steel in their gaze and the sharpness in their tone of voice. Egon was getting irritated and for a change, it wasn't with me.

He sighed. "I've no idea. I will have to check our schedule. Would you mind if Janine called you to schedule this visit or must we maintain a veil of secrecy that precludes her involvement?"

I just couldn't help it. I tried biting my lip, digging my fingernails into my palms, every trick I knew but I started snickering anyway. Egon's head whipped around and his eyes narrowed before he sighed again and waved me into the lab. "My mother," he mouthed, unnecessarily. I moved into the lab, and leaned against one of the lab tables, playing with the various pieces of equipment scattered over its relatively clean surface. Clean meaning, of course, that some of the tabletop was almost visible.

"No, Mother, that wasn't sarcasm, it was frustration, but I do apologize." Egon rolled his eyes in my direction, now playing to an audience. "Certainly. I will have Janine phone you forthwith. Yes, Mother. I love you too, and I look forward to our visit. Goodbye." The phone receiver clattered as he dropped it a little harder than necessary, looked towards me, and gave a heartfelt sigh.

I snorted, grabbed my stomach -- holding back laughter **hurts** -- and everything I'd restrained started bubbling to the surface. "I'm sorry, Spengs, but you..." I couldn't breathe from laughing so I stopped to gasp a few times. "You should see your face." I punched Egon lightly on the shoulder and then bent over to catch my breath. "Hell of a way to talk to your mom, Egon. I thought you're supposed to be the one setting an example for me."

Egon rubbed the back of his neck, frowning. "I'll bear that in mind, Peter. Perhaps you might begin emulating my example by showering as we," he shot a quick glance at his watch, "have a job scheduled in an hour and have yet to breakfast." He scanned me, head to toe, with a rueful gaze. "And it seems best that we don't meet the client in your present condition."

Nope, I wasn't going to let anyone see me in full Venkman sloth mode. It'd be hell on the image that I spent so many years perfecting. Anyone beside the guys. And Janine, 'cause it's not like it would count if she saw me this way.

"Hey, I'd have been in the shower already but I heard you haranguing your mom and I came in to jump to her defense," the blue eyes narrowed again, "or back you up, you know, whichever required my assistance." I headed back towards the bathroom, tossing my words over one shoulder. "Sounds like we're gonna be visiting the world's dullest city again. This gonna be worth subjecting me to that level of tedium?"

"Cleveland is not the world's dullest city," Egon said in a manner that would have brought a smile to Ivan Pavlov's face. He followed me to the doorway of the lab and lounged against the doorframe. "There are a myriad of options available to visitors, though I am certain you will never find it as stimulating as a city with the cultural significance of, say, Las Vegas."

I stuck my head out of a slightly steamy, still humid bathroom. "Hey, whose turn was it to do laundry? How come there aren't any clean, dry towels?"

Egon smiled. "Yours, I believe."

No question he felt the lack of a towel was my just due, both for failing to do laundry and for maligning his hometown. I adopted my best hangdog expression; it works wonders with women.

“No,” Egon said in answer to my silent begging. “You are perfectly capable of walking to the basement in search of a clean towel.”

I turned it up a notch or two. “If I promise not to bitch about going to Cleveland, would you get me a towel?” Recognizing a near-hopeless cause, I batted my eyelashes shamelessly. “Come on, just a clean, dry towel for your oldest friend, your best buddy, the guy who can get you a date with someone other than that red-haired imp on the first floor.”

“You are presuming I would desire a date with the type of women with whom you associate.”

To my surprise, he neither denied that he was dating Janine, nor said he wasn’t interested in dating anyone else. I filed those little tidbits away as useful information for the future. Egon stuck his hands in the pockets of his trousers, dark gray instead of dark brown I noted, and considered my plea. I saw the slight hesitation and whined just a little harder.

“Come on, Spengs, you want me walking around in my shorts in front of Janine to get that towel?”

He gave me a rueful smile. “Subjecting Janine, or potential clients, to that sight would not be very good business strategy, would it? Very well,” he said suddenly. “In return for a promise of exceptional behavior in Ohio, I will fetch you a clean, dry towel.”

I drew my finger across the left side of my tee shirt in a rough cross and nodded. Then I sniffed the tee shirt and recoiled.

Egon smiled and walked into the bunkroom. He returned carrying a basket, a laundry basket, filled to the brim with fluffy, clean cotton towels. I blinked at them. Based on the number of steps he took, it had to have been right by the door. I’d never seen it. I’d have to have walked around it or past it and I’d never seen it.

“You’re a pretty amusing guy,” I said, legitimately impressed with the poker face he’d somehow maintained. Of course, I was still half-asleep, unshowered, and hadn’t had a drop of caffeine yet so it wasn’t anywhere near an equal contest. “You know payback’s a bitch, right, Egon?”

He pointedly looked at his watch. “Peter, it is eight-seventeen. We have a scheduled nine-o’clock appointment and it will take approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to reach our destination. A little alacrity might be in order.”

I grabbed a quick steamy shower, as hot as I could stand it to get the pores open for that really smooth-shaven look that women love. I toweled my hair dry, dressed quickly and then thumped down the stairs to the second floor. I sniffed. Nothing frying, no bacon, probably no eggs but I definitely smelled coffee. I inhaled a little more strongly. Maybe that Colombian one that Winston likes so much which was a very good sign because it meant Ray hadn’t made the coffee. But it looked like it was going to be cereal for breakfast this morning.

Cereal it was. Over Corn Flakes (Egon and Winston), Wheaties, the breakfast of champions (mine) and Captain Crunch (Ray), Egon briefed us on the upcoming Ohio visit.

“This has apparently been an ongoing problem, at least ten months in duration. The client, Ruth Grayden, describes it as a ghostly apparition that hovers around her, occasionally moving towards her, though it’s never touched her. Yet. She is rather fearful that it will do so. Peter, I believe the amount of sugar you just spooned onto your cereal has been proven to induce diabetic coma in laboratory animals.” He continued without missing a beat. “Mrs. Graydon lives alone -- she was widowed approximately four years ago -- so there are no corroborative witnesses. Though she has three children, all are adults and live in other states.”

“Can hardly blame them for that,” I said around a mouthful of cereal and sliced banana. “I’d escape as soon as possible too, which is probably why she wanted to come here instead of having us go to Ohio.”

Egon scowled at me but answered as if I’d asked a question, which I had, sort of. Of course the scowl might have been for talking with my mouth full, something that annoys him no end. I took a gulp of coffee. Aaahhh. Bitter and smooth at the same time. Perfect.

“Mrs. Grayden proposed meeting with us here to ensure discretion. Apparently her children view her encounters with this entity as something of a joke or, more worrying to her, as examples of encroaching senility. I assured my mother that we would conduct our investigation quietly and would maintain a low profile.” He shot a stern glance in my direction in a not-so-subtle reminder of the promise he’d exacted upstairs.

“Well, a rental car is going to be a lot less obvious than Ecto,” Winston concluded as he poured himself another cup of coffee. He held the pot up with a quick questioning glance around the table. Egon nodded and Winston poured. “You know this lady, Egon? Any chance that she’s imagining things?”

“There’s always that possibility, of course, but I think it unlikely in this situation. The Graydens have been friends of my parents since before my birth. Doctor Grayden was a thoughtful, dignified man; Mrs. Grayden was always rather self-possessed, sedate, not prone to flights of fancy by any means.”

Must have been a ball of laughs at all of Grayden-Spengler get-togethers, about as fun as a funeral procession. It was no wonder Egon always wore black trousers when I first met him.

“A vaporous apparition,” Ray repeated thoughtfully. “Probably just a Class Three. It sounds relatively benign even if it is scaring the poor lady out of her socks.”

“I ask that we pack our jumpsuits and travel in street clothes,” Egon said firmly, in a manner that indicated that he wasn’t really asking at all. “As far as anyone is concerned, we are simply visiting my family.”

“All of us?” I asked. “And family better mean just your mom because there’s no way in hell any of us are visiting Cyrus.” That supercilious snob had a permanent position on my shit list for how he’d manipulated Egon into leaving us and going to work for Spengler Labs.

“Egon’s got other family in Ohio,” Ray answered quickly, ably deflecting the standard Spengler defense of his uncle as a ‘serious scientist whose priorities simply do not coincide with ours.’ “A

couple aunts and cousins and stuff.” He stood up, cleared his bowl and mug and headed towards the sink. “It’s been a while since we’ve seen any of them. This might be a good opportunity.”

Why we needed to visit any of Egon’s family I sure as hell didn’t know. I didn’t drag the guys to visit my cousins and neither did Winston. Hell, I didn’t even visit my own cousins.

“My mother has asked that we stay with her,” Egon continued as if without interruption. “Mrs. Grayden will meet us there and provide all pertinent details of her situation. We can visit her house afterward.”

“Skulking about in a rental car,” I muttered. “Do we need disguises? Should we dye our hair?” And then an evil thought hit me and I grinned. “You know, Spengs, if you really want to be low profile, you could get a hair cut. No one would recognize you.”

“It’d be like if you weren’t talking all the time, Pete.” Winston grinned. “No one would recognize you with your mouth closed. We might all pass as normal.”

Ray’s laughter trailed in from the kitchen and Egon didn’t bother suppressing his smile. He and Winston began clearing their breakfast dishes, a clear signal that I’d better eat up because they weren’t going to wait for me. I scraped my spoon against the bottom of the bowl in a hurried shoveling motion. I might have just enough time to finish eating and still get the last word in.

“I just don’t understand why her children wouldn’t believe her,” Ray said earnestly. “I mean, just about everybody’s heard of the Ghostbusters.”

“Yeah, Pete makes sure of that,” Winston laughed, as he stacked bowls and mugs in the dishwasher. “Face it, Ray, at least half the country still thinks we’re smoke and mirrors. As far as they’re concerned, there’s no such thing as a ghost, not outside books or movies anyway.”

“I’m afraid Winston is correct,” Egon admitted. “Outside the TriState area, anyone who reports seeing a ghost is generally regarded with substantial disbelief and not a little scorn.”

“I understood this when we first started out but I don’t get why public opinion hasn’t shifted at all over the years.” Ray pushed his hands through his hair in utter exasperation, unable to conceive that people chose not to believe what was right in front of them, or at least on the evening news. “Especially anyone who knows us. Her kids **know** you, don’t they, Egon?”

I finished the cereal and leaned back in my chair with a sigh. “You said it, Tex,” I said and then wiped my mouth. “They know Egon. That’d be enough to scare any good Midwestern soul. I mean, hey, I’ve seen gods and demons and terror dogs, and Egon still scares me sometimes. And that’s just his hair. Imagine it for a minute; they probably knew him going through puberty.” I shuddered visibly at the thought of a teenage mad scientist Egon and then shot a sly smile in Egon’s direction. Payback’s a bitch all right.

## Two

“More tea, Peter?” Katherine Spengler, paused in the moment of lifting the teapot and lifting an eyebrow, looked like a pose from a diorama of life in the 1950’s. Or maybe even the 1850’s. The room was timeless: small armchairs and loveseats arranged in a manner to encourage conversation, small tables scattered on the perimeter with a long, low table near the center. No electronics, no stereo, no television.

“No, thank you.” I was full, packed, crammed to the gills with cake, muffins, and cookies that she called biscuits. And dinner was only a couple of hours away. The fall weather in Ohio was a little crisper than the Indian Summer we’d left in New York but it hardly warranted packing on extra fat for the long winter. “Everything is wonderful but I’ve got to watch my figure or the girls will complain.”

“Vanity, thy name is Venkman,” Egon murmured in tones low enough that his mother could not possibly have heard. She looked at him with a sharp glance anyway before offering tea to Winston, Ray, and then to her son.

Mrs. Grayden was drinking bottled water and had turned down tea, coffee, and all of the incredibly delicious but fattening baked goods spread across the living room coffee table. Or was that sitting room? Mrs. Spengler used different names for rooms and food than the ones normal people use.

In my opinion, Mrs. Grayden could’ve used a piece of cake or two. I remembered her now, vaguely, from Egon’s father’s funeral. She’d been there, at Katherine’s left elbow while Egon stayed on Katherine’s right. Like Katherine, she was in her mid-sixties but looked younger. I remembered her as slightly pudgy with a warm, maternal face. Now she just looked like one of those women who exercise too much: bony, pinched, dry, and tired. Living with a ghost that won’t let you sleep at night has a tendency to do that.

“As you were saying, Mrs. Grayden,” Egon said encouragingly.

Spengs nearly always has impeccable manners but for this visit he’d rolled out the diplomatic red carpet, damn near bowing. He wore his good charcoal suit and this whole tea thing seemed second nature to him.

“It’s been only this last year that it began....” She hesitated and her eyes sought an answer in Egon’s face.

“Manifesting?” he prompted, leaning toward her while still managing to balance that little china cup in its saucer without spilling a drop.

She smiled, a brief and fleeting flash of her former warmth. “Yes. When it began, Margaret was still with me – I’ve since had to let her go – but she never saw it or heard anything.” Her eyes flickered with an unidentifiable emotion. “Or so she said,” she muttered darkly. “Margaret was not the most reliable person.”

And Margaret was? I looked at Egon but he was giving his entire attention to Mrs. Grayden. Mrs. Spengler caught my quizzical look and mouthed the word 'help' at me. I could tell it wasn't a plea for assistance.

The corner of Winston's lips ticked up in a controlled reaction. Help, huh? I started mentally recalculating our bill for this "discreet investigation."

"What does it look like when it manifests?" Ray asked, mirroring Egon's serious but encouraging tone.

Mrs. Grayden shook her head. Her long red hair was tied back in one of those old-fashioned styles – a chignon? – and the roll or whatever in the back bobbed gently.

"It varies, Doctor Stantz. In the beginning, I thought it was lightning, a bright flash outside my window at night. I paid it no heed even when I realized that there was no accompanying thunder. I thought it heat lightning or some such occurrence."

Ray nodded reassuringly. "Some ghosts are able to vary how they appear."

"I'd ask Margaret, or my children when they were visiting, but no one else saw the lightning. After more than a few skeptical remarks, I refrained from mentioning it."

"It's not unusual for an entity to be selective to whom it manifests," Egon assured her.

"But then I began seeing it inside the house..."

"A bright flash of light?" Ray asked quickly.

"Sometimes." The slight rise in vocal pitch was the only hint that she found the discussion unnerving. "Other times it would appear as a gray shape with colored sparkling lights inside it." She looked away and closed her eyes, pursing her lips. "I know that sounds improbable. My daughter insists that I need to have my eyes checked but I had an eye exam six months ago and the doctor told me that my vision is fine."

I leaned forward and touched her gingerly. Under the soft neutral sweater, she was birdlike and frail, trembling as if ready to bolt. She shied from my hand.

"Mrs. Grayden, we have seen things beyond what even Stephen King could imagine. We believe you and we're here to help."

She pulled herself together then. "Yes, of course. I know that." She looked beseechingly at Mrs. Spengler. "Katherine told me about Egon's experiences as a child, how she and Edwin didn't believe him and how she's come to realize how very wrong they were."

Mrs. Spengler winced just a little. Egon held no grudge but his mother had not forgiven herself for the years of terror her son had endured. She returned Ruth Grayden's gaze with an unflinching nod. Spenglers are tough, they're fed stoicism with their baby food, and even

though Katherine was a Spengler by marriage, anyone who'd been married to Edwin for nearly forty years had to be as tough as a Marine.

"I knew that Egon would believe me when my own children do not."

Which was really kind of sad. I saw Ray's eyes fill with sympathy but I doubted Mrs. Grayden would be grateful for it. She was obviously nervous, had barely sat still the whole time she'd been here, but she still seemed strong. Even strong people develop a twitch after ten months of a supernatural guest.

"You say that it has manifested as a bright flash of light and also as a gray shape with colored lights. Is there anything else you can tell us about it?" Egon asked calmly. "Has it spoken to you? Threatened you?"

His matter-of-factness seemed to work better than my earlier attempt at sympathetic support. Then again, Ruth Grayden had known Egon since his birth. She obviously felt more at ease with him than she did with the rest of us and it was clear that she saw him as a fellow victim. There was no question about which of us was doing the client handholding on this job.

"Not in words," she answered slowly. "It's dark, like a brooding, malevolent presence. I feel it even when I don't see it and it frightens me. More than I can articulate." Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "Sometimes I think that it's trying to take my mind or my soul."

At the profound silence in the sitting room, Mrs. Grayden shuddered and then touched the fingers of her right hand to her mouth. "That sounds rather melodramatic. I apologize." She smiled wanly at Egon. "I'm afraid I'm up most nights, waiting for it to appear. I know it's ridiculous to lock my bedroom door and draw the curtains but I do it anyway."

And she'd lived with this a year while her children laughed at her. My God. Then I looked at Egon and thought about all those years that he'd been afraid, all those years that no one believed him, when he was only a child. Six, seven years old and terrified to go to bed every night. I love his mom nearly as much as I love my own but there's a part of me that just can't forgive her. Not because she didn't believe -- that doesn't surprise me anymore -- but for ignoring his screams. I think that's the part that haunts her too.

"It comes only at night?" Egon queried.

"No. It's come every hour of the day or night. Sometimes it comes three times in one day, sometimes I don't see it for a week or more." As Egon opened his mouth, she continued. "I saw it last night and earlier today. I can't promise that it will appear as soon as you visit my home but it's there. It's there right now."

I leaned back in my armchair – sitting room or living room, the Spenglers have comfortable furniture – and listened to Ray and Egon run through the normal menu of questions. As Mrs. Grayden answered, her voice picked up volume and confidence.

She'd never seen anything move by itself, or anything thrown, or objects broken or damaged in some way that couldn't be explained by the wind, an accident, or gravity. There were no funny



smells in the house. She didn't hear it when it came, just sensed it or saw it, and she didn't hear any strange sounds in the house at all. The gray shape was in human form, though somewhat elongated.

"One thing I have noticed," she said suddenly. "For some reason, no matter how I store it, food seems to spoil more quickly than it did before. And much of what doesn't spoil still has a funny taste. I had the repairman out to check the refrigerator and freezer half a dozen times with no change. Finally, I bought a new one but it doesn't seem to have made any difference. Electricians have checked the circuitry and everything is working properly."

I saw Ray and Egon exchange a puzzled glance. This one was new to me but I was kind of surprised that it was new to them as well. Between the two of them, they've memorized half the reference books in our library.

Egon smiled flatly. "Fortunately, Ray and I possess a modicum of knowledge in the field of electronics and electricity. We'll be happy to look into it."

A bad refrigerator. Well **that** brought back some happy and unhappy memories of Dana Barrett and Gozer the Gozerian. I hoped like hell that this job would be the nice, quiet vaporous apparition that Ray had diagnosed back in New York.

### Three

Winston gave a low whistle as we drove up the circular driveway to the front of the house.

"So what did Doctor Grayden do, huh?"

The house was impressive. Hell, the Spengler house was impressive, the Grayden house was a goddamn mansion. It wasn't Tara or the White House, just a big house. A really big house. A big oversized Colonial that probably could have housed the entire Grayden family, the three kids with their spouses and their children. And all of their children's friends. *Cha-ching* went the little cash register in my brain.

"He was an ophthalmologist," Egon said distractedly as he and Ray ran quick diagnostic tests on all of the meters and other scanning devices.

"An eye doctor? No shit!" I craned my head out the window to get another look at the house. "I didn't know that paid that good." Though he probably made a steady income on the Spenglers alone. If Egon's father had ever loosened up enough to have a family pet, it would have been a seeing-eye dog.

"I'm sure he was well compensated for his work, Peter, but I believe much of the family's money came from Mrs. Grayden."

Rich **and** beautiful; or she probably was thirty or forty years ago. I was just born at the wrong time. I like redheads. I like blondes and brunettes but contrary to what I'd ever admit to Janine, there's just something about red hair, even when it's faded like Mrs. Grayden's was. I bet it was

a bright, coppery red when she was younger. Paired with her fair skin and hazel-green eyes, she'd have been a stunner all right.

Ruth Grayden opened the door before Egon even rang the bell. It was clear she'd been watching for us.

"Thank you for coming so quickly." She stepped aside, pushing the heavy wooden door behind her to admit us.

I blinked. Was that something she always said to people she hired to fix a problem? We'd all just left Egon's mom's house. She left before us, and we'd only taken ten or fifteen minutes to change into jumpsuits and check our equipment. She **knew** we were coming right over. It was either a rich thing or an Ohio thing. I shook my head. I had no idea.

I followed Egon as he trailed behind Mrs. Grayden into a large room. A large open room with a staircase and a big chandelier and lots of doors opening from it. Obviously a center hall with a ceiling rising to the second floor. I wondered how they cleaned that light fixture.

"Do you need a tour?" she asked in a low voice.

Egon said 'no' just as I was opening my mouth to say 'yes.' It would have been nice. It was a really big house and now that I was inside I could see that it was an old house, not one of those McMansions or Plasterboard Palaces that they're throwing up in every suburb in America. From what I could see of the rooms with doors off the hall -- a living room, a dining room, something that might have been a study -- the furnishings weren't opulent or luxurious. The furniture was beautiful, simple clean designs, deep-cushioned and looked as if it would be very comfortable. It was furnished for a family, not to impress.

"We need to take some preliminary reading." Egon smiled reassuringly. "I'd like to set a baseline for the overall house before we look for the entity."

"It's just to see what we've got," Ray chimed in. He divided his attention between his meter and the house, eyes wide as he searched the ceiling for signs of what he suspected was a Class Three.

The two boy geniuses moved off into the hall, waving PKE meters and twisting knobs. They each took a doorway, stepped in for a moment or two to take a reading and then stepped back into the hall, repeated the action with another set of doors and then came together to compare notes.

I stood in the big center hall, giving myself a headache by staring up at the detail in the carved wooden ceiling. Scaffolds. Had to have been done with scaffolds. Both the carved ceiling and the chandelier. I bet that weighted a ton. It was as large, if not as ornate, as the one Ray trashed at the Sedgewick.

"Nice house," I said conversationally to Mrs. Grayden who hovered at the foot of the staircase. She was still a bit of a twitch but I wrote that off to not having had a good night's sleep in more months than it took to have a baby.

Winston strolled by, walking the perimeter of the hall, the wooden floor creaking under his steps. The thrower in his hand was probably more out of habit than any real need. Unless the sound was turned off or really low, there hadn't been a squawk on any of the meters. Ray and Egon were conferring in quiet tones in the middle of the short hallway that ran toward the kitchen at the back of the house. I could see by the frustration in Ray's face that they were either getting nothing or were stymied by what they were reading.

"Maybe you could show us where it appeared earlier today," I said.

"It was over there." There was a distinct tremor in her voice as she pointed to the far corner of the living room, just off the center hall. I inclined my head in that direction and we all trooped into a room the size of the firehouse ground floor. It smelled faintly of lemon and was well furnished with comfortable looking couches and loveseats and armchairs and tables, but the space still seemed immense.

"Where exactly?" Egon asked as he and Ray strode forward, meters extended.

She pointed towards the fireplace at the other end of the room, more specifically at the built-in bookcase that flanked the fireplace on its right.

"I was sitting here," she indicated an armchair in the middle of the room, "reading and I just knew it was here. When I looked up, it was right there, by the fireplace. It moved to the right, towards the windows and then it disappeared."

Egon bit his lip, nodding thoughtfully as he scanned the entire room with his meter. He adjusted it several times but it remained stubbornly silent. I could tell by the puzzled look in his eyes that this wasn't the simple Class Three Ray had predicted. It wasn't anything, if the meters were to be trusted. Of course, not surprisingly, Ray seemed more excited than frustrated since this was an opportunity to identify something new, something outside the PKE meter's design parameters.

"Mrs. Grayden, we're not detecting any of the standard energy residuals that we'd expect," Egon explained carefully and in English for a change. "I'm going to get some more equipment from the car and then we'll take readings throughout the entire house."

Winston sidled over to me and I read confusion in his expression. "Is he saying that it's something other than our standard ghost, demon or poltergeist?" he whispered. "I hate it when it's something weird."

I snorted. "And ghosts and demons aren't weird?"

He smacked me in the shoulder as he holstered his thrower. "Wiseass. You know what I mean."

I did and grinned back at him before trailing after Egon as he strode quickly from the room. I followed him to the car where he was sorting through the equipment in the trunk with a single-minded intensity.

“Since there’s nothing here, can we go home now? This Cleveland air just doesn’t smell right; not enough exhaust fumes. I think my lungs are closing up.”

Egon stood up straight and stared at me over the rims of his glasses. He didn’t have to say a word.

“Well, maybe it is her vision,” I suggested. “Or maybe she’s just lonely. Your mom said old Ruth’s been something of a recluse for the last year or so. She could be lonely, looking for company, and her imagination supplied her with a regular visitor.”

“You may recall the scientific method, Peter,” he said as he turned back to the car trunk. “We’ve merely begun the process of exclusion to determine the underlying cause in this situation.”

“I got it!” I leered at Egon’s back. “It’s a Mrs. Robinson thing. You know, trim, sexy older women with the hots for a younger guy. How better than to get your attention that to come up with a ghost? Now you just have to fall for her daughter and we’d have a movie.”

“Really, Peter,” Egon said with a sardonic sideways glare, “with the imagination you possess it is a wonder that you ever desire actual human company. As it so happens, I did, at one time, date Celia Grayden. You may be assured that it is highly unlikely that I will, as you put it, fall for her.”

Well, I wasn’t expecting *that*. Egon turned back to the trunk and pulled out the magneto-flux something or other that picks up stuff the PKE meter doesn’t and a few other devices. He tucked the PKE meter onto his belt and set off for the house.

“You dated her daughter, Spengs?” I bounced along beside him, walking sideways and trying to get his attention. “How long ago was this? How long you two go out? Did you...nah, forget I asked.”

The mind boggled at the thought of a teenaged Egon necking with a junior version of Ruth Grayden. Of course his hair would have been closer to normal back then. I wondered if she was a science nerd too.

Egon frowned as he made minute adjustments to the piece of equipment in his hands but that only slowed his pace a little.

“Hey, seriously, Egon, you have any idea what this is?”

Egon stopped momentarily and glanced towards the windows of the living room. “At the present time, no, but I fully intend to remedy that situation. I know all too well what it is like to see something that I know is real and have no one believe me, Peter.”

I knew all that. And I also knew that no one had investigated his bedroom closet with the type of equipment we had with us. I didn’t say it though because Egon was feeling some type of commitment beyond what we normally bring to a job and it wasn’t just because this was an old family friend. She trusted him as a fellow victim and he obviously felt the weight of that trust.

“The meters are not registering any measurable psychokinetic energy, therefore it is likely that the entity’s detectable presence is outside the parameters of our design. It is not the first time we’ve encountered something we hadn’t seen previously.”

“Okay.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “So we’ll apply a little scientific method and unearth whatever’s haunting your mom’s friend.” I waited until he met my eyes and I saw that he wasn’t dwelling in the past anymore. Then I opened the door to the house.

One of the things I liked about this house was that while it was an oversize Colonial, it wasn’t ostentatious. The staircase ran up the left wall of the entry hall and though it might have been a little wider than some, it was just a normal wooden staircase, with wooden risers and banister and all. No specially made runner, no marble, no carved stone, just a normal staircase, one that I could see kids running up and down, sliding down the banister. Kids like Ray Stantz who paused about a quarter of the way up the stairs to the second floor and turned to us with a grin.

“I thought I’d start checking out the upstairs,” he called down. “This is a neat old house. Maybe it has some hidden passageways or sealed rooms, some reason for a ghost to still be lingering.”

Ray’s easy belief and curiosity leavened Egon’s mood but there was still a thoughtful cast to his expression when he turned to Ruth Grayden.

“Mrs. Grayden, Ray and I will take readings upstairs. Perhaps you could spend some time with Peter and Winston going over the details of the entity that you saw.”

She looked at him as if she wasn’t all that happy about being handed off to the B team, which annoyed me just a little. I decided to chat with her in the kitchen. The kitchen is the center of most houses, it’s associated with warmth and it’s the area where people feel most comfortable. Besides, I hadn’t seen anything but the hall and living room. I directed her towards the kitchen as Ray and Egon’s steps up the staircase echoed through the hall.

The kitchen was big, like everything in this house was big. It must have been one empty echoing barn for one person to live in. A table with eight chairs was to the left, the counters, cabinets and appliances to the right, and a breakfast bar with four stools divided the room. Spic-and-span clean, it smelled faintly of ammonia. There wasn’t a single thing on the counters, not a coffee cup, not a spoon, not a paper clip. In a kitchen this size, maybe there was room for all the clutter than ended up on our countertop; there were sure enough cabinets and drawers. I steered Mrs. Grayden towards one of the stools and slid onto another one. Facing her, I wrapped my ankles around the legs of my stool and smiled in what I hoped was an encouraging manner.

“Tell me about the food that doesn’t taste right,” I prompted.

Mrs. Grayden looked at me strangely and then turned and looked back toward the hall, as if wishing Egon down from the second floor. She was nervous and edgy and I got the feeling that she really didn’t like me, which smarted just a little. Women her age almost always like me, which is a good thing when their daughters bring me home to meet mom and dad. The dads on the other hand....

“I know Egon wants you to tell me about the entity, and we’ll talk about it, I promise. But I’m really curious about the food spoilage because that’s very distinctive. It might help us narrow down the type of entity that it is. Tell me about that.”

It couldn’t hurt. Since we had no idea what this thing was it seemed logical to focus on what was unusual about it.

Winston prowled around the kitchen, eyeing the appliances and space with some envy and then focused on the refrigerator. He opened the door to the freezer and backed away from an upswell of frost that looked as if it would keep things frozen solid. As in permafrost.

“Well,” she said hesitantly, “at first, I thought Margaret was being lazy or not sealing the food properly. I have special containers for everything, you know, and if she was putting the vegetables in the containers for the meat or the chicken in the containers for the fruit, I might understand why things tasted so badly.”

I nodded to tell her I was following her and that she should continue and then tried to divide my attention between what she was saying and what Winston was finding in the various cabinets. He opened and shut each cabinet door quietly, and with her back turned to him, I don’t think Mrs. Grayden knew he was surreptitiously searching her kitchen. It wasn’t like there was anything really to hide. Lots of single serving-size cans or packages of food in the cabinets, lots of bottled water. No obvious reason why food would spoil or taste funny, especially since all the food appeared to be sealed.

“It was bad enough that my children used Margaret as something of a spy. Oh,” a dramatic wave of one hand, “I know that sounds ridiculous but I overheard her more than once on the phone with my daughter.”

I opened my eyes wide and gave a sympathetic shake of my head. Bad enough the help was slacking off, but reporting behind your back? Jeez, guess Margaret forgot who was the one signing the checks.

She appeared to be warming up a bit, both to her subject and to me. I even won a tentative smile before it faded and the nervous tension returned. “She’d call them whenever I mentioned seeing the specter and even tell them something as silly as what I was eating or drinking for heaven’s sake. I’m not an old lady yet. I don’t need a keeper. If Celia wanted to know what I was eating, she should have asked me. I don’t keep it a secret.”

Well, I could see where that would be annoying. I wondered what Margaret’s take on this whole thing was. And Celia’s. It might worth checking that out, especially to get to meet someone who’d known Spengs in his youth.

Mrs. Grayden uttered a choked gasp and for a moment I thought maybe she’d seen Winston filching some of her bottled water or maybe leaving something on top of one of the counters but then I realized she was staring at the hall. All that hard won-warmth had vanished and her face paled, eyes wide and white; either the pupils and irises had shrunk or her eyes had grown large enough that they seemed smaller in a sea of white.

I slid off my stool and looked into the hallway. I hadn't heard a thing. I could distantly hear Egon and Ray's footsteps upstairs, but there was nothing in the hall. No creak of the old wooden floorboards, no opening of a door.

"It's...it's here," she stammered. "It's right there." She waved a hand toward the center of the hall.

And I was staring into a totally empty hallway. A large, central hallway with pretty nice floors, nice wallpaper and a big light fixture but no bright lights, no gray shape that may or may not have been human, no bogey.

"It's right there," she said again, her voice wavering towards a screech. "Do something!"

Winston hurried up beside me, thrower in one hand, radio in the other. "Egon, Ray, we got a bogey report in the main entry hall. You two wanna join us?"

I grabbed the radio and pulled it and Winston's hand towards my mouth. "Ray, you got your scopes with you? Might want to put 'em on."

That should alert them that the bogey wasn't visible. At least not to me. Like Egon said, some ghosts could pick and chose who saw them. Footsteps thundered overhead and came rapidly down the stairs.

Mrs. Grayden was backing away, towards the kitchen cabinets as if she could hide. The look of terror on her face stopped the comforting words as I began to speak them.

"Do something," she begged; face contorted in misery and panic. "Can't you stop it? Please, *please* do something. It's coming for me."

Winston and I stood between her and the passage to the hall but it didn't seem to reassure her. First Ray and then Egon spun around at the bottom of the staircase, meters in one hand, throwers in the other. I allowed myself a brief moment of pride and relief, thankful that both of them had remembered to pull their throwers and didn't just charge into the situation with PKE meters. Ray had his scopes over his eyes but I could see by the way that his head swept the hall from one side to the other and then from floor to ceiling that he hadn't located it yet.

"Stop it!" Mrs. Grayden was cowering behind the kitchen cabinets. "Egon, please stop it! Don't let it get me!"

Egon flinched and looked around the hall again. "Where is it? Tell me exactly where it is."

Either she was seeing something that we weren't seeing or we weren't looking in the right place. I dashed back to Mrs. Grayden's hiding spot and slipped an arm around her shoulders, trying to ignore how violently she was shaking.

"We're gonna stop it, I promise you we're gonna stop it. We just need your help, just a minute, not even a minute, just a second. I'm gonna walk you over to the door and you can tell Egon where it is then we'll stop it, okay?"

As I babbled, I drew her towards the stools; it was a little back from the doorway but a place where she'd have an unobstructed view of the hall.

"It can't hurt you. We've got these special weapons that will stop it," I lifted my thrower and waved it in front of her terror-stricken eyes. "It will not hurt you. Do you understand? Can you tell me where it is?"

She just stared at me and I had the feeling that this was what the phrase 'struck dumb' described. She was too scared to speak. I felt impatience ripple through me and fought to keep my voice in the same range as Egon's calm and neutral tones. She hadn't responded to sympathy, she'd responded to matter-of-factness.

"Come on, Ruth, we're not gonna let it hurt you but you have to tell me where it is because we don't see it. Can you tell me that? Can you tell Egon that?"

She pointed mutely towards the middle of the hall.

"Under the light?" I asked.

Throwers in one hand, meters in the other, Egon and Ray circled under the fixture, staring upward. Ray smacked the side of his ectoscopes as if that would help him see it.

Mrs. Grayden nodded desperately in my direction and then looked back at the hall.

"Oh God," she whispered; all the terror in the world packed into two words. "Oh dear God, it's coming."

She scuttled back toward the protection of her kitchen cabinets and I looked helplessly over at Winston as we listened to the steady stream of panic-stricken words flowing over the kitchen counter. Zed's eyes were wide and more than a little unnerved. How the hell could we stop something we couldn't see, something we couldn't even pinpoint with the meters?

"Stop it, please... you have to stop it, it's coming for me. Please."

I turned to look towards the hall. Egon was talking to Ray, both of them swiveling their heads around and searching the ceiling.

"Get down!"

Winston's shove came out of the blue and all I could think of at first was that we had lied to her. We promised that we'd stop it and protect her and we'd failed. Then I heard the roar that passed over my head and I flattened myself to the floor. The sound was all around me, one roar after another, but somehow I knew it emanated from behind me, from the kitchen, not from the hall.

"Ray!"



Egon's voice had the edge of panic that it gets only when he's really worried about one of us. I started to sit up but Winston pulled me down, his hands locked over my head.

"Egon, stay down!" he yelled in a tone of voice that even Spengler would have to obey. "Pete, don't move," Winston said tightly, bare inches from my ear. "Just stay low, just another minute."

And then the roaring was over. The sharp smell of cordite drifted across the kitchen. I could hear a clicking sound, one after another after another. It continued in sequence until Winston rolled off me and pulled the gun away from Ruth Grayden.

I pushed upwards until I was kneeling; eyes wide, heart pounding as my body struggled to catch up to whatever the hell had just happened. Winston was trying to calm Mrs. Grayden and he'd tucked the gun at the back of his belt where she couldn't reach it. I didn't quite understand that at first, it was empty wasn't it? Then it occurred to me that a woman who kept a loaded pistol in her kitchen might also have some extra ammo nearby.

Winston helped her back into a hiding position and then straightened with a groan. As he turned I saw the shadow that crossed his face and I swiveled my head back to the hallway just as Winston said "Sweet Lord" in a hollow voice.

Ray was sprawled on his right side, Egon face down. Neither made a move to rise. Out in the hallway, right in the spot inhabited by Ruth Grayden's own personal demon, they'd been in the killing zone.

"Stay there," Winston ordered in as firm a voice as I'd ever heard him use. "Just stay right there and don't move."

It took me a second or two to realize that he was talking to Mrs. Grayden. I staggered to my feet and made it to the door half-a-step ahead of Winston. I dropped back down to my knees next to Ray.

The bullet had clipped his left arm just above the elbow. Groggy and semi-conscious, he was pressing his right hand over the wound but it wasn't slowing the blood flow. Shit. His face had lost almost all its color, little beads of perspiration sprang up to accompany each moan.

"Ray, it's gonna be okay, buddy." I unbuckled his pack and eased it off so that he could lie down properly on his back. He rolled onto his back, biting his lip from the pain and squinting to focus dazed eyes. Ray groaned as I lifted his legs, dropped booted feet on top of the pack and then pushed the scopes off his face.

"It hurts," he mumbled. "Oh, God ... it really hurts."

"Yeah, Ray, I know. Don't worry, you're gonna be just fine." My stomach was turning over and over again like I was going to be sick, but it wasn't nausea. It was this chill that I felt from the inside out, as if my intestines had frozen. My body was pumping adrenaline, trying to keep up with events that my brain was barely beginning to process. Raising his arm and pressing my hand on the wound hadn't even slowed the blood loss.

Winston slid in next to me. “I’ll take over here, Pete.” Winston took Ray’s arm from me. “Call nine-one-one and get the first aid kit from the car.”

I stared at him, barely noticing the hint of gray in his face that ran underneath the perspiration on his forehead. “Egon?” I looked over my shoulder at the still form behind me. Winston had removed Egon’s pack but left him lying face down, limbs sprawled. My heart started thumping loudly, loud enough that I was surprised Winston didn’t hear it.

“I can stop Ray’s bleeding. Egon needs more help than I can give him,” Winston answered flatly. “Get an ambulance, Pete.”

Like hell. I scurried over to Egon.

“Don’t move him,” Winston barked.

Winston was scaring me more than the blood I saw on the side of Egon’s head. An inch or so over his right ear, blood seeped steadily through a handkerchief, clotting in a tangle of twisted blond hair. I pressed fingers against the side of his neck and prayed. His pulse was weak and it was way too fast but it was there. He was alive and I didn’t want think about the fact that he’d been shot in the head or any of what that might mean. I grabbed one of his hands, needing to hold onto him in some way. His arm was limp, his face so lax that his features smoothed over, making him seem younger but different, less like Egon. I didn’t like it, I hated that look, it was scaring the hell out of me. It was as if I’d already lost him.

“Damn it, Venkman, call an ambulance! You’re not helping anybody just sitting there. And then get the first aid kit. I think it hit a blood vessel.”

I pulled my gaze away from Egon and turned back to Ray. He was unconscious now and despite the tee shirt Winston held tightly against the wound, blood was still streaming at a frightening speed. There was a phone in the kitchen and I sprinted for it.

As I dialed, I heard faint moans and whimpers from behind the counter. Interspersed with the inarticulate sounds, there was an occasional word, a ‘please’ or a sobbed ‘no.’ The phone was a cordless one so I walked over and watched Ruth Grayden rocking slowly on the floor, her arms wrapped around her knees. The pitiful sounds were muffled because she had her face pressed against her knees, hiding. I couldn’t even hate her for what she’d done.

Running back from Ecto with the first aid kit I was more than a little surprised to see Mrs. Grayden in the hall. When I’d left the kitchen, I was under the impression she wasn’t going to move for a long time, maybe until she had her own ambulance pickup. But she’d moved all right. She was kneeling next to Egon, her hands on his shoulders and I froze just inside the doorway, watching her.

“Egon? Egon, please wake up.” Her voice started out normal but moved into the frantic range within seconds. Maybe she’d realized exactly what she’d done. Maybe she was starting to think about having to face Katherine with the news that she’d shot Egon, maybe killed him.

Then she began to shake him, gently at first and when there was no response, more and more insistently. His head lolled brokenly with each movement. His glasses slipped from his face. “Egon, *please*.”

“Don’t touch him.” Winston’s face was contorted with anger and fear and the frustration of not being able to move from Ray’s side. “You’re *hurting* him.”

“You’ve got to help me. It’s going to get me.” Her voice rose to a screech. “You said you’d help me, Egon, you *promised*.”

“Get away from him!” I grabbed her by the back of her cardigan, my hand twisting in soft wool and a rope of pearls, and pulled her away from Egon. Then I yanked her to her feet and slapped her across the face. Hard. Her head rocked back and only my fist in her sweater kept her standing.

“Pete!”

Her fear had concentrated the light scent of lavender that she wore, making it almost oppressive. Oppressive, smothering, murdering... I slapped her again. “You did it!” I barely recognized the strident voice that I heard. “There’s no ghost, no flashing lights, no gray cloud. **You** did it.” I started shaking her, like she’d shaken Egon. “Do you understand what you did? He can’t answer you, he can’t help you because you *killed* him, maybe killed them both. Look at what you did...”

“*Peter Venkman!*”

That snapped me out of it. Ruth Grayden was sobbing, Egon lay bleeding at my feet and I’d dropped the first aid kit that Winston desperately needed to try to save Ray’s life. I shoved her away, harder than necessary, and pretended not to notice when she fell. Scooping up the first aid kit, I knelt next to Winston and handed him each of the items as he asked for them.

“Pete, he’s not dead,” Winston said softly, eyes never moving from the blood pressure cuff he affixed around Ray’s upper arm as a tourniquet. “I know you’re upset, man....”

“Winston, she put a bullet in his brain,” I said with quiet certainty, “so maybe dead isn’t the worst possible scenario here.”

Winston didn’t answer; there wasn’t much to say.

With the tourniquet in place and fresh gauze tightly pressed against Ray’s wound, Winston sent me for blankets. I raced upstairs, opened any likely-looking door that might have been a linen closet and then settled for stripping blankets from the first two beds I found.

Blankets in place and all possible first aid given, Winston stayed in place at Ray’s side and I settled next to Egon. Resting one hand on his back, I could feel the rapid, shallow rise and fall of every breath through the tight woven fabric of the blanket. I smoothed his hair with my other hand, the one that didn’t have Ray’s blood all over it, and added my handkerchief to the one

already pressed against the wound that was still sluggishly bleeding. He was warm, he was breathing, and that felt reassuring even though I didn't want to hope.

"How much damage..." I swallowed the rest of my words, suddenly aware that my own breathing was coming in shaking gulps and my voice was cracking. "When she shook him, I mean." I turned to Winston for answers, hoping for reassurance.

He didn't look away from Ray and I wasn't sure if his grim expression was a reaction to my question, to Ray's condition, or to the overall situation.

"Hard to say. A bullet impacting on a skull causes a vibration..." Winston trailed off and then looked at me in mute apology. "I really don't know, Pete. I just thought we shouldn't move him in case it made it worse. I could be wrong. I just know enough to know I'm out of my league with that type of injury."

"Worst case," I insisted out of some perverse desire to feel worse than I already did, to start the grieving process, to try to accept something that I knew I'd never be able to accept, to let grief coexist with raw panic. Maybe I just wanted to kill the hope that kept flickering inside. As if hoping and being devastated when that hope proved unwarranted would hurt any worse than losing one or both of them.

Winston shook his head. "We don't know how bad it is. Could be it just grazed him, knocked him out, a concussion or something, in which case shaking him may add to his headache but not much more than that. I didn't poke at the point of entry. Let's leave it for the professionals."

I'd asked for answers, hoping for reassurance, and Winston was trying to give me reassuring answers. Instead all I could think about was that Ray might have lost too much blood to survive and that Egon might already be gone, in every way that mattered.

A benign vaporous apparition, huh Ray? You can't get much more benign than something that's not even there, can you? Who'd have thought that the client was the dangerous one? Our client: that nicely-dressed lady huddled in the corner, shaking and talking to herself. The client and our conviction that it was a ghost, that it had to be paranormal.

It seemed to take hours before I heard the distant wail of a siren.

#### **Four**

Huddled on the hard plastic seat, one of a row of attached seats in the Emergency Room waiting area, I was too far into my own misery to hear approaching footsteps. Not these type of footsteps anyway. Somehow I could always tell when it was a doctor or nurse walking by and then I'd pull my head out of my shell and look up expectantly, waiting for someone to tell me that my life, as I knew it, was over.

"Peter?"

I'd called the Spengler house when we got to the hospital; a neighbor answered. Apparently the cops had dropped the bomb first and the neighbor's husband or boyfriend or son – whatever, it hardly seemed to matter, so little did it at this point – was driving Katherine to the hospital.

Winston pulled out of his shell before I did and was standing next to Mrs. Spengler, resting a hand on her arm and trying to look reassuring. But she was staring at me, as if I was the real barometer of her son's condition. And in a way, I guess I was. I hope I didn't look half as desperate as I felt.

I stood up and pulled her into a hug. Weird. I'm used to women being able to tuck their heads into my chest or under my chin. Katherine's not as tall as Egon but she was tall enough to feel awkward in my arms, like I was simply holding her, not comforting her.

I had thought about what to say and decided that honesty without any descriptive details was the way to go. I knew that she had to already be scared and worried, I didn't want to panic her. She had other ideas.

"The police said that he was shot in the head," she said bluntly. "Where?"

I caught my breath, slightly startled by her calm. I searched her face and saw the strain, what it was costing her to maintain this appearance. "Just over the right ear. The bullet fractured his skull but didn't penetrate the brain..."

"Oh, thank God," she murmured, eyes closed, a shudder rocking her frame as emotion hammered cracks into her façade.

She seemed shaky enough that I put one arm around her shoulders and steered her to the seat next to where I had been sitting. Winston sat on her other side, as if bracketing her could protect her from bad news. Sitting next to her, I kept my arm in place. "In addition to the skull fracture, he has an epidural hematoma, both or either of which caused swelling in the right temporal lobe. He's in surgery right now -- they wanted to operate right away."

I left out the phrases 'immediate surgical intervention' and 'life threatening.' I hadn't liked them the first time around and I didn't like them any better now. I'd been numb while signing the consent forms, my signature scrawled over page after page even more haphazardly than normal. The faster I signed, the faster they would operate and it wasn't like we had any other choice.

"He's alive," she said distantly, like a mantra she'd repeated on the way to the hospital. "Ray?"

I looked over at Winston, as if we'd divided responsibility and worry because it was just too overwhelming for either of us to think about both Ray and Egon dying.

"He was shot in the arm but it nicked a vein or something," he answered in a subdued voice while staring at the ugly linoleum tile floor. "He lost a lot of blood. We just don't know."

But the ambulance crew had plugged bags of plasma extenders and whole blood into Ray, grabbed him and ran like hell to the hospital, none of which seemed particularly encouraging. I

couldn't even think about it. I just kept seeing Ray heading up the staircase, cheerfully expecting to find a ghost or something paranormal that just didn't appear on our meters from some reason. Something new. He loved finding something new. Loves, I corrected myself harshly.

"They haven't been able to stabilize him yet," I added, somewhat uselessly. Useless, helpless, inadequate; the words barely described my overwhelming feeling of impotence. There was nothing I could do, absolutely *nothing*, to affect Ray's condition or Egon's. Even with all of the modern medical miracles and a three-day supply of blood at hand, the doctors hadn't been able to stabilize Ray's blood pressure, heart rate or respiration. Egon's life, his mind, everything that made him Egon, lay in the hands of a neurosurgeon I hadn't even met.

I'd never been good at praying, besides half-jesting utterances, usually sexual or acquisitive or a combination of the two. I used to pray when I was a kid but when it never seemed to do any good I just got out of the habit. So now, when I really needed to pray, when I needed something more than anything in the world, I didn't really know **how** to pray for it. I wanted to ask Winston but I didn't want to say it in front of Katherine Spengler; might give her the wrong idea. I hoped I hadn't used up my allotment of prayers in the stupid shit I usually wish for.

"What about Ruth?"

I could feel Winston's eyes on me and I struggled to contain my antipathy. This was Egon's mom and she deserved better than what had happened. I wouldn't make it any worse for her. I was already feeling more than a little guilt that I'd hit Ruth. I'd lashed out at a woman who was disconnected from reality, lashed out in anger and fear, most of it self-directed but bountiful enough to share.

"They transported her here."

I didn't mention that Ruth had been screaming and fighting the EMTs and the cops, that they'd had to tranquilize her to get her onto a stretcher, that her hair had started to unravel while she struggled, and the strands whipped around her face like a maelstrom.

"The police said that she was probably hallucinating, that they didn't think she intended to shoot them." Agonized blue eyes flickered over both Winston and me. "There wasn't a ghost, was there?"

I shook my head. None of the words that came to mind would actually comfort her. I knew what was coming next but it would have been pointless to head it off. She needed to talk about it.

"I brought him out here," she said in a near-whisper. "Oh God, I brought you all here."

I tightened my arm around her shoulders and pulled her towards me. The tiny little plastic seats didn't have any arms, which made this a little easier.

"We'd have come no matter who called us. If it wasn't you, it would have been one of her kids, one of her other friends or even Ruth herself."

She endured the embrace; she yielded but didn't seem to draw any consolation from it. Instead, she just stared straight ahead. I knew how she felt, probably exactly how she felt. That combination of grief and guilt is the loneliest feeling in the world.

"I should have known. When she told me about the ghost, I thought that explained it; that's why she seemed a little odd." She blinked and drew her head back, as if it had been physically wherever she'd been mentally. "She is ill, isn't she?" She turned in her seat, pulling out of my sheltering arm to face me.

"Probably. The doctors are going to have to run a lot of tests to determine what's causing the hallucinations."

"But isn't that your field, Peter?"

That stung, more than she knew. I studied my hands, which I found to my surprise were now folded; I wasn't praying, at least not consciously.

"Not necessarily," I said with a calm I didn't feel inside. My heart had started pounding again. "There may be neurological causes. It could be a reaction to a medication she's on. It may well be schizophrenia or some other disorder but that's not something anyone can quickly diagnose. They'll need to rule out a medical cause first."

I listed all the possibilities over and over again in my mind. Ruth Grayden didn't seem like your average junkie but hey, who could tell these days? Brain tumor seemed more likely. And it didn't even have to be a tumor, there were other neurological problems that could induce hallucinations.

The food nagged at me though. The food that tasted funny. A change in taste might come about because of a physical problem but the bottled water and the single-serving packages hinted at something more than merely taste. And Margaret spying for the Grayden kids. I didn't really want to think about that one. Paranoia can arise from neurological problems as easily as it does from psychological ones.

I felt a warm touch on my forearm and raised my eyes from my folded hands to acknowledge Katherine reaching out in comfort.

"I didn't mean to imply that you could have known, Peter."

But I should have. I'm a psychologist for God's sake. I was a psychologist before I was a Ghostbuster but I'd ignored every indication that this was something other than paranormal.

The meters didn't pick up any psychokinetic energy. We all knew that, we knew the facts, but we blithely assumed that the cause was still paranormal. In retrospect it was so easy to see that Egon didn't *want* to believe what the facts were telling him and I didn't *want* to force him to consider that Ruth Grayden's ghosts were in her own mind. Ironically enough, I didn't force the issue because I didn't want him hurt. Well, wasn't that a bitter pill to swallow?

## Five

“Katherine?”

I raised my head at the sound. We’d been waiting for what seemed to be hours without word, the sheer weight of worry pinning us into these uncomfortable seats. Hospital waiting rooms are built like bus stations, for transitory people, not for reassurance, not to provide a place where reeling family or loved ones can come to terms with the disaster that dropped into their nice, orderly lives. Whatever meager comfort any of us drew came from contact with the other two, and that was slowly being sapped.

I looked the man over. Large, manicured hands rested in the side pockets of a doctor’s lab coat, one that covered green surgical scrubs. This guy, this doctor, was about my Dad’s age and had even less hair. The little he had was gray but at least he didn’t try to comb it over. Whoever this guy was, it was clear he knew Katherine Spengler. I might think of her that way sometimes but none of us ever call her anything but Mrs. Spengler.

“Owen.”

She rose with extraordinary grace, surprising considering her state of emotional exhaustion. For the last hour or more she’d not said a word, responding to conversational gambits with only a shake or nod of her head. I’d seen it before, that self-isolating approach to things that terrify beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend. It was compounded by the realization that this burden was too much for one person to bear and the self-inflicted guilt and shame for not being strong enough to bear it in the first place. I’d had a front row seat watching Egon wrestle with the same issues in much the same way for over fifteen years, and God willing, would keep that seat for another forty or fifty years.

She may have been surprised to see him but it was clear he had come looking for her. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and gripped Mrs. Spengler’s upper arms; a hug but not a hug. Maybe that’s how acquaintances hug or hell, maybe it was another Ohio thing.

“Do you want me to have Marge come down?” He had a phlegmy smoker’s voice but he didn’t smell like cigarettes or smoke, more like antiseptic, but that was getting harder to pick out as it seemed inherent to the environment. “I know how stressful it is to wait. You shouldn’t be alone.”

Katherine turned towards me then. “I’m not alone, Owen. These are Egon’s friends, Peter Venkman and Winston Zeddemore.”

A pretty obvious oversight since she had been sitting between us. I tried to ignore it as Winston and I stumbled to our feet to shake his hand.

“This is Owen Mehalick. I should really say Doctor Mehalick. He was Edwin’s doctor.”

From the way she left it unsaid I got the impression that this Doctor Mehalick was the guy who took care of Egon’s dad when he had his stroke. Which made him a neurologist or



neurosurgeon and possibly made him Egon's doctor. Something that didn't make me all that happy because, after all, Edwin Spengler didn't survive his stroke. On the other hand, this doctor wasn't wearing that controlled mask of professional sorrow that doctors don when they have bad news. I found myself watching his eyes, paying attention to whom he watched and how long his gaze remained steady. There was no twitch in the well-groomed eyebrows and the grayish-hazel eyes were calm and centered on Mrs. Spengler.

"And Egon's," he confirmed. "The neurologist on call knew my association with your family, knew I'd want to take the case."

There was a hesitant silence as if all of us wanted to say something but were afraid to put thoughts into words.

"The surgery went well. We removed the clot, bone fragments, and some contused and necrotic temporal tissue. We did an ultrasound during surgery to make sure that there were no other problems that developed since the CT scan and everything looked good."

And? I could hear and feel the air pressure deflating around me as we all let out breaths from lungs tight with anxiety. But what did that mean? All those undergrad and grad courses that focused on the brain, on cognitive functioning and biochemistry were a long time ago. I struggled to wrench out the knowledge that still lingered, pull everything I needed to know up to the surface.

"You removed brain tissue. How much?" Winston asked.

I should have been able to ask that question but raw panic at the thought was making the very air catch in my throat, preventing the formation of any sound other than a swallowed moan.

Mehalick nodded, a professor's acknowledgement to a bright student for a good question. "Less than a centimeter, Mister Zeddemore. I can't really say for certain but I don't expect it will impair him in any way. He's in Recovery right now but will be moved to ICU shortly. We'll continue to monitor the pressure inside his head, as well as his heart rate and blood pressure. Until he regains consciousness, we're maintaining him on a ventilator."

I closed my eyes at the all-too-easily visualized picture of Egon breathing by way of machine. From the soft sound next to me, I guessed Katherine found it painful to imagine as well. But he was alive.

"How long will he be unconscious?" I finally asked.

Mehalick frowned and I didn't like that. "Hard to say. We're using steroids and other medications to reduce the swelling and keep the pressure down. I expect to see gradual incremental improvements but it may be some time before he is fully alert."

"Some time being?" I prompted.

He shrugged. “Possibly days, Mister Venkman. Recovery from a traumatic brain injury can be a very slow process. Think of it as a seven-layer cake. He’s going to come up a layer at a time until he is fully alert.”

I ignored both the title error – ignorance, not arrogance in this case – and the bad analogy. I was way too worried still to care about stuff like that.

“Okay, you’re telling us we have to be patient, not one of my strong points.” At least I brought a tired smile to Winston’s face. “We’ve been patient and we’ve been waiting and we haven’t been able to find out the status of our other friend, Ray Stantz. Can you help us?”

Mehalick ran one hand over his head in what looked like a habitual gesture, one from when he probably still had hair to push back. Now he just kind of rubbed the chrome dome. “Of course. I believe Doctor Umland is treating Mister Stantz. I know his condition is still considered critical. Let me find out the latest.”

As he turned to leave, Katherine reached out a hand to his arm and stopped him. “I want to see my son.”

I realized in some surprise that they were the first words she’d spoken since Mehalick had given his report of the surgery. Her voice was flat but firm and from the way she gripped the doctor’s arm, I could tell that she was hanging on until she saw Egon and then, maybe then, she’d fall apart. Not a lot, because she was a Spengler after all, but enough to let some of the pain out. And it was exhausting to carry around the amount of grief that she was toting. After she cried, maybe she could get some rest.

Mehalick must have read that same message in her eyes because he patted her hand where it gripped his arm and said, “Of course you do, Katherine. Let me find out Mister Stantz’s status and then I’ll bring you to Egon, personally.”

## Six

I lost seven pounds in the three days it took Egon to regain full consciousness. We took turns, shifts, four to six hours each, sitting with Egon and Ray. It was Katherine Spengler, Winston and I at first. When Janine arrived the next day – it was the earliest she could get there – with her white face and her oversized, fearful eyes, she was integrated into the schedule. Sit with Egon, talking occasionally but often just sitting there holding his hand, then do the same with Ray. Then go to the Spengler house and sleep for a few hours, if it was possible, wake up, eat, and relieve whoever was on shift.

I tried to sleep. The house was comfortable, the bed was luxurious and inviting, and every time I lay there, I stared up at the ceiling reliving the events in the Grayden hall. After an hour, I’d get out of bed and walk around the house, looking at things. Looking at things that could hold my attention in a transitory way without demanding any real effort. Just being in a place that smelled like wood and furniture polish and ripening bananas was an incredibly luxury after hours in an antiseptic institution.

Ray was in and out of consciousness, not stabilizing until almost the second day. Two incredibly draining days of listening to every one of his breaths, trying to monitor whether they were even and regular, or if something in the pattern had shifted, trying to will some noticeable improvement into him by touch or voice alone.

When I walked in to relieve Janine and Ray's eyes fluttered open, I almost cried. But I didn't because I was just too tired to cry. I think, like exhaustion, the body reaches a point where if it hasn't cried, it's just not going to do so. I was living on adrenaline and my body had nothing left for tears.

Janine leaned forward in her chair and I hovered over her shoulder. I think she was crying but I didn't want to say anything because she was trying to be brave even though she aged a year or more every time she looked at Egon.

"Hey, Peter," Ray said sleepily. "Janine, what are you doing here?"

Janine sniffed and Ray took bleary notice of the emotions painted over her face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Ray," I said with forced cheer. "Everything's going to be okay now, but this getting shot stuff scared me out of ten years of my life, and I'm betting they were ten good years, full of wine, women, and song. Not to mention that we had to bring Janine out from New York to kick your butt into shape."

And all the time I was pretending to yell at him, I just kept tightening and releasing my grasp on his hand, like they tell you to do when you're giving blood. He was tangible: every time I opened my hand and let go, he was still there when I squeezed again. I felt like I was wearing one of those old-fashioned corsets and someone had just loosened it. It wasn't anywhere near comfortable yet but I could breathe a lot more easily.

"I got shot?" he asked muzzily.

And then we laughed. Well, Janine and I laughed and if it had more than an edge of hysteria in it, I think it could be excused. Ray looked puzzled, but he seemed to be willing to cut us some slack.

"Peter, you look terrible," he announced. "Which one of us got shot?"

And only the bandages around his arm and the IV tubing and all of the monitor leads kept me from climbing onto his bed and hugging him thoroughly.

It was another day before Egon was alert enough to open his eyes spontaneously and speak. The doctors, Mehalick and others, kept explaining that he was conscious, just not alert and they'd point to the little bits of torture they inflicted on him to get him to react as evidence. His reaction to slight pinpricks -- muscle extension, flexion, or withdrawal, muttering sounds, and finally opening his eyes -- excited them and I remembered Mehalick's comments about incremental progress and how slow it was. Progress for me was when they finally removed the vent tube and I could listen to him breathe in and out, all by himself.

On the day that Ray finally stabilized and spoke to me, I almost danced across the hospital to let Winston know that Ray was going to be okay. But Katherine had relieved Winston and he had gone to catch some sleep or get something to eat. Katherine was sitting in a chair next to Egon's bed with her hand wrapped in her son's and calmly but persistently repeating the same demand over and over again.

"Egon, open your eyes. I am speaking to you, Egon and I want you to open your eyes and pay attention."

I smiled a little because she was using that 'Mom' tone of voice, the one that's so ingrained that sixty-year-old men still sit up straight when they hear their mothers use it. She wasn't even my mother but I felt my shoulders squaring and my back straightening. I think it's where Pavlov got his ideas.

"Egon, open your eyes now."

And he did.

I hovered near the end of his bed, just outside his mom's vision and I don't think she even knew I was there. My heart started beating fast enough for all three of us and I held my breath as muddled blue eyes took a slow glance around the room. He looked as confused as hell, but the doctors kept telling us to expect that. For once I thought that maybe being confused was a step in the right direction. You have to be conscious, you have to be aware, to be confused.

"Egon, look at me."

And as hard as she tried to keep her voice firm and matter-of-fact, I could clearly hear the quaver in it. Bewildered blue eyes struggled to focus and then turned in her direction. He blinked a few times, as if in greeting or acknowledgement, and then slipped back into that half-state between consciousness and sleep.

I moved forward and put my hands on Katherine's shoulders, and kneaded them silently as shuddering breaths gave way to silent tears. How she'd kept that inside her all this time, waiting until it was safe for it to break, I had no idea. After about five minutes, she reached up and patted my hands, then turned to face me.

"Thank you," she whispered hoarsely. "He's going to be all right, isn't he, Peter?"

"Oh yeah," I answered with a grin. "Come on, if we're not gonna do high fives or something after that little demonstration by Doctor Spengler, at least give me a hug."

She stood and turned to face me, smiling coyly. "You're positively shameless, you know."

Pulling her tightly against me and rocking back and forth a little, I laughed quietly into her shoulder. "Come on, it's been days and days since I got to hold a beautiful woman. How 'bout you and me, we run away to Cabo San Lucas or something?"

With my face buried in her shoulder, I could smell that powdery smell that I always associated with my grandmother, and when she got older, my mother. It was comforting on such a fundamental level that I felt a deep, deep breath work its way out from somewhere inside.

“One of these days I’m going to say yes and you won’t know what to do,” she said into my hair.

“Trust me, I’ll know what to do,” I said with a leer in my eyes and my voice. Then I laughed as she smacked me on the shoulder and it felt good. It felt like the first real laugh I’d laughed in years.

I had the afternoon shift with Egon the next day. He was opening his eyes on command regularly now and responding, hoarsely, to questions or demands. Even after hours and hours of this, I hadn’t gotten used to the pallor of his face, the way his features still seemed to blur and soften or the bandage on his head. There wasn’t a hint of blond hair. I hadn’t been present for any of the times the bandage got changed and for some reason, it was as if the fact that Egon had no hair was one of those elephants in the room that everybody noticed but nobody wanted to mention.

“Okay, who am I?” I asked with the calm, patient tones that I used to use for experiments. There was a wickedly devilish laugh that accompanied that voice on occasion but that hardly seemed appropriate in these circumstances.

“Peter Venkman,” he replied with a sigh, eyes fluttering open and closed as if only the questions were keeping him awake.

“And who are you?”

“Egon Spengler,” he answered dutifully with his eyes closed.

“Where are we?”

“In the hospital.”

He sounded a little sleepy and I wondered if I was boring him.

“And which of us has to fight off the women because he’s such a stud?” I asked with a grin, trying to provoke something more than a response.

“I do,” he answered, with the barest hint of that dry tone that comes so naturally to him.

It was so natural that I smacked him on the arm in annoyance. “I said women, not Janine. I beat them off with a stick and you throw one for her to fetch.”

And as it hit me that his answer wasn’t by rote, wasn’t merely a response to a command, I heard the clicking of high heels on the hospital floors. Nurses don’t click; they glide up on you as silent as ghosts. Egon must have heard it too because he opened his eyes and said, “Hi, Mom.” All by himself.

She stopped short and her smile lit the whole hospital floor. “Hello, sweetheart.”

## Seven

Cleveland was gray, something that it made even less appealing than usual. It was a crisp, fall day back home in New York, but here in Ohio, it was overcast with low, hanging clouds and a general dampness that seeped into my bones. I never really liked coming out here and it looked like Cleveland was no more thrilled about my presence than I was. This time though, I didn't really mind the trip.

I took a quick glance at the directions again. Egon usually drives whenever we're in Cleveland, native son and all. Even though I'd driven countless times from the hospital to the Spengler house and back again, I still wasn't sure how to get there. I wasn't going to admit that to Egon so I'd downloaded directions from the Internet – well, Winston had downloaded them for me – and I had to keep checking them every five minutes.

Winston had stayed in New York. Neither of us was quite ready to leave Ray alone. Even though he'd bounced back as if nothing had happened, it was still way too close to those two days of bedside vigil and not knowing if he was even going to live, much less be all right. And he didn't need to be tired out by unnecessary trips either, though he'd complained and argued for nearly a whole day that he was **perfectly fine**. But those arguments didn't get by the Zeddemore frown and folded arms of steel, much less the fearsome Venkman temper tantrum. So I'd flown out by myself to bring Egon home.

The hospital released him seven days after Mehalick pronounced him “alert and neurologically intact.” But Mehalick didn't want him flying yet and wanted to have him local for a checkup or two. Which fit in perfectly with Katherine Spengler's plans. I suspected there was a bit of a conspiracy at work there. So Egon was released from the hospital into his mother's care and Winston, Janine and I took Ray home.

I'd been okay for the first week. We spoke with Egon on the phone every day and having Ray alive and well still seemed like a novelty. Both Winston and I kept waking up in the middle of the night to make sure Ray was breathing okay. It wasn't until the fourth or fifth night that either of us slept right through, not counting nightmares.

Mine were making a regular appearance with all of their usual viciousness. So on the eighth day, I decided to blow off a little anger.

I swung the bat into the brick wall, feeling the jarring impact reverberate up the bat, through my wrists and into my arms and shoulders. I swung it again, connecting with even more force, grunting from the tremors as wood hit brick and hairline cracks began appearing on the surface of the bat.

“Peter Venkman, what the hell are you doing?”

I thought it was pretty obvious but since Zed needed a little help figuring it out, I slammed the bat into the back wall of the firehouse again. The little alley where the trashcans get knocked

over by Slimer or other vermin in search of food was my personal batting cage. This time I could *hear* the splinters, hear the loud crack as one long finger of wood split off from the whole.

“You know how hard it is to find a wooden baseball bat?” he asked incredulously. “Everywhere I go, all they have are those aluminum ones.”

Aluminum made a lot of noise but vibrated like hell when you slammed it into a wall. The muscles in my arms still ached just from remembering it. Besides, aluminum bats didn’t make that satisfying sound as the force of impact tore them apart.

*Whack!*

This time the bat split in two, leaving me breathing heavily and holding a fairly narrow sliver of wood connected to the handle.

“That better be *your* bat, Venkman,” Winston said warningly. “If I find out that’s my Mickey Mantle bat, I’m telling you now, there’s nowhere far enough that you can run.”

Panting, I tossed the remaining fragment of bat towards the garbage can and bent over to catch my breath. Winston walked over and picked up a few pieces, glaring at them suspiciously.

“What’s it you’re always telling us, Zed?” I said between breaths. “Complacency gets you killed. That right?”

He tossed the remaining pieces of what used to be *my* Mickey Mantle bat into the garbage can and brushed his hands off in disgust. “Nice to know someone’s been listening when I try to teach you Ivy League boys about strategy and defensive tactics.”

I laughed soundlessly for a moment or two. “I have the feeling that we’re all going to pay a little bit more attention to that in the future, Professor Zeddemore.”

I could feel the intense burn of his gaze on me as I stared at the wall, not seeing it, still seeing the stuff I got to relive every night for the last week. With a muttered curse, he settled himself on the lid of one of the garbage cans and swung his feet against the metal.

“Good thing we didn’t get the plastic ones you wanted to buy,” I said as I took a seat opposite him, sliding down the wall to its base and sitting on the stinking concrete surface. “Better make sure that can’s full. Don’t want the lid caving in or anything.”

I registered the disdainful scowl but I also noted the quick tapping against the side of the metal can and the dull thump that announced it wasn’t empty.

“So you going to tell me what this is all about, Pete, or are you going to make me guess?”

I turned my head to the side. If I looked down the alley I could see the reflection of the sun sinking below the horizon across the river on the Jersey side. The warm gold streaks cut across the early evening on an almost flat slant, highlighting little bits of glass and metal in the street and sidewalk.

“You think we were complacent on that bust in Ohio.”

No, not we, Winston, I thought angrily. Me. Well, maybe it was we. None of us had acted like we had the brains that God dished out to opossums, favorite target and roadkill of American cars and trucks everywhere.

“Are you taking this guilt trip alone or can anyone come along for the ride?” he asked.

That finally drew my attention away from my own self-disgust. “I think this ticket to ride requires that you parade yourself as a psychologist and then completely miss every clue that our client was schizophrenic instead of haunted.”

“Uh-huh.” Winston swung his feet a little, letting them tap against the metal can. “The way I remember it was that you were focusing on the food, the stuff that seemed out of place, while the rest of us were looking for a ghost. Besides, it wasn’t like she was a raving loony, Pete. She seemed pretty straight and sane to me. When she pulled the gun, I honestly thought she was trying to shoot the ghost...”

“She was,” I said tightly.

“Yeah, but I still thought it was a real ghost, one that we didn’t see for some reason, not that it was a ghost in her head. Just never occurred to me.”

I pulled my knees up to my chest then let my head drop onto them. “Winston, what type of gun did she use?”

He was used to my sudden topic changes and wasn’t thrown at all. “A Colt twenty-two, which was a damn good thing. I don’t like to think what might have been if it was a higher caliber with more velocity.”

There was no question in my mind what might have been. There would have been another headstone next to Edwin Spengler’s or we would have been looking for a hospital or nursing home that would care for a man in a persistent vegetative state. The only reason that we were lucky enough to have a fourth partner recovering in Ohio was because Chris Grayden bought his mother a .22 caliber handgun instead of a .44 or a .357 or something even more powerful.

“Winston, I don’t know how you remember all this stuff about guns. I just know you know more about it than I do, so I rely on you to tell us what we need to know.”

I heard the groan before Winston kicked his heels against the garbage can in frustration. “Come on, man. You told me yourself that this was something that had to be diagnosed by exclusion. First the M.D.’s run a boatload of tests to rule out neurological stuff or drugs or other medical conditions, and then they have a psychiatrist evaluate her. But you were supposed to know somehow, right?” he demanded scornfully.



“That’s the thing, Zed,” I said in a small voice to my knees. “I *did* know. But I took every clue, every indication that this could be some type of psychological disorder, and plugged it into our paranormal paradigm.”

“And it fit,” he sighed. “Because pretty much any type of behavior, no matter how weird, fits in what we’ve seen. You know you would have had a hell of a time convincing Egon that his mom’s best friend was a raving loony.”

But I hadn’t even tried and because of my complacency, my two best friends in the world almost died.

I turned the rental car into the driveway of the Spengler house, only a half-hour later than expected. So much for Winston’s directions being foolproof. As I got out of the car, the front door opened and I saw Egon watching me with barely concealed amusement. Damn it, somehow he already knew I’d gotten lost. I didn’t have any bags with me -- this was a quick turnaround, grab Egon and fly back to New York this afternoon – so I grabbed the baseball cap and headed towards my partner, my best friend, the practically bald guy on the front steps.

“You know when I said you should get a haircut so you’d go incognito, I was thinking something a little less radical, Spengs.”

Egon groaned. “Peter, that was only mildly amusing the first time you said it. It is not cheese or fine wine; it does not improve with age and certainly not with repetition.”

I whipped the baseball cap at him and was unreasonably pleased when he fielded it without a problem. “I brought your Blue Jays cap, Egon. That way you can cover up that haircut, you know, the one that wants to be a crew cut when it grows up.”

He smiled as he glanced at the cap and then smiled at me, clearly as pleased to see me as I was to see him. Two weeks in his mother’s care had put some weight back on his bones and flushed his skin a healthy pink. But I’d be willing to bet that he’d need systematic desensitization therapy to go anywhere near a blender again.

“Thank you, Peter, and thank you for coming out to Ohio, which I know you dislike. It was completely unnecessary, as I have been an adult for more years than you have, and have most certainly achieved a higher level of maturity. I am perfectly capable of sitting on an airplane by myself.”

That wasn’t even open for negotiation. The only question had been whether I’d fly out to get him or his mother would fly with him to New York. It was going to take a long time before any of us took his presence, alive and well, for granted again. I reached the front door and grinned, then threw my arms around him and hugged him tightly, trying not to remember how I’d felt three weeks earlier when I’d held onto his hand because it was the only thing I could embrace without fear of exacerbating the bullet’s damage.

He put up with the intense embrace. He probably thought he had an idea of how bad it’d been from my side of the hospital bed but he really had no clue. When I was starting to contemplate

the probability that I'd break one of his ribs and he'd have to stay in Ohio for a longer period, I released my grip and backed away.

Egon smiled and turned back into the house, cap in hand. I followed him, reaching up automatically to rub the blond fuzz already sprouting on top of his head. He stopped walking and glared at me over his shoulder but I'd already frozen when my fingers slid over the curving scar. Though Egon's only a few inches taller than I am (I say it's an inch, he says three or four) it was enough to hide the scar. It wasn't that I didn't know it was there, I just **forgot** it was there. For that one playful minute, I'd forgotten and the reminder was a little bit of a sucker punch.

He turned around completely and inclined his head down so that I could see it without strain.

"It's healing quite well," he said dispassionately, "and when the hair grows in it will obscure it completely."

I traced my fingers wonderingly over the reddened ridge of scar tissue. It was simultaneously not as bad as I'd expected and worse than I'd expected. Egon waited patiently until I'd finished and then turned around and headed towards the back of the house. He was a lot calmer about this than I was.

"I thought we'd have lunch here with my mother before we head back to New York. I'm sure she'd like to visit with you a little when she returns."

I trailed behind him, the Spengler house almost intimately familiar to me now from the prowling I did when I couldn't sleep. I inhaled the clean smell of an old wood frame constructed house, the lemony smell of furniture polish and the more distant smell of clothes being spun in the dryer. It was both homey and disturbing, as if I could never quite relax in this wonderful home because of the associations I formed while Egon and Ray were in the hospital.

"So where's Mom?" I said glibly, to cover up how unnerving it had been to encounter such a palpable reminder that a doctor had cut open Egon's skull. "I can't believe she's not here to meet me." I threw myself into a seat at the kitchen table and swung my feet up onto the table itself, ignoring Egon's frown.

"She's at the hospital. I expect her home shortly." Egon pulled the refrigerator door open and peered inside. "Would you like something to drink, Peter? I'm afraid my mother doesn't stock your favorite brand of liquid sugar. You have your choice of orange juice, water or lowfat milk." He turned his head towards the counter and a coffee machine. "Or there's coffee. Decaf, I'm afraid," he said with an apologetic glance in my direction.

"No wonder you're dying to get home," I complained. "OJ's fine. So why is she at the hospital? Is she making sure Doctor Mehalick didn't forget anything? He didn't forget to put your brain back in, did he? Or did he give you Abbie Normal's brain by mistake?"

"You'll have to wait and wonder, won't you?" he said as he smacked my feet off the table.

Egon placed a tall glass of orange juice in front of me and I drank deeply, suddenly parched and in need of liquid energy. I'd missed this. The banter, the one-upmanship, the ease of being with

a friend who knew me inside and out and loved me not in spite of it, but because of who I really was. I sucked down the orange juice so I wouldn't have to think about how close I'd come to losing that forever.

Egon pulled up the chair at the head of the table and sipped slowly from a glass of water. "How are the nightmares?"

I finished the juice and wiped my orange mustache on a hand, and then wiped that hand on my jeans, just to provoke the expected look of resigned tolerance from Egon.

"So, Winston told you about those, huh?"

That drew an amused laugh, a bass bark. "Really, Peter, do you think I'd need Winston to tell me that? I'd have been astonished if you weren't having nightmares. As a psychologist, you know it's a reasonable response to the stress you suffered."

I felt my mood darken and I knew I didn't hide it quickly enough.

"Was it the reference to nightmares or to psychologist?" Egon immediately asked. No question that his intellect was still as speedy as ever. I didn't say a word but I could see those blue eyes moving rapidly over my face and evaluating the tension in my body.

"Ah, it was the psychologist reference. I should have expected this." He frowned and glanced away for a moment and I suddenly realized that he was nervous. He was nervous?

Egon dragged his attention back to me and met my eyes with an abashed glance. "Peter, I am sorry. I am truly sorry about what happened. You tried to tell me that it was something outside the paranormal realm and I refused to consider it." He glanced down and stared at his hands. "My blindness nearly cost Ray his life. All of you, including my mother, suffered because I did not consider all of the possibilities."

Wait a minute, I thought and replayed what he'd just said. "Wait a minute," I said aloud as I pulled myself upright in the chair. "What the hell are you talking about? You didn't blow it, I did. I completely missed all the signs that she was suffering hallucinations and paranoid delusions."

"No," he insisted, shaking his head in confused insistence. "You told me, outside by the car when I was gathering more equipment, but I didn't listen. You said that it was her imagination."

I stared at him. I'd just been joking about it, or maybe my subconscious had been a lot more with it than my conscious mind had because it had never really occurred to me at the time that the ghost existed only in her own head.

"Egon, I wasn't serious when I said that. Well, maybe I thought about it, but I didn't insist that you take it seriously. Do you really think I'd let you ignore me if I seriously believed she was imagining things?"

I saw the quick smile, a sudden flare that faded just as quickly. “No,” he said with deliberation. “But you raised a valid point and I failed to give it adequate consideration because of the circumstances.”

“Well, so we’re both to blame then. All right?” I was a little irritated with his insistence that he was responsible. “On the other hand, I wasn’t expecting her to pull a gun. If you knew that was a possibility and ignored it, well, then you can have all the blame you want and think you deserve.”

He snorted. “I suppose we’ll have to have it out with my mother over who is truly at fault. She is convinced that she is responsible for all that happened.” He leaned back in his chair, balancing it on its two back legs in a way that completely freaked me out.

“Come on, Egon, cut it out.” I leaned forward to pull his chair in, terrified that he’d fall backward and re-injure his head. “*Egon,*” I growled when he ignored my first request. “Put the chair on the ground, damn you.”

The creak of a door swinging on its hinges drifted across the kitchen and Egon’s chair slammed down forward on all four legs, fast and hard. I grinned at him. There was no question that he’d adjusted his position because his mom was home and we both knew it. Narrowed blue eyes met mine with a clear message of ‘don’t you dare.’ I smiled mockingly back at him.

“Peter, dear, you’re here already. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to meet you.”

Katherine Spengler swept into the kitchen, dropping a grocery bag on a counter before meeting me by the table with a warm hug that I held a little longer than normal before releasing her.

“I see you remembered your manners, Egon, and offered Peter something to drink.” The smile she shot in his direction still had an element of desperation in it, as if she was assuring herself of his existence. “Peter, we have ham and turkey. Which would you prefer?”

“Either seem appropriate for Peter,” Egon muttered as he leaned over and kissed the top of his mother’s head in a jokingly affectionate manner. He reminded me for a moment of a teenager whose newly acquired growth spurt has given him a height advantage over his parents, one in which he revels. “Mom, I’m going to get the laundry from the dryer before it gets all wrinkled. I have a few shirts in that load that I want to pack. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Both Katherine and I watched as Egon disappeared down the stairs to the basement. Then we turned and met each other’s gaze.

“He’s fine,” she said. “Occasionally he doesn’t remember something as quickly as he likes and gets frustrated but the doctors say he’s fully recovered, that he’s experiencing ordinary lapses of concentration or recall delays and is less patient than normal because he attributes them to the injury.”

She moved to the counter and began unpacking the groceries: milk, more orange juice, eggs, yogurt, granola. I rolled my eyes behind her back at the selection.

“If he’s fine, why were you at the hospital?” I asked idly as I sat back down in my chair. I briefly considered putting my feet up again but I have a healthy respect for Egon’s mother.

“Here, I bought you a Coke, Peter.”

She handed me the icy cold can with an expression that conveyed her belief that she was handing over poison. I looked up at her with a worshipful expression that I really and truly felt. This was a mother among mothers.

“I was visiting Ruth. I apologize that I wasn’t here but the visiting hours are rather strictly rationed.”

I popped open the can of Coke and felt as if someone had popped open a hole in me that drained all of my bubbly energy. “You went to visit Ruth,” I repeated in disbelief. “Ruth, the lady who put a bullet in his head?” I asked with a finger pointing towards the basement door.

Katherine stopped in her tracks and then slowly walked to the refrigerator and put the milk, orange juice, eggs and yogurt away. She didn’t look at me and didn’t respond to me and I could hear the hum of the refrigerator in the sudden silence. When she shut the door, she turned and looked at me with all the stern disappointment that the Spenglers do so well.

“No, Peter. I was visiting my friend, Ruth.” She crossed her arms. “The one who has been my friend for forty years. The woman who visited me in the hospital when Egon was born, and watched him for me when I had doctor’s appointments or errands where I could not bring him along. The woman who stood by my side when Edwin was ill and was there every hour of the day and night when he died. Did you really think that something she did while she was ill would negate forty years of friendship?”

Well, when she put it that way, I felt small and mean. Considering my profession, I should have been the one who understood, who withheld judgment and blame. But it was a struggle to forget the hours and days when both Ray and Egon hovered between life and death.

“If Egon were ill, would you abandon him?” Katherine asked sharply.

“Of course not,” I snapped. And then I rubbed a hand across my face and repeated it, more softly and with understanding. “Of course I wouldn’t. I’d never abandon him. I’m sorry. I’m still a little rattled over how near it was.” I exhaled loudly. “Have they come up with a diagnosis?” I met her eyes and hoped she forgave me.

Katherine frowned as she sat down in Egon’s chair and twirled his glass of water between her palms.

“One doctor diagnosed it as undifferentiated schizophrenia; another as paranoid schizophrenia. I’m not sure it makes a difference. Her daughter, Celia, said that Ruth accused Margaret of trying to poison her, of tampering with her food so perhaps the latter diagnosis is the correct one.”

I nodded. The single serving portions, sealed to prevent tampering, and all the bottled water; now I saw the logic. I should have seen it sooner. Everything makes sense in retrospect, obviously.

“I keep thinking that I should have known, that I somehow missed it,” Katherine said, eerily echoing my own thoughts.

I blinked at her in astonishment and then smiled. “Fight you for the blame,” I challenged. “Who’s the psychologist here?”

“And you should have seen in an hour what I hadn’t in a year?” she countered with arched eyebrow.

“Egon blames himself for not seeing it either,” I said ruefully. I raised my can of Coke in salute. “But they’re all alive, thank God. Here’s to their survival.”

Katherine raised Egon’s glass of water and clinked it against my Coke. “Here’s to lifelong friends,” she said with sorrow for hers and pride in mine.

I nodded. “Lifelong friends,” I echoed. “And let us never be complacent, with our friends or our assumptions.”

As Egon’s footsteps echoed up the stairs from the basement, his mother and I clinked beverages once more and drank deeply; I realized that maybe I did know how to pray after all.