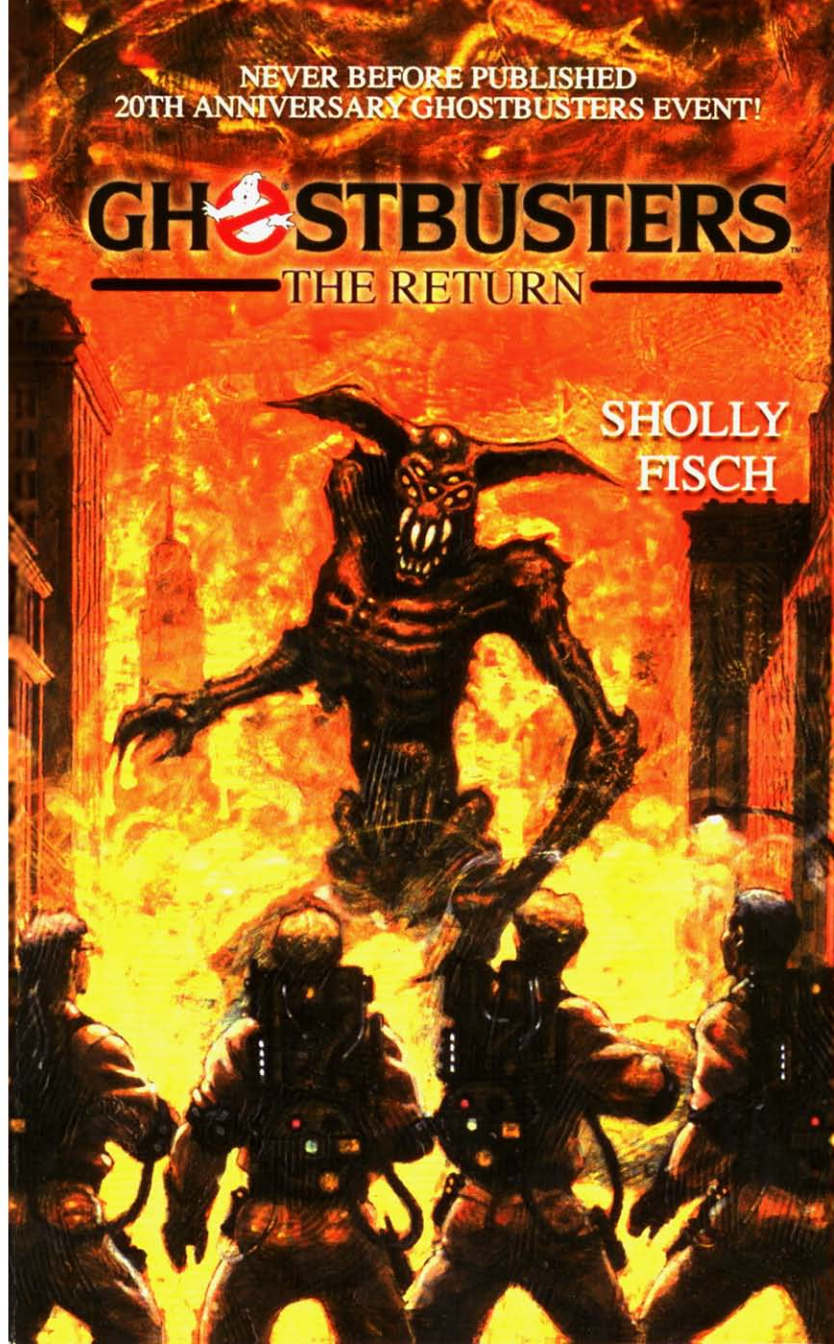


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THE DANGERS OF NEW YORK DRIVING

Ray turned to check the traffic, just in time to see a cloud of black smoke and hear a mechanical roar as the driver of the cement mixer gunned the engine. The truck barreled out into the street, tearing across the busy thoroughfare in reverse.

But the thing that mattered most to Ray was where the cement mixer was going. It was headed straight for the side of the Ectomobile.

The driver's door crumpled as the Ectomobile jumped with the force of the collision. Egon and Ray were pelted with a hail of shattered glass, as the cement chute on the back of the mixer came smashing through the side window and stopped inches from their heads.

Ray's first reaction was shock, followed by anger. But all of that vanished when he saw the glowing, skeletal arm that waved to him from the cab of the cement mixer.

"Oh, no..." said Ray.



*This one's in memory of Thérèse,
who wasn't 'fraid of no ghosts...
and probably would have just invited them in for tea.*

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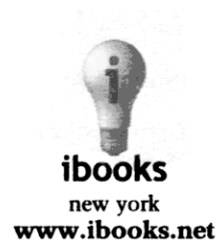
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GHOSTBUSTERSTM

THE RETURN

SHOLLY FISCH

**BASED ON CHARACTERS CREATED
BY DAN AYKROYD AND HAROLD RAMIS**



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CHAPTER 1

“EEEEEEEHYALALALALALALA!”

The gibbering ghoul soared headfirst through the forty-foot-tall speaker tower, which exploded in a deafening roar. A shower of sparks rained down on the mosh pit below.

“Y’know, the kids call it music,” Peter Venkman said. “But me, I call it noise.”

Egon Spengler fumbled with a small, boxlike device, trying to take psychic readings while simultaneously covering his ears against the din. “Interesting,” he said. “The phenomenon is reminiscent of the Char-tellian ‘spirit cantatas’ that du Roche described in the thirteenth century...but with a more contemporary flavor, of course.”

Up on the stage, a decaying corpse in a leather jacket was shrieking into a microphone. Its voice sounded like a bag filled with drowning kittens and

broken glass. As it sang—if you could consider what it was doing “singing”—the corpse accompanied itself by thrashing away on an electric guitar that the human band abandoned when it fled the stage in terror. Fragments of the corpse’s rotting fingers whipped through the air, sheared off by the metal strings of the guitar.

Meanwhile, further back on the stage, a skeleton was pounding on the drums. Occasionally, it smashed through the drumheads, largely because it was using its own shinbones as drumsticks.

Ray Stantz shrugged. “It’s got a beat. You can dance to it. I give it a six.”

“I don’t know,” said Winston Zeddemore. “I prefer the classics myself.”

Mayor Arnold Lapinski stared at the four Ghostbusters in a mixture of aggravation and disbelief. Much like his predecessor, former mayor Lenny Clotch, Lapinski wasn’t a calm person under the best of circumstances. In the face of the havoc mounting all around him, the short, balding man was a ball of nervous energy, constantly shifting his weight back and forth and wringing his hands. “If you guys are done being clever,” he said, “would you mind stopping those things *before* they bring down Madison Square Garden?”

In truth, the Mayor’s concern was understandable. Madison Square Garden had been a major New York City landmark for decades. Every year, millions of spectators flocked to the huge arena for countless sports matches, concerts, circuses, and events of every kind. Now, a trio of poltergeists was smashing through walls and balconies amidst fiery explosions and rains of debris. If they continued much longer,

the structural damage would reduce the Garden to a smoking pile of rubble—not to mention what it would do to the hundreds of teenage concertgoers who hadn’t evacuated the stadium with the rest of the crowd. Instead, they’d continued dancing and cheering long after the ghosts took the stage from the human opening act.

“Well?” demanded Lapinski. “Don’t just stand there! *Do* something!”

Venkman chewed his lip thoughtfully for a long moment before he answered. “Mmm...no,” he said.

“‘No?’ ”

“No.”

The Mayor turned to Venkman’s partners.

“Nope,” said Winston.

“Sorry,” said Ray.

“I’m afraid not,” said Egon.

The Ghostbusters could almost see Lapinski’s blood pressure rising. He strained visibly to keep from bursting into a stream of profanities. He spat out his words through gritted teeth as he paced. “‘No.’ ” he said to the aide who stood beside him. “They’re telling me ‘no.’ ”

Suddenly, the Mayor could simmer no longer. He spun toward Venkman, shouting in his face. “What’re you talking about, ‘no’? You guys call yourselves ‘Ghostbusters,’ right? That’s your job! You bust ghosts! Well, in case you haven’t noticed, we got ghosts! They’re right over there! So go bust ‘em! What in the name of Fiorello LaGuardia are you waiting for?”

Calmly, Venkman turned to a short, mousy man in polyester who stood off to the side. “Louis?”

Louis Tully jumped at the sound of his name, and

tripped over his feet as he quickly stumbled his way over to the Mayor. He clutched a thick sheaf of papers in one hand and alternately adjusted his tie and thick glasses with the other.

Lapinski sneered and eyed him suspiciously. "What's this?"

"Louis Tully, your mayorship," said Louis, extending a hand that the Mayor failed to shake. "I'm the Ghostbusters' accountant, business manager, and legal advisor. Well, originally, I started out just as a CPA, specializing in personal and business tax returns. But then I realized that in today's market, you really have to diversify. So I started taking law classes in night school and—"

Lapinski abruptly raised a hand to cut him off. "No," said the Mayor, driving his finger into the document in Louis' hand. "I mean, what's *this*?"

"Oh!" Louis replied. "This is a contract for the Ghostbusters' services. You'll find it says so quite clearly in section four, sub-paragraph B—"

"A contract? It looks more like a phone book!" He turned to Venkman with an accusatory look. "You never made Clotch sign a contract."

Venkman draped a sympathetic arm around the Mayor. "I know, I know. It pains me deeply. You know me, Arnie. I'm a sealed-with-a-handshake-word-is-my-bond kind of guy. Call me old-fashioned, but it's just the way I like to do things.

"But the thing is," he continued, raising a finger, "you boys down at City Hall have stiffed us every time we've done a job for you. Still, I tried to hold out. I said, 'Aw, we don't need all that legally binding mumbo jumbo. Arnie's my man! He's as trustworthy

as the day is long. If Arnie makes a deal, you can bet that he'll stick to it.' "

Venkman drew the Mayor close and spoke in a quiet, confidential tone. "But you know, Louis here—he just kept insisting that we get everything in writing. I was helpless before his dogged persistence. I mean, you can see the guy's a tiger."

Louis raised his hand in a nervous half-wave, then fumbled with his tie.

Lapinski started to page quickly through the weighty document. "You expect the City of New York to cover 'any and all damages and other associated costs that arise in the course of the contracted supernatural containment activities'? What kind of rube do you think I am? You guys blew the top three floors off a skyscraper once! You trashed the grand ballroom at the Plaza! That's not even counting what it took to get the Statue of Liberty back into the harbor after you left it in the middle of East 89th Street!"

"Can't make an omelet without breaking a few laws of physics," said Ray.

The Mayor's jaw dropped as he turned the page. "You want me to pay for your *dental plan*?"

"Hey, this sunny smile doesn't come easy," Venkman said with a grin.

"You're out of your minds!" Lapinski shouted. "And you must think that I am, too! There's no way in a million years that I would ever even *think* of signing something like this!"

There was an ominous rumble, and then fountains of red-hot molten lava shot skyward from the mezzanine. The crowd cheered.

Venkman stroked his chin thoughtfully, as though

something had just occurred to him. "Say, Ray," he said, "isn't this an election year?"

"Why, yes, Peter," Ray replied. "I believe it is."

"Whoooa!" exclaimed one of the nearby black-clad teens. "Those effects are *amazing!*"

Lapinski stared, then looked away and shook his head in disgust. "Give me a pen," he grumbled.

"...Then sign here and here. Okay, now initial over here next to the municipal tax waiver. And that's it! We're done!" said Louis.

The Mayor's tone could have dripped icicles. "I'm so pleased."

"Um...could I have my pen back, please?"

But Lapinski's attention was already somewhere else entirely. "All right, all right, I signed your damn contract! Now do something!"

"That's okay," Louis said to no one in particular. "I have another pen at home..."

"With pleasure," Venkman said with a pleasant smile. "Gentlemen, shall we?"

In the fifteen minutes or so that it had taken to sign the massive contract in triplicate, the Ghostbusters had strapped on proton packs, their black color providing a stark contrast to the beige jumpsuits they wore. At the flip of a switch, the gauges on the high-tech devices jumped to life, and indicator lights flashed blue and red. The four comrades could feel the familiar vibration that hinted at the power locked inside the devices on their backs.

As one, the Ghostbusters reached over their shoulders and drew out the rifle-like nutrona wands that were connected to the proton packs. After several years of experience and hundreds of ghosts, they

moved into action with practiced ease. Venkman, Winston, and Egon fanned out around the fringes of the crowd.

Ray took the middle, squeezing through the thrashing bodies of the teens in the mosh pit as he pushed toward the stage. "Scuse me. 'Scuse me," he said to the dancers who slammed into him from all sides. "Nuclear accelerator coming through."

Finally, Ray reached the stage and hoisted himself up. Getting to his feet, he took the microphone from the startled rotting corpse. His voice boomed out over the sound system: "Attention, young people! You are in the presence of a class-three psychic manifestation. There is no need to panic. However, for your own safety, please proceed to the nearest exit in a calm, orderly fashion. Thank you."

All over the arena, the concertgoers stopped dancing and looked at each other, not sure what to do. On the one hand, the announcement sounded serious. But on the other hand, they weren't used to leaving a show while the band was still on the stage.

The rotting corpse stared at Ray and raised what was left of its eyebrow. It snatched the microphone back and howled incomprehensibly as the "music" resumed at full volume as though it had never been interrupted.

That settled it. With an enthusiastic roar, the crowd was back on the floor, thrashing and writhing as though nothing had happened.

Venkman sighed. Capturing ghosts was always so much harder when you had to be careful not to fry the civilians. He threw the power switch on his nutrona wand and looked to Winston and Egon. "Let's rock!"

* * *

Up on the stage, Ray drew his own nutrona wand for a point-blank shot at the corpse. As he flipped on the power, the corpse lunged at him.

"Cower, human!" it shrieked. *"Cower before the minions of Xanthador!"*

Reflexively, Ray jumped back with a start. But standing where he was, so close to the front of the stage, the move sent him toppling backward over the edge. Without meaning to, Ray's hand gripped the nutrona wand. It fired a blinding, yellow-orange stream of energy that ripped through the ceiling as he fell.

Ray's blast stopped as quickly as it came, although not before a couple of overhead spotlights exploded. Even so, the stage was high enough for Ray, or someone below, to be seriously hurt by the fall—that is, if it wasn't for the crowd. Conditioned by countless sessions of stage diving, the kids in the mosh pit thrust their hands straight up, stopping Ray's fall a foot or two above their heads. With another wave of cheers, they passed him hand over hand around the densely packed area. To Ray, lying on his back in the midst of it all, it was like riding a living, slow-moving conveyor belt—not altogether unpleasant, but not the most efficient way to travel either.

Ray called out, "Uh, could you put me down, please? Or move me over that way...?"

Meanwhile, near the side of the stage, Winston stood on one of the seats and took aim. "Show's over," he muttered as he squeezed the trigger.

Instantly, a fiery ion stream flashed over the heads of the crowd to wrap itself like a tentacle around the

rotting corpse. It roared in fury as it struggled against the grip of the energy that bound it.

Egon took a two-foot-long electronic box, marked with yellow hazard tape, and dropped it on the stage. He stamped on a foot pedal at the side of the device, and the top sprang open. An inverted pyramid of light shot upward out of the box. "Trap's ready!" he called.

The skeleton stopped drumming, snapped its shin-bones back in place, and ran. With a howl, it dove off the stage toward the crowd.

But it never touched the ground, or even the outstretched hands of the onlookers. A glowing beam of energy shot out to intercept it in mid-leap. At the other end of the ion stream, Venkman leaned back. The tendril of energy rose, lifting the squirming skeleton high up into the air.

Egon took aim at the ghoul that swooped over the crowd. He let fly with several rapid-fire blasts, but it was moving too fast, staying just ahead of his fire. The only effects of Egon's effort were a series of holes that he accidentally blew through the walls. Little by little, though, Egon was closing in...

...until he abruptly cut off his barrage. The ghoul was sailing past the ion stream that held the skeleton in the air. Egon knew, all too well, that if his ion stream crossed another one, the resulting reaction could mean the end of all life in the universe. Well...all right, there had been that moment ten years ago when they'd all intentionally crossed streams and the universe *hadn't* come to an end. But that had involved a trans-dimensional being called Gozer the Gozarian and a temple that stood outside the space/time continuum. The resulting explosion only destroyed an alternate reality, a female godling—and

a good portion of a midtown Manhattan apartment building. Still, why take chances?

It took a moment for the ghoul to realize what was happening. Once it did, it stopped cold in mid-air and doubled back to keep the stream between Egon and itself. It waited, watching Egon warily to see whether he'd shoot. When he didn't, the ghoul giggled, bounced around in the air a few times, and blew a raspberry at Egon—all while making sure to stay on the far side of the stream.

At which point another ion stream shot straight up to wrap itself around it.

Directly below the ghoul, Ray was still on his back, supported by the crowd. "We got him! Keep me steady, folks!"

One at a time, the Ghostbusters moved their captives slowly across the arena. Winston was first, easing the corpse into the pyramid of light that flowed above the trap. It thrashed and writhed inside the light, but there was no escape.

With Winston clear, Venkman swung his nutrona wand around to sweep the skeleton into the light; a moment later, Ray followed suit. When all three of the ghosts were held fast, Egon stamped on the pedal again. In an eyeblink, the light was sucked down into the trap along with the ghosts. The lid of the trap snapped shut. With a small electronic beep, an indicator light on it changed from green to red.

It was over. Only the wisps of smoke that seeped out of the seams in the trap gave any hint of the restless spirits that were imprisoned inside.

An unusual hush fell over the arena for a moment. The crowd watched Egon, who was still standing

beside the spot where the ghosts had vanished. He shifted nervously, not quite sure about what to expect.

Then, without warning, the crowd burst into wild cheers, woofs, and applause. They surged forward in a mass of enthusiastic high fives.

"Awesome show, dude!"

"That rocked!"

"Amazing CGI! It looked so real!"

"Now, *that's* a monster rock show!"

At first, Egon started to respond to the attention with a smile. But a moment later, the color drained from his face. Part of it was a reaction to the swelling mass of people who were rolling toward him, only inches away. Mostly, though, it came from the sudden realization that the trap was lying directly in their path. Egon didn't really know what would happen if a trap was trampled while ghosts were still inside it...but he did know that it wouldn't be good.

He thrust one hand forward, as if to hold back the tide, while he fumbled to scoop up the smoking trap. "Hold it! Wait! Don't step on the pedal!"

Just as a heavy leather boot was about to come down on the trap, the crowd froze as an amplified voice cut through the commotion: "*Thank you, New York!*"

Everyone turned to see Venkman standing at center stage, a microphone in his hand. In true rock star fashion, Venkman thrust a fist in the air. "You've been a terrific bunch of sheep tonight," he told the crowd. "Thanks so much for sticking around and giving us that extra bit of challenge as we tried to save the Garden. You know, we always enjoy catching ghosts, but it's so much more fun when we have to avoid killing any bystanders."

All through his patter, Venkman tried to catch his teammates' eyes. He raised his eyebrows, nodded to them, and jerked his head in the direction of the exits. But they just looked confused. They stared at him, obviously trying to figure out what he was up to, and made no move to leave.

Venkman rolled his eyes in exasperation, but continued without missing a beat. "Okayyy...I'd like to take a minute here to introduce the members of the band. Over there, playing a mean proton pack, the sultan of the supernatural, the jam master of ectoplasm: *Ray Stantz!*"

The crowd cheered. From the side of the arena, where he was now standing on his own two feet again, Ray nodded his thanks.

"And on my right," Venkman continued, "on ectotrap, the man who put the 'mad' back in scientist: *Egon Spengler!*"

Again, the crowd cheered. Egon smiled, holding the still-smoking trap as far away from them as humanly possible.

"Let's not forget the man whose rock-steady backbeat keeps us all on track," Venkman said. "You know him, you love him, you can't live without him: *Winston Zeddemore!*"

Another cheer, and Winston waved his powered-down nutrona wand in the air in reply.

"Oh, and of course, I'm Dr. Peter Venkman." He bowed deeply as the crowd burst into the largest ovation of all. Venkman raised a hand for quiet, doing his level best to look modest. "Last but not least, let's not forget the man who brought us all here tonight. He's a guy who tends to shun the spotlight, but I'm sure he'd like to shake every one of your hands." He

pointed toward the back of the arena. "The Mayor of the City of New York: the honorable *Arnie Lapinski!*"

As one, the cheering crowd swept forward to envelop the startled Mayor in a maelstrom of handshakes, back slaps, and conversations about rent control. Finally picking up on the opportunity, Egon, Ray, and Winston ducked out the nearest exits.

"It's been real!" Venkman called, jumping down from the stage to beat his own hasty retreat. "Drive safely! Good night!"

CHAPTER 2

A group of somber-looking men sat around a long, mahogany table in a wood-paneled conference room. In a corner of the room, a television screen showed the ghoul bursting through the speaker tower. "This was the scene just hours ago, when Madison Square Garden was transformed from a place of joy into a supernatural battlefield," a reporter said in voice-over. "For years, New Yorkers have flocked to the Garden to cheer their favorite home teams on to victory, but last night, it played host to a competition of a different kind."

The image cut to a shot of an ion stream zapping the corpse. "On the one side were the forces of darkness. Standing against them were New York's hometown heroes, the Ghostbusters."

The ghosts were replaced by Venkman, bowing to

the crowd. "Oh, and of course," he said, "I'm Dr. Peter Venkman."

The reporter continued: "His Honor, Mayor Lapinski, had this to say."

The television showed the Mayor standing outside the arena, surrounded by reporters with microphones. He looked only slightly the worse for wear after his encounter with the ghosts—not to mention the crowd. "Once again," he said, "our city owes a great debt to the Ghostbusters. I thank them, and I am sure that the people of this city do the same." He turned to look directly into the camera, jaw set and gaze focused into a piercing stare. "In addition, to all you gremlins and goblins who may be watching...to all you things that go bump in the night...I have a message for you:

"We have taken your worst. We have stared into the face of evil. And still, New York stands strong. We're tougher than you are. We're meaner than you are. So keep your sorry ectoplasmic butts out of our city—or we'll send you running straight back to Hades!"

Even the reporters in the crowd were starting to cheer when a well-dressed man in his mid-fifties pushed the button on a remote control. The television screen turned pale blue as the videocassette recorder clicked off, leaving silence in its wake.

"We're doomed," he said. He ran a hand through his thick, silver hair and exhaled deeply, then looked around the room at his four equally well-dressed companions, who sat in various places around the meeting table. "Look at that," he said, gesturing toward the television. "How do we beat him?"

"Well, maybe it's not that bad, Gary," said a younger man in glasses. He pulled a folder out of a

stack that lay beside him, and started to flip through the papers inside. "I mean, his numbers in the polls plummeted after he closed those senior centers..."

Across the table, a beefy, middle-aged man in rolled-up shirtsleeves waved his hand dismissively. "Polls don't mean nothin'!" he said. "Look at this." He stuck his cigar back in his mouth and held up copies of the previous week's *New York Post* and *Daily News*. Both displayed similar photos of the Ghostbusters posing in a circle around the Mayor. If anything, Hizzoner looked even more confident than the Ghostbusters did.

"Stu's right, Ted," Gary agreed. "It's why we lost the last two elections."

Stu took the cigar from his mouth. "It don't matter how many senior centers Lapinski closes, or how many times he cuts museum budgets 'cause he don't like one of the pictures," he said. "Who cares how bad his record is on the economy or social issues? All it takes is one lousy spook attack, and *poof*—he's the golden boy again. As long as he's standing next to the Ghostbusters when they save the city from this week's latest hoodoo, we ain't got a chance."

The younger man wasn't ready to give up that easily. "But if we had the right candidate..." said Ted. "What about Halloran? He projects a tough image."

Gary shook his head. "He's a former police chief, Ted. He fights crooks, not ghosts."

"Mills?"

"Not enough of a common man."

"Welkowitz."

"Oh, come on. Even *I* wouldn't vote for Welkowitz."

Ted sat back in his chair, looking deflated. A pensive silence fell over the room.

The fourth man in the room was older than the others, an African-American man in a tan, three-piece suit. He had been quiet throughout the discussion. Instead, he stared at the pale blue television screen, deep in thought.

"You know," he said, "Ted's right. With the right candidate, we might just stand a chance."

"In an ideal world, maybe," Gary allowed. "But frankly, John, I don't see anyone who can fill the bill."

"That's because you're not thinking creatively," the older man replied. "The Mayor's popularity isn't intrinsic. It doesn't come from anything he's done himself. It comes from his association with the Ghostbusters, right?"

"Right..." said Gary, not quite sure where his colleague was going with this.

John picked up the remote control. He rewound the tape slightly and hit the STOP button. "So if that's the case, then maybe there's someone who *can* beat him."

John pushed PLAY. Once again, Venkman appeared in Madison Square Garden, bowing deeply to the crowd.

John stopped the tape. With a smile, he picked up the *Daily News* and pointed to the photo—not at the Mayor, but at the man standing beside him. "Gentlemen," he said, "I give you our new candidate for the office of the Mayor of New York City: Peter Venkman!"

Flashing red lights lit up the darkened street as an old, converted 1959 Cadillac ambulance rounded a

corner in lower Manhattan. Even a glance at the assorted aerials, detectors, and warning devices that blanketed its roof made it clear that this was no ordinary emergency vehicle. Splashed across each of the two front doors was a drawing of a plump cartoon ghost, surrounded by a red circle with a slash through the middle. The license plate read "ECTO-1." And, as though there could be any doubt as to the occupants, a digital sign atop the Ectomobile alternated between two messages that were spelled out in bright red LED lights. At one moment, the sign read, GHOST-BUSTERS. At the next, it read, WHO YA GONNA CALL?

The Ectomobile pulled into a short driveway that led into a former firehouse that served as the Ghostbusters' headquarters. Winston sat behind the wheel and let the Ectomobile idle in the driveway, while the others climbed out of the car.

Venkman leaned down into the driver's window. "Thank you, my good man. What do we owe you for the fare?"

Winston turned toward him with a look that was simultaneously bored and indulgent. "That wasn't funny the last six times either, Peter."

"Hmph." Venkman sniffed in mock indignation.

Ray and Egon had already reached the building, and were opening its huge doors to let the Ectomobile inside.

"It's funny, finding a class-three manifestation on that scale without any warning," Ray said. "It's been so quiet lately."

"Mm," Egon agreed. "You'd expect some smaller-scale events to occur first."

Ray shrugged. "Maybe the other events were so small, they never got reported."

"Possibly..." Egon replied, obviously not convinced. "The creature said they were minions of someone, didn't it? What was the name? 'Xanadu?'"

"'Xanthador,' I think. Or something like that."

"Does it mean anything to you?"

"Nope. Never heard it before. You?"

Egon shook his head. "No. It could be the name of some obscure deity, or perhaps the name of whomever summoned them. I'll check *Tobin's Spirit Guide* and see if I can find any reference."

The two of them stepped aside to let Winston ease the Ectomobile into the building's parking bay. Venkman swept past them as he strolled through the parking bay and into the main part of their headquarters. As he walked by, he threw his head back and called, "Loooooocyy! I'm hooooome!"

The rear of the first floor was devoted to office space. Directly in front of the paneled office area and a bank of file cabinets was a heavy oak receptionist's desk. The petite woman behind the desk wore a loud print dress, dangling earrings, glasses with heavy black frames, and vivid red hair in a shade that had never been found in nature. The sign on her desk announced her name as JANINE MELNITZ.

Beside the desk, a second woman sat in a visitor's chair—a taller, slender woman with frizzy, dark hair. The only other living occupant of the building was a two-year-old boy who was curled up on a blanket on the floor, sound asleep beside a teddy bear.

Venkman took in the scene, then opened his arms and moved toward the taller woman with a welcom-

ing smile. "Dana! Sweetie-poo! What are you doing here? Isn't midnight kind of after Butch's bedtime?"

Dana rose from her chair without returning the smile or opening her arms for a hug. "His name is *Oscar*."

Well, this couldn't be good. Dana was using that tone of voice and insisting on her son's proper name again. It could only mean that Venkman was in trouble.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"Where was...?" Venkman's brow furrowed. Why was she asking the question? "Well, the boys and I were just up at Madison Square Garden, taking in a show." He shrugged and smiled disarmingly. "Things got a little wild. You know how it is when you're saving hundreds of people from certain doom—"

Dana shook her head. "Before that. This afternoon."

"This afternoon?" Venkman echoed, clearly at a loss.

"Yes. When you were supposed to babysit Oscar while I went to my rehearsal."

"Oh! That! Well, uh...I'm—I'm sorry about that, but there was, uh, an emergency. Big emergency. Giant...ghost monster. Huge. Tried to eat the, uh...Chrysler Building. Big problem. Lots of danger."

Dana gave him a cold look. "Was that before or after you went to the movies?"

Venkman went pale for a moment. Then, in a sudden flash of realization, he glared at Janine. She smiled sweetly back at him.

Just then, the other Ghostbusters walked up to join them. "Hey, Dana," said Ray.

"Hi," said Egon and Winston, almost in unison.

"Hi, guys," Dana said, before turning her attention

back to Venkman. "Peter, we've had this discussion before. Do you realize how important these rehearsals are? There are thousands of cellists in New York, just dying for the chance to play with the Philharmonic. If I'm not there to fill my chair in the orchestra on time, then my bosses will give it away to someone who will! Luckily, Janine said it was okay for me to leave Oscar here with her while I made a mad dash to the Met. But we can't keep going on like this, Peter!"

"Uh..." Winston said, holding up the still-smoking trap that held the ghosts from the arena. "I think I better go downstairs and stash these boys in the containment unit."

"I'll come help you," Ray said, grateful for the excuse to leave.

"Me, too," Egon added quickly. "I've been meaning to, um, look at...a gauge."

Dana and Venkman watched them make their hasty exit. Then they turned to look at Janine.

"Oh—right!" Janine said, in her nasal, New York twang. "I should be getting home. G'night." With that, she picked up her shoulder bag and left.

Once everyone was gone, Venkman said, "Don't you think you're blowing all this out of proportion? Okay, so I forgot one time..."

"That's just it, Peter. It's not one time. You promised to take Oscar to the Museum of Natural History weeks ago."

"So? I figured the little guy would like the dinosaur skeletons."

"Sure. But it's five weeks later now, and you still haven't taken him! And don't get me started on trying to get you to meet my parents!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I care for you, Peter, but you are, by far, the most immature, irresponsible person I have ever met!"

Venkman offered a small, tentative smile. "Don't forget cute. And charming. You've always told me I'm charming."

But Dana wasn't in the mood to get distracted. "It's time to start being responsible, Peter." She wrapped Oscar in the blanket that lay beneath him, and scooped him up into her arms. "I've got a son and a career that mean a lot to me. When you're ready to respect that—when you're ready to respect *me*—then give me a call."

With that, Dana strode across the parking bay and out the front door.

Venkman just stood there, looking stunned. "Okay," he said absently, "I'll call you..."

Beyond the veil that cleaved the space betwixt the waking world and the darkling plain, there lay a land of mist and shadow. There was little that inhabited this simultaneously dank and arid land. Indeed, whatever unfortunate creatures did live there tended not to do so for long.

Within the bleak and shifting landscape of this netherworld, a sullen figure brooded darkly. Its seven gleaming, yellow eyes narrowed as it ran a bony claw along multiple rows of razor-sharp teeth. Even the marrow that it sucked from a handful of souls tasted gray and lifeless—far from the heady brew that it ordinarily preferred.

Xanthador, the Lord of Fear, opened his long jaws. The voice that issued from their depths was reminis-

cent of six-inch iron nails dragged across a mile-long blackboard. "Geezil," he said in a slow, ominous tone.

Nearby, a round little demon stopped chewing in mid-bite and instantly dropped the soup bone he was holding. He jumped to eager attentiveness at the sound of Xanthador's voice, choking down the meat that had stuck in his throat.

"D-did you call, o King of Terror? H-how may I be honored to be of service?"

"I am not happy."

Geezil swallowed hard. He knew all too well that when Xanthador wasn't happy, anyone within reach was in serious danger of losing a few limbs.

"A-as you say, o mighty Xanthador, Lord of Fear, Prince of Panic, Sovereign of Dread," said Geezil. "Whatever your whim, I shall hasten to fulfill it, o Monarch of Fright. For you are the shadow that creeps in the night, and I am but your humble servant, o Master of Horror. Your might is awesome to behold, and—"

"Yes, yes," Xanthador said with an impatient wave. "You may forego the litany for now."

"As you wish, o Overlord of Apprehension and Ruler of—"

Geezil's words were cut off by Xanthador's hand, which shot out with blinding speed to grip him by the throat. Geezil dangled several inches above the ground, gurgling as he struggled to breathe.

"I said you may forego the litany," Xanthador said. The casual calmness of his tone was shaded with more than a hint of menace.

Geezil choked out his reply: "Sure...thing...boss."

"My agents have failed me, Geezil. I gave rise to fearsome apparitions and asked nothing more of them

than to sow terror among the mortals. A simple matter, you must admit."

Still dangling from Xanthador's grasp, Geezil managed a feeble "Uh-huh."

"Then why do I feel no rush of power?" Xanthador snarled. He punctuated the question with an angry sweep of his arm that also happened to send Geezil flying. "Why does the savory elixir of fear not flow over my tongue?"

Geezil smashed into a rocky outcropping and fell to the ground with a grunt. He decided to assume that Xanthador's question was rhetorical.

Xanthador seemed not to notice. The Lord of Fear gazed off into the distance. "How different it is from millennia past," he said. "Now, that was a time, Geezil—a time when the merest mention of Xanthador caused the most gallant of heroes to quiver like the weakest of maidens. Ahhhh, how the fear welled up in rich and luscious waves. How it rose from the darkest recesses of humanity. How it nourished my very essence! In those days, Geezil, I strode the Earth like a titan."

The obsequious demon picked himself up from the ground and limped back to Xanthador's side. "And so you shall again, my liege."

Xanthador broke off his reverie. Slowly, he turned toward the demon. He eyed his lackey carefully. "Do you think so, Geezil?"

Trembling under Xanthador's stare, Geezil forced what he hoped was a confident smile. "You bet, o Master!"

In a flash, Xanthador grabbed Geezil by the throat and jerked him up in the air to face him eye-to-eye. "Precisely how do you expect that to happen,

Geeezil?" Xanthador stretched out the demon's name as he squirmed in his grasp. "My minions may wreak havoc, but havoc without fear is nothing to me! The humans do not fear me, Geezil! Without their fear, there is nothing to fuel my strength! My power is but a shadow of what it once was! How, then, shall I rule? Why do the humans not fear me? Why do they not cringe in the face of my minions?"

Geezil struggled to gasp out a response. "B-because they're...stupid?"

Xanthador flung Geezil to the ground. He hit face first with an unpleasant thud.

"No, Geezil. It is not a lack of imagination that averts their fear. The humans are most imaginative. Indeed, they are almost clever in their way." Xanthador shook his head. "No. I have pondered this question for quite some time. It has consumed the very depths of my being, yet, my meditations have borne fruit. After much consideration, I have at long last reached the answer. Do you know what that is?"

Geezil pulled his head out of the ground, and spat out a mouthful of dirt. He figured that the safest answer was a shrug, and winced at the twinge it brought to his neck.

Xanthador leaned in close. "It is because they do not *believe*," he said quietly.

"Believe?" asked Geezil.

"As their technology has grown, the mortals have turned their backs on the old ways," Xanthador explained. "They have grown so accustomed to the artificial miracles their machines produce that they no longer recognize *true* mysteries for what they are. The humans no longer believe the truths that lie

before their eyes, Geezil. Without belief, there is no reason to fear."

Geezil mulled over the point for a bit. "But if that's true, o Master, then how can we scare them? If they just rationalize everything away, then how will you rise to power?"

Xanthador smiled a nasty smile. "Oh, I shall rise once more, Geezil. My dominion shall again span the Earth, from the heights of the mountains to the depths of the seas."

"But if the humans won't get scared..."

"I never said the humans have abandoned fear, Geezil—it runs as rich and deep as it ever has. It has merely altered its shape and focus. True, the humans' belief is no longer stirred by traditional means. Nevertheless, there are things in which they *do* believe. Thus, we shall adapt accordingly. The humans' beliefs are different today, and so are their fears. We must respond in kind."

Xanthador reached up to pluck tendrils of ectoplasmic mist out of the murky air. He began to shape the vapor with his hands, molding it into corporeal form as he spoke. "This night is not yet over. There is yet ample time to attempt one more foray before the dawn. Humanity's beliefs shall be our stepping stones. Through them, we shall introduce the mortals to levels of terror that they have never imagined."

CHAPTER 3

The darkened waterfront parking area was just about deserted by one o'clock in the morning. Only one car sat with its nose pointed toward the Hudson River, a battered, dark blue Honda Civic that showed every day of its eleven years. Outside the automobile, everything else was as quiet and deserted as New York ever gets.

To the teenage couple inside the car, that was precisely the point. The two of them gazed across the river at the pinpoint lights that twinkled from the distant New Jersey shore. In his most suave, devil-may-care manner, the acne-ridden boy stretched out an arm and laid it around the shoulders of the girl beside him. "Ahhh," he said, "alone at last."

The girl giggled and adjusted her glasses. She looked away shyly. But as her gaze shifted from the dashboard to the shadows outside the car, Marisol

Araujo's mood changed a bit. She reached over to the door and checked the lock. Once she saw that it was secure, she settled into the crook of her boyfriend's arm—but she continued to scan the darkness outside. "Danny?" she said in a tentative voice. "Are you sure we should be out here so late?"

"Where should we be?" was the reply. "The couch in your parents' living room? Remember what happened last time..."

"No, I know. But y'know, it's just... There's nobody around so late."

Danny Reitman looked at her and smiled. "I know. Cool, huh?"

She elbowed him playfully in the ribs. "Danny, I'm serious. Maybe we should go back."

"Go back? Marisol, it took me weeks to get my cousin's car! And I had to give him twenty bucks! I thought you wanted to be together."

"I do! But I just... I don't know if this is the best idea. I mean, we could maybe get mugged and stuff."

"Oh, come on. Who's gonna mug us?" He gave her a little squeeze and gestured around at the empty parking lot. "You said it yourself. There's nobody else around."

"I know. I'm just being silly. But..."

"Besides, if anybody did try something, I'd protect you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

She smiled, then snuggled up against him. "My hero," she sighed. "Y'know, you're so good when I'm scared."

"You like that, huh?"

"Mmmmmm."

"When you're scared?"

"Mmmmmm."

They sat there like that for a bit. Danny studied the top of Marisol's head, enjoying the feeling of her body against his. "Scared..." he murmured.

"Did you say something?"

Danny cleared his throat. "Hey, um," he said, trying to seem casual. "Did I ever tell you about the guy with the hook?"

"Hook?"

"Yeah. It's this thing that happened to a friend of my cousin's. See, he's parked out in a car—I dunno, maybe it was even this car—with his girlfriend. And it's a dark night, like tonight. And they're listening to the radio, and this news bulletin comes on."

She pressed in closer to his side.

"So, the news guy says that everybody should watch out because there's, like, this insane killer maniac with a hook instead of a hand, who broke out of jail."

She buried her face in his neck. "You're making this up. You're just trying to scare me."

He closed his eyes and smiled. "No, really," he said. "The guy told my cousin. So anyway, the girl gets all freaked out by the news and tells the guy to take her home. He doesn't want to go, but he's, like, a gentleman, so he steps on the gas and they go. And they get home and get out of the car, and you know what they find?"

She was squeezing his thigh. In a small voice, she asked, "What?"

"A bloody hook! Hanging off the door handle!"

She gripped him even more tightly. "You mean the guy was...?"

"Right there! He was gonna open the door, just when they hit the gas and peeled out of there."

"Ewwwww..."

"Yeah, I know."

Marisol broke away. Anxious, she threw up her hands. "Okay, that's it! We can't stay here! Take me home!"

Danny opened his eyes, startled. "What? But..."

"No, I mean it, Danny! What if there's some psycho around here, too?"

"But you don't have to... It's just a story..."

"I mean it!"

He put a hand on her shoulder to calm her. "Marisol, there's nothing to worry..."

Suddenly, their heads jerked around as they heard a loud thump and the screech of scratching metal coming from the front of the car. Standing there was a disheveled man with a wild look in his eye—and a metal hook in place of his right hand. His clothes and the hook were spattered with blood. Even more striking was the fact that he was glowing.

Danny and Marisol screamed.

"Get us out of here!" Marisol shouted.

"I'm trying!"

Danny struggled to get his hand into the pocket of his jeans. Why did they have to make these things so tight?!

"Danny!"

The figure with the hook was on the move now. He was heading around the front of the car, toward the passenger door.

Finally, Danny freed his keys from his pocket.

"Come on!" Marisol shook his arm in panic. The keys went flying.

Danny's left hand shot out to snatch the keys from the air. He fumbled with them, trying to find the right one.

The maniac was at the passenger door now, banging on the roof and yanking at the door handle. It was a good thing that Marisol had locked the door, but it was obvious that it wouldn't keep him out for long.

"DANNNNNEEEEEEE!"

"I'm trying!"

Over and over, Danny jabbed the ignition key at the slot, struggling to get it inside.

The steel hook smashed through the window. A shower of broken glass rained over the teens.

Marisol screamed.

The engine roared to life.

Danny wasn't thinking about mood anymore. He wasn't thinking about the damage to his cousin's car. There was only one thing on his mind: getting the hell out of there.

He threw the gearshift into reverse. With a squeal of rubber on asphalt, the car peeled out in a curve. He slammed the shift into drive, and the car zoomed out of the parking lot.

Marisol was sobbing as she stared at the passenger window.

Danny glanced over, but it wasn't to see if she was all right.

A glowing, bloody hook dangled from the window frame. As they watched, it melted away into the wind.

"Good morning!" Ray called as he slid down the fire pole to land in the parking bay. Ever since he lost his house covering the group's expenses during the

company's third bankruptcy, Ray had taken over part of the second floor as his living space. It wasn't the same as living in the house that had been his home since childhood, but the morning commute to work was a whole lot more fun.

He landed beside Winston, who was standing in front of his locker, putting on his working clothes. "Morning, Ray," he said with a quick nod and a grin, as he zipped up his beige jumpsuit. An ID patch above the left breast pocket spelled out his last name: ZEDDEMORE; a shoulder emblem matched the cartoon ghost on the Ectomobile. A pair of polished black boots completed the uniform.

Egon and Janine returned Ray's greeting from the first floor office area. "Hi, Ray," Egon muttered, pre-occupied. Janine waved.

Actually, it was a bit remarkable that Janine could even wave, considering that she was simultaneously talking on the phone, positioning a paper cup of coffee on her desk, shrugging off her coat, and placing her handbag in the bottom drawer of her desk. Ray guessed that she had probably just arrived herself.

"No, I'm sorry, Mister Milken," Janine was saying. "Doctor Venkman hasn't arrived yet. Would you like to leave a message?"

Egon had clearly been there longer. He was already hard at work, hunched over a computer. The light from the screen reflected off his glasses and illuminated his gaunt, severe features. Combined with his unruly hair, the effect made Egon look like the stereotypical crazy scientist in a 1950s science-fiction movie. Actually, Ray reflected (and not for the first time), the comparison wasn't entirely unfounded.

Ray circled around Egon and looked over his

shoulder to see what he was doing. Before he could ask, Egon leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "No mention of any 'Xanthador' in the standard databases. We'll have to check the classical paper archive."

"Yup," Ray agreed. "Time to hit the books."

But as Ray lifted his head from the screen, he saw a grotesque figure swooping straight at him. It was pale green, blob-like, and mottled with light brownish spots. The creature had no legs, but that didn't seem to prevent it from gliding effortlessly (if not gracefully) through the air. It looked as though half of its body was taken up by its huge eyes, mouth, and teeth—particularly since it had an entire roast turkey crammed in its mouth. The legs of the turkey stuck out at odd angles as the creature noisily chomped and gnawed at the bird.

Ray gave the creature a high five. "Hey, Slimmer."

The creature's reply would have been gibberish even if its mouth hadn't been full.

The two of them proceeded to greet each other with a brief and obviously well-practiced bit of hand jive. They mirrored each others' movements as they slapped the fronts and backs of each others' hands, reached up over their respective shoulders, and pretended to draw nutrona wands to shoot "ghosts" overhead. They capped the routine off with a mutual, ghostly "Ooooooooooooo" and burst into laughter.

"You do realize that the name of this little organization is *Ghostbusters*," said a voice from the parking bay. "We're supposed to get rid of the repulsive little spuds, not adopt them as pets."

"Hey, Peter," said Ray. He casually wiped a few pieces of semi-chewed turkey off his clothes.

"I mean, how are we supposed to maintain any sort of credibility with the public if people come in here and find this...ectoplasmic reject kicking back with a beer? 'Sure, Mrs. Vandergelt, we'll rid your mansion full of wraiths in no time. One hundred percent guaranteed. When the Ghostbusters come in, the spooks stay gone. I'm sorry, what did you say? Oh, that? That's just our mascot!' "

Slimer spit a turkey bone at him.

"Not to mention," Venkman continued, "that, thanks to onionhead over here, we've got a food bill bigger than the national debt. Half our overhead, right there!"

Ray was unruffled. "Dana won't take your calls, huh?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

In fact, Venkman looked like a mess. His receding hair was disheveled, and he hadn't shaved. The dark lines under his eyes suggested he hadn't slept well last night.

With a surly "I'll be in my office," he stomped off to the open office area behind the receptionist's desk. A moment later, he stomped back to point an angry finger into Janine's face.

"And another thing," he told her. "In the future, I'd appreciate it if you'd remember that your job description does not include running around the streets of New York, telling everyone I've been at the movies all day!"

She rose to face him eye to eye. "In the future," she shot back, "I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a little advance warning before you decide to make up stories about nonexistent monsters eating the Chrysler Building!"

Before Venkman could reply, the phone rang. "Excuse me," Janine said testily. Her manner changed completely as she answered the phone in a cheery, businesslike tone—well, cheery for her, considering the bored, nasal sound that was her typical greeting. "Ghostbusters. May I help you?" She reached for a pencil and paper. "Uh-huh... How many? And where are they now? Okay, got it. Thank you."

She looked serious as she hung up the phone. "I think you fellas better go."

At the same time that Ray had been sliding down the fire pole, twelve-year-old Jed Isaacs was standing in the middle of a schoolyard, fingering a red, rubber ball. He screened out the backdrop of shouts and laughter that came with the morning recess period, and stared intently into the eyes of the kid who stood opposite him.

The batter stared back into Jed's eyes and shifted the taped-up broomstick on her shoulder. It was bad enough that Esther was the other team's best hitter, but she was also Jed's little sister.

The rest of the kids on the makeshift diamond provided a steady stream of cheers and patter.

"No batter! No batter!"

"Go, Esti! Go, Esti!"

"Home run! Home run!"

"Swish, batter, swish!"

With careful deliberation, Jed went into his wind-up and let fly. Esti swung and missed. With a *thwack!*, the ball struck the brick wall that stood behind her, smack in the middle of the rectangle that had been chalked on the wall.

"Whoo!"

"You stink!"

"Oh, snap!"

"No pressure! No pressure!"

The ball bounced along the ground a few times until Esti picked it up and tossed it back to Jed. He caught it with a smirk. She stuck her tongue out at him before settling back into her stance to wait for the ball.

Jed studied her for a long moment, then reared back and released the ball once again. Esti swung. This time, she made solid contact.

The ball sailed over the heads of Jed and his four teammates. When Esti tagged the discarded box that served as first base, the ball was still going. Two of Jed's teammates raced along in a vain attempt to catch up to it. The ball hit the ground yards ahead of them and took a high bounce. A second bounce off a parked car sent it rolling across the street amid yells of joy and anguish.

Jed was the first to realize where the ball was headed. "Oh, man..." he moaned, scant seconds before it rolled into a storm drain and dropped out of sight.

Everyone stared, wordlessly, at the storm drain. Then, one by one, the other kids looked at Jed.

"How come *I* always gotta go get it?" he complained.

"Cause you got the longest arms," Esti replied.

"But it's gross!"

"It's our only good ball!"

"Maybe I can't even reach it. Maybe it dropped all the way down to the sewer this time."

One of the other kids was crouching down and

peering into the drain. "No, I see it!" he called. "It's stuck right there on the ledge!"

Jed knew he was beaten. "Okay, okay." Resignedly, he made his way across the street.

After checking to make sure no cars were coming, he kneeled down beside the drain. Sure enough, the red ball was visible directly beneath the grate, wedged among a dark mass of unidentifiable...stuff.

Jed sighed. "Yell if any cars come, okay?" he said to a girl in a baseball cap and uniform shirt. The girl nodded. She stepped into the gutter beside him and turned to keep an eye out for oncoming traffic.

Jed stretched himself out into a prone position across the storm drain. Hesitantly, he extended a hand inside—then he yanked it back and jerked himself up onto his knees. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Something's down there!"

"Shyeah, right!" said one of the kids.

"Is not," another kid said with a dismissive wave.

"Don't be a baby!" said a third.

Esti shielded her eyes against the sun and looked down into the drain. "I don't see anything."

Jed peered carefully through the grating. Everything looked exactly the same as it had before. The expression on his face showed that he was unconvinced, but everyone was watching him. He didn't want to look chicken. "Yeah, okay," he said.

He lay back down across the drain and reached inside. The ball was directly beneath him, but the problem was that he couldn't reach straight down to get it. He needed to maneuver his arm around the gate and stretch it back underneath. And since his

body was covering the grate, he couldn't see what he was doing. He had to try to find the ball by touch.

He groped around the area where he thought the ball was. His face twisted in disgust, and he recoiled as his hand encountered a pile of soggy muck.

"You got it?" one of the other kids asked.

"Not...yet."

Gingerly, Jed probed around in the dark, his arm straining as he tried to reach further and further inside. He felt things that were hard, that were clammy, that were rough, and that were downright slimy. But so far, nothing felt like the ball. After a couple of minutes, though, his hand rested on something that felt different. It wasn't the ball—he was pretty sure of that—but it didn't feel like anything else in the drain either. It was big, far larger than his hand. As he moved his hand over it, he found that it was rounded and leathery. Ridges indented its surface in some sort of regular pattern. Jed's curiosity almost made him forget the ball as he ran his hand back and forth across the mystery object, trying to figure out what it was.

Then it moved.

With a shriek, he jumped back off the grate. Everyone reflexively pulled back in surprise. Jed scrambled to his feet halfway across the street, pale and breathing heavily. The rest of the kids stared at the storm drain in a mixture of anticipation and anxiety.

Nothing happened.

Once the kids realized that, their mood shifted from fear to ridicule. They jeered at Jed in the way that only a bunch of young children can.

But that all came to a sudden stop when the red

rubber ball suddenly popped out of the drain, all by itself. It arced up through the air, bounced against the pavement two or three times, and slowly rolled to a stop.

The kids looked at each other, confused. Mostly, though, they looked at the storm drain, not quite sure what had just happened.

That was when a pair of huge, chalky white jaws shot out of the drain. They missed Esti by inches, snapping shut around empty air.

The children screamed at the sight. They scattered, running in every direction and leaving their equipment forgotten behind them.

Albino alligators were swarming out of the sewer now. More of them were coming out of manholes and the other storm drains along the block. They seemed to ooze their translucent bodies unnaturally around the grating, in ways that no ordinary alligator could. Their growls cut through the air.

By this point, it wasn't just the children who were screaming. Adult passersby ran from the block or took refuge inside stores and barricaded the doors. One of them flipped the sign on one of the store entrances to CLOSED.

The only one who wasn't going anywhere was Esti. After her close call with the first gator, she stood frozen in terror, trembling but otherwise unable to move. In all the confusion, the alligators hadn't seemed to notice her—but one of them noticed her now. It crept toward her, sniffing the air as though guided more by smell than by sight.

On some level, Esti knew she had to get out of there. Yet, as the alligator inched closer, the fear

GHOSTBUSTERS

wiped all rational thought from her head. She had to get out of there, but she couldn't will herself to do it.

Just then, a hand grasped her wrist firmly. Jed yanked her out of the animal's path. He took off, pulling her along into a run until her legs started to work for themselves again.

The alligator "watched" them disappear into the distance and decided the potential meal wasn't worth the trouble of chasing after them. Instead, the huge, spectral reptile lumbered off toward the school building, in search of easier prey.

There was plenty there to be found.

CHAPTER 4

The second grader was sobbing and screaming—at least whenever she could catch her breath long enough to do it. She'd managed to stay ahead of the alligator until now, but wedged into a corner between the school building and the fence that surrounded the yard, there was nowhere left to run. The huge, white predator closed in, opening its jaws.

"Not so fast, Albert!" called a voice from behind the beast.

In a flash, the ghostly gator was wrapped up tight in the grip of an ion stream. At the other end of the beam, Venkman hoisted the howling monster up over the second grader's head. He maneuvered it over to the monkey bars, where Winston triggered the trap that swallowed it up in a burst of light.

"...and they were everywhere!" Off to one side of the

schoolyard, the hysterical principal was babbling at high speed, a mile a minute. "The children were in a panic! The staff, too! They—they train us to deal with fire drills, but something like this..."

"Understandable," Egon replied.

"It—it was all we could to evacuate the students! We—we called animal control!"

"And when did you start to suspect that this wasn't a natural phenomenon?"

"W-when they started flying!"

Sure enough, three of the creatures were airborne. They flew in a fairly tight circle, buzzing a small, plastic playhouse where a burly man in a uniform labelled ANIMAL CONTROL was hiding inside and whimpering.

A short distance away, Ray snagged another alligator in an ion stream and guided it toward Winston's trap. "Y'know," he called to his comrades, "as fun as this is, we can't keep doing it one at a time. There's just too many of them!"

"Do you have a suggestion?" Venkman called back, steering another gator into the trap.

"I've got an idea," Winston called back.

A few minutes later, he was standing in the middle of the schoolyard, his nutrona wand sheathed and his hands empty.

"Hey, you walking handbags!" Winston yelled. "You call yourselves predators? I've seen worse on Forty-second Street! Come over here, and I'll make shoes out of you!"

One by one, the alligators lifted their heads and turned in his direction. It wasn't clear whether they understood his words, or whether the blind creatures

were simply responding to the sound of his voice. Either way, he was catching their attention.

"Yeah, that's right!" Winston continued. "I'll kick your tails right back to the bayou!"

He definitely had their attention now. The snarling predators were coming toward him, snapping their jaws. As they approached from all sides, they formed a moving circle around Winston, leaving him nowhere to go.

"Oh, you're gonna eat me?" Winston yelled. "I'll have you for breakfast! No wonder you taste like chicken!"

The circle was tightening around him like a noose. Winston could start to feel their breath on his body. Sweat poured down his brow and his voice started to get a little shaky, but still he continued. "You're as ugly as you are stupid! But hey, what can you expect from something that comes out of the sewer?"

"Now!" cried Egon.

Winston shielded his eyes as brilliant white light shot up all around him. Being blind, the alligators hadn't seen the ring of ecto-traps that lay on the ground all around him. But now that they were directly over the traps, they could certainly feel their effects.

They roared in helpless rage as they were sucked in; then, just as suddenly as they had opened, the lids of the traps slammed shut. The roars of the gators vanished, replaced by a series of small electronic beeps as the indicator light on each trap switched from green to red.

"Nice one," said Egon.

"Thanks," said Winston.

"Yeah, but we're not done yet," said Ray. "We've still got to clean up any strays inside the school."

"Can't we just let the cafeteria food kill them?" Venkman asked.

Despite the tired protests, the four Ghostbusters cautiously approached the large metal doors of the school and entered the building. Inside, all was quiet. Their footsteps echoed through the empty hallways.

They moved along in a loose circle with nutrona wands drawn, keeping all sides covered. As dangerous as the schoolyard had been, they knew this could be worse. The creatures could be lurking around any corner or behind any door, just waiting to attack.

"Hey, I thought these things were supposed to be an urban legend," Winston said, an edge of nervousness in his voice.

"Blind, albino alligators in the sewers of New York? Yup. They don't really exist," Ray replied.

Winston kicked open the door of a kindergarten room, and leaned in to make sure it was clear. He found blocks, graham crackers, and finger-painted likenesses of the Sta-Puft marshmallow man, but no alligators. Satisfied, he resumed his position with the group and continued speaking as they moved farther down the hall. "Kids bring home baby alligators from vacation, but then get bored and flush them. So the alligators end up breeding in the dark in the sewers."

"Uh-huh. Urban legend, all right," said Venkman.

"Yes," said Egon, "but remember the stories about banshees vomiting blood through their eye sockets during homecoming dances? That was supposed to be an urban legend, too."

"Until Berlin," said Ray.

"Exactly," Egon said, with a knowing look.

Suddenly, Ray stopped. "Wait a minute," he said, pointing toward a nearby door.

"The boys' room?" Venkman asked. "Ray, I thought I told you to think of that before we left home."

"No," said Ray. "These things live in the sewer, remember? So where do you think they'd naturally gravitate?"

"Worth a try," Winston said with a shrug.

"Okay," said Venkman, "but if they're smoking in there, I'm telling their parents."

Winston's military training made him the natural choice to take the point position. Once again, he kicked the door open and leaped into the room. He landed in a crouching position and swung his nutrona wand left and right to cover the area. The others followed close behind him. Their eyes scanned the bathroom, taking in the sinks, mirrors, and urinals.

The room was as dingy as school bathrooms often are, with cracked tiles here and there, and occasional bits of graffiti. But at first glance, the Ghostbusters did seem to be the only occupants. Egon shifted his nutrona wand to one hand so that he could pull out his PKE meter to measure the ambient psychokinetic energy in the room.

"Poor Vinny," said Venkman.

"What?" Ray asked, confused by the non-sequitur.

Venkman pointed at the message scrawled on a nearby wall. "Well, according to this, he's got a really tiny..."

"Sshhhh!" Egon said, putting a finger to his lips. He pointed at the gauge on his meter, which twitched madly, jumping repeatedly into the red. The activity intensified as he directed the device toward the four stalls at the far end of the room.

All conversation ceased. The Ghostbusters crept quietly toward the stalls, hoping that they might still be able to take the creatures at least partially by surprise. Venkman caught the others' attention and pointed a finger toward the various stalls. Picking up on his signal, they fanned out so that each stood in front of the closed door of a stall.

Venkman raised one finger. Then two. Then three.

Acting as one, they kicked in the doors of their respective stalls. They flew open and slammed into the walls of the stalls with a resounding series of bangs. And inside, they found...

...precisely nothing. Oh, the usual things were there—toilets, toilet paper, and so on. But there was no sign of the spectral alligators.

Venkman had to chuckle at the ridiculousness of four grown men armed with high-tech weaponry charging into toilet stalls. "Looks like your gadget could use a cleaning, Egon—the only danger here is having to sit on these seats."

Egon studied his meter and gave it a shake. "I don't understand..."

Relieved, Venkman leaned over. "Hellooooo," he called into the toilet. "Anyone in there?"

Without warning, the toilets exploded. Four spectral alligators erupted out of the drains, amid a shower of water and shards of porcelain. One of them flew straight through Venkman's chest.

Reflexively, the startled Ghostbusters recoiled from the barrage, but they recovered quickly. As the ghosts soared past them and out of the stalls, the quartet spun around with nutrona wands blazing. The mirrors over the sinks exploded into a cascade of broken glass under the force of the blasters' ionized bombardment.

When the air cleared, the Ghostbusters could see that two of the beasts had been snagged in Winston's and Ray's ion streams. The other two were airborne and circling the room, snarling and weaving in close to snap their jaws at their would-be captors. Egon wasted no time, and immediately began throwing handfuls of paper towels on the floor.

"Egon, I think they have janitors who can take care of the spill," Ray said.

"I don't want to risk a short-circuit," Egon replied. Satisfied that he'd used enough towels to see that the top layer remained dry, he dropped an ecto-trap on top of the pile.

The third alligator cried out in anger out as Venkman wrapped it up in another ion stream.

Egon triggered the trap, then took another shot at the final ghost. His first shot missed, taking out some ceiling tiles. The second one missed, too. But the third time proved to be the charm. The gator was trapped.

One by one, they eased the ghosts into the trap, taking care not to cross their beams. It was more of a challenge in this confined space than it had been at Madison Square Garden. With a little effort, though, they soon managed it. The trap snapped closed, and the familiar indicator light flashed over to green.

Egon used his PKE meter to sweep the area. "All clear."

That gave the Ghostbusters the breathing room to slip their nutrona wands back in their sheaths and assess their personal damage. "Everyone okay?" Ray called.

Egon and Winston told him they were fine. They picked bits of toilet paper off their uniforms and

waved the wet parts of their jumpsuits back and forth in a vain attempt to dry them quickly.

With a stab of concern, Ray realized that Venkman hadn't answered. He stepped quickly over to Venkman's stall. "Peter?"

"Oh, I'm just dandy," Venkman said. He stepped out to reveal that his head and torso were covered in dripping, funky-smelling ectoplasmic slime—a souvenir of the alligator flying through his chest. He swept a hand across his face, then shook it to dislodge a large glob of slime. "But can someone please tell me why I'm always the one who gets slimed?"

Louis tapped his foot nervously. "For lunch, I was thinking maybe we could go to that macrobiotic restaurant on Greene Street. See, from noon to two, they have an all-you-can-eat brown rice bar for only \$12.95 per person."

"That's fine, Louis," Janine said, "but I told you, I can't leave the office unattended. I have to wait here until someone else comes back."

"Did you tell them we had lunch plans?"

"I'm sorry, sugar bear, but it's an emergency. At a school."

"Sure, I understand," he replied, checking his watch for the fourth time in about five minutes. "It's just that, based on my figures, if we each take three helpings at the buffet and it amounts to more than three cups of rice apiece, that would be a savings of twenty-three percent over the regular menu price."

"Y'know, you can take your coat off and sit down if you want."

"Oh, no, thanks. I'll just leave it on, in case they come back."

Janine ran an emery board around the edges of her thumbnail, then blew off the shavings. "Suit yourself."

Louis kept tapping his foot. He hummed a bit, trying to appear nonchalant. But he couldn't contain himself. "Of course, if they're not back by two o'clock, then we'll miss the buffet. So in that case, we'll get a better deal if we go to Natalio's for their ten-percent-off Tuesday special. I have it all worked out on a color-coded flow chart..."

Janine rose from her chair and moved close to him. "You're so organized. I just love that in a man..."

"You do?"

"Mm-hmm." They leaned in toward each other, their lips drawing near.

"Awwwwwwwww..." squealed Slimer. The potato-shaped ghost floated nearby with a moon-faced expression and a mouth overflowing with uncooked pancake batter.

At just that moment, the front doors opened, and the Ectomobile pulled into the parking bay. Ray and Egon followed in its wake, deep in conversation. As was usually the case when they got into one of these kinds of discussions, Janine couldn't make heads or tails of what they were talking about. In fact, she'd long since decided that it wasn't even worth trying.

"...took some ambient Kirlian readings on our way back," Egon said.

"Let me guess. Off the scale?"

"Not even in the same zip code as the scale."

Ray frowned. "Hmmm. Was the phenomenon localized around the school?"

"Mostly. But not as much as I'd like."

"Sounds like there could be something big brewing."

"I'd say. A lot bigger than just a few spectral alligators."

Louis tugged excitedly on Janine's sleeve. "Great! They're back! Come on! If we hurry, they might still have some of the preservative-free, whole-grain dessert left at the buffet!"

"In a minute. I just have to give them their messages." Janine started to walk toward the Ectomobile, but she slowed and stopped about halfway there, trying to figure out what was going on. Winston had gotten out of the driver's seat and opened the back door. He was gingerly reaching down toward the person inside.

"Easy, Peter. We're back. Let me help you. Careful, try not to get anymore on the seat."

With Winston's help, Venkman stepped out of the car. He was moving stiffly, and it took a second for him to get his footing. The cause was fairly obvious, though. He was covered from head to toe in greenish, mucus-like slime. The dripping substance oozed down his body and was already starting to pool at his feet.

"I'm showering here, you know," Venkman said. "I'm not having this stuff clog up my drain again. Last time, it attacked the plumber and tried to mate with his snake."

Janine took a good look at Venkman, then gave a dismissive wave. Slimed again. No biggie.

She stepped crisply over to them. "Hi, boys," she said. They mumbled greetings as they started to unpack the Ectomobile.

She flipped through a handful of small pieces of paper. "You got a bunch of calls while you were out. Doctor Spengler, the Psychical Research Society called to remind you that they still haven't received your

renewal yet, and they want to know if you're coming to the annual dinner and seance."

"I guess so. I'm supposed to give the keynote chant."

Janine handed him the paper and went on to the next one. "The Mayor's office called. He's coming down here in an hour and a half to hold a press conference out front."

As one, they groaned. "He's coming here?" Egon said. "He never comes here."

"Election year," said Ray.

Winston opened the back of the Ectomobile. He started pulling out piles of smoking traps, and passed handfuls to Ray and Egon. "Not to mention we just saved a school full of kids. Now, *that's* a photo op."

"Oh, well. Anything for me?" Ray asked Janine.

"No. But Doctor Venkman got three calls from a Mister Gary Milken."

"Gary who?"

"Probably a telemarketer," said Venkman. "I'm gonna go take a shower."

"Okay," said Ray. "We'll stash the livestock in the containment unit."

"Or the walking deadstock," said Egon. The three of them headed downstairs to transfer the trapped ghostly alligators into the high-tech storage unit in the basement.

Venkman started to make his way laboriously upstairs. He was on the second step when Louis called after him. "Well, I guess I'll be taking Janine to lunch now. If we catch the traffic lights just right, we can still..."

Venkman moved down a step and looked at him with a fixed, irritated stare. Slime dripped from his

arm as he waved around at the otherwise empty room. "Don't you think someone should be here to man the phones and door?"

"Well, you're back now. Can't you do it?"

Venkman glared at him. All was silent, apart from the gentle *plip plip* of dripping slime.

Louis shifted nervously. "I, um, I guess we could wait five minutes."

"Thank you," said Venkman.

Once again, he started up the steps. But before he got beyond the third step, he heard a deep voice from the parking bay. "Excuse me, Doctor Venkman?"

He looked down to see a group of well-dressed men in designer suits. He stared at them with all the enthusiasm of someone who'd been dipped in ectoplasmic slime and would really prefer to be standing in a hot shower. "Yes?"

The gray-haired man in front of the group stepped forward and extended a hand. "Gary Milken."

Resignedly, Venkman walked back down the stairs. "Most persistent telemarketer I've ever seen. You must work on commission."

"I'm sorry?"

Venkman shook his hand, coating it with slime. "Never mind. Let me guess. The ghost of your great-grandmother won't get out of your rumpus room, the walls are dripping blood, and you keep hearing a voice that whispers, 'Get out of the house.' Well, Ms. Melnitz here will be happy to assist you. And in the meantime, please...stay out of the house." He released Milken's hand and started back toward the stairs. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a very important date with a shower."

Milken chuckled. "I'm afraid there's been something

of a misunderstanding." He produced a handkerchief in his left hand and casually used it to wipe the slime off his right, as though this sort of thing happened to him every day. He passed the wet, greasy handkerchief off to a young man behind him, who looked at it distastefully before sticking it gingerly in his pocket. "We're not here to hire the Ghostbusters. We're here because of *you*."

"Oh," said Venkman. "Well, if you're here to deliver a subpoena, it's not really a good time right now."

"No, no, nothing like that. We represent the New York State Independent Party. Ordinarily, I would have waited for you to return my calls, but I understand you're scheduled to participate in a press conference with the Mayor in a little while. I wanted to be sure to catch you before then."

Despite the waiting shower, Venkman had to admit that he was starting to get curious. "Why's that?"

"Doctor Venkman, do you know when the New York State Independent Party won its last mayoral election?"

"Mmm...no, can't say as I do."

"1926. We'd like to change that."

"So you came all the way down here to ask me to vote for you? I don't want to criticize your campaign strategy, but at this speed, you should finish off the voters in Manhattan by the year 2620. Then, of course, there's Brooklyn..."

One of the well-dressed men behind Milken muttered to the equally groomed man beside him. "Jumps to a lot of conclusions, doesn't he?"

"Yes," muttered his neighbor, "but he's quick on his feet. And witty."

"Witty's good."

Milken continued as though he hadn't noticed them. "We're here for much more than your vote, Doctor Venkman," he said with a winning smile. "To defeat Mayor Lapinski in this year's race, we'll need a special candidate—one with the commitment and charisma to lead this city out of its current hole and into a bright new future. We think you've got what it takes to do it."

"Doctor Venkman, how would you like to be Mayor of New York City?"

Venkman stared at him, not quite understanding any of this, let alone believing it. For perhaps the first time in his life, he was speechless. "M-me...?"

"Who better? You've devoted your life to helping others. While the current administration spends its time down in City Hall, kowtowing to the special interests, you're out there in the streets every day, keeping the public safe."

"But—but I'm not a politician..."

"We see that as a plus. The voters are tired of politicians. They don't trust them."

Venkman's brain was racing so fast that he was having trouble keeping up with it. It wasn't a question that he had ever expected to hear. All his life, his approach to the world had been an ongoing series of hustles, scams, and dodges—seeing just how much he could get away with instead of really working at anything. Even when he was six years old and subcontracting his paper route to the neighborhood kids, Venkman was always looking for an angle.

In fact, that's what had drawn him toward parapsychology in the first place. It was all so nebulous that universities would give him a paycheck without him actually having to deliver anything of substance. And

when they did finally catch on and the cash cow went off to pasture, he convinced Ray and Egon to start up Ghostbusters. Of course, at the time, he never suspected that they'd actually wind up catching ghosts—or risking their lives doing it. But even with all the risks, it still beat working a "real" job.

And now these people were asking him whether he wanted to take the reins of one of the largest and most prominent cities in the world? Whether he wanted to spend his days managing the million different tasks that made the city run? Whether he wanted to hold the final sign-off on the police, the civil services, and city contractors?

This was...

It was...

It could be...

...the greatest scam on Earth!

Forget about the nice house, he thought. Forget the endless stream of free dinners and all the famous rich people coming to you, begging for favors. Forget about never having to pay attention to parking laws or traffic lights. Just imagine what you could do with a gazillion-dollar city budget—every year!

Venkman left the stairs to greet the group with a broad smile. "Gentlemen," he said, "you've got yourselves a candidate."

Milken ignored the slime as he grasped Venkman's hand warmly in both of his own. "Excellent!" he said. "Welcome aboard. I foresee great things in our future."

"Gary, you have no idea."

Janine and Louis stared at each other in disbelief. "Mayor Venkman?" said Louis.

"I wonder if there's still time to move to Jersey," said Janine.

The politicians in the room seemed much more enthusiastic. Unlike Milken, the rest of his team found it harder to forget about the slime. But despite some frowns and wincing, there were hearty handshakes all around.

"Now, don't worry," Milken told him. "I recognize that your experience running a city government is...shall we say, limited. That's why we're going to pair you up with a deputy mayor who knows more about the ins and outs of this city than any man alive." He pulled over a small, balding man with wire-rimmed glasses and a combover. "Sid here served as auditor, city planner, and ombudsman in three separate administrations. He'll be there by your side, every step of the way."

For the second time that day, Venkman was speechless. Auditor? Ombudsman? All the dozens of schemes that had flooded his mind in the past ten seconds were evaporating just as quickly.

But he recovered fast. There might still be a way out of this.

Venkman threw a slimy arm around Milken and steered him away from the crowd. "Y'know, Gary," he said, "I'm sure Sid's great. He seems very talented, and that hairdo—well, what can I say? It's a chick magnet. But if you want to build this campaign as an alternative to the usual politicians and party line, maybe it would be better to go with someone who has *less* experience."

Milken's eyes narrowed with interest. "What would you suggest?"

"Someone fresh—unsullied by the machinations of the political machine. Someone who could spend time focusing on this big, beautiful city instead of all the

nitty-gritty little details. Someone who wouldn't get thrown by new ideas, just because they're not the way things have always been done."

"Hey, what's going on?" Winston had a puzzled look as he came back up from the basement.

"Someone," Venkman said, "like him."

Milken studied Winston for a moment, considering the point. "Hmmm....*two* Ghostbusters," he said, mulling it over.

"But people don't vote for deputy mayor," said one of the well-dressed men behind him. "It's an appointed position."

"True," said another. "But we play up the idea. With Peter Venkman, you don't just get one man, you get a team. Two local heroes for the price of one."

"Interesting," said a third.

The second man consulted a file folder. "He's got a nice background. Former Special Forces, Strategic Air Command training... There's the whole military hero/served his country angle."

"He could bring in the minority vote," said a third.

"Now, wait a minute..." said Sid.

"Huh?" said Winston.

"It's unconventional," said Milken.

"I'd say 'unconventional' is what you were going for when you decided to recruit me," Venkman replied.

"True," said Milken. "I can't can't say that the conventional approaches have paid off very well for us in the past eighty years." He gave Venkman a confident nod, and shook Winston's hand. "Mister Zeddemore, welcome to the team."

"Huh?" said Winston.

"Now, we'd better let you get to that shower."

GHOSTBUSTERS

Milken told Venkman. "You've got a lot of work ahead of you. We'll be in touch."

Venkman saw them off with a flurry of waves, handshakes, and friendly slaps on the back.

"Huh?" said Winston.

Janine and Louis just stood there, stunned by the whole spectacle.

Ray and Egon walked in from the basement, carrying armfuls of now-empty traps.

"Did we miss anything?" asked Ray.

CHAPTER 5

Even back in the days when the Ghostbusters' headquarters was still a fire station, the block had rarely been host to such excitement. The Mayor stood in front of the large bay doors, flanked by the Ghostbusters and his usual entourage. Beyond them was the crowd of reporters, with their microphones, cameras, and broadcast vans. Beyond that, the crowd multiplied with curious onlookers who'd been drawn by either the media circus, the rumors of the morning's events, or just a bit of free entertainment and a chance to sneak into the background on the TV news.

"...another piece of evidence," the Mayor was saying, "of the effectiveness of our campaign against quality of afterlife crimes. I'm especially glad to announce the safe rescue of these children, without the loss of a single life. As you all know, I have always

been devoted to promoting the well-being of our children, because children are our future."

The Mayor wrapped up his statement. "That's about it. So, if there are any questions...?"

A flurry of hands went up among the crowd of press people. "Does this mean there are more of these things in the sewers?" one asked.

"We haven't seen any signs of it. Still, in the interest of public safety, I've ordered the DPW to check every sewer drain throughout the five boroughs. They expect to finish the job in under five months."

"Will there be any school closings for fear of future attacks?" another asked.

"No. At this point, we have no reason to think this was anything other than an isolated incident."

"Has PETA or the SPCA verified that the alligators were handled humanely?"

"I can assure you that no animals—living or dead—were harmed in this incident."

"Can we get a first-person account from one of the Ghostbusters?"

"Why, sure," said the Mayor. "Boys?"

Venkman moved eagerly toward the microphones. As he passed Mayor Lapinski, the Mayor whispered an almost-friendly warning: "Remember to make me look good, now."

Venkman stepped forward and smiled for the cameras. Freshly showered and wearing a newly-pressed set of coveralls, he pulled himself up to his full height and tried his best to look every inch the hero.

"I won't lie to you. Things got a little hairy today," he said, in his most sincere voice. "But everyone came through it okay. The kids are safe, the ghosts are under wraps, and as far as these kids' families are

concerned—as far as *we're* concerned—that's the bottom line. As long as the safety of this city is threatened, someone's going to have to put himself on the line to protect it. That battle needs to be fought right here in the streets, and it needs to be fought from the highest offices in City Hall, too."

The Mayor smiled to himself. Venkman had indeed managed to find a way to bring this around to a plug for him. As tenuous as the link might have been, Venkman did it in a way that probably didn't sound too terribly strained. He still wasn't pleased about signing that lousy contract business they'd pulled, but maybe the deal was beginning to pay dividends after all.

Lapinski started to take a step forward to rejoin Venkman at the mike.

"That's why," Venkman told the reporters, "I've decided to run for the office of Mayor of the greatest city in the world, that tarnished but beautiful lady—New York City!"

The crowd exploded into chaos. There was a roar of noise as two dozen reporters shouted out questions at the same time. Flashbulbs were popping all over the place. With no warning whatsoever, a routine press conference had erupted into a major scoop.

The Mayor's jaw dropped. What did Venkman think he was doing?!

"Doctor Venkman!" shouted one of the reporters. "When did you declare your candidacy?"

"Just now," he replied with a smile. "Weren't you paying attention?"

"Doctor Venkman!" yelled another. "What ticket are you running on?"

"The New York State Independent Party, along with

my good friend and future deputy mayor, Winston Zeddemore." There was another flurry of flashbulbs as Winston waved, a little awkwardly, to the cameras.

"How do you stand on public transportation?"

"Well, usually, I hold the pole in my left hand," Venkman said, "to keep me steady when the train stops."

"Do you think you can win?"

"I wouldn't be doing this if I thought I'd lose."

Venkman gestured for the newspeople to settle down, and put his sincere face back on. "Let's get serious here for a minute, people. Yes, I am a candidate for Mayor, and yes, I am planning to win. I think the people of this fine city are tired of putting up with the same old political machine. I think they're ready for new blood and a new attitude. I think they're ready for someone who won't play politics—who'll do what it takes to get the job done."

"Doctor Venkman!"

"Doctor Venkman!"

The Mayor finally managed to push his way to the front and place himself between Venkman and the crowd. He forced a smile. "Sorry, boys. That's all we have time for."

"Gee, I can hang out for a while," said Venkman. "I don't have anywhere to go."

Lapinski turned toward him, the forced smile still on his lips. But his eyes weren't smiling. "Some of us have cities to run. And some of us should be off chasing ghosts."

"Mister Mayor!" called one of the reporters. "How do you feel about Doctor Venkman's candidacy?"

"Well, boys, I always enjoy a little competition. Maybe one of these days, I'll find some."

The reporters chuckled appreciatively.

"I'm always in favor of people trying to improve themselves. Unfortunately, I think Doctor Venkman will find that the people of New York are smart enough to value the voice of experience...and a mayor who knows what he's doing. You can't fix the school board with a ray gun."

"Still," he continued, "that's one of the great things about America—anyone can run for office, no matter how unqualified they are. I'll offer Doctor Venkman my deepest condolences later, after the voters have spoken. But in the meantime, at least, it looks like we've got us a horse race!"

Lapinski shook Venkman's hand for the cameras. As the photographers snapped away, capturing the moment for posterity, he muttered under his breath, "I'll break you for this."

"Arnie," Venkman muttered back, "did anyone ever tell you that you're cute when you're desperate?"

"He announced?! How could he announce?" Ted Golden paced back and forth in Milken's richly paneled office, gesturing wildly. "He—he's not even on the ballot yet! I'm still working on his message points!"

Milken sat back in the chair behind his desk, watching an all-news channel. He took in the live feed of the press conference with satisfaction. "Relax, Ted," he said. "This is a minor hiccup at most. There's no real harm done."

"Relax? No harm done? Five minutes into this campaign, and he's already a loose cannon!"

"That unpredictability is part of the idea, remember? He's not a politician. Besides..." Milken pointed

at the television screen, which showed a close-up of Mayor Lapinski. Milken could almost see the veins bulging in his forehead. "Isn't it worth it to see all of this happen during Lapinski's own press conference?"

Golden stopped pacing for a moment and looked at the screen. A smile almost crossed his lips. But then he threw his arms up with a growl that was a mixture of frustration and resignation. "I'd better go finish those message points before he gets into even bigger trouble." He stalked out of the office, shaking his head.

Milken studied the image of Venkman and Lapinski on the television screen. This could work—they might actually win this thing. Venkman and Zeddemore's celebrity could carry the day more effectively than talent or experience ever could. Voters liked the image of someone strong enough to protect them.

But the election wasn't over yet. In fact, it had hardly begun. While the candidates might be the public face of the campaign, there was an awful lot that still had to be done behind the scenes.

Milken switched off the television, rose from his desk, and walked down the hall to a large open area where a handful of aides sat at desks making phone calls. Campaign manager John Fielding was crouched over one of the desks, giving instructions to the aide who was sitting there.

"How are we doing?" Milken asked the room in general.

"Great," Fielding replied. "I sent an aide over to file the initial paperwork on Venkman and Zeddemore. Fortunately, we already had the campaign finance report done, so we just had to fill in their names. I take it you heard that Venkman announced?"

"I heard something to that effect, yes."

Fielding grinned. "Did you see Lapinski's reaction?"

"I enjoyed every minute of it. How are we doing on the petitions?" In order to get their candidates on the ballot, they were going to have to get more than seven thousand people to sign the necessary petition.

One of the aides covered the mouthpiece of his phone so that she could answer. "Amazing. It's only been a few minutes, but the volunteers from the field have been calling in to say they've got three hundred signatures already."

"Impressive. How are they doing it so fast?"

"Strategic placement," said Fielding. "We got a few dozen just by sending them over to that school with the alligators during pick-up time. Another hundred from the crowd at the Mayor's press conference."

Milken smiled at the irony of that.

"The rest I'd already sent out to places where I figured people would want to see a couple of Ghostbusters in City Hall. Movie theaters showing action films. Science fiction book stores. Places like that. And we haven't even started on the boroughs yet."

"Excellent. At this rate, it's conceivable that we might even be able to file the petitions by next week."

"Meanwhile, Stu's working the unions, trying to drum up support there. Ted's working on message points."

"So I've heard."

"I'm drafting a first pass on their platform. And we've got Venkman and Zeddemore coming in tomorrow for photos and the start of their training."

Milken clapped him on the shoulder. "Great work. We're on our way."

* * *

It had been a rough rehearsal that afternoon. The piece itself wasn't particularly difficult. It wasn't the sort of thing that a roomful of beginners could handle, but the New York Philharmonic had performed music that was far more complex. No, what made it rough for Dana was the fact that she had spent at least an extra hour trying to deal with a perfectionist conductor and a first oboe with a head cold.

The longer-than-usual session meant that Dana was late for picking up her son Oscar from day care. It would have been nice if she could have called Peter, or even Janine, and asked one of them to get Oscar for her. But Dana still hadn't started returning Peter's calls yet, so doing something like that probably would have caused more problems than it would have solved. It also would have been nice if she could have asked Oscar's father to take care of his son. But the last she'd heard, her ex was off on an extended tour of Europe, performing a series of one-man minimalist symphonies.

Fortunately, it wasn't the first time that work was going to keep a parent from getting to the day care center on time. A quick call, and one of the assistant teachers assured her that it would be no problem to keep him for the extra time. Of course, it also got her yelled at by the conductor for taking valuable time to make the call, but it was a small price for a mother to pay.

By the time Dana was finally released, ran crosstown to get Oscar, stopped off for groceries, and caught a subway home, it was already well into dinnertime—and she hadn't even begun to cook yet. With Oscar in one arm and a couple of bags of gro-

ceries in the other, Dana fumbled her keys free from her bag and somehow managed to open the door. Oscar wasn't exactly crying at the moment, but he was hungry enough to be pretty grumpy by now.

"Eat. Want eat."

"I know, kiddo, I know. I want to eat, too. Just another minute," she told him, bouncing him up and down as she spoke in an unnaturally happy tone. "We're home. Here we are. I'll give you some dinner in a minute, okay? Okay."

Swooping through the apartment, she set the groceries down on the kitchen counter, dropped Oscar into his high chair, returned to the living room to shrug off her coat and toss it over the arm of a chair, and hit the button on her answering machine on her way back to the kitchen.

There was a beep, and a familiar, filtered voice filled the apartment. "Dana, it's your mother. When is that adorable grandson of mine coming for a visit? Not to mention that boyfriend of yours. Not that I'm pushing, dear, but you're still not getting any younger. Well, call me."

Another beep. "Hi, it's Peter. Call number seventeen. I'm a dope. But a cute one. Please call back. 'Bye.'"

Dana rummaged through the refrigerator. There had to be something she could give Oscar that didn't have to be made fresh. She picked up a half-empty container of leftover dim sum and considered it briefly. Nah, he'd never touch it.

Beep. "Number eighteen. Did I mention I'm a jerk? Please call. 'Bye.'"

Beep. "Me again. You've really gotta call me. I've

got some big news this time. You're not going to believe it. Call me, okay?"

Dana smiled and shook her head as she continued to dig through the fridge. *Right, big news*, she thought. *Probably "We belong together."* Bologna? A half-eaten stuffed cabbage? She was starting to seriously consider feeding Oscar chocolate for dinner when she spotted the perfect thing.

Beep. "Hello, Dana. This is Egon Spengler speaking. Peter would like me to tell you that he truly does have important news to share with you, and that I... What was it?... Right. And that I am serving as an independent third party to verify that this isn't some cheap scam to get you on the phone. Please call him so we can get this over with. Thank you."

Despite herself, she smiled. As she dropped some leftover pasta onto the tray of Oscar's highchair and blew a stray lock of hair off her face, Dana wondered whether she'd been too hasty with Peter. Not just because she could use an extra pair of hands to help with her errands, but because enough time had passed to let her cool off and remind herself that it was true—he really was kind of cute.

"And a dope," she told Oscar.

He munched happily on his pasta in reply.

Dana filled a sippy cup with tap water and set it down beside the pasta on his tray. *That should keep him busy for a few minutes*, she thought.

She took advantage of the brief respite to finally take off his jacket. She went inside and hung the two coats in the closet beside the front door. She started back toward the kitchen and then, almost as an afterthought, flipped on the television so she could

listen to the news while unpacking the rest of her groceries.

Returning to the kitchen, Dana asked Oscar, "What do you say, kiddo? Ready to keep the title of best-informed two-year-old on the block?"

She started to pull groceries out of the bag, taking care to bypass the potato chips that were near the top of one. She knew that if Oscar saw the chips, he'd refuse to eat anything else. Instead, she took out a banana and held it out toward him. "Banana?"

"Yah. Nana," he said, with his mouth full.

Dana peeled the banana, broke off the top half, and handed it to him. She took a bite from the other half, watching Oscar eat with pleasure. She exhaled through her nose as she chewed, finally letting her body relax.

Slowly, she became aware that Peter's voice was filling the apartment again. "That's funny," she told Oscar. "Did I bump into the answering machine?"

As Peter's voice was replaced by a reporter's, though, she realized that the source was someplace else. Curious, she stuck her head into the living room to look at the television and see what was going on.

She stared at the screen.

No, she thought. *It couldn't be...*

"Geezil!"

"No need to holler, o infinite master of trepidation. I'm right here beside you."

Xanthador flexed every one of his many claws. His tail swept slowly from side to side, then suddenly whipped out to shatter a rock outcropping that stood behind him. Geezil threw his arms over his head to

protect himself against the ebony rubble that rained down on the barren plain.

"Attend, Geezil. Gaze in abject awe. Already, I begin to succeed. Already, I can feel my power beginning to grow."

"I am so pleased to hear it, o venerable overlord of fright."

"With every strike executed by my minions, the fear increases. The barrier between worlds weakens. It is only a matter of time until the Earth shall fall beneath the shadow of Xanthador."

Geezil started to edge away from his master before Xanthador could bring down another outcropping. "Very good, o formidable ruler of misgiving. I'll go prepare for your final triumph."

Xanthador reached out and stopped him. "Patience, Geezil. The time is not yet upon us, but it shall come."

Geezil managed to croak out a response, despite Xanthador's hand wrapped around his throat. "Not...yet?"

"No. The prophecy has not yet been met. My power grows, but slowly."

"I guess that's...why...my head's still...attached..."

"Hmm? Ah." Xanthador released his grip, as though he hadn't even noticed what his hand was doing. As Geezil gasped for breath, Xanthador continued without so much as a pause. "For now, I regret to say that I must content myself with localized incursions. Yet, each individual's terror adds to my might. The fear of one fuels assaults on ten. The fear of ten fuels assaults on hundreds. The scope of our efforts shall expand, the fear shall multiply, and my power shall thrive."

Geezil cleared his throat and took a deep breath. "Works for me."

It had been a long night—and morning—by the time Rudy Hamilton dragged himself back into the lobby of his hotel. He'd long since lost track of the number of bars he visited over the course of the night. Through it all, he hadn't managed to pick up a single woman, but he had much better luck picking up glasses of scotch. Rudy had stuck around long enough to hit closing time at several nearby bars, then moved on to close the after-hours clubs as well.

Now that morning had come, he made his way to the elevator, stumbling a bit along the way. He hit the UP button and ran his hands through his various pockets, searching for his room key as he glanced idly around the lobby. He could see that foot traffic was light at this early hour of the morning.

Just as Rudy found his key, something caught his eye. Across the lobby, the door to the hotel bar was ajar...and the lights were on. Could it be? Was the bar open at this hour?

The doors of the elevator parted as the car arrived with an electronic bell tone. Rudy looked down at the room key in his hand, then back at the door that led to the bar. *Well, I guess I could just check whether they're open*, he thought. *Just out of curiosity.*

Pocketing his key, he headed over to stick his head inside the open door. Sure enough, a bartender was standing behind the bar, polishing glasses with a white cloth. There was only one patron inside: an attractive, languid woman who was sitting at the far end of the bar.

He pushed the door open a bit more and stepped

inside. The bartender looked up and saw him approaching. "Can I help you?"

Rudy climbed onto a stool. "Scotch and water, please. Neat."

The bartender smiled, but shook his head. "Sorry. We're not open. I'm just cleaning up." To punctuate his point, he gestured toward the chairs that were stacked upside down on top of tables around the room.

"You're not serving?"

"Can't. It's not legal, this early. I could lose my license."

Rudy looked over at the drink that was nestled in the hand of the woman at the end of the bar. She looked back at him, the corner of her mouth curling into a lazy smile. "Not even one last nightcap?" he asked the bartender. "Or morningcap, or whatever?"

"Sorry," the bartender replied with a shrug. "Course, if you were to help yourself to something while I wasn't looking, well, there wouldn't be much I could do about it, now would there?"

Rudy caught the bartender's knowing smile, and nodded. He started to ease himself off the stool, but the woman at the end of the bar raised a hand. "Don't bother yourself," she said, in the sort of throaty voice that often came with a little too much alcohol. "I'll get it for you. I need a refill anyway."

"Thanks," said Rudy.

Watching her get off her stool and move around to the back of the bar, Rudy guessed that she'd had quite a few refills already. But then again, after the night he'd had, he supposed he wasn't really in a position to judge.

"Scotch and water, right?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Still, despite her blurry-eyed look, Rudy had to admit that she was a good-looking woman. Long hair and pale skin—maybe a little too pale, but no big deal—that was offset by a silky black dress, cut low across the front and slit high up the side, revealing just enough to keep him interested. He glanced at himself in the mirror behind the bar and straightened his hair with his hand.

"Here we are." She came back around the front of the bar with a pair of amber drinks in her hands. She set one glass down on the bar and sat down beside him.

Rudy raised his glass toward her in a toast, and looked deeply into her eyes. "To early risers," he said.

"Or late bedgoers," she said, slurring her words a bit.

They took a swallow from their respective drinks.

"So," Rudy said, "are you staying in the hotel?"

"Mm-hmm."

"In New York for work or pleasure?"

"Oh, working, unfortunately." She took another sip. Then, in a meaningful tone, she added, "Not that there's anything wrong with mixing in a little pleasure too..."

"I couldn't agree more."

"Really..." she said. "And you? Are you here with anyone?"

Bingo, Rudy thought. "Nope, just me. Finished off my sales quota yesterday. So now I'm all by my lonesome, looking for a little fun before I head home this afternoon."

"Lucky you. I've got miles to go before I hit my quota."

"Poor baby. What's your line?"

"It's...hard to describe."

"Technical, eh?"

"Something like that. But I could show you...if you'd like to come up to my room."

Rudy's heart was pounding in his chest. "I thought you'd never ask."

She turned to the bartender. "I don't suppose you could be a dear and send room service to room 1218? We're going to need some ice. A *lot* of it..."

Rudy's eyebrows rose. "Oh, really?" He wasn't quite sure what she had in mind, but he quickly decided that he'd like to find out. The next few hours could turn out to be very interesting.

The bartender chuckled and reached for the phone beneath the bar. "Sure. No problem."

She eased herself off the bar stool, brushing against Rudy as she rose. He was right behind her.

"Hang on a minute," he said. He pulled a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and dropped it onto the bar beside his empty glass. "Oops," he said, sliding the bill toward the bartender with a wink. "I think I dropped some cash."

"I'll keep an eye out for it," the bartender replied. He tossed Rudy a little two-fingered salute before slipping the bill into his pocket.

Rudy turned back to his new friend. He slid his right hand into her left, their fingers intertwining. "Shall we?"

"Mm-hmm."

The two of them walked to the door, hand in hand. As they passed a tall window, they were enveloped in the warm glow of a shaft of sunlight. Rudy closed his eyes momentarily against the glare. As a result,

he didn't notice the other effect that the light had on his companion.

It turned her body translucent.

Perhaps more important, Rudy also didn't notice the other change that was gradually taking place as they left the bar. While he held her left hand, the fingers on her right hand began to glisten. Slowly, they grew long, hard, and metallic, until they resembled a set of razor-sharp blades.

"By the way," she purred, "how are your kidneys?"

"My...kidneys? They're fine," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

CHAPTER 6

“I’m telling you,” Ray said, “there’s something going on.”

“Why?” Egon replied dryly. “Just because in the last seventy-two hours, we’ve had to deal with twelve free-floating vapors, six class-four poltergeists, eight full-body apparitions, and a swarm of ectoplasmic, urban-legend alligators that I’m still not sure how to classify?”

“No, it’s more than that. You have to consider the forms they’ve been manifesting, too. Sewer gators. Kidney thieves. Hook-handed killers. Heck, we had three vanishing hitchhikers this morning alone! When’s the last time that happened?”

“So you’re saying that they’re all connected.”

“They have to be, don’t you think?”

Egon nodded. “I’d say so. As coincidences go, I’d place the probability of this happening by chance

as...just slightly less likely than all of the plankton on Earth suddenly jumping up and singing ‘Hello, Dolly.’”

“Which would make it slightly *more* likely than the plankton jumping up to sing ‘Ice, Ice Baby.’ ”

“Why do you say that?”

“Even plankton have some taste.”

Egon smiled at that. Ray always took it as a personal triumph when one of his jokes made Egon smile. It was the closest Egon ever came to laughing out loud.

“Someone’s bringing urban legends to life,” said Ray. “We’re not going to be able to stop this for good until we figure out who and why.”

“You’re probably correct,” Egon agreed. “But it’ll have to wait until Peter and Winston return from their meeting, and we’re back to full strength. For now, I think we’d better table the discussion and turn our attention to the matter at hand.”

“Right.”

Throughout the conversation, the pair had been slowly inching up toward a four-foot, potted cactus, their nutrona wands held loosely but ready. Large potted plants were not uncommon along the streets of New York, but this one was different. Ordinarily, it would have been strange enough that this particular plant stood in the middle of the street, or that both the cactus and its pot were a pale, chalky white. Or that the afternoon sun shone partially through it, rendering the cactus translucent. But in this case, all of those considerations were overshadowed by the thing that was even more unusual:

The cactus was moving.

It wasn’t that it was floating or walking around or

anything like that. It wasn't even jumping up to sing "Hello, Dolly." But it was pulsing and bulging in various places, with an organic motion that made it seem alive.

Ray and Egon stopped walking and maintained a respectful distance of about three feet from the spectral cactus. Egon shifted his nutrona wand to one hand and took out his PKE meter with the other. He waved it slowly in front of the cactus, moving it up and down, then side to side, as he scanned the plant for supernatural energies. Not surprisingly, the readout on the meter was going through the roof.

"Readings in the red zone?" Ray asked.

"Infra-red," Egon said.

"And here we are, shorthanded."

"Apparently, Peter and Winston chose a rather inconvenient time to start moonlighting in politics."

Ray edged a half-step closer to the pulsating cactus. Without taking his eyes off it, he asked, "Ever hear of dead plants leaving ghosts behind?"

"Not in the last fifteen centuries or so," said Egon. He was keeping an equally close eye on the cactus. "There's the legend of the Deadly Night Shades, but that's about it."

"Sounds right. How about urban legends about cacti?"

"No, but I'm not really up on the literature. I've never had much patience for things that aren't real."

"Why's it moving like that?"

"I'm not sure. Um...does it look to you as though it's starting to move faster?"

It was true. The pulsations were coming fast and furious now, as though it was reaching a fever pitch.

"Shoot it!" cried Ray.

But before they could trigger their weapons, the cactus exploded. It burst into a spray of...something...that filled the air and splattered across their bodies.

For a split-second, the two Ghostbusters assumed it was ectoplasmic slime. Immediately, though, they both realized that it wasn't slimy, and it wasn't a single mass—the "it" was really a "they."

And "they" were alive.

Egon looked down at his chest in alarm. "Ghost spiders!"

"Thousands of them!" cried Ray.

The spiders were everywhere. On the street. On the walls. And most important, on Ray and Egon. More out of reflex than anything else, they flailed wildly, trying to swat the spiders away. But their hands simply passed harmlessly through the insubstantial bodies of the ghostly arachnids.

"We can't blast them!" Egon realized. As long as the spiders were swarming on their bodies, zapping them would mean zapping each other—and with weapons that could blow holes through concrete, that just didn't seem like a good idea.

"They're on the clothes! Ditch them!" Ray shouted back. He was already stripping off his gear and coveralls, carrying the bulk of his spiders with it. He stomped on the pedal of a fallen trap and tossed his coveralls into the brilliant white light that poured out of it. In a flash, Ray's spiders were gone...and his coveralls were, too.

A moment later, Egon followed suit. Standing in their underwear, the pair snatched up their proton packs and looked around at the waves of spectral arachnids that seemed to be everywhere.

"I wish I thought to thank my mother when she was alive," Ray muttered.

"Thank her for what?" Egon asked.

"For teaching me to always wear clean underwear."

"Let's get to it." Egon gritted his teeth and took aim. "Where the hell are Peter and Winston?"

I could get used to this, Venkman thought.

He adjusted the silk necktie they'd given him, straightened the lapels of his new Armani suit, and struck his most mayoral pose. Lights flashed as the photographer snapped another picture.

"Excellent," said the photographer. "Now, let's get a few of the two of you together."

Winston joined Venkman in front of the cameras. It was funny how different Winston looked in an expensive suit; Venkman had rarely seen him in so much as a tie. He had to admit, his fellow Ghostbuster cleaned up nicely. In Venkman's opinion, at least, the two of them genuinely looked like candidates.

Winston was grinning madly, like a kid on Christmas morning. "Can you believe this?" he asked.

"You know me," Venkman replied. "I'll believe anything."

The photographer raised a hand to catch their attention. "How about a few warm smiles? Good. Hold it." He snapped off several photos in rapid succession. Venkman fought the temptation to hold up two fingers behind Winston's head. "Okay, now put an arm around Mister Zeddemore's shoulders. Great. Just like that."

The past couple of days had been a whirlwind. With so little time to catch his breath, it all still felt

like a dream to Venkman. However, even if it did turn out to be a dream, he had absolutely no intention of pinching himself to find out.

"Okay, we need some serious shots now. Let me see some confidence. Come on, you call that confidence? There you go. Excellent."

Growing up as the son of a pair of carnival barkers, Venkman had never really pictured himself taking a job that meant wearing a suit every day, let alone running for office. Then again, he hadn't really imagined himself on the faculty of a major university or chasing spooks out of Madison Square Garden either. And those jobs hadn't turned out too badly. Sure, they kicked him out of the university eventually, and Ghostbusters did go bankrupt a few times. By and large, though, it had been an incredible ride.

"Good. Let's get the two of you shaking hands now. Doctor Venkman, can you move half a step to your left? That's it."

Venkman wasn't really sure what his chances were in the election. Still, considering the free suits, free meals, and who knew what else that he'd be picking up along the way, it looked like he'd come out of this ahead either way, regardless of whether he won or lost the election. And if by some chance he did win...well, then the fun was just beginning. Not that he'd ever try to hurt anyone—well, maybe just that woman at the Motor Vehicles Bureau who kept sending him to the back of the line—but he had no doubt that he'd have ample opportunity to pick up a few perks along the way. After all, he'd have the New York City checkbook in his pocket and a deputy mayor who didn't know anything more about city government than he did.

"Annnnnnnnd that's the last of them. Thank you, gentlemen."

Venkman and Winston clapped each other on the shoulder and stepped away from the backdrop that had been erected in the conference room. "A splendid morning's work, my friend," Venkman said. "How about celebrating over some lunch and cocktails?"

"Sounds good," Winston replied, as they moved toward the door. "But maybe we should check in with Ray and Egon first, to make sure they don't need us."

"Hey, they're professionals. They can handle things for a few hours. Why would they possibly need us?"

"I guess. Can't hurt to check, though."

John Fielding was waiting for them at the door. He shook his head. "Sorry, fellows. Not so fast."

Uh-oh, Venkman thought. In his experience, the words "not so fast" were never good. For a moment, he wondered whether they'd at least let him keep the suit.

"You're not done for the day yet," said Fielding. "Not by a long shot."

Oh, is that all, Venkman thought with relief.

"You still need to go through your first briefing session, and then we have to start your media training. Here." Fielding handed each of them a thick binder. At a guess, Venkman would have figured that each binder was filled with a couple hundred pages. His estimate would have been short by at least another hundred.

"What's this?" Winston asked, opening the cover to glance inside.

"Your platform," said Fielding. "That book contains your position on every issue that's likely to arise during the election. The blue page at the front of each

section is a brief on the substance of the issue. After that, you'll find your position, the positions of your various opponents—you'll want to pay particular attention to Mayor Lapinski's, of course—and your three or four key message points."

Suddenly, Venkman felt himself getting nervous. This was starting to sound like work. He held up a hand in mock defense. "Whoa, whoa, Johnny. Hold up a minute. Don't you think we're veering just a tad into overkill here?"

Fielding looked puzzled. "Why's that?"

Venkman hefted the thick notebook. "Well, this doorstop here. I'm sure the guys and gals in the back room put a lot of work into this. The binding alone is very attractive—you don't find this kind of black vinyl, three-ring binder just anywhere. But if all this thing does is list the candidate's opinions, then I think we can probably do without it, don't you? I *am* the candidate, after all. Who knows my opinions better than me?"

Fielding's look of puzzlement had been replaced by an eyebrow raised in skepticism. "Oh. When you put it that way..."

"I knew you'd come around."

"Where do you stand on the Brooklyn sewer treatment bypass legislation?"

"Huh?"

"The Brooklyn sewer treatment bypass legislation. You're the candidate. You must have an opinion..."

"Well, uh, sure," Venkman stammered. "In the, uh, matter of the Brooklyn sewage treatment..."

"Bypass legislation."

"...bypass legislation, I'd have to say that, uh...sewage plays a major role in the City of New

York. And one thing's for sure: If you have sewage, you're going to have to treat it. And, uh, treat it well. So if you want to, uh, bypass the sewage..."

Fielding watched Venkman with his arms crossed and a bemused smile on his face.

"Yeah, all right," Venkman said, deflated. "I'll read the book."

"Thank you."

Venkman flipped idly through the binder, pausing at individual pages more or less at random. "But I'm not so sure about this whole business of you guys telling me what my opinions are. Over the years, I have managed to come up with one or two of my own, you know."

Fielding sighed. "Peter, you're a smart guy. You hold two Ph.D.'s, right?"

"Right. Psychology and parapsychology."

"Good. Then I'm sure you can follow this: The candidate is the public face of the campaign."

"Right."

"But that's just the *public* face. The candidate's not a one-man show. He's representing the needs and interests of the entire party. That means the things that come out of his mouth have to be aligned with the positions of the party." Fielding tapped his finger on the cover of the binder. "Every word in here was crafted by experts working behind the scenes. They understand these issues far better than you and I ever will. You just need to trust them, okay?"

"I suppose."

Just then, Winston chimed in. "Actually," he said, "the sewage treatment legislation is pretty important. If it passes, it runs the risk of raising toxicity levels in the water by a good forty percent. Not to mention

the possible health risks for children living around there."

"Yeah?" said Venkman. He started to flip through the binder. "What page is it on?"

"Oh, I don't know," Winston replied. "I didn't read about it in here."

"Then how do you know about it?"

"They were debating it in last week's city council meeting. I saw it on cable."

"You watch those things?"

"Absolutely. Don't you?"

"Uh..."

"Peter, those guys on the city council are making decisions that affect all of us. It just makes sense to stay on top of it," Winston said. "Like that whole budget fiasco in the Transit Authority a few months back. Now, that was a mess. Money being mismanaged left and right... I'll tell you, if I'd been there, I'd have been all over those guys."

Fielding nodded in appreciation. "That's very impressive, Winston. More and more, I can see that we made the right choice bringing you onto this ticket."

"Thank you, sir."

"We're all going to be working together closely for the next several months. Call me John."

"Thanks, John."

"Now, the good news is that you two are big news. The press has been clamoring for interviews," said Fielding. "We need to keep that heat going, so we've scheduled a full slate of interviews for you tomorrow."

"What's the bad news?" Winston asked.

"You need to be ready by then. That means media training today. And it means—" Fielding tapped the

hefty binder in Venkman's hand "—you have to get through all of this by tomorrow. I wouldn't count on any of us going home early tonight."

As Fielding and Winston continued to talk, Venkman stared at his running mate in disbelief. "*Money was being mismanaged left and right?*" "*I'd have been all over those guys?*" What happened to Winston? Since when did he know so much about this stuff?

Or could it be that Winston had been interested in these sorts of things all along, and Venkman just never noticed? It wasn't as though he'd ever spent a whole lot of time pondering Winston's political views, or the ways Winston spent his spare time.

Either way, the most likely result was a serious crimp in Venkman's style. He wondered if there might be a way to turn things around. Maybe Ray would make a more clueless deputy mayor...

But no, it was too late for that. He'd already publicly announced Winston as his running mate. Besides, he liked Winston. This all seemed to mean so much to the guy. Much as it might make his life easier, he just couldn't pull the rug out from under him.

None of which meant that Venkman had to give up his plans, of course. It just added a complication that he would have to work around. It was the price of friendship, he supposed with a sigh.

Venkman watched Winston and Fielding paging through the binder. Winston was saying something about school reform and fiscal responsibility.

Friends are a pain, Venkman thought.

It's good to have friends, Winston thought.

He knew full well that he wouldn't be standing here in a fancy suit if it weren't for Venkman. Peter was

the golden boy who was the party's first choice. More and more, though, it seemed as though the party boys considered Winston to be an asset, too—and that felt pretty good. Either way, though, he didn't mind tagging along for the ride.

Actually, it was an attitude that had served Winston fairly well throughout his adult life. Growing up on the streets of Brooklyn, he never really imagined himself running for office...or even chasing ghosts, for that matter. With Winston's father working construction, the Zeddemores hadn't had the kind of money or middle-class lifestyle that folks like Ray or Egon had grown up with.

It was Winston's mother who had encouraged him to go into the service after high school, so that he could get a decent education on the government's tab. Sure enough, a few years later, he came out of the military with certification in electrical engineering...not to mention small arms training, a black belt in karate, and a stint in the Strategic Air Command ECM school.

With the military behind him, Winston fully expected to put his engineering background to work when he came home. What he didn't expect was to find the economy in what the President was referring to as "a downturn," with hardly a job to be had. Winston's father's connections helped him land the occasional construction job, but even those were few and far between. And there was only so long that he could live off Mama Zeddemore. He started off searching the want ads each day for electrical engineering jobs. But after a while, he was searching for any job at all.

So when he saw the ad for an "ectoplasmic contain-

ment specialist," he had no idea what the job might be, but he figured he had nothing to lose. Whatever it was, they were looking for candidates with weapons training and either military or law enforcement experience. He had plenty of military experience, all right. It was probably some kind of security job, he guessed.

Even today, he still smiled at the memory of what passed for his job interview. The whole thing had consisted basically of Janine asking him one question: "Do you believe in UFOs, astral projection, mental telepathy, ESP, clairvoyance, spirit photography, full-trance mediums, psychokinetic or telekinetic movement, cartomancy, phrenology, black and/or white magic, divination, scrying, necromancy, the theory of Atlantis, the Loch Ness monster, Bigfoot, the Bermuda Triangle, or in general in spooks, spectres, wraiths, geists, and ghosts?"

Winston's answer had been a simple one: "If there's a semi-regular paycheck in it, I'll believe anything you say."

A few minutes later, Ray, Egon, and Peter had come swooping back into the office. Business was booming, and they were up to their ears in phantoms. Before Winston could so much as say a word, Ray told him he was hired. From then on, his life became a mad rush of ghoulies, ghosties, and things that went bump in the night.

Winston never expected to spend the next several years doing what his mother affectionately referred to as "running around with a bunch of white boys, hunting spirits." A religious woman, she was always just a little uncomfortable with what he did for a living, despite his repeated assurances that his employers

were *scientists*, not black magicians. Still, her discomfort didn't stop her from cutting out every news item that mentioned him and pasting it into a scrapbook about her son, the Ghostbuster. By this point, she was up to her third book.

When Winston called to tell her about the latest little twist in his career path, though, his mother's reaction was a whole different ball game. She hadn't believed him at first, of course. Deputy mayor? She thought he was pulling her leg. And, to tell the truth, he couldn't blame her; he was having a hard time believing it himself.

Once she realized that he was telling the truth, though, she was fit to bust. She was so overwhelmed that he had to hold the telephone receiver away from his ear to avoid going deaf from the excited shrieks. Her own son, possibly the next deputy mayor of New York? She couldn't get off the phone fast enough so she could call every single relative, living and dead—and then run up and down the block to tell the neighbors. Winston hadn't stopped grinning since then.

He had always known that his mama was proud of him. But now, he finally felt like he was living up to it.

That was why he was determined to make sure that he and Venkman won this election. It wasn't for the fame, which he suspected was part of Peter's reason for doing it. Winston's primary motivation wasn't even to help people and make a difference, although that was certainly a big piece of it.

No, the main reason he wanted to win the election was that he didn't want to let his mother down.

* * *

By the time Doctor Peter Venkman, candidate for the office of Mayor of New York, got home that night, he was beat. It was well after ten o'clock when he stepped out of a taxi in front of his apartment building. He was used to late nights; in fact, he was far more of a night person than a morning person. But tonight, his brain was suffering from information overload. After a day of photo shoots, briefings, and media training, his head was swimming with facts and opinions about public utilities, tax rebates, and garbage strikes. All he wanted now was to take a hot shower, leave a couple more apologies on Dana's answering machine, and hit the sheets.

"I sure do know how to live," he told himself.

Venkman stood there on the sidewalk for a moment. He moved his head around in a circle and rolled his shoulders a few times, trying to loosen up the tension in his neck. It helped a little. Feeling a bit better, he took out his keys and let himself into the building.

Once inside, he paused to open his mailbox. He pulled out a handful of envelopes and flipped through them as he climbed the stairs to his apartment. "Bill. Bill. Junk mail. Junk. Junk. Fabulous offer to win big. Bill."

The long day made the flights of stairs seem even more steep than usual. He wondered whether there were elevators in Gracie Mansion. There weren't all that many floors in the mayor's residence—certainly not as many as there were in the high rise apartment buildings that so many New Yorkers lived in. But, he figured that, as a city-owned building, the mansion probably had to have at least one so that it could be

considered wheelchair accessible. *Well, if it doesn't, he decided, rounding the next landing, that's going to be my first order of business when I take office.*

Even in the privacy of his own thoughts, Peter Venkman always framed things in terms of "when." "If" just wasn't his style.

At last, he climbed the last few stairs and walked to the door of his apartment. He flipped briefly through his ring of keys and slipped the appropriate one into the deadbolt lock. As the key turned, he was startled by a voice behind him:

"If you're doing all of this to impress me, it's working."

Venkman's eyebrows rose in surprise, and his lips curled into a smile. He turned to see Dana standing there with a cockeyed smirk of her own.

"What, this?" he said. "If you think the way I open a door is impressive, you should see me with a window."

She slowly stepped closer. "I meant the whole thing with you running for mayor."

He took a step toward her, meeting in the middle of the hall. "Oh, that. Guess you caught me. Yeah, it's gonna be on the front page of tomorrow's paper: 'Candidate Runs to Impress Girl.' "

" 'Girl?' "

"Okay, 'Candidate Runs to Impress Independent, Liberated Woman with Hopes, Dreams, and Aspirations of Her Own.' "

Dana fingered the lapel of his jacket. "Nice suit."

"Thanks. So...what brings you by?"

"I tried calling you at the office this afternoon, but Janine said you haven't been in all day."

"Yeah, election stuff. How long have you been waiting?"

She glanced at her watch. "About...forty-five minutes or so. One of your neighbors let me in. I suppose I look honest."

"Not to mention really, really hot. So where's Bu—I mean, Oscar?"

"Babysitter. And 'Butch' is fine."

"Well, it won't get him beaten up after school, anyway." Venkman breathed a mental sigh of relief. Dana was letting him call Oscar "Butch" again. If she hadn't completely forgiven him yet, she was on the way, at least. "Listen, do you want to come in?"

"It's probably beats standing out here in the hall all night. I think the woman in 3-G is watching us through the peephole."

Venkman turned toward apartment 3-G and waved. "Hi, Mrs. Tugfoigl. Be sure to tune in again tomorrow for another stirring installment of *Hallways of Our Lives*. Will Dana lay down her cello and take Peter back? Will Chenelle survive her fateful brain surgery? And what about Naomi?" He pursed his lips and ran toward apartment 3-G, planting a loud, smoochy kiss right on the glass of the peephole. Once he felt fairly confident that his neighbor had recoiled from the peephole in embarrassment, he walked calmly back to his own door.

Dana was giggling. He loved it when she giggled.

He opened the door and ushered Dana into the apartment. With a final wave to Mrs. Tugfoigl—more for effect than anything else—he closed the door behind them.

Once they were alone, he slipped his arms around Dana's waist. "So what *did* bring you back?"

"Who says I'm back?"

"It was my raw, animal magnetism, wasn't it?"

Dana slipped out of his arms as smoothly as he'd slipped them around her. "You're right."

"About my magnetism?"

"No, that you're a dope."

With a grunt, Venkman mimed being stabbed through the heart. Was it any wonder that he found her so attractive?

Dana waited patiently until he finished staggering around in his death throes. When he was done, she asked, "Mayor, huh?"

"Why not?"

"I don't remember you mentioning any political aspirations before."

"They developed kind of suddenly. Here, let me take your coat. Oh, and any other pieces of clothing you'd like to remove."

Venkman spent the next hour filling her in on all the details over coffee. Or almost all the details, anyway; he left out the parts about scamming whatever he could out of the job.

Dana was not only an attractive audience, but an attentive one as well. She asked the occasional question, but otherwise, she didn't interrupt very much. As he let the story unfold, he noticed a funny look in her eyes. She seemed unusually focused, studying his face.

After awhile, he couldn't ignore it any longer. "What's up?" he asked. "Do I have something stuck in my teeth?"

"Hmm? Oh. No, it's nothing like that."

"So what, then?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking..."

"Yeah?"

"Well...you remember our conversation about responsibility?"

"Yeah?"

"Being the mayor is a pretty big job. It brings along a lot of responsibility. Do you think you're ready for that?"

To be honest, the enormity of the responsibility hadn't fully hit him until just that moment. He thought about how much work it had taken just to start to understand all of the issues today. He could only imagine how much tougher it would be to have to actually deal with all of them.

But then again, he figured he could give all the work to his staff.

"Sure," he said. "I can handle it. No problem."

She eyed him curiously. "What are you up to?"

" 'Up to?' Y'know, I'm deeply hurt that you just immediately assume that I'm up to something. Can't I just act out of civic mindedness? Can't I just try to help my fellow man? Can't I just want to give something back to this crazy, cockamamie city that I love?"

Dana didn't say anything, but the look on her face said she still wasn't convinced.

So Venkman kept going: "Can't I try to mend my ways and win back the woman who means more to me than any election—nay, more than life itself?"

Dana looked bemused. "You are so full of it."

"But charming."

Dana leaned back in her chair and let out a deep breath. "I don't know."

"Don't worry about it. There are lots of things I don't know about. Material dialecticism. Calculus..."

"Why am I finding this new attitude of yours hard to believe?"

"Because you're overly skeptical? It's okay, everyone has their little character flaws." He laid his hand on hers. "But admitting it is the first step. I'm here for you. We'll get through this together."

Dana barely acknowledged that he said anything. "I've known you long enough to know that you always have an angle. However, I've also known you long enough to know that you usually do the right thing in the end. Who knows—maybe this whole thing will be good for you."

"So we're back together?"

Dana looked into his eyes and smiled. "I'll think about it."

CHAPTER 7

Ray and Egon stared at the flames all around them. "Fascinating phenomenon," said Egon.

Ray extended his hand, palm outward, toward the nearest sheet of bluish fire. Then he slowly pushed his hand further, until it was enveloped by the flames. His face registered no pain. "No heat," he said. "It kind of reminds me of..."

"The spirit inferno of Avignon?"

"Exactly. France, 1862."

Egon shook his head. "1863."

"Oh, right. Of course." Ray started thrusting his hand in and out of the fire, as scientific curiosity began to yield to playfulness. "Wow. I've read about it, but this is the first time I've actually seen a level-B pyrokinetic manifestation."

"It's the first time anyone's seen one in nearly one hundred and fifty years," Egon said.

"Then it seems like a funny coincidence to have one show up now." Instinctively, for what must have been the six hundredth time, Ray slapped at the last remaining ghost spider. It had been scrabbling around his body since the day before—and was likely to continue doing so, since his hand passed through the spider without any noticeable effect. "You think it's connected?"

Egon pointed his PKE meter at the flames and moved it from side to side in a slow arc. "The readings are consistent with the incidents we've seen over the last few days."

"So does that mean you guys can put it out?" The question came from a burly fireman in full gear. He was the only one willing to join the two Ghostbusters in the middle of a city block that was engulfed in a supernatural blaze. Half a dozen of his colleagues were huddled near a pair of fire engines that idled a block away. They weren't nicknamed "New York's Bravest" for nothing—these were men who would charge into a raging inferno without thinking twice. But this was something completely outside their realm of experience. "My boys tried everything, but nothing worked. Foam, water—everything just passed through without doin' nothing."

"That's because it wasn't holy water," said Ray.

"Huh?"

"The thing that puzzles me," said Egon, "is that this one breaks the pattern."

"Into a million pieces," said Ray. "It's different than the incidents we've been dealing with recently. For one thing, it's the first time there hasn't been any damage. We've got plenty of fire all over the place, but it isn't actually burning anything."

Egon nodded. "Moreover, it's just a fire, albeit a spectral one. There's nothing about it that would cause it to qualify as an urban legend."

Ray leaned back, so that the ethereal flames engulfed the top of his head, along with the ghost spider. With a sizzle and a tiny scream, the spider was gone. "Yep, it's a puzzle, all right," he said with a yawn. "If I had time to get more than three hours of sleep one of these nights, I might have enough brain cells left to solve it."

"Yeah, yeah," said the fireman. "But can you put it out?" His questions were getting more insistent—and, all things considered, Ray couldn't blame him.

He looked up as a *chup chup chup* sound grew louder above them. "Actually, it looks like your people want to give it one more try."

A trio of pale, white helicopters approached overhead.

"Those aren't our birds," said the fireman.

"Then whose are they?"

"You got me. News choppers?"

Egon raised a hand to his forehead, to shield his eyes against the sun as he watched. "What's that beneath them?"

Ray squinted at the aircraft. "Oh, it's an old firefighter technique for fighting forest fires. They hang a giant tarp under the helicopter, dip it in a lake or body of water to pick up several hundred gallons of water, and then they release it over the fire."

"Not in a populated area!" The fireman was getting agitated and nervous. "The weight of that much water falling from that height could kill somebody! We've gotta get out of here!"

"It's worse than that," Ray said, as he pulled out

his nutrona wand and hit the power. "It is an urban legend! Get ready, Egon."

Egon followed Ray's lead. "For what? What is it?"

"A skeet shoot," said Ray.

That's when the spectral helicopters released their loads of water.

And that's when scuba divers started falling from the sky.

The music flared as Venkman strolled quickly across the stage. The band launched into a few bars of a familiar, bass-heavy melody. When the band leader called out, "Who ya gonna call?" the cheering audience screamed, "Ghostbusters!" The applause went on until Venkman and the host greeted each other with a warm handshake, and Peter took a seat in a comfortably padded chair beside the host's desk. He flashed the band leader a little thumbs-up and silently mouthed the words "Hi, Paul."

"Welcome back," said the host. "Now, you've been here before, right? What is it, about four years ago?"

"More like five, I think," said Venkman.

"Is it really? Well, I'm sorry it's taken so long to have you back. Now, Doctor Venkman... It is 'Doctor,' right?"

"Right, Dave." Ordinarily, Venkman's gut impulse would have been to tell the host to call him by his first name. But the media trainer had taught him to use the title. It established a subliminal air of authority in the eyes of the audience, especially if he kept using the host's first name.

"And what are you a doctor of, again?"

"A couple of things. I've got Ph.D.'s in both psychology and parapsychology."

"Really? That's very impressive. Two degrees?"

"The very best that the Offshore University of Manila has to offer," Venkman said with a smile. The trainer had warned him that Mayor Lapinski's people would probably try to downplay Venkman's credentials by questioning the validity of an advanced degree in parapsychology, but he could preempt the strategy by making light of it himself. By lacing his discussions with just a touch of self-deprecating humor (although not too much—he didn't want to raise any doubts about his qualifications in the audience's mind), he could use his advanced education as a point in his favor while still sounding like an average joe.

After pausing for a laugh from the audience, he added, "No, actually, I went to Columbia University."

"Not too shabby," said the host. "Well, I know everyone's anxious to hear about the mayoral race, and we'll get to that in a minute. But first, there's something I've got to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Do you think you could exorcise the spirits of last night's audience from the studio? Now, *those* folks were scary..."

While Venkman handled the entertainment circuit with his characteristic smooth charm, the media planners at party headquarters booked Winston into the more serious outlets that drew smaller audiences but focused more deeply on the issues. And so it was that Winston found himself sitting in a darkened studio, across the table from a talk show host who was far more somber and sincere than the one who was interviewing Venkman across town.

"Mister Zeddemore," said the host, leaning forward in his chair.

"Yes," Winston replied, leaning comfortably back with a look of concentration on his face. The media trainer had taught him to look relaxed and confident, but to be careful not to seem bored or disinterested.

"Transit fares."

"Yes."

"As you know, the Metropolitan Transit Authority raised them this year."

"Yes." Winston wished the host would get to the question already. He was beginning to become acutely aware of the quiet that came with the lack of a studio audience. In the midst of the darkened set, the host's slow, contemplative style was starting to make him sleepy. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself awake.

The host made a tent with his fingers and touched them to his lips. He studied Winston for a long moment, and then finally asked, "Are the fares too high?"

He sat up and leaned forward, toward the host. "I'm glad you asked me that." *Or that you asked me any question*, he thought.

Winston launched into his pre-scripted response. It was made easier by the fact that this was one of the replies that weren't all that different from his own opinions. "Personally, I've never met a New Yorker who *didn't* think transit fares are too high. In this case, though, I think the issue is less about the fare hike itself than about the way in which it happened. The MTA petitioned the government to raise the fares by arguing that they were facing a massive deficit, and that's what swayed the government in their favor.

Now, of course, we know that wasn't really the case. The MTA did have enough money. They just weren't managing it well."

The host nodded sagely. "If you were in office when a similar situation transpired, how would you handle the dispute?"

"I'd challenge the MTA to find better ways to handle their budgets. I'd remind them that their mission is to serve the public, not to turn a profit." Winston had to acknowledge that the campaign people had written him a good answer. It put him squarely on the side of the public, but didn't rule out the possibility of fare hikes, so that he could avoid completely offending the MTA.

His eyes moved away from the host to look directly into the camera. "New Yorkers want to work. They want to live their lives. It's up to us to make that possible, and to make sure they can afford to do it."

As stoic and professional as he appeared on the outside, Winston was grinning like an idiot on the inside.

What a trip! he thought.

"The time grows closer, Geezil."

Much as Geezil realized that the statement was self-evident enough to be a little silly—time always grows closer, it doesn't stand still—he had enough common sense to know better than to mention it. In fact, he'd long since discovered the wisdom of staying outside the reach of Xanthador's arms. Physical abuse came with the job description here. But as Xanthador's size and strength grew day by day, the chances that Geezil's master would kill or dismember him by

accident were becoming even greater than the chances that he'd do it on purpose.

With all of that in mind, he simply said, "My heart leaps with joy, o most excellent monarch of fright."

Xanthador's tongue rolled languorously out of his mouth to extend several feet, before curling around to lick his lips with pleasure. "Do you feel the change, Geezil? Can you taste it?"

Geezil stuck out his considerably shorter tongue. All he tasted was the usual foul air. "Oh, yes. Most definitely, o archduke of horror. It tastes delicious. Yum yum."

Without warning, Xanthador's tongue lashed out to wrap itself tightly around Geezil's throat. "Then why have you not begun the preparations?" he said in an oily tone that did nothing to hide the implied threat beneath the words.

His power must be growing, thought Geezil as he struggled to breathe. *He can talk with his tongue stretched halfway across the plain.*

"I was...just on my...way...to do so...o...master," he wheezed.

"By all means, then. Fulfill your duties without delay," Xanthador said, releasing him.

Geezil fell to the ground, gasping for breath. *The neck,* he thought. *Why is it always the neck?*

"The barrier between worlds grows thin as vapor," said Xanthador. "It will be soon now. Before long, Xanthador shall walk the Earth once more. All must stand in readiness."

He plucked long, silvery strands of ectoplasm from the breeze, and began to mold and weave them into shape.

"To work, Geezil," said Xanthador. "We have much to do."

"The thing is," Louis was saying, "if we leave now, we can still be there in time for the curtain. It would be a shame to miss part of the play, even though I did get the tickets for half price, so I guess we'll come out ahead as long as we get there before fifty percent of the play is over. Although, on second thought, I suppose that in computing the net cost of the tickets, you also have to factor in the sixty-three minutes I spent standing on line at the TKTS booth. And, of course, they were sold out of tickets for the play we really wanted to see. But even so, it's still a good deal."

Janine didn't appear to hear a word that Louis said—she was too busy talking on the phone and scribbling notes at lightning speed. "Yes, sir," she said into the receiver, "I'm sure you had no idea that the car wasn't yours when you drove it away... Yes, I understand that you didn't know the owner's dead grandmother was wrapped in the blanket on the luggage rack... Yes, it must have been quite a shock when she sat up in the chop shop..."

"Hello, my fellow citizens!" Venkman threw his arms open wide as he swept into the office with Winston following behind.

Egon raised his eyes from a dusty tome to stare at Venkman. He used an elbow to nudge Ray, who was slumped over an equally ancient volume and snoring quietly. Ray woke with a start, exclaiming, "Aw, Mom! Why *can't* I fly to the Bermuda Triangle?" It took an instant for him to take in his surroundings,

and another to wipe the sleep from his eyes. After that, he stared at Venkman, too.

"Did you catch us on TV?" Venkman asked, without waiting for anyone to answer. "It's amazing. These reporters and talk show hosts are hanging on my every word. Naturally, some of it comes from my personal eloquence. But you wouldn't believe what running for mayor does for your social life..."

He continued on like that for a while, not noticing the state of his audience. But as he spoke, Winston looked around and was concerned about what he saw. It was anyone's guess as to whether Ray or Egon was more disheveled than the other. Their coveralls were dingy, their cheeks were hollow (well, Egon's were more hollow than usual), and there were dark circles under their eyes. The two of them continued to stare at Venkman. Winston suspected that it would have been an angry glare instead, if not for the fact that they looked too exhausted to muster up the necessary energy.

In fact, Janine didn't look much better. Usually, her clothes were a bit loud and funky but neatly pressed, and her shoulder-length hair was perfectly straight without a strand out of place. This evening, however, her clothes were rumpled and her hair was starting to frizz up as she struggled to keep up with the ringing telephones.

Louis wore his usual, slightly nonplussed expression. But even Slimer, who was hovering off in a corner of the room and stuffing a family-size bag of potato chips into his mouth (bag and all), didn't look happy.

All of which seemed to go straight over Venkman's head without effect.

"...the food in the green room didn't really agree with me," he was saying, "so I said to the associate producer—now get this—I said..."

Winston poked Venkman gently in the ribs. "Uh, Peter..."

"Hang on, Winston. Let me just finish this story."

"Peter."

"Yeah, yeah. In a minute. So, anyway..."

"Peter."

"What?" For the first time, Venkman seemed aware of his surroundings. He was silent for a long moment as he took in the sight of Ray and Egon staring back at him. Then, finally, he spoke. "You guys really need a shave."

That was all Egon could take. "Good idea, Peter," he snapped. "Maybe we could take the time to shave if half our manpower didn't disappear for five days to be interviewed on talk shows! Maybe we could even stop wearing the same clothes we've been wearing since Tuesday!"

As always, Venkman looked to Ray for support. "Ray, Egon's off again. Talk to him, will ya?"

Ray shrugged. "He's got a point, Pete," he said with a yawn. "We've been stretched pretty thin all week."

Slimer blew Venkman a large raspberry, spraying his shirt with a mixture of slime and potato chip crumbs.

"Gee," said Louis, "if you guys need some extra muscle, I could always strap on one of those gadgets and join you. I mean, it wouldn't be the first time. Remember that whole Vigo thing?"

Actually, they all remembered it—all too well. Louis still believed that he blasted through the barrier that protected the ghost of a murderous, seventeenth-

century Carpathian madman. The truth was that he just happened to fire at the same moment that the Ghostbusters defeated the ghost inside the barrier. In fact, when Ray subsequently checked Louis' equipment, he discovered that the accountant had turned the settings up far too high. It would only have taken a few more minutes for the proton pack to explode...taking several city blocks with it.

Not that any of that had dissuaded Louis. It took weeks before they could pry him out of the coveralls he'd grabbed and stop him from trying to tag along on their missions.

"Thanks, Louis. That won't be necessary," said Egon.

Ray continued to look Venkman in the eye. "This city is in the midst of a major psychic upheaval. Where've you been?"

Venkman tried to hold Ray's gaze at first, but then he had to look away. "Do you believe these guys?" he said to Winston. "Here we are, busting our humps to make this city a better place, and these guys—"

"It won't work, Pete," said Ray.

"What won't work?"

"That deflection tactic you use," said Egon. "Consider whom you're talking to. We've seen you do it hundreds of times."

Without missing a beat, Venkman shifted gears, swinging around to throw an arm around each of them. "Well, besides, I'm sure you guys did great without us. I mean, you're the A team. You've got it going on. We just hang onto your coattails and coast along—"

"That one won't work either," said Ray.

"Did I ever mention..."

"Oh, for crying out loud, Peter, knock it off," said Winston. "The guys are right."

"Finally," Janine said with a sigh.

"Sorry, guys," said Winston. "There's just been so much to do. It's been kind of hard to find space to breathe. But we didn't mean to leave you holding the bag."

Venkman started to say something, but then apparently reconsidered and looked down at his feet. "Yeah, like he said," he mumbled. "So, what's going on?"

"Major activity," Ray said. "That incident with the alligators was just the tip of the iceberg. Ever since then, we've been up against a non-stop series of contiguous, free-repeating, spectral manifestations. But that's not the weird part."

"Sounds weird enough to me," Winston remarked.

"Not nearly weird enough," said Egon. "What sets these apart and makes them truly unusual is that they all take the form of existing urban legends."

"Hold it," said Venkman. "Urban legends? How do you get ghosts of things that never existed in the first place?"

"Precisely," said Egon. "There must be a common source. Something out there that's creating them, or at least causing them to manifest in these particular forms. However, we've been too understaffed—"

Ray cleared his throat and shook his head slightly.

Egon caught the signal and took the point. "That is, we haven't been able to find the connection yet."

"Say, if you fellows are understaffed," said Louis, "I could always get out my gear and—"

"No thanks, Louis," said Ray. "We're okay."

Venkman picked up a cracked, yellowed scroll from

the table where Ray and Egon were working. He unrolled it partially and glanced at the unfamiliar foreign writing. "So you're looking for urban legends in here? I don't think you're going to find a whole lot of poodles in microwaves back in the seventh century."

"No, we're looking for the name one of the ghosts used back at Madison Square Garden: 'Xanthador,'" said Ray. "I knew that blow-up at the Garden was too big to be an isolated incident. Then, less than a day later, all of this hit the fan."

"But the Garden wasn't even an urban legend," said Winston. "Seems like kind of a long shot, doesn't it?"

"Maybe so," Ray replied. "But right now, it's the only shot we've got."

"All right, I get it," said Venkman. "Tomorrow morning, we'll talk to the campaign boys and try to find a way to carve out some time to help you guys."

"I'll see if I can carve out some time, too," said Louis.

"Thanks anyhow, Louis," said Venkman, "but we've got it covered."

Winston nodded his assent. "What do you need us to do?"

Janine held up the note she'd written. "Well, you can start by checking out an undead grandmother on the roof of a car uptown."

"Now?" Venkman looked at his watch and winced.

Egon raised an eyebrow. "You've got to go?"

"Big fund-raising dinner. We're supposed to meet and greet the major backers of the campaign. It starts in about fifteen minutes."

Ray and Egon looked at each other; then Ray

sighed. "Go ahead," he said. "Do what you've got to do. We'll handle the granny."

That was all Venkman needed to hear. He clapped Ray on the shoulder, gestured to Winston, and started for the door. "Thanks, Ray. Like I always say, you're a real friend."

Winston hung back for a moment before following Venkman. "We really will talk to the guys at the party tomorrow," he assured them. "We'll see what we can do to help you out."

"Thanks, man," said Ray.

As they watched the candidates disappear through the front door, Ray and Egon closed their books. "I'll go load up the car," Ray said, with a resigned sigh.

"So much for getting to the root of the mystery," Egon said. "Looks like Xanthador will have to wait yet another day."

"We could do it," said Janine.

"Hmm?"

"Louis and I. We could try to dig up information on Xanthador while you're out busting ghosts, or whatever you call it."

Loading a pair of proton packs into the Ectomobile, Ray started to reply automatically, without paying much attention: "No thanks, Janine. We've got—"

Egon interrupted him in mid-sentence. "No, wait. Research is something they can do."

"Can I wear a uniform while we do it?" asked Louis.

"Sure," Egon replied.

The idea registered visibly in Ray's eyes. Actually, it could conceivably do some good. The odds that Janine and Louis might stumble across something while searching blindly weren't great, but it was

always possible that they might get lucky. At the very least, unlike proton packs, the books weren't likely to blow up.

Well, except for the one that Egon kept in the safe.

"Okay," Ray said. "You guys are on."

As he and Egon climbed into the Ectomobile, Ray gestured toward the various papers and books on the table. "You can start by going through this stuff, and then move on from there."

"You got it," said Janine.

"Oh, there's just one thing," Egon called from the car.

"What's that?" asked Janine.

"How's your Sanskrit?"

Mayor Arnie Lapinski wasn't happy. "The polls say *what?*!" he demanded.

The young aide reflexively pulled back and raised his hands in defense against the verbal attack. "Y-you still have the greatest percentage of s-support from the voters, sir!" he hastened to point out. "Thirty-eight p-percent say that if elections were held tomorrow, they'd vote for you! The D-Democrats only have seventeen percent! That's l-less than the number of voters who registered as Democrats! It's j-just that..."

The Mayor fixed him with a fierce, stony stare. "Just that? what?"

The aide spoke in a voice that was so quiet, it was barely audible. "It's just that Venkman is g-gaining. He's up to twenty-three percent now, and the trends show him c-climbing."

"How is that possible?!" the Mayor shouted. "The guy didn't even exist on the political radar until a few days ago! Where is this coming from?!"

Nathan Wong, a tall Asian man in a conservative suit spoke calmly from his chair beside the Mayor's desk. "Come on, Arnie, you know exactly where it's coming from. The ghosts are coming faster and more furious than ever. Supernatural attacks are taking the front pages on a daily basis. With all of that going on, is it any wonder that people would start looking toward a Ghostbuster to keep them safe? It's our own campaign strategy, turned against us."

Lapinski could almost feel his blood pressure rising. The thing was, he hadn't been born to power. A lifelong New Yorker, he was born and raised in a tenement on Manhattan's Lower East Side. That was long before gentrification, when the neighborhood was a magnet for penniless immigrants, not the trendy hipsters who occupied so much of it today.

The young Arnie Lapinski pulled himself up the hard way. City college tuitions and Army ROTC scholarships made it possible for him to get through college and law school. It took a couple years of service to pay back the Army for the free education, but then he was back home and off to the city prosecutor's office. He didn't make a whole lot of friends on his way up the ladder; he was too busy making sure he got the high-profile cases—not to mention making sure that his name was the one that got printed in the newspapers. The friends came later, as people started to realize that before long, he'd wind up behind the big desk in City Hall. He knew full well that most of them were really just out for what they could get, but he didn't much care. After all, he was only associating with them for the same reason.

By now, Lapinski had been mayor for the better part of a decade. In that time, he'd been accused of

a lot of things—micro-managing where he didn't belong, using his office to settle personal grudges—but no matter how many picketers carried protest signs with Hitler moustaches scrawled on his photo, he never really imagined it would cost him the election. The fact was that plenty of New York's most influential people thought he was doing a great job, as long as the graffiti was cleaned up, crime was down, and tax shelters were available for the asking. With their backing, and an occasional supernatural threat to the existence of mankind to keep the rest of the voters grateful, the election should have been in the bag.

Of course, that was before Venkman jumped in, and the whole campaign strategy got blown out the window. Yet, he couldn't let that make a difference. He'd worked too hard for too many years to let some penny-ante spook-chaser take his office—his power—away from him. He needed to crush Venkman in the election. And once he was safely ensconced back in office for another term, he'd grind Venkman into the dirt.

"You're supposed to be my campaign manager, Nate," the Mayor told the tall man. "So if they've taken my *old* campaign, then give me a *new* one!"

"We're working on it," he assured the Mayor. "But you know full well that it takes time."

"What 'time'? The guy's appearing on talk shows already! We don't have time!"

"If we rush into a brand-new direction for the campaign, and we pick the wrong campaign, it could flush the whole election down the toilet."

"Fine, you want a campaign? Here's a campaign for you: Venkman's got no experience! I know what I'm doing, he doesn't. Boom, end of campaign."

"It's not that simple."

"Of course it is! The guy's as slick as a game show host at a televangelist convention. He's gotta be hiding all kinds of dirty secrets. Let's hammer 'im!"

"We're already pursuing all of that as part of our strategy. Suze's team is preparing debating points on the most obscure, convoluted issues we can find. If there's an issue that can trip Venkman up and show that he has no clue about government, we'll find it. And the results of our background check on him should come in any time now. But we both know there are no guarantees."

"Why not?"

"For the same reason the strategy was working for you. All it'll take is one big supernatural attack before the election, and people will forget about everything else. They'll just fall in love with the person who saves them."

Lapinski took a deep breath. For all his bluster, he knew Nate was right. But he was also starting to get an idea.

"Okay," he said. "Well, I, for one, do not intend to concede defeat right now—especially when we're in the lead and we've still got this much time before the election."

"Do you have something in mind?"

The Mayor nodded slowly. "I'd say there's only one thing we can do..."

CHAPTER 8

So far, Antonia Salazar was having a pretty good day. Her supervisor, whom she affectionately referred to as "the dipstick," had called in sick that morning. His bout of the flu cleared the way for a peaceful, relaxing day of personal phone calls and computerized solitaire.

At precisely 11:30, she picked up her bag and headed out for a leisurely two-hour lunch break. *Not a second more than two hours*, she promised herself. After all, she didn't want to take advantage.

She waited a couple of minutes for the elevator, then descended the seven floors to street level and stepped outside for the four-block walk to her favorite deli. As usual, the walk took her right past the front entrance of City Hall. The scene outside it was far from typical, though. A long line of people stretched out of the entrance, down the steps, and all the way

down the block, where it almost reached clear around the corner.

Now, what's this all about? she wondered.

She continued to wonder about it as she walked along, making her way down the line. It wouldn't be tax day for ages yet. For that matter, it wasn't even the first of the month.

If all of these people weren't there to pay money, maybe City Hall was giving something away? Rebate checks? Toasters? Whatever it was, it looked like a lot of people wanted it.

Of course, she could have satisfied her growing curiosity fairly easily by simply asking one of the people who were standing there. But she had a New Yorker's instinctive aversion to making eye contact, let alone conversation, with total strangers in the street. Besides, it seemed to her that some of the eclectic bunch of people standing in line put the "strange" back in "stranger."

Is that a possum on that guy's shoulder? she thought.

Still, she continued to walk. More and more, she was becoming intrigued by the line of people. What if they *were* giving something away—something really good—and she didn't find out until the next day, when she read the newspaper? What if it was too late by then, and she missed any chance she might have had?

As she fell deeper into thought, Antonia didn't notice that her pace was slowing. By the time she took a few more steps, she was standing still.

Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained, she thought.

She approached a nearby man who was wearing a

turban and some sort of large amulet on a chain around his neck. "Excuse me? Hi," she said.

He looked at her but said nothing in reply.

"I don't mean to bother you, but I was just wondering. What's this all about?"

He continued to stare silently. With a touch of discomfort, Antonia realized that he still hadn't blinked.

"What's going on?"

Without saying a word, he reached into his jacket and produced a sheet of newspaper. He extended it toward her.

Hesitantly, Antonia took the newspaper from his hand. She smoothed it out to see that it was a full-page advertisement. It read:

OPEN CALL FOR EXORCISTS

THE MAYOR'S OFFICE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK ANNOUNCES OPEN AUDITIONS FOR QUALIFIED EXORCISTS, TO BE HELD FROM 10:00 A.M. THROUGH 3:00 P.M. ON FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13 AT CITY HALL.

APPLICATIONS ARE ENCOURAGED FROM EXPERIENCED PSYCHICS, SHAMANS, NECROMANCERS, PARAPSYCHOLOGISTS, MEDIUMS, ASTROLOGERS, HOUNGANS, MYSTICS, OCCULTISTS, INVESTIGATORS OF THE SUPERNATURAL, AND PERSONS OF THE CLOTH.

SALARY AND BENEFITS TO BE COMMENSURATE WITH THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE WINNING APPLICANT.

THE MAYOR'S OFFICE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER.

"Oh," Antonia said. "Thanks." Because what else could she say?

Gingerly, she handed the paper back to the man, who took it without a word. He folded the sheet neatly and returned it to the inside pocket of his jacket.

Apparently, the conversation was over. Antonia resumed her walk to the deli, although perhaps she walked a little more quickly now.

She shook her head and thought, *Only in New York...*

The Mayor sat in a small, plain room at a heavy steel table that had probably been in the room since the Lindsay administration, back in the 1960s. To one side of Lapinski sat his campaign manager, Nathan Wong; to the other side was the commissioner of New York's Office of Emergency Management. A tall but neat stack of applications lay at one end of the table, so that an aide could pass around the appropriate paperwork as each interviewer entered the room.

"Prepare yourselves, gentlemen," said the Mayor. "We've just sent an open invitation to every whacko, weirdo, and nutjob in New York City."

"Heaven knows we've got no shortage of those," said the commissioner.

"Still, let's keep an open mind. It could work," Wong said. "How hard could it be to find someone more effective than the Ghostbusters?"

"Well, we may as well get started," the Mayor said to the others at the table. He called out to an aide

who was stationed at the door: "Send in the first applicant!"

To be honest, Lapinski wasn't entirely sure what a prospective exorcist would look like. He assumed it would be either a pseudo-scientist like the Ghostbusters or some kind of New Age mystical-crystal-reading Gypsy flake.

The first applicant was a middle-aged woman dressed in numerous layers of colorful scarves and cloths. Her fingers and ears were adorned with rings of silver and gold, and her hair was tied back in yet another colorful, patterned scarf.

Well, at least she looks the part, thought Lapinski.

The aide passed copies of an application to the men at the table. The Mayor looked at the name at the top of the page. "Madame...Elena?"

"Madame Elena," she confirmed, in a rich, thick European accent. "Madame Elena sees all, tells all. Madame Elena holds the power to help with all of life's problems. Visa and Master Card accepted."

"What's your background?"

She held out her hand. "Cross my palm with silver, and all your questions will be answered."

"What?" asked the Mayor. He couldn't possibly have heard her correctly.

"Cross my palm with silver, and all your questions will be answered," she repeated.

"You're not serious?" said Lapinski.

She nodded again.

"You, uh, you do know this is an audition, don't you?" said the commissioner.

Her hand was still extended.

"Well, uh, traditionally, people ask questions in auditions."

She nodded again.

"And, uh, they don't usually pay for the answers. Not, uh, usually."

She nodded.

The men at the table looked at each other, not sure where to go from there. The request had taken them completely by surprise, and they didn't quite know what to say.

Finally, Wong spoke up. "You know what," he said, "if it'll speed things up..." He pulled a five-dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said with a bow. By the time she stood up straight again, the five dollars had disappeared somewhere into her clothes.

The Mayor shuffled his papers, buying himself time to regain his composure. Clearly, he'd lost control of the situation for a moment, and it was time to take back the driver's seat. "Okay, you've got your money. Fine. Now then, what's your background?"

Madame Elena gestured broadly as she launched into her tale. "I was born beneath the moon in the hills of Romania. The wolf howled and the wind sang with the voices of the spirits on a late Summer's night. My mother cried out from her caravan—"

"Yes, yes," said Lapinski, with more than a little impatience in his voice. "Let's cut to the present. What techniques do you use to deal with ghosts?"

Madame Elena held out her hand. "Cross my palm with silver, and all your questions will be answered."

Once again, the room was silent as everyone checked to make sure they'd heard correctly.

The Mayor was aghast. "But—but we already did that! You said you'd answer *all* our questions!"

Madame Elena held up her index finger. "Five dol-

lars crosses only one of my fingers. Another question, another five dollars."

That did it. "You're supposed to be psychic, right?" said the Mayor.

Madame Elena nodded.

"So tell me what I'm thinking."

Madame Elena stared deeply into his eyes. Then her lip curled in disgust.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," she said.

Wong breathed deeply as he tossed the application on the pile. "Well, that's the last of them."

When they started, none of three men had fully appreciated just how grueling the process would be. But after seven hours—a full two hours longer than they stated in the ad—and well over one hundred applicants, they most definitely understood it now. Their ties had come off after the second hour, and their jackets followed not long after. They'd lost count of the cups of coffee they'd consumed, and by now, the only thing that each of them really wanted was a good, stiff drink.

And the thing was, it was all for nothing. An endless parade of paranormal misfits, and there wasn't a single decent candidate in the bunch.

The Mayor ran his hand through what was left of his thinning hair. "So," he said, leaning forward to rest his head on his hands, "what do we do now?"

They were quiet for a bit.

"I guess we could try launching an intensive supernatural training course for existing emergency services personnel," offered the Commissioner. "Maybe we could create sort of a paranormal SWAT team."

"Would that work?" asked Wong.

"I dunno. Maybe," said the Commissioner.

"And who would run this intensive training of yours?" asked Lapinski.

The Commissioner pondered that for a moment. It wasn't a standard training course that was likely to be offered in another state. Nor had he come across a lot of potential instructors today. Finally, with a shrug, he said, "The Ghostbusters?"

Lapinski shot him a look that ended the discussion.

"It's always possible," said Wong, "that there won't be any more ghost attacks between now and Election Day. That would negate the whole issue. It'd be a moot point."

"After everything that's happened in the past week?" said Lapinski. "That sounds like an awfully big long-shot."

"Thy pardon, good fellows. I pray thee, a moment of thy time."

As one, they looked toward the door to see the source of the deep, rumbling voice.

Lapinski almost gasped. The figure that filled the door stood at least six and a half feet tall, with a massive build that could have been sculpted out of rock and a hat that lent almost an additional foot to his height. On anyone else, his archaic Puritan garb would have looked out of place, or even comical. But on him, it looked as natural as his stern, craggy face and graying beard.

As distinctive as all that might have been, though, the feature that stood out the most was his eyes. They were as black as the darkest night, but seemed to burn with a nameless, unyielding force.

The Mayor wasn't used to feeling intimidated; he was usually the one doing the intimidating. But the

new arrival's mere gaze sent a chill through him, piercing straight through like an arrow—no, like an eight-foot-long spear. Suddenly, Lapinski felt like he was back in the third grade, withering beneath the stare of Sister Theresa when she could tell he'd done something wrong...even if he didn't remember doing anything wrong himself.

The Puritan crossed the room in long strides, coming to a halt before the table. "I am given to understand that thou art in need of a champion to smite the unholy hordes of darkness that do plague thy city."

With some effort, the Mayor managed to stammer out, "A-and you are...?"

"Goodraven. Jonathan Goodraven, at thy service."

"You—you're an...an exorcist?"

"I have been honored to do the Lord's work for lo, these many years." As he spoke, his sonorous voice rose, becoming even deeper and more resounding. It seemed to shake the very walls themselves. "Though the forces of evil are legion, they are but chaff before the light of glory. The Devil of Windsor, the Bloody Coven of Knightsbridge, the Banshee of Schenectady—all have fallen 'midst blood and fury at my hands. As they have shown no mercy, so too have I given no quarter. One and all, they have found themselves cast back to the sulfurous pits of Gehenna that spawned them."

"How...do you do that, exactly? Cast them back to the pits, I mean."

"I have been known to employ means both mystical and mundane. Some might confine themselves to their personal tried and true, but I have found greater success in pursuing whatever path might prove most

expeditious to the matter at hand. I must confess that I have little use for niceties. However, the results of my handiwork have yet to provoke complaint."

Lapinski felt as though he'd just fallen in love. Now, *this* was an exorcist! And not just that—Goodraven sounded like an exorcist after his own heart, to boot. He cast an awed, inquisitive glance to either side. Wong and the Commissioner were looking back at him with slack jaws. Each of them managed just the faintest of nods in reply.

Not that it mattered much. Even if they hadn't agreed, the Mayor's mind was made up. He rose to his feet and extended a hand over the table. Goodraven enveloped his hand in a powerful, bone-crushing grip.

"Mister Goodraven," he said, "on behalf of the City of New York, I'd like to offer you a job."

CHAPTER 9

"I understand, boys. Really, I do," said Milken. "You feel a responsibility to your team, and you don't want to let them down. It's a virtue, and an important one. To tell you the truth, I admire you for it."

As he spoke, Milken studied the half-dozen prototype posters that were spread out across the conference table. They showed Venkman and Winston in various poses with various attitudes. Some of them were serious and determined, others warmer and more welcoming.

Meanwhile, the real thing was standing on the opposite side of the table. They'd explained their situation and asked for time to spend with the Ghostbusters. Or, more precisely, Winston had made the request while Venkman couldn't resist checking out the posters. Now, Winston stood quietly, listening

respectfully to see what Milken would say. Venkman admired the photos of himself.

"The thing is," Milken continued, "you have to remember that you're also a member of another team now. This team carries responsibilities, too. You have commitments that need to be fulfilled so that you don't let down this team either."

"Gary, it's not just a business thing. These are our friends we're talking about," said Winston.

Milken held up two posters side-by-side to compare them. "I'd like to think that we're your friends, too, Winston." He passed one of the posters over to Venkman. "What do you think about this one?"

Venkman studied the photo of himself. "He's a handsome man."

Milken chuckled. "I'm leaning toward that one myself." The poster was a large photo of Venkman, looking serious and dignified, with an equally dignified Winston in the background. The text across the top read, "WHO YA GONNA CALL?" and the bottom read, "VENKMAN FOR MAYOR."

Winston wasn't letting go that easily, though. "Okay, I get that we're part of two teams. I even get the two sets of friends thing. But that sounds like we should split our time evenly between here and the Ghostbusters. Why should the party's needs come first all the time?"

Milken lowered the poster. It was the first time in the entire conversation that he really looked at Winston. "Listen," he said. "I'm not going to try to pretend that I'm an impartial observer here. Naturally, I want to make sure we get what we need, to make sure you boys have the best chance possible of winning this election. But put all the emotions and biases aside,

and look at the situation objectively. You four Ghostbusters are all equals, right?"

Winston nodded. Technically, of course, he wasn't a full partner like the others. But no one had ever treated him any differently as a result.

"Well, that's not the case here," said Milken. "Sure, everyone in these offices has an important role to fill, and an important contribution to make. But you two are the ones that the voters are looking at. You're the ones they're going to make decisions about on Election Day. No matter what any of us may contribute, you and Peter are the ones out front, leading the way."

Winston hadn't thought of it like that before. What with all of the coaching and training and scheduling, he hadn't seen himself—or even Peter—as leading the way. If anything, it felt more like he was following along and working for the party. But, he had to admit, Milken was making a certain amount of sense.

"If you need to cut back your involvement with the Ghostbusters, then your partners can pick up the slack to carry on without you," Milken continued. "Admittedly, it may not be easy. There's lots of work to do, and the two of you leave pretty big shoes to fill. But they can do it."

"On the other hand," he said, "if you cut back here, then everything grinds to a halt. Not one of us can give a speech in your place. Peter's going to debate Lapinski and the other candidates on television in three days. If he doesn't show up, or if he doesn't spend the next two days preparing, what would we do then? The minute the two of you walk out that door, the election is over. So you tell me: When you take everything into account and consider it all logically, where would you place your priority—on the

side where other people can pick up the slack, or on the side where you're quite literally irreplaceable?"

Winston didn't answer right away, mainly because he knew there was no good answer. Whichever way he went, he'd be letting someone down—and letting people down was something that he never liked to do.

But he also knew Milken was right. There were people on one side who could pick up the pieces if he let them slip for a while. There wasn't anyone to pick them up on the other. Logically, there was only one choice he could make.

With a resigned sigh, he said, "I guess I'd choose the party."

Milken clapped Winston on the shoulder and gave him a warm smile. "Of course you would." Leaving his hand on Winston's shoulder, he looked deep into his eyes and added, "Thank you for that. I know it's not an easy decision. It means a lot to me." He steered him toward the table. "Now, let's take a look at these posters..."

Throughout the conversation, Venkman had given no sign that he heard a word of it, despite the fact that it was happening directly in front of him. Now that it was over, he continued to stare at the poster in his hands. "Y'know, Gary, I've been thinking..."

"Hm?" said Milken.

"We're laying an awful lot of this campaign on Winston's and my being Ghostbusters. I mean, even this tag line, 'Who ya gonna call?'"

Milken eyed him warily. "Yes. Do you have a better idea?"

Venkman brushed a nonexistent dust mote off the poster. "No, no. You guys are the pros. But I'm

wondering if maybe we should change the tag line. Maybe we should downplay the connection a little."

"Downplay it? Why would we want to do that?"

"Well, did you see the paper this morning? There was a nice, big picture of Ray and Egon on the front page, but no mention of Winston and me until the story got continued on page eight."

"So?"

"So there's still a good couple of months left until people step into those voting booths. I don't have to tell you what a long way that is in newspaper time, not to mention voters' memories. How long do you think it's going to be before the papers stop referring to us in their articles about the Ghostbusters? How long'll it be before people on the street start to forget that we were ever Ghostbusters at all?"

Milken smiled knowingly. "That would be a problem," he said. "What do you propose?"

"Well, like I said, I think we might want to make some changes to downplay the connection. Not rely on it so much. Run on our own merits." Venkman snapped his fingers, as though he'd just been struck by a brainstorm. "Oh! Or—and this is just off the top of my head—or, I guess, we could make sure that people don't forget the link."

"And how do you suggest doing that?"

"I don't know... I guess the easiest way would be to make sure Winston and I show up in some of these front page photos." He frowned, as though another new thought had just occurred to him. "Yeah...but that would mean spending time helping out Ray and Egon, wouldn't it?"

Winston nodded in agreement; Peter actually did have a point. They didn't stand a chance without the

connection. He didn't believe for a minute that the voters would completely forget that they were Ghostbusters, but it wouldn't be at the front of their minds, either. A front-page action photo every once in a while would do them more good than all the campaigning in the world.

"All right, all right," said Milken, throwing up his hands in mock surrender. "Maybe there's a way we can make everyone happy."

"What's that?" asked Winston.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about the next couple of weeks. Your itineraries are already set, and they're packed solid. But after that, maybe—*maybe*—we can try to build in a pocket of time here and there so that you can help out the Ghostbusters occasionally."

"Gary, that's brilliant," said Venkman. "That's why you're the man in charge. I never could have thought of something like that myself."

"Thanks, Gary," said Winston. "We appreciate it."

"Don't thank me yet," said Milken. "Nothing's set in stone. I still have to check with John to see if something like that is even possible. But we'll see what we can do."

"Good enough," said Winston, and he shook Milken's hand.

Just then, the door opened and an aide entered. Milken walked over to see what he wanted.

Venkman gave Winston a wink. "See? Timing and presentation are everything, my friend," he said in a low voice. "If you want to convince them, you've got to look at things the way they do. Show them what's in it for them, and you'll have them eating out of your palm."

As Venkman spoke, Milken and the aide talked quietly, then moved to the far end of the room to turn on the television that was mounted in the wall.

Milken looked at the screen for a few seconds; then he turned to Venkman and Winston. "You boys might want to take a look at this."

Every reporter who worked the city beat was well aware that the Mayor dearly loved cameras. His regular press briefings were virtually a daily affair. Combined with the additional "special press" conferences that he called whenever something out of the ordinary happened—and in this city, "out of the ordinary" could mean anything from a minor school board dispute about chalk suppliers to Armageddon—it meant that the Mayor was often standing in front of the same cameras a couple of times each day. Even when the news might conceivably be of some interest, the sheer routine made the process mind-numbingly dull—at least until a few days ago, when Venkman announced his candidacy. It was the first real surprise to hit one of these things in years. Realistically, the odds of stumbling across something else on that scale were slim to none. But until the memory of that day faded, the press corps was living in hope.

Today's gathering didn't rival that one, but it was still something to see. It wasn't every day that the Mayor introduced the city to a walking monolith of a man in a four hundred-year-old wardrobe.

"...not that we don't appreciate the work that the Ghostbusters have done in the past," Lapinski was saying. "They have provided a useful service and have been well paid in return. But there's also no denying that we can do better. The collateral damage alone

from their escapades has reached far in excess of one million dollars. It's just a matter of time before the 'collateral damage' grows to include the loss of life as well. We all agree that the citizens of this city need to be protected from supernatural threats. But not at the cost of possibly becoming ghosts themselves. That's why my office has decided to turn to a man with experience, a man who is a *real* professional. Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to New York City's new defender against the unseen: Jonathan Goodraven!"

Ray was driving the Ectomobile back to the office, Egon sitting beside him, when the car phone rang. Ray yawned once, then hit the button on the hands-free device. "Y'ello."

"Ray, it's me. Where are you?"

"Oh, hey, Pete. We're in the car. Hey, guess what? You're not going to believe what we ran into this morning. A class-five, mass-induced—"

"Ray, shut up a minute and listen to me. Turn on one of the news stations on the car radio. It is still a regular radio, right? You haven't rewired it so that it only picks up alien signals from outer space or old radio shows from the past or something, have you?"

"No, it's still the same as it ever was," said Ray. "Although that rewiring idea does sound pretty—"

"The radio, Ray. Turn it on."

"Got it."

Actually, Egon beat him to the radio. The car filled with the sound of a scratchy recording of an upbeat rhythm and blues song. It only lasted for a second or two before Egon changed the station, but the few

notes were enough for Ray to identify. "Sam and Dave. Atlantic Records, 1968."

He stopped talking when Egon found the station they needed. A familiar voice was saying, "...collateral damage alone from their escapades has reached far in excess of one million dollars..."

"Is that the Mayor?" Ray asked.

"Until November," Venkman said through the speakerphone.

"What is he talking about?" Egon said, to no one in particular.

The answer became immediately clear as the Mayor continued. "...decided to turn to a man with experience, a man who is a *real* professional. Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to New York City's new defender against the unseen—Jonathan Goodraven!"

"Jonathan who?" said Ray.

"Big guy," Venkman said. "He's on TV right now." He paused. "Somebody's not making Mr. Blackwell's Best-dressed list this year. Either of you know this spud?"

"The name sounds vaguely familiar..." said Ray. "But no, I have no idea."

"Never heard of him," said Egon. "Strange..."

In fact, it was strange indeed. As Ray well knew, Egon made a point of keeping up with all of the parapsychology journals and conference proceedings—including the ones that were so obscure that not even Ray read them on a regular basis. If Egon had never heard of Goodraven, it meant that he must not walk along any of the usual professional tracks.

"So what does all this mean for us?" Ray wondered.

Egon smirked without any noticeable humor. "I

wouldn't put much faith in our contract with the city, for one thing."

The voice on the radio changed—Goodraven's, no doubt.

"I have little use for pretty words," said the deep, sonorous voice. "I shall waste neither my time nor thy own."

There was a brief silence on the radio. Egon and Ray exchanged a puzzled glance. Egon was just reaching to adjust the tuner when the voice returned.

"Very well," it said, in an unmistakably grudging tone. "I am told that I must needs address the citizenry to assuage its fears."

"I could get to like this guy," Egon said with a hint of sarcasm.

"Reminds me of Vincent Price," Ray commented.

"Good citizens, thy world is under siege. The nights teem with ungodly horrors that lurk just beyond the light of vision. Maintain thy vigilance, for the alternative is writ in the blood of untold agonies. Repent thy sins and prepare thy souls, as doing so is thine only hope. For those who are vigilant, and whose hearts are pure beyond blemish, all will be well. I bid you good morrow."

Venkman's voice crackled over the speakerphone. "He's got quite a little bedside manner going there, doesn't he?"

Egon clicked off the radio, his eyes narrowed in thought. He didn't say anything.

Ray shrugged. "Well, we can still get hired by private clients, anyway," he said with characteristic good nature. "Assuming any clients call us after those cracks about 'collateral damage' and 'real profession-

als.' Besides, we *were* complaining about being overworked, right?"

"Whoa!" said Venkman. "You mean you're just going to sit back and let this stooge walk all over your turf?"

"Turf?" We're not street gangs, Pete. New York is eight million people's turf."

"Yeah, but he's not stealing eight million people's paychecks."

"It's the Mayor's decision. He can hire whomever he wants. And let's face it, the Mayor's not especially likely to hire us back while you're running against him."

"Oh, so it's my fault?"

"I didn't say that."

"Yeah, right," Venkman said with an unmistakable edge in his voice. "I've gotta go to a meeting." There was a click, followed by a dial tone as he hung up the phone.

"What was all that about?" Ray wondered.

"You know, there's another option," said Egon.

"For what?"

"For handling this Goodraven situation."

Ray was a little leery about any kind of option Egon might come up with—interpersonal issues weren't really his strong suit. He tended to do better with fungus and mold. Still, Ray supposed it couldn't hurt to ask. "What are you thinking?"

"Admittedly, Goodraven talks a good game with all those 'thee's and 'thy's. However, if you and I don't know who he is, I can't imagine that anyone else does, either. Who knows if he's even any good? There's no data to support an informed conclusion."

"Fair enough. You're suggesting that we check him out?"

"No. I'm suggesting that we show him up."

"How?"

"Even if the city isn't paying us anymore, we should keep at it. Let the population of New York City see whose ectoplasmic containment units are more full when all is said and done. Let them see who provides the most effective protection."

"And if the answer turns out to be Goodraven?"

Egon gave him a look. "How likely is that? The probability is staggering."

Ray mulled it over briefly as he steered the Ecto-mobile onto the block that housed their office.

"I like it," he said.

Before Egon could reply, the phone rang again.

"Peter?" Egon guessed.

Ray shook his head. "Too soon. He wouldn't have cooled down yet. I'd say Winston."

He pulled the Ectomobile into their driveway and hit the button to answer the phone. "Y'ello."

There was silence on the other end.

"Hello?" Ray said, a little louder this time.

The silence continued.

"Probably a wrong number," said Egon.

Ray reached over to hang up. Just as his finger was about to push the button, a voice as cold as death came out of the speaker: "Have you...checked...the children...?"

"Children?" said Egon. Into the speakerphone, he called, "You've got the wrong number."

Again, the voice repeated: "Have you... checked...the children?"

"That's no wrong number," Ray said, with a shudder in his voice.

"Another urban legend?" Egon asked.

"Yeah."

"Children in danger?"

"Worse." His voice sounded hollow. "A teenage girl is babysitting by herself. The kids went to bed hours ago. There's a phone call, then another, all with that message. And it turns out the calls are coming from inside the—"

Ray broke off the story as he was struck by a sudden realization. His face went pale, and he gaped up at the entrance to the Ghostbusters' headquarters.

"Coming from inside where?" asked Egon.

Ray threw open the car door. "Grab your gear!" he yelled. "We've got to get in there!"

CHAPTER 10

Half an hour earlier, Janine and Louis had been sitting at a table in the Ghostbusters' offices, poring through stacks of ancient, leather-bound books. Janine preferred to assume they were leather, anyway.

"Hm. How fascinating," Janine said. "Listen to this."

Louis closed the book he was reading and added it to his discard pile. "Did you find something about Xanthador?"

"No. But according to this, if you want to get rid of nightmares, you should boil up some wine and oil with the tongue, eyes, liver, and bowels of a dragon, and then 'anoint the patient every morning and evening.'"

"Gee, I usually just drink a cup of warm milk."

"That works, too."

Louis straightened the material of the Ghostbusters coveralls he was wearing, and stole a glance at Janine,

admiring his girlfriend's looks. For the twenty-third time that day, he wondered what he'd ever done to deserve her. Absently, he opened yet another musty tome. As he lifted the cover, dust from the book scattered in the air, making him sneeze.

In contrast to Louis' uniform, Janine was still dressed in the street clothes that she'd worn to work that morning: a form-fitting polyester dress in black and white zebra stripes. "Bless you," she said.

Louis looked up from the book. "Thanks," he said, in a breathless tone that reflected deep, genuine appreciation, rather than an automatic reply.

Catching his tone, Janine stopped reading in mid-sentence. She looked up at him, and their eyes met. "You're welcome," she said meaningfully.

The two of them gazed at each other with longing.

"I just love a man in uniform," she said.

"Me, too," said Louis. Then, realizing what he'd said, he hastened to add, "I mean, I feel the same way... No, I mean... Not that I love men in uniform...although I'm sure most of them are quite nice people... I mean, I love women who love men in uniform... Well, not just *any* women who love men in uniform... I was thinking more specifically—"

Janine silenced him with a deep, prolonged kiss. Then, with a single, graceful stroke, she swept a stack of books off the table.

Or she would have, if the oversized books hadn't been so big and heavy. What actually happened was that the stack of books refused to budge, as Janine discovered with a grunt. It took both hands, and some help from Louis, to shift the books to one side of the table.

Once some space had finally been cleared, they

threw their arms around each other and started to kiss passionately. Intertwined, they fell across the table in the midst of the volumes that lay there.

The dust from the books made Louis sneeze.

Meanwhile, over in the kitchen, Slimer was trying an experiment of a different kind. He studied a brand new, five-pound plastic bag of unpopped popcorn, feeling the heft of its weight in his hands, and admiring the label's photo of a skinny man in glasses and a bow tie.

His hands moved to one end of the bag. In a single, sharp movement, Slimer yanked hard in both directions, sending up a shower of popcorn kernels as the end of the bag burst open. The effect made him laugh, although he was careful to keep most of the popcorn in the bag. He didn't want to lose too much of it before he tried out his idea.

Next, he floated over to the microwave oven and opened the door. He started to pour the bag of popcorn inside, thus creating a large, growing heap in the middle of the floor of the microwave.

Midway through the process, he abruptly cut off the flow of popcorn when he was struck by a new thought. He took a handful of the unpopped kernels and dropped them into his mouth. Then, he took careful aim and spit out a stream of kernels like machine-gun fire. They bounced off a frying pan in the drying rack beside the sink with a loud, ringing *clang-ang-ang-ang-ang*.

Slimer giggled heartily. He was still giggling when he turned back to the microwave and added the rest of the bag of popcorn.

Once the bag was empty, he slammed the door,

pushed the button to set the microwave for six hours, then hit the button marked **START**. As the microwave lit up and began its work with a quiet hum, Slimer positioned himself horizontally in mid-air beneath the microwave. He opened his mouth wide, and waited to see how long it would take for the popcorn to force the door of the microwave open and cascade down into his mouth.

The popcorn was just starting to pop when he was startled by the sound of a voice. "Oh, my. You poor dear. Just look at you. You're absolutely soaked!"

Baffled, Slimer drifted aimlessly into an upright position as he tried to figure out what was most puzzling: the presence of an elderly woman in the kitchen, the fact that he actually wasn't soaked at all, or the fact that, like him, she was drifting in the middle of the room without any legs to support her.

Slimer spoke in a stream of gibberish that sounded something like a question.

"Don't you worry now, dearie," said the ghost of the old woman. "I know just how to fix what ails you."

Before Slimer could protest—or even react—she pushed the button that simultaneously paused the microwave and opened the door. In a single, fluid motion, she reached inside and used her hand to sweep the pile of popcorn kernels (both popped and unpopped) out of the microwave. The kernels fell in a graceful shower that hit the floor and bounced all over the room.

Slimer was so startled by the whole thing, and transfixed by the shower of popcorn, that he didn't even put up any resistance when she suddenly grabbed his arm, shoved him inside the microwave, and

slammed the door. By the time Slimer realized what was happening, his rotund body was already stuffed into the too-small space. He tried to move, but with his body filling the space, the best he could manage was a slight, helpless jiggle of one arm.

Before he could think to dematerialize and pass through the walls of the microwave, the old woman hit the START button. "There you are, dearie," she said. "You'll be dry as a bone in no time."

Slimer didn't feel so well. His superheated body started to bubble and bulge.

The old woman watched through the window of the microwave. She smiled pleasantly, and started to hum a happy tune.

The bubbling was getting faster now, stronger, more out of control. Panic registered on the distorted mass that was now barely recognizable as Slimer's face.

Faster and faster, the reaction multiplied exponentially in speed and intensity. In a matter of seconds, it raced to a fever pitch—

—and Slimer exploded. The door of the microwave blew open in a mass of black smoke and green sludge. The bits of slime that splattered across the room were all that was left of the Ghostbusters' pet poltergeist.

"Oh, my," said the old woman. "What a mess."

Louis and Janine were still sprawled across the table, and he was still sneezing, when she opened her eyes to see they weren't alone. The visitor was a tall, slender man with dark hair, dark eyes, and swarthy good looks. He wore a silk shirt and tight pants, and an embroidered red jacket that looked like something

Janine might have expected to see on a bullfighter or a waiter in a Mexican restaurant.

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, Janine tried desperately to salvage whatever bit of professionalism she could still muster. "Excuse me! I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, struggling to pry herself loose from her awkward position beneath Louis. The visitor waited patiently for her, a bemused smile playing about his lips.

Still muttering apologies, Janine dropped down to her feet and hastily began straightening her clothes and hair. Only then, as Louis' sneezing fit started to subside, did he notice the visitor himself.

"Oh. Hi," Louis said. His glasses were askew, his hair was mussed, and he just couldn't help looking sheepish from his position atop the table.

With all the grace of a baby calf finding its legs for the first time, he clambered down from the table. He tried to zip up the front of his coveralls, only to discover that the zipper was stuck in the halfway position.

As Louis muttered to himself and struggled to free the zipper, Janine stepped up to the visitor. She'd done her best for a quick fix-up, but with her hair in disarray and her lipstick smeared across her mouth and cheeks, the effect was moderate at best. "Sorry about that," she said. "Welcome to Ghostbusters. How can I help you?"

The visitor did not reply—at least not in words. Instead, he thrust one arm upward and the other across his torso in a dramatic pose. Janine didn't notice the castanets in his hands at first. But they seemed to come alive as their clacking accompanied the sound of his shoes striking the floor in a brief,

fast-paced dance step that ended as abruptly as it had begun.

"Uh...wow," said Janine. She found herself fascinated—albeit a little perplexed—by the spectacle in front of her. She wasn't used to people dancing through the office in the middle of the afternoon.

Somewhere behind her, Louis was still tugging on the stubborn zipper. He started jumping up and down in an attempt to shake it loose.

Janine didn't notice. She couldn't take her eyes off the mysterious flamenco dancer, whose feet were now tapping against the floor as he slowly circled around her. She stared at him, entranced, as he directed smoldering glances deep into her eyes.

When he completed the circle, the dancer drew back with a flourish and extended a hand toward her. Meanwhile, Louis was still jumping and tugging on the zipper. At least he was until he smacked into a nearby filing cabinet, lost his balance, and fell over.

Janine didn't even look in the direction of the crash to see if Louis was all right. She took the visitor's hand, and he led her over to the open space between the office area and the parking bay. With fluid grace, he slid an arm around her waist, pressed his cheek against hers, and guided her back and forth across the floor. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensual feel of the dance. The visitor moved with measured precision, and as long as Janine followed his lead, she moved with a grace that she never knew she possessed.

Louis managed to get back up on his feet. To his delight, he discovered that the fall had jarred the zipper loose. He zipped the coveralls up with pleasure, then turned to see the handsome stranger hoisting his

girlfriend high over his head and spinning around before gently setting her down again.

"Hey, guys," Louis said, "whatcha doing?"

Janine could barely hear him. Louis' voice sounded distant, as though it was coming from far, far away. The sensation was like being underwater or lost in a dream. As the visitor twirled her away from himself, then caught her and pulled her back, Janine found herself falling madly, deeply in love.

Janine opened her eyes to gaze into the face of her new love. She smelled his scent, and felt the strength of his powerful arms. Then, she looked down...and screamed.

To be fair, it was an understandable reaction. The rhythmic clicking of her partner's heels didn't actually come from his shoes—he wasn't wearing any shoes. Nor did he have heels—at least, not the kind that Janine was expecting. Instead, the clicking was coming from the long, sharp claws that extended from her partner's six toes and the spur that protruded from the back of each foot. He had the feet of a chicken.

And when she looked back up into his horrible, laughing face, she discovered that he had horns as well.

Suddenly, the floor opened up all around them. Flames licked upward from somewhere deep below. The roar of the fire was accompanied by the screams and moans of a million tortured souls. Only the small piece of floor beneath Janine's feet hovered above the pit.

"Janine!" Louis shouted.

"Louis!" she screamed in reply.

"Hold on! I'll save you!"

Louis started to rush toward the pit, but he was

stopped cold by a firm grip on his shoulder. He turned to see a hulking, twisted, translucent fiend. It grunted, drool dribbling down his chin. Its hands held a large axe.

With what was probably intended to be a smile, the fiend opened its mouth and said: "Have you... checked...the children?"

Before Louis could do anything more than look confused, it swung the heavy axe directly at his head.

Winston just didn't buy it. "You're telling me Ray blamed you for getting them fired?"

"That's right. The man was totally unreasonable," said Venkman.

"Ray did that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Ray?"

"Yes, Ray," said Venkman. "Guy about this tall? Baby face? Nicotine patch?"

"No way."

"You weren't on the phone. You didn't hear him."

"Come on. Ray? Ray's a pussycat. You must've misunderstood."

"Aha! Don't let him fool you. Under all that niceness, he's got a real nasty streak."

Winston rolled his eyes and sighed.

Milken cleared his throat. "Gentlemen? Much as I hate to interrupt, we do have work to do."

"Right. Sorry," said Winston.

The two of them rejoined Milken down at his end of the conference table. Venkman still looked a bit out of sorts, but he gave his body a little shake and got down to business with the others.

"Now, we'll have to do something about this Goodraven character..." Milken said.

Affecting a Brooklyn accent, Venkman said, "I could have Lefty and the boys rub him out."

Milken smiled indulgently. "I'll speak to John about adapting our campaign strategy to accommodate Goodraven. But knowing John, he's probably already working on it."

"I bet your guys never saw something like this coming. It must be throwing them for a loop," said Winston.

"Actually," said Milken, "we knew that something like this was possible."

"You did?"

"Certainly. It stands to reason. They based so much of their campaign on the Ghostbusters that they needed a substitute when that was no longer an option. The Mayor couldn't continue to give your group free publicity once you boys were running against him."

"Really," said Winston, shooting Venkman a side-long *I-told-you-so* look.

Venkman grimaced momentarily, but stayed focused on the task at hand. "So you've already got a way to deal with the spud?"

"Spud?"

Winston translated. "He means Goodraven."

"Ah. Well, naturally, we couldn't assemble too specific a plan before we knew whom the Mayor might appoint. But we do have a more general strategy in place. Now that we know that Goodraven is the one, we can run a thorough check on his background."

"You mean 'dig up dirt,'" said Venkman.

"If you prefer. Once we have that information in

hand, we should be able to discredit him and cut the Mayor's support out from under him again."

"But what if there isn't enough dirt on Goodraven?" asked Winston.

Milken gave him a patronizing smile. "There's enough dirt on *everyone*."

As the fiend swung its heavy axe, Louis instinctively recoiled, only to trip over his own feet. He fell backwards, hitting the floor as the axe sailed over him and smashed through the front of a file cabinet.

"Louis!" screamed Janine.

Frantically, Louis tried to scramble away while the fiend struggled to pull the axe free of the cabinet. But, from his position sprawled out on his back, Louis couldn't move more than a couple of inches before the fiend ripped out the axe and raised it high over his head.

"Have you...checked...the children?"

In the split-second before the axe could come down to complete its deadly arc, Ray and Egon burst through the front door like the cavalry on the attack. In a flash, they took in the scene and raced into action.

"I'll get him!" Ray shouted to Egon. "You take El Diablo!"

"Right!" said Egon.

The next thing Louis and Janine knew, a blinding pair of ion streams tore across the room to bind the two spectres. The fiend tried to free itself by slashing at the beam with the axe, but to no avail. Ray wrapped the stream around him, pinning his arms to his sides. The fiend and the devil howled in anger.

As one, Ray and Egon leaned back, hoisting the

murderous, roaring spirits into the air. "Okay!" Ray called, shouting to be heard over the din. "Now we just have to get them in the trap!"

"Right!" Egon called back. "Where is it?"

Ray shot Egon a concerned glance before focusing his attention back on restraining the fiend. "Didn't you bring one in with us?"

"I thought you brought it!"

Without an ecto-trap, they'd have to stand there, holding the ghosts. But the instant one of them went to get a trap, one of the ghosts would be free.

"Janine!" called Egon. "Hurry! Go get us a trap!"

"How?" she called back. Although the devil was restrained, she was still surrounded by his flaming pit.

"Louis!" Ray said. "You've got to do it! Go get a trap!"

"Okay!" Louis replied. "Where are they?"

"In the back! In the first cabinet!"

"Gotcha!"

Louis started to run back behind the office area, but stopped after a couple of steps. "The first one on the right or the left?"

Ray thought for a second. "The right!"

"The big gray one?"

"No, the black one!"

"Never mind!" shouted Egon. "Just go outside and get one from the car!"

"Gotcha!"

"One that *isn't* smoking!" added Ray.

"Okay!"

Louis ran past them and was halfway down the parking bay when he stopped and turned back toward them. "I don't have the keys!"

It was getting harder to hold the writhing ghosts. They couldn't pull free, but their struggling was jerking the ion beams around, making it difficult to keep them steady. Ray's beam grazed a fluorescent light that was hanging on the ceiling, and the bulb exploded.

"It's not locked!" Egon shouted to Louis.

"In New York City? You know, that really isn't safe..."

"*GET THE TRAP!*" they screamed.

"Gotcha!"

As the seconds ticked by, it felt like Louis was gone for an eternity. But before long, he ran back into the headquarters with a trap in his hands. "Here it is!"

"Great!" said Ray. "Lay it down on the floor over there, and then stomp on the pedal!"

Louis did as he was told. Instantly, an inverted pyramid of light shot up out of the trap. In a matter of moments, the ghosts were gone, the trap snapped shut, and the axe fell to the floor with a metallic *clang*.

Once the ghosts disappeared into the trap, the fiery pit around Janine vanished, reverting back into the building's usual floor. Gingerly, she tested the floor with her toe to make sure it was solid. Then, once she was reasonably sure that it was, she ran over to Louis. The two of them threw their arms around each other.

As they shut down the power on their proton packs, Ray wiped the sweat off his brow and Egon breathed a sigh of relief.

"You were right," said Egon. "That urban legend is a bad one."

"Someone's raising the stakes. Just be glad we got here in time."

Egon stood over Ray, watching as Ray crouched down to collect the trap. Neither of them saw the ghost of the old lady that drifted noiselessly behind them, high above the floor. After all, neither of them knew that there had also been a third ghost—not until a moment later, when the old lady soared down, grabbed the fallen axe, and charged at them, screaming, "*DIE! DIE FOR XANTHADOR!*"

Simultaneously, Ray and Egon grabbed for their nutrona wands.

The axe whistled through the air as the old lady swung it around in a roundhouse arc. The swing could have taken off both of their heads in a single blow—that is, if it wasn't for the timely arrival of a fighting-mad Slimer. He looked battered, bruised, blackened...and really, really irate. He zoomed through the air at breathtaking speed to bodyslam the old lady with his considerable bulk before she could complete her deadly swing.

The impact sent the old lady tumbling head over heels through the air. It took almost the entire length of the building for her to recover and come around for a second try.

This time, though, the Ghostbusters were ready. Ray waited until she was committed to her charge and too close to change course. He stamped on the pedal of the ecto-trap. The old lady soared straight into the light and vanished before the trap snapped shut. Once again, the only remaining trace was the axe that fell to the floor.

Usually, saving the day brought a rush of triumph and joy, because of both the victory and the simple fact of survival—but not this time. This one had been

a little too close. Everyone stared grimly at the smoking trap.

Ray gave Slimer a high five. "Thanks, buddy."

Slimer muttered some gibberish in reply.

Egon gazed at everyone in the room. "Now, before we make further assumptions, are there any more ghosts besides these three?"

Janine, Louis, and Slimer shook their heads.

"Good," said Ray. To Egon, he added, "'Xanthador' again."

"But it's not 'Cower before Xanthador' anymore," Egon replied.

"Nope. Now it's 'Die.' And this one was intended specifically for us."

"Agreed. The odds against this being a coincidence are astronomical. Still, it seems like a lot of effort for a small target. Why would they bother?"

"I guess because we've been fighting against them."

Egon nodded, digesting the point. "If that's true, I'd say Jonathan Goodraven chose a bad time to move to New York."

"You know what?" said Ray. "Forget Goodraven. Forget the whole competition thing. We've just got to get these guys, once and for all."

"What changed your mind?"

"They just made it personal."

CHAPTER 11

Venkman sat in the back of the black limousine and stared out the window. Outside, bright neon lights of every color were beginning their daily battle against the gathering darkness that came with evening.

The limo's progress was slow, thanks to the rush hour traffic, which was in full swing. The fact that the midtown streets were clogged with cars, buses, and assorted vehicles was bad enough, but teeming masses of pedestrians were also crossing the streets on their way home—sometimes obeying the stop lights, sometimes not—which brought traffic to a virtual standstill. When you put it all together, it was no wonder that Venkman's limo was inching along. With luck, it managed to move a car length or two during each green signal, before the light cycled back to red and the long line of cars in front of the limo sat still once again.

This was going to take a while—not that Venkman gave any sign of noticing. He stared blankly past the signs and crowds, lost in thought.

"Hey," said a quiet voice beside him. "Penny for your thoughts."

It took a second for the words to penetrate, but then he turned with a smile. "You'd be overpaying."

"You were really off in your own world there," said Dana. "What were you thinking about?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Nobody goes that quiet and spends that much time staring into space without thinking about something."

"No? How about coma patients?"

"Fine. *You* don't go that quiet and spend that much time staring into space without thinking about something."

Venkman gestured dismissively. "Aah, it was nothing. Just guy stuff. Y'know—football, scratching, that kind of thing."

"Mmm."

"Hey, did I mention how beautiful you look tonight?"

Dana smiled. "All right, I get it. You don't want to talk about it."

In fact, despite Venkman's obvious attempt to change the subject, he really did mean the compliment. Since they were creeping along toward a black-tie dinner at the Museum of Modern Art (or MOMA, as it was more popularly known to the locals), both of them were looking their best. Venkman wore an overcoat over a simple but stylish black tuxedo. Dana was wearing a short black jacket over a shimmering

black evening gown that was cut low both in front and in back.

The dinner was a fundraiser to benefit a new gallery for the museum. Venkman knew nothing about modern art, but he was scheduled to deliver a supportive speech over dinner. Given the dinner's thousand-dollar-a-plate price tag—and Mayor Lapinski's legendary talent for cutting funds for the arts—it was a perfect opportunity for him to connect with an audience that was both powerful and sympathetic. All in all, the evening promised to be a slam dunk. He'd have them eating out of his hand by the time they brought around the coffee.

What was equally important, from Venkman's perspective, was the fact that he was allowed to bring a date. Dana loved art. After Oscar was born, she'd even worked part-time restoring antique paintings while she was on maternity leave from the Symphony. It had been ages since she had been to the Metropolitan Museum of Art; somehow, she couldn't bring herself to go back to the Met after the ghost of a Carpathian dictator tried to steal her baby there. But MOMA was no problem. MOMA was a very different art museum with a very different sort of collection, but it provided a good alternative. Venkman was glad for the opportunity to impress her with a fancy dinner for a change—especially if it was in a place that she liked.

Besides, what with the election, the Ghostbusters, and Dana, it was getting harder and harder for Venkman to juggle all of the many demands on his time. It seemed as though everyone wanted something from him these days—each time he tried to give some attention to one part of his life, it meant letting the

others drop. At least the chance to campaign and go on a date simultaneously meant that he could tend to two sides of his life at the same time. It was a real blessing.

Or it would be, if he could pull himself out of the funk that he'd been in all afternoon.

"You're doing it again," Dana said.

Venkman shook himself from his reverie. "No, I'm listening to you. Really. Every word."

Dana looked amused. "That's funny. I didn't say anything."

Venkman only hesitated for an instant. "You see? That's how much I pay attention to you. I start listening before you even start talking."

Dana tossed her head back and chuckled in amazement. "You're really just totally shameless, aren't you?"

"Who, me?" he said, putting on an expression of complete innocence. "I prefer to think of it as 'endearing.'"

She sat up and laid her hand on his. "You know, if you tell me what's bothering you, I'll listen. I might even be able to help."

Venkman studied her for a minute. Dana really did want to help him, and it was yet another reason why he lov—well, it meant a lot to him, anyway. But what could he say? That his life was getting too complicated? That people were expecting too much from him? That he was being stretched in a million directions, and he just couldn't be everything for everyone? There wasn't a whole lot that Dana could do about any of that, other than offering to drop out of his life herself. And that was the last thing he'd ever want her to do. It would be too high a price to pay.

No, it was better to say nothing at all. He'd figure out a way to deal with it all and keep everybody happy. *Besides*, he thought, *it's not like this is going to go on forever*. Once the campaign was over and he was in office, everything would be better. He could hire the Ghostbusters back—at a substantial increase in pay, to make up for their troubles. In fact, he could give himself a big raise too, to make up for his own troubles. And with a staff in place to handle his work for him, he'd be able to spend more time with Dana. All he had to do was weather the next couple of months of campaigning, and then life would go back to normal.

"Peter?"

He sighed. "It's nothing. Really. Look, I just had this stupid fight with Ray today."

"With Ray? What about?"

"Something stupid. It doesn't matter. The point is, I tried to lay it on him, but it was really all my fault. So I'm feeling like kind of an idiot right now."

He could see Dana's body relax, relieved that it wasn't anything more serious. She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. "He's your best friend, Peter. He'll forgive you."

"Yeah, I know. I'll call him tomorrow."

She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek. "You're a good friend."

He responded by leaning in as well, and kissing her lightly on the lips. "Thanks."

They kept their faces close together for a moment, exchanging smiles and silent gazes. Venkman felt so much for this woman who cared so much for him. There had to be something he could do to show her that he felt the same way...

They kissed lightly one more time and settled back into their seats, still holding hands.

"So I was thinking..." he said. "In a couple of weeks, when I get over the initial hump on this campaign thing, maybe I can finally take Butch to the Museum of Natural History to see those dinosaurs."

Dana raised a hand. "Let's not start that again."

"No, I mean it. I know I let you guys down on that one, and I want to make up for it."

"Peter, you're never going to have time to take Oscar to the museum while you're running for Mayor."

"No sweat. I'll work it out. Besides, it'll be good for the campaign. It'll help bring in the dinosaur vote."

"Oh, really?"

"Sure. Most people don't realize it, but dinosaurs are a vital, underappreciated minority in New York."

Dana chuckled. "All right, how about this: I'll take Oscar to see some of the dinosaur skeletons tomorrow. He'll be happy, and it'll take the pressure off. Then, whenever your schedule permits, we can all go together to see the rest of them."

Venkman threw up his hands. "And she has brains, too!"

"You're only just realizing that now?"

"No, of course not," he said, sliding over to put his arms around her. "From the first moment I saw you, that was what attracted me. Your brains."

"Really."

"Absolutely. Your gorgeous..." He kissed her. "...gorgeous..." He kissed her again. "...brains." He kissed her a third time.

They spent the better part of a block that way, until the MOMA building finally came into view. Reluc-

tantly, they had to separate at that point, so that they could touch up their appearance and look presentable when they arrived.

As they fixed their hair and straightened their clothes, she caught his eye. "Feeling better?" she asked.

"After that? Oh, yeah."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know," he said. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"Good. Listen, thanks for telling me what was going on between you and Ray. I know it's not easy for you to talk honestly about your feelings. But I'm glad you did."

"Yeah," said Venkman. "Me, too."

Egon just couldn't keep his eyes open anymore. Slowly, the parchment began to slip from his fingers. His head began to droop and fall forward, until he caught himself and woke with a start.

He shook his head, adjusted his glasses, and looked quickly around at his surroundings to orient himself. He saw the familiar office area, the piles of ancient books stacked on the table, and Ray paging through yet another volume at the far side of the table.

Oh, right, he thought.

With a yawn, Egon rolled up his sleeve to check his watch. It read three-sixteen A.M.

He turned his attention back to the Egyptian scroll in front of him. He opened his eyes wide, gave his head another shake, and tried to go back to searching through the hieroglyphics for some mention of Xanthador.

Ordinarily, he wasn't bad at deciphering the ancient symbols. Back in college, he once translated sixteen

dirty limericks into hieroglyphics as a favor to his childhood friend, Peter Venkman, so that Venkman could write them on bathroom walls. At the moment, though, Egon's sleep-starved brain was having trouble focusing on the task at hand. His thoughts kept drifting away.

Eye, scarab, water, ibis, walking man... he thought.

Eye, ibis, water...

Eye before ibis except after sea...

A scarab and an ibis walk into a man...

He woke again with a jolt and checked his watch. Three-twenty.

"Ray, let's call it a night," he said.

"Just a little longer," Ray said.

"It's almost three-thirty."

"It is?"

"Yes."

Ray thought about it for a second, then went back to his book. "We've got to nail this thing."

"I agree. But I can't stay awake any longer, and you fell off your chair half an hour ago."

"That was just a touch of vertigo."

"Due to the remarkable height of your chair, I assume," Egon replied dryly. "I admire your dedication, but we're no good to anyone like this. Let's pick up again in the morning."

"The sooner we find something on Xanthador, the sooner we can put an end to all of this."

"Yes, but operating at a diminished capacity isn't going to help. We'll come back to it in the morning. Janine and Louis can keep checking the English-language sources, too."

"What if there's another attack by then? Someone could die."

"And it will be you. You won't be able to save anyone if you don't get a few hours of sleep first. Or do you think it's a good idea to operate a proton pack when you're semi-conscious?"

Ray started to say something in response, but stopped himself. "Okay," he said. "You win. But just a few hours."

"Fine."

Ray placed a bookmark inside the book he was reading and closed the cover. "You want to crash upstairs? Your old bed's open."

"That sounds good."

The two of them walked around the room, turning off lights and trying not to stumble over their own tired feet. But when Egon went to turn off the lamp on Janine's desk, he noticed something.

"Did you leave the phone off the hook?" Egon asked.

"Not as far as I know. Maybe it got knocked over while we were dealing with the ghosts."

Egon picked up the fallen receiver and held it to his ear. An electronic voice on the other end was saying, "*Ling xiang de shihon, shijian shi...*"

With a puzzled look, Egon said, "It's a recording. It sounds like...Chinese?"

"Chinese?"

"I think so."

Ray groaned. "Giving the correct time, right?"

"Could be. Did you call?"

Ray shook his head. "Urban legend. A woman gets even with her ex after a messy break-up by using his phone..."

"To dial the phone number for the correct time in China?"

Ray nodded. "It's bad enough that they tried to kill us. But they wanted to drive up our phone bill, too."

CHAPTER 12

It was a little past ten-thirty in the morning when the call came in over the radio.

"Delta-six requesting assistance! Over!"

"Roger, Delta-six," said the dispatcher. "What's your twenty?"

"Five-seven-two Fifth Avenue! Ground floor, in the sporting goods store! We've got a—Watch out!" There was the sound of a scream, followed immediately by breaking glass.

"Delta-six, are you all right? Over."

"I'm here. We're in need of immediate back-up! Over!"

"Delta-six, what's your situation? Over."

"We've got a ten...a ten... Aah, forget the numbers! There ain't no numbers for this! Just send the Ghostbusters—fast!"

"Negative, Delta-six. All requests for supernatural

assistance are to be routed through the Mayor's office to Goodraven. Are you in need of supernatural assistance? Over."

"Whatever! Just get someone here, now! Before these spooks kill somebody!"

Ray had already dropped the scroll he'd been reading. He raced across the parking bay to the Ectomobile and had the engine running before Egon even finished climbing into the car. But before they pulled out, Ray stuck his head out the window to call to Janine and Louis, who were still seated at a table, surrounded by books.

"Keep an ear on the police scanner," he said. "If anything else comes up, call us."

"Right," said Janine.

The scanner had been Egon's idea. They'd never needed one before. After all, the police had always called them directly when they had a problem that fell outside the jurisdiction of the living. Actually, more often than not, the Ghostbusters received panicked calls from victims before the police even knew what was going on.

Now that Goodraven was in the picture, though, the Ghostbusters realized that the police wouldn't be calling anymore. That meant there was a good chance they wouldn't know about spectral events until it was too late. A trip to an electronics store and a swipe of a credit card were all that it took to fix that. ("If only all of our problems could be fixed this easily," Ray had remarked.)

Ray started to back up out of the parking bay. As the car moved, Egon held his door open and leaned out. "And remember," he called, "if any further apparitions manifest here..."

"Spray them with wraith repellant, get out of the building, and call you," said Janine.

Egon slammed the door just as the Ectomobile pulled out of the building. The car peeled away with lights and sirens blaring like the Fourth of July.

Louis looked around furtively and sprayed some wraith repellant back over his shoulder, just in case.

No sooner had Ray and Egon left than the phone started ringing. Several of the lights on Janine's phone lit up, indicating that a number of people were calling at the same time.

Janine had worked for the Ghostbusters long enough to know what to expect. Whenever a ghost did something in a public place, they invariably got calls from various bystanders who wanted to report it. The numbers of calls had risen over the years as cell phones increased in popularity and more people started carrying them around. Unfortunately, though, the callers almost never wanted to pay for the Ghostbusters' services; they simply assumed it was a city-funded organization like the fire or sanitation departments, rather than a private business. They were just reporting the incidents as good citizens or—more often—because they were in fear for their lives.

If some of them were willing to cough up some cash, Janine thought, I might get paid on time one of these days.

She picked up the book she'd been checking and carried it over to her desk. She continued to skim the pages as she took the calls.

"Ghostbusters," she said to the first caller. "Yes, we already heard. A team is on the way. Thank you."

One by one, she hit the button for each of the lines

on the phone. She spoke absently into the phone as she continued to skim through the book. "Ghostbusters. If this is about Fifth Avenue, they're on their way. Thank you." Click. "Ghostbusters. If this is about Fifth Avenue, they're on their way. Thank you." Click. "Ghostbusters. If this is about Fifth Avenue, they're on their way. Thank you."

It took a few minutes for the phone calls to subside. By the time they did, Janine had made it through several more pages of the book. But when she turned the next page, her eyes widened with interest. Hanging up the phone, she read more carefully. "Say, here's something," she said. She brought the book back over to show Louis.

"It isn't another article about tantric sex, is it?" Louis asked.

"No," she said. "Look at this..."

"Look at that, Oscar," said Dana. "Look—dinosaurs!" "Dinosaws!"

"That's right, dinosaurs. Those are skeletons from real dinosaurs."

"Dinosaws! Dinosaws!"

The two of them had just walked in the main entrance of the Museum of Natural History, and already Oscar's grin reached from ear to ear. Dana suspected it had more than a little to do with the diorama constructed from full-scale replicas of dinosaur skeletons which towered above the visitors in the museum lobby.

To be honest, Dana had to admit that she was a little awed by the skeletons herself. The largest was a long-necked dinosaur that had to measure at least sixty feet from its nose to its tail. It was rearing up on

its hind legs, so that its head reached almost to an arched ceiling that, in any other building, would have been the ceiling of the floor above. A similar but much smaller dinosaur stood behind it. A third dinosaur, which appeared to be a different species than the other two, stood in front of the tall dinosaur, poised for an attack.

All in all, it looked as though the tall dinosaur was protecting its young against an attacking predator. Dana smiled. *I can identify*, she thought.

She led Oscar around the display to a corner where an admissions desk stood. She got on line and checked her watch. It was 10:48. Fortunately, the line was not very long. *Just enough time to show Oscar the dinosaurs, drop him off at day care, meet Peter for a quick lunch, and get to work in time for the afternoon rehearsal*, she thought.

Oscar was pulling on one of the velvet ropes that had been set up to guide people who were waiting in line. Dana considered telling him to stop, but he was having fun, and he wasn't likely to knock over the heavy, metal posts between the ropes. Besides, he wasn't trying to stick the velvet rope in his mouth—yet—so she decided to let him be.

As she waited to pay, Dana glanced over the free brochures that lined the front of the admissions desk. There was a general pamphlet and map for the museum as a whole, as well as more specific pamphlets about special exhibits, the planetarium attached to the museum, and so on. She decided to take one of each and pass them on to Venkman. Not to badger him (although he'd probably assume that was her intent), but so that he'd have the information handy whenever he did get the chance to take Oscar.

Then, on second thought, she took two copies of each—one copy to give to Venkman, and one to save for the day when he inevitably lost the first one. Their little talk about responsibility seemed to have made a difference, but she wasn't expecting miracles overnight.

"Can I help you?" said a young woman behind the desk.

Dana gently detached Oscar from the velvet rope and moved him to one that was closer to the desk. She stepped up to the desk. "Hi. One adult and one two-year-old."

"Would you like to visit the planetarium or watch an IMAX movie?"

Dana tried to picture Oscar sitting through an IMAX movie or planetarium show. "No, thanks. Just the museum."

"Okay, then. Our suggested donation for basic admission is twelve dollars for adults and seven dollars for children two and older."

Dana thought about it for a minute. The "suggested donation" seemed kind of steep for what was essentially going to be an hour with her two-year-old. She wondered how many people paid what they suggested, and how many made considerably smaller suggestions of their own. But then again, the museum was a good cause, and how often did she visit?

She took a twenty-dollar bill out of her purse and handed it across the desk. In return, the young woman gave Dana one dollar in change and two small badges that bore the museum's logo. Dana attached one to her blouse and the other to Oscar's shirt.

"Oh," she said, "can you tell me where we can find the dinosaurs?"

"Upstairs on the fourth floor," said the young woman. "Enjoy your visit."

"Thanks. I'm sure we will," said Dana. She turned to Oscar and pried the velvet rope out of his grip just as he was pulling it toward his mouth. "Come on, kiddo. Let's go see some dinosaurs."

All in all, Venkman would rather have been looking at dinosaurs.

Come to think of it, there were *many* things he'd rather have been doing. Reclining in his mansion while counting his vast personal fortune was fairly close to the top of the list. So was nude shuffleboard with a quartet of international supermodels. But even if you skipped over the top of the list, plenty of other options sprang to mind, ranging all the way down to paying taxes and battling the hordes of the undead. He'd rather have been doing either of those, too.

Because as bad as any of those things might be, at least they didn't make him feel like an idiot.

"...And that's why I hope you'll let me serve you as the next mayor of this incredible city," he said. "Together, we can carry New York City forward, to build a better and brighter future for all of us."

"Good," said Ted Golden. As the public relations person for the campaign, Golden and campaign manager John Fielding were the ones pretending to be reporters and peppering Venkman with tough questions. "Let's just go over a couple of points."

"Let me guess. You want to shower me with lavish praise?" said Venkman.

"The lavish praise will come after the debate," Fielding replied. "For now, I have a couple of corrections to make on some of your answers."

"And I've got a few suggestions for presentation," added Golden.

Venkman supposed the practice session for the debate was going well enough. Over the past week or so, he'd spent countless hours getting briefed on the issues—even if you only counted the hours when he'd been awake and paying attention. And he'd always been good at thinking on his feet and bluffing his way out of tricky corners. All of the same skills were likely to serve him well during the debate.

But the fact remained that, of everyone in the room, he was probably the least experienced and the least knowledgeable about politics or the issues. That included Winston, who was sitting off to the side, enjoying the show...and probably even included the janitor who was standing in the corner, emptying a wastebasket. Venkman just hoped that his ignorance and discomfort wouldn't show too much during the real debate.

"...and watch out for saying 'can'—'we *can* do this,' 'we *can* carry the city forward,'" Golden was saying. "You need to sound more definitive: 'We *will* do this,' 'we *will* carry the city forward.'"

"Okay," said Venkman. "I *can* remember that, and I *will* be taking a break now." He walked over to the far end of the room and collapsed into the chair next to Winston's.

"Looking good, Peter," said Winston.

Venkman leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. "You think so?"

"Uh-huh. If I didn't know you, I'd never suspect that you have no clue what you're talking about."

Venkman chuckled. "Thanks a bunch."

"No problem."

"Y'know, you're welcome to do the debate instead of me, if you want."

"That's a tempting offer, but I don't think it would go over real well. This is a mayoral debate, not a 'mayoral debate plus one candidate for deputy mayor.'" Winston grinned. "Unless you want to trade jobs, that is."

Venkman opened one eye and returned the grin. "I'll think about it."

"You're going to be fine tomorrow."

"Who, me? Yeah, I'll rock. They'll probably carve my face onto Mount Rushmore. Replace Jefferson or Bush or whoever it is up there. Nobody remembers any of them besides Washington and Lincoln anyway."

"No, really. Look, you'll be wearing that earphone thing for Ted to prompt you if you get stuck. But that's not going to happen. You're Mister Smooth. No one's going to be able to pin you down."

"That's *Doctor* Smooth to you. But thanks."

Fielding ambled over to the two candidates and handed Venkman a paper cup of water. "We have enough time for one more round before lunch. You ready?"

Slowly, Venkman rose to his feet and stretched. "Sure. Doctor Smooth is in the house."

"Doctor Smooth?"

Venkman's only reply was a smirk. He draped an arm around Fielding and started the walk back to the podium. "Hey, by the way, how are you guys doing with digging up dirt on that Goodraven guy?"

"No dirt yet," said Fielding. "In fact, so far, we haven't found any information at all, but we're still

looking. We should have something in time for the debate tomorrow."

"I hope so," said Venkman. "Wouldn't it be a kick in the pants if he was clean?"

Whatever else it might have been, the Ghostbusters' arrival wasn't subtle. The Ectomobile's siren echoed for blocks as it roared up the street toward the sporting goods store, and its tires squealed as it screeched to a halt behind the police cars that had converged on the scene. Ray and Egon started to assess the situation before they even got out of the car.

From outside the building, it wasn't immediately obvious that anything supernatural was going on, but it was clear that something was wrong. Half a dozen police officers were watching the store with guns drawn, taking cover behind anything that presented itself: mailboxes, bus stop shelters, their own cars. The windows and doors of the store were riddled with holes. Some were large and jagged, where parts of the windows had shattered. Others were round and about an inch or two in diameter, with cracks in the glass that radiated from the holes in spiderweb patterns. To Ray and Egon, the holes looked too big to be from bullets, but then again, conventional weapons weren't exactly their area of expertise.

They climbed out of the Ectomobile and started toward the police officers. But before they could take more than a single step, one of the officers shouted, "Get down!"

There was a crash of breaking glass, and Egon caught a glimpse of something small and white hurtling toward him. Reflexively, he jumped back. The

projectile whizzed past his face and shattered against the wall of a building behind him.

He and Ray stopped what they were doing, and turned to examine the point of impact. Something had splashed against the wall where the projectile hit. What was more impressive, though, was the fact that the wet bricks were sizzling and starting to dissolve.

That was enough to convince the pair that the officer had the right idea. They crouched down, making themselves into smaller targets as they stepped over toward the wall.

Egon reached up and extended a finger to touch the wet spot, but then moved his finger away as he thought better of the idea. Tentatively, he rose partially out of his crouch. He leaned in close and sniffed the wet spot on the wall.

"Acid," said Egon.

"Golf balls," said Ray.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Golf balls. Another urban legend. Supposedly, if you unwind the elastic cord inside a golf ball, there's a small rubber ball full of acid at the center. That's how the story goes, anyhow."

"But it's not real."

"Nope."

There was something about the certainty in Ray's tone. "You checked," said Egon.

"Where else is a ten-year-old going to get his hands on acid?"

"I used to use mail-order chemical companies."

"I was thirteen by the time I thought of that." Ray tapped him on the arm and beckoned him to follow. "Come on, we don't have a lot of time. Let's get to work."

Still crouching down, they jogged over to a young policewoman who was taking cover behind her car. Only her head and arms extended above the hood of the car, so that she could see what was happening and keep her gun trained on the building. Egon wondered if she realized that the gun would be useless against intangible phantoms, or if she was just pointing it because she didn't know what else to do.

Suddenly, there was another crash, louder this time. A barrage of golf balls erupted from the store, smashing into buildings, cars, and pavement.

Everyone on the scene ducked down behind something to take cover. Distracted by the deadly volley, the policewoman didn't notice Ray and Egon approaching. She did a double-take when they plopped down beside her. "What do you think you're doing?" she barked. "Get outta here! This is a restricted area!"

"Ray Stantz, Ghostbusters," said Ray. "How many entities are inside the building?"

"I don't care if you're the Amazing Renaldo and Miriam!" she replied. "Get outta here!"

Ray and Egon looked at each other. They weren't used to this sort of reception. "We're scientists," Ray explained. "We're here to help."

"Not today you're not. We're under strict orders not to request or accept assistance from you guys. The situation here is under control."

Egon peeked over the car to survey the area. "This is under control?" he said, a little incredulous. "How are you planning to disperse the presence that's inside that store? Tell it to come out with its appendages in the air?"

"We're not going to disperse anything," she said. "He is."

Ray and Egon exchanged another look, then rose up to peer over the car. "Is that...?" Egon asked.

"Must be," said Ray. "Jonathan Goodraven."

Sure enough, a man in period clothing was emerging out of an alleyway, a few doors down from the sporting goods store. Like the Ghostbusters, Goodraven was keeping his substantial frame crouched over. But in his case, it didn't seem to be a defensive posture; rather, he was pouring something onto the ground from a box in his hand.

Goodraven's other hand held the neck of a large canvas sack that was slung over his shoulder. When the substance in the box ran out, he tossed the empty container on the ground and simply continued with a fresh one from the sack.

Just then, a fiftyish police captain joined the Ghostbusters behind the car. "What's going on here, Burke?"

"These civilians approached me, Captain Poole. I have informed them that we are under orders not to accept their assistance, and instructed them to leave the area."

"She's right, fellas," the captain said. "The order was announced during this morning's roll call at every precinct in the city."

"But that's insane, Captain!" Egon protested. "We're fully trained to—"

Poole held up a hand. "I know. I was there when you guys took out that marshmallow thing a few years back. You guys aren't exactly neat, but you do get results."

"So why—"

"Because we have orders. If you were to offer to assist me or any of my men, or request any information, we would have to turn you down."

Egon started to say something, but Ray laid a hand on his arm to stop him. He studied the captain with a thoughtful look. "So we can't offer any assistance to you or your men."

"Exactly," said Poole. Egon noticed that the edges of his mouth twitched slightly, as though he was suppressing a smile.

"But if we were to go ahead on our own, or offer help to Goodraven directly..."

"Not my affair. That would be up to him."

"And if we were to ask you for information, like how many entities are inside..."

"We would not be able to supply you with any information about the four perpetrators. Or the two clerks and three customers we haven't been able to extract from the store."

Ray smiled. "Sorry you can't help us, Captain."

"Just doing my job."

With a mutual nod, Ray and Egon peeked through the car windows to make sure the coast was clear. Then they took off, running as best as they could while crouching and wearing proton packs.

They caught up with Goodraven while he was still in front of the building next door to the sporting goods store. As they got closer, they could see that the substance he was pouring on the ground was salt—a long neat line of it stretched out of the mouth of the alley. As he poured, Goodraven mumbled, "...*in nomen impius. Amen.*"

Not surprisingly, Ray decided to give the friendly approach a try. "Mister Goodraven," he said, with a

smile and an outstretched hand. "Good to meet you. I'm Ray Stantz. This is Egon Spengler. Ghostbusters."

Goodraven gave no sign of hearing Ray as he continued to work. He connected the line of salt to the end of another that stretched down the block. Apparently, the whole thing formed one huge ring.

"Um, hello?" said Ray.

Only after the job was complete did Goodraven rise to his full height and look at them. Egon suppressed a shiver as his dark gaze fell upon them. Somehow, when Goodraven was crouched down, he hadn't looked quite so...*big*.

Again, Ray extended a hand, although his smile was a little more forced this time. "Ray Stantz?" Ray repeated, in a tentative voice. "Egon Spengler? Ghostbusters?"

"Ah, yes. I have heard tell of thee," said Goodraven, without taking Ray's hand. He looked them over with an evaluating eye. "Thou hast not the mien of those who do the Lord's work."

As far as Egon was concerned, that was enough to touch a nerve. "Perhaps that's because we're *scientists*, rather than slaves to some antiquated notion of—"

"Whoa, whoa." Ray quickly stepped between them with an ingratiating, if uncomfortable, smile. "I can assure you that we all share the same goals. Can we be of any help?"

"I have no need of thine assistance, nor that of any other. I have performed a binding ritual to contain the dark forces that lurk within this structure."

Ray looked along the ground. "That's a lot of salt."

Egon was still feeling too testy to be impressed. "Binding them is only fifty percent of the task," he said. "Do you have a plan for removing them, too,

or were you planning to leave them there indefinitely?"

"Once bound, it is a simple matter to cleanse their foul taint from off this mortal plain."

"Um...good. Good," said Ray. "Mind if we... observe your technique?"

"Do as thou wilt."

Without so much as a further glance in their direction, Goodraven walked along the outside of the ring of salt until he stood directly in front of the sporting goods store. He laid his sack down on the ground. He bent down, reached inside it and pulled out the largest flamethrower that Egon had ever seen. He pointed it at the store window and released a tremendous bolt of flame that instantly transformed the store into a blazing inferno.

Half of the police officers were frozen in shock. The other half were on their radios, calling for immediate assistance from the fire department. Ray, Egon, and the police captain all rushed over to Goodraven, grabbing at the flamethrower and his massive arms.

"What are you doing?!" Poole screamed.

"I should think it clear," Goodraven replied in his usual grim tone. "I am ridding this structure of evil influences."

"You set it on fire!" shouted Egon.

"I have long found the purifying power of righteous fire to be most efficacious."

"But there are people inside!" yelled Ray.

"Those who do truck with shades must share their fate."

"We can't wait for the fire department! We've gotta get those people out of there!" said Poole.

"While there are ghosts with acid and golf clubs in

there?" said Ray. "Even if your people find the hostages, you'll never make it out in time! Not without help!"

The captain only paused for a second. "All right," he called to the surrounding officers. "I need two volunteers to go in with me and the Ghostbusters!"

The young policewoman, Burke, ran forward, along with an equally young male officer.

"Good work," Poole told them. "Sing out when you find hostages, then get out of there like the Devil himself is at your heels."

"Because he probably is," muttered Egon.

"Go!"

Side by side, the captain, the two police officers, and the Ghostbusters plunged through the door into the burning store.

Goodraven stayed where he was, watching them with the same grim, impassive expression he'd worn throughout the exchange.

Quietly, in his rumbling voice, he intoned: "*For I shall rain down fire upon their heads, and sulfurous brimstone upon their houses. And they shall know my power and fear my name.*"

CHAPTER 13

The Mayor hadn't felt this good in days. At last, things were finally getting back to the way they should be.

Oh, it was too soon for the polls to shift all the way back yet, but Lapinski was confident that it was only a matter of time. Hiring Goodraven had been a master stroke. Bringing in a new spook hunter—a *better* spook hunter—knocked out the only aspect of Venkman's campaign that might conceivably have made him a threat.

"Mister Mayor," said Wong, "you claim to represent the common man. Yet, just last year, you pushed through legislation that nearly doubled the increases that were allowable under the existing rent control guidelines. How do you respond?"

"An excellent question, Nate. Thank you," the Mayor replied from behind his podium. "My opponent

would like to twist the facts to make you believe that this legislation hurts the common man, when nothing could be further from the truth. Who are the landlords of New York? The stereotype says they're corporate fatcats or faceless holding companies. But really, many landlords are the little people, like you or me. Like Mollie Jane Kidorf of Queens, or Anna Day of Staten Island. They're ordinary working people—many of them elderly—who've scrimped and saved their entire lives just to own the building they live in. They rent out parts of those buildings to others, just to be able to make ends meet.

"And as all of us know, making ends meet is getting tougher and tougher these days. Why, the cost of heating oil alone has risen fourteen percent in the last ten years. Outdated rent control laws have prevented these hardworking New Yorkers from keeping up with their own rising costs. My opponent would like to keep it that way, punishing good people for the crime of pursuing the American Dream. Now, maybe he's just being naive, since he's new to the issues and probably doesn't understand them fully. But, personally, I think we need to give a fair shake to *all* New Yorkers. We need to keep rents stable for tenants without draining the bank accounts of their slightly more fortunate friends and neighbors."

Wong applauded. "Great job, Mister Mayor! That's it for now."

With all modesty aside, Lapinski had to agree that he had done a great job, indeed. Over the course of the practice session, Wong had hit him with the toughest questions he could: every unpopular decision, every scandal, and every shortcoming from the past several years. Lapinski had taken every punch

and spun every mistake into a virtue. He'd artfully sidestepped inconvenient issues, like the city's spiraling debt or the fact that the "corporate fatcats and faceless holding companies" were actually the biggest beneficiaries of his new rent control laws.

Stepping down from the podium, he asked, "How'd I look, Nate?"

"Terrific, Mister Mayor. Perform like that in the real debate tomorrow, and you'll wipe the floor with Venkman."

"That's what I like to hear."

"And because you did so well, we have a little gift for you. It just came in an hour ago." He handed the Mayor a thick folder of paper.

"What's this?"

"Peter Venkman's police record."

Lapinski grinned like a hungry barracuda. "Just when I thought the day couldn't get any better..." He hefted the file in his hand, enjoying its weight. He almost started whistling.

He opened the folder and eagerly began to flip through the file. But before he could make it all the way through the first page, an aide approached with a cordless telephone.

"Excuse me, Your Honor," said the aide. "The Police Commissioner would like to speak with you right away. He says it's urgent."

Lapinski took the phone and held it to his ear. "Jim! How are you?" he said, in his warmest, most effusive tone. "Thanks very much for sending over the Venkman file. I'm just looking at—" He paused to listen as the Commissioner interrupted him. "On Fifth Avenue? Well, Goodraven can handle it... He's on the scene? Good..."

His face went pale, then beet red. He lost his grip on the thick file in his hand. A flurry of papers fell to the floor like snow. "*Goodraven did WHAT?!*"

The good news was that Goodraven had fired through the window, so the display caught most of the blast. The bad news was that the blaze was spreading—fast. The smoke was already starting to make it difficult to see. The heat inside the store was incredible, hot enough that the sprinklers were doing little more than adding steam to the smoke. And there were four cackling ghouls in caps and plaid bermuda shorts smacking acid-filled golf balls around the store.

When you put it all together, the bad news pretty much outweighed the good.

"We need to do this quickly," said Egon, ducking below the smoke and flying golf balls.

"Isn't that kind of..." Ray coughed several times from the smoke. "Isn't that kind of obvious?"

The police were already on the move, staying close to the ground to crawl under the smoke. The captain called out, to locate any living people who might be trapped inside. "Police officers!" he shouted. "We're here to rescue you! Call out your location, and we will assist you to safety!"

Panicked voices shouted back from various parts of the store: "Here!" "Over here!" "Help! Please help me!"

Poole sighed. The store was big, with plenty of aisles and displays that might hide victims or perps. To no one in particular, he said, "It figures. Just once, why couldn't they all be in the same place?" Then, to the two junior officers, he added, "Follow the voices. When you find someone, sing out and get

them out of the store. But once you're outside, check whether it's safe before you come back in. We don't need dead heroes today."

The younger officers acknowledged the order and headed off to help.

Elsewhere in the store, Ray and Egon were already doing their bit. Over in the shoe section, Ray squinted against the smoke to see one of the ghouls rearing back to hit another ball.

"Fore!" shouted Ray, zapping the undead creature with an ion stream that bound it before it could complete its swing. He used his foot to send a trap skidding across the floor beneath the ghoul. A flash of white light, and it was gone. "One ghost down!"

Despite the poor visibility, Egon found a second ghoul teeing off in the basketball section. He leveled his nutrona wand and fired, but a sheet of flame leaped up in front of him, spoiling his aim. The ion beam tore through a rack of basketballs. Dozens of the balls exploded from the force of the blast. Others careened madly in all directions.

Before Egon could get off a second shot, he was tackled from behind. The unexpected blow wasn't especially heavy, but under the circumstances, it was enough to make him lose his footing and hit the floor hard.

The proton pack on his back made it difficult for him to scramble back to his feet right away. But even before he rose, he managed to grab his fallen nutrona wand and twist around to face his attacker—only to find himself staring into the inanimate face of a dummy in a basketball uniform. With a sigh of relief, he noted that its feet were melted, probably from

when it was hit by acid, or perhaps from the heat of the fire. Either way, that was what had caused the accidental tackle. Still, the delay had done its damage. By the time Egon got back to his feet, the second ghoul was gone.

Over the roar of the fire, he could hear the young policewoman's voice, coming from somewhere to his right. "First hostage clear!" she called.

"Second hostage clear!" came her partner's voice from the other side of the store.

Egon nodded. That left three living people to evacuate, and three ghosts left to contain.

Suddenly, from out of the smoke, he spotted a golf ball whizzing toward him. He ducked to avoid it, calculated its approximate trajectory back to its source, and fired blindly in that direction.

Yet he still couldn't see well enough to know whether his ploy worked. He narrowed the beam and pulled back on the wand, like he was landing a bass, and found that he was dragging the bound and writhing ghoul out of the smoke and flames. He stamped down on the pedal of his ecto-trap, and the ghoul vanished inside. "Two ghosts down!" he shouted.

Ray was in the middle of binding the third ghost when he heard Poole's voice from somewhere near the entrance. "Hostages three and four clear!"

Ray triggered the trap. "Three ghosts down!" he called back.

Almost done! Just one more person and one more ghost! Ray thought, wiping the sweat out of his eyes. *We're going to do this! It's going to work!*

As if on cue, the fire at the front of the store took

its toll. Weakened by the flames, the plaster and wood in the ceiling began to crack and buckle. With a deafening roar, massive chunks of burning debris gave way and fell from the ceiling to block the door.

Ray's mind started racing as he tried to think of alternate routes to get out of the building. *Maybe there's a rear exit, or—*

But he dropped the train of thought when he heard the screams. Trying as best as he could to avoid the flames that were sprouting all around, he followed the sound. He soon found that it was coming from a tent that was set up as part of a display in the middle of the camping section.

It sounded like a woman inside the tent. Ray figured that she'd probably taken cover inside when the golf balls started flying, but the strategy backfired when the tent caught fire, trapping her inside.

He needed to get her out, but he couldn't open the burning tent flaps with his hands. Desperately, he searched around for some kind of tool that he could use. Sleeping bags, lanterns, camp stoves...all useless. Then his eyes lit on a rack of fishing poles.

Ray put down his ecto-trap and grabbed one of the poles and cast toward the tent. The hook caught in the canvas of the tent flap. Gingerly, being careful not to dislodge the hook, he pulled back on the pole. Slowly, the tent flap rose. By the light of the flames, he could see a saleswoman huddled inside the tent, her head buried in her arms.

"It's all right," he called to the woman. "We're going to get you out of here. I'll hold the door. Just crawl out carefully and stay away from the walls."

The saleswoman didn't lift her head. She just kept sobbing and screaming.

She can't even hear me. She's hysterical, thought Ray. "You can make it. But I can't let go to come get you. You've got to do it."

She didn't move. With a sinking feeling, Ray realized that the only way she'd make it out of the blazing tent was if he got her out himself.

Meanwhile, Egon was making his way through the store, holding his PKE meter in one hand and his nutrona wand in the other as he searched for the last ghost. So far, he hadn't found a trace. The reading on the meter indicated that it was still around somewhere, but the golf balls had stopped flying and the ghost seemed to be lying low.

Still, he couldn't afford to give up the hunt, even though the fire had spread throughout the store by now. The last thing they needed was to have the ghost pop up unexpectedly to stop them from escaping.

Suddenly, the indicator on the PKE meter jumped. Egon stopped in his tracks and slowly swept the meter around his body until the reading jumped again. With the smoke and flames, he couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of him, but he set off, using the PKE meter like a compass, and watched the reading.

The limited visibility made it difficult for him to see which way he was going, but from his crouched position, he could see enough of the merchandise near the floor to realize that he was heading into the golf section. In retrospect, it seemed like an obvious place to look.

Without warning, another dummy—this one dressed in golf clothes and holding a nine

iron—toppled forward out of the flames. It knocked Egon to the floor, landing on top of him.

He started to push it off him, only to find himself staring into the glowing red eyes. *Pseudo-organic possession*. The dummy raised the nine iron over its head and started to bring it down.

Egon didn't even try to dodge. Instead, he simply pulled the trigger on his nutrona wand, which was pressed up against the dummy's chest. At point-blank range, the ion stream blew the plastic body to bits. When the shrapnel cleared, all that was left was a ghost howling in helpless rage within the grip of Egon's ion stream.

"Last ghost down!" shouted Egon.

Ray couldn't see Egon through the blaze, but he heard him. "Great!" he called back, still holding the fishing pole in place. He coughed several times; the smoke was getting worse. "Now, follow my voice—fast! I need some help!"

"In a minute! I can't let go of the ghost!"

"Stick it in a trap!"

"As soon as I find one! I fell and dropped it!"

Grimly, Ray realized that there was no way for him to get help in time to save the woman in the tent. The police couldn't get back in through the debris that burned in front of the door, and until Egon could get the ghost into a trap, he was as helpless as Ray.

Ray was going to have to do this alone.

Constantly checking to make sure that the tent flap was still open, he stepped backward while slowly letting out more of the fishing line. When he reached a bank of shelves full of camping gear, he managed to wedge the fishing pole among the products on one

of the shelves. As gently as he could, he let go of the pole.

It held. The pole stayed in place, holding the tent flap open.

Still coughing, Ray raced over to the tent, and got down on his hands and knees. He knew that if he let his clothes come in contact with the flaming tent, it could spell disaster. So he got as close to the floor as he possibly could and inserted his head and shoulders into the tent.

"It's okay," he told the sobbing woman. "Come on, let's get out of here. Together."

He laid his hands on her shoulders, and the human contact alone had a helpful effect. Without opening her eyes to look at him, she clung tightly to his arms—as much for emotional comfort as for physical support.

"Keep your head down," he said, guiding her through the doorway of the tent.

Once they were clear of the tent and up on their feet, Ray's thoughts turned back to finding an alternate escape route. He squinted into the smoke and flame, but he couldn't see far enough to spot any other exit doors. He wiped his brow to clear away the sweat that came at least as much from the tension as from the heat.

And that's when he saw it. The blaze had spread past the camp stoves. It was closing on the tanks of butane fuel that stood behind them.

"Egon!" he shouted. "We've gotta get out *now*! It's gonna blow!"

"On my way!" came the reply.

With one arm around the saleswoman's shoulders and his other gripping the cord attached to his ecto-

trap, Ray started to run. He had a fairly good idea of where the front of the store was, as long as he stayed on course while dodging around pockets of fire along the way. But he had no idea how they'd get out once he got there.

Their path converged with Egon's as they approached the front of the store. Egon was still towing the ghost in his ion stream as he ran.

"I'm open to ideas!" said Ray.

"That makes two of us!" Egon replied.

Keeping one arm around the saleswoman, Ray pulled out his nutrona wand with the other. He blasted the window, shattering it into a hail of tiny glass fragments.

"Out the window!" said Ray.

"It's still burning up there!"

"No choice! On the count of three..."

Just then, a powerful jet of water blasted in through the broken window. It sizzled into steam as it came in contact with the fire.

"The fire department!" said Egon.

Ray brought the saleswoman into the outer edges of the jet of water. On the fringes, there was enough water to get soaked, without getting bowled over by the force of the pressure. Egon followed close behind.

"There they are!" shouted a voice from outside.

"Try to stay in the spray on your way out!" Egon told Ray.

"Right!"

The soaking wouldn't protect them from the fire for long, but then again, it didn't have to. The trio took a running start, jumped up into the window display, and kept going. They burst out into the sunlight, arm-in-arm, with Egon towing the last ghost

behind. A rush of cool, fresh air hit them as they reached the pavement. After the inferno in the store, the change in temperature felt like bathing in ice water.

"Keep going!" shouted Ray. "We need distance before those tanks blow!"

They had just cleared the curb when the butane tanks caught fire. The explosion ripped through the store and shattered windows all up and down the block. The force of the blast knocked the Ghostbusters and the saleswoman flat on their faces and sent them tumbling across the blacktop. But at least they were alive.

Despite his aches and pains, Ray didn't think he'd broken any bones. Slowly, and with some effort, he looked up to see that the crowd outside had multiplied. Police backup had arrived, along with three fire engines and their crews, a team of emergency medical technicians, and the usual assortment of news reporters and rubberneckers that mass destruction always brought along.

Through it all, Goodraven stood, impassive, in precisely the same place where he'd been the entire time. He seemed oblivious to the chaos raging all around him, and turned only slightly to watch the Ghostbusters go sprawling into the street.

Somehow, Egon had managed to keep a tight grip on his nutrona wand through the blast and through the fall. If he let his fingers slip for even an instant, the ghost would get free and the whole thing would start all over again.

"Ray..." he said, "Do you suppose...you could get me...a trap?"

* * *

A short distance away, the police captain was jabbing a finger into Goodraven's chest and hollering at him. Poole had decades of practice in intimidating people, even when the top of his head only reached the middle of their chest. But Goodraven was a whole different story.

"Are you nuts?!" he shouted. "You coulda killed somebody! What was that?!"

"That," Goodraven said in a calm, even tone, "was the Lord's work. His will be done."

The captain pulled out a pair of handcuffs. "You're coming downtown, freak! We've got you on arson, reckless endangerment—"

"I think not."

"Oh, you don't, do you?!"

"Nay. I merely fulfilled the task assigned me by the Mayor of your city."

Poole glanced over at the news cameras behind the police barricades. He imagined leading the Mayor's new golden boy away in handcuffs. Next, he imagined his pension evaporating before his eyes.

Goodraven suddenly raised a finger, as though he'd just remembered something. "Ah," he said. "Nay, but I misspoke. Your pardon."

Goodraven strode over to where Ray and Egon were lying on the ground, but didn't give them so much as a glance. Instead, his unflinching glare was directed at the ghost hovering in the grip of the ion stream. He stared long and hard into the spectre's empty eye sockets. It was the first time that Ray had ever seen a ghost look scared.

And, as it turned out, for good reason. Goodraven's

hand shot out to grab the intangible wraith by the throat. He started to mutter under his breath in a language other than English. His eyes became even more intense. The ghost let out an inhuman shriek of terror...

...and burst into bright orange flame. For a moment, it howled in pain and fear. Then it was gone.

Goodraven walked briskly back to the captain. "Now have I fulfilled the task assigned me by the Mayor of your city."

Without another word, he picked up the flamethrower, replaced it in his sack, and left. The reporters thronged around him as he reached and passed the barricades, but he simply walked purposefully away until they gave up and stopped following.

"What do you *mean* we can't find him?!" the Mayor roared.

The aide drew back reflexively, although he apparently managed to fight the urge to flee the building. "We—we tried to patch through police channels as soon as word came through, but apparently he already left the scene."

"Well, he's got to go home sometime! Call him!"

"W-we can't."

"We can't? Why not?!"

"M-Mister Goodraven never filled out an application. We d-don't have his phone number."

"What?!"

In a small voice, the aide said, "He...was supposed to come in to fill out his paperwork today."

"He was supposed to fill it out today? That's just dandy!" shouted Lapinski. "How are we supposed to fire this idiot if we can't get hold of him?!"

The aide shrugged helplessly.

"Send him e-mail! Put out search parties! Shine a signal in the sky, if you have to!"

"We could spread word through the media..."

"And let everyone know that we can't keep track of our own crazy exorcist? Out of the question!"

Lapinski turned to Wong, the police commissioner, and the commissioner for the Office of Emergency Management. Up until now, they had all been doing their best to stay invisible on the other side of the room. Even the police commissioner flinched.

"We need heavy duty damage control. I want Goodraven found—*now!* I want a statement for the press that distances us completely—*without* sounding like we made a mistake! We've gotta take care of this before the idiot pulls something like this again!" He glared at them. "Make me happy, gentlemen. Because if we don't pull this one off, we could *all* be out of a job."

It didn't take too long for the emergency medical technicians to get Egon and Ray back up to speed. A little oxygen helped combat the effects of the smoke inhalation. A little first aid took care of the minor cuts and burns they picked up along the way.

More important, the fire department managed to clear everyone out of the twelve-story building before the fire had spread beyond the store. The only people who'd been in immediate danger were the former hostages, and thanks to the police and the Ghostbusters, all of them were safe now. The fire department still had its hands full extinguishing the fire, but the worst was over.

"You did some good work back there, fellas," Poole said, shaking Ray's and Egon's hands.

"You, too, Captain," said Ray.

"Listen," the captain said in a confidential tone, "for what it's worth...your boy has my vote."

Ray was better than Egon at hiding his reaction when they both winced. "Thanks, Captain," he said, forcing a smile.

As Poole walked away to talk to his officers, Egon and Ray headed for the Ectomobile. They started to load their gear in the back of the car.

"The situation is getting worse," Egon said.

"I know," said Ray.

"We can't continue much longer without help."

"I know."

"And we won't get any from that walking anachronism Goodraven."

"I know."

"That maniac doesn't even know what century he's supposed to be in. His clothes and his speech patterns don't even come from the same century!"

"Not necessarily. Actually, his speech patterns sound like he learned them from a King James Bible. People still use those today."

"Fine, granted. But nevertheless."

"We need help," Ray agreed, "and it's not coming from Goodraven."

"Precisely."

Ray slammed the Ectomobile's rear door closed. They circled around their respective sides of the car and climbed inside.

"I'll call Peter and Winston when we get back to the office," said Ray. "Maybe they've worked out some kind of arrangement by now."

"And if not?"

"Let's cross that bridge when—"

Both of them jumped a bit when the car phone rang.

Ray reached for it first. "Hello?"

"Doctor Stantz?" Janine's familiar, nasal tones came through the receiver.

"Janine?" Ray said, concerned. "You're not under attack again, are you?"

"No, we're fine. Well, Louis has the sniffles from all these dusty books, but it's not like there are any ghosts or anything. I've been trying to reach the two of you for half an hour."

"We've been a little busy."

"Well, I found something."

"On Xanthador?"

"Uh-huh."

"Hang on a minute." Ray hit the speakerphone button so that Egon could hear what she had to say.

"Okay, go ahead."

"It turns out we were looking in the wrong place. We were figuring it'd be back in ancient Rome or Mesopotamia or someplace like that. I found something in this diary from right here in the U.S. in...when is this from?...1627."

"Xanthador's American?" said Ray.

"Not necessarily," Egon noted. "More likely an import—part of the belief system of some early immigrant."

"What does the entry say?" Ray asked.

"Well, I can't read all of it. Between the smeared ink, the handwriting, and the funny spelling, it's kind of hard to make out."

"What can you read?" asked Egon.

"It's something about somebody showing up from some colony that got wiped out. Apparently, he was babbling about fear and a demon named Xanthador who came from ancient...Ba...Bab...Bab-something."

"Babylonia," said Egon.

"Or Babel?" said Ray.

"The way things are going, it could be Babylon, Long Island," Egon said with a sigh.

"Anyway," said Janine, "it looks like they wrote the whole thing off to Satan, and they were going to send someone to check it out."

"What happened?" asked Ray.

"I don't know. It doesn't say," said Janine.

"Try looking a week or so later," suggested Egon.

"I did. I couldn't find anything. But it looks like there are some pages missing."

"Hmm. Does it say who they sent?" asked Egon.

"I think so, but the ink's smeared and the page is torn."

"So much for getting a lead that way," said Egon.

"All right. Thanks, Janine. Good work," said Ray. "Why don't you two focus on sources that deal with ancient Babylonia for now. Maybe we'll find more there."

"Roger," said Janine.

"We'll be back soon. See you later," said Ray.

"Bye."

Egon hit the button to break the connection. "Not much to go on."

"No, but it's more than we had before," said Ray.

"The diary mentioned 'fear.' Do you suppose it could be some sort of fear demon?"

"Could be. Unless it just meant they were scared

out of their gourds when the whole town was slaughtered. But a fear demon would make sense."

"How so?"

"Well, whatever's going on now is sure spreading a lot of fear."

Egon picked up the thread. "And even in normal times, urban legends cause fear."

"They make people nervous, anyway. So maybe Xanthador's doing all of this to spread fear."

"Or," said Egon, "Xanthador's *feeding* off the fear."

Ray considered that for a bit. "Of course, this is all just theory," he said.

"Absolutely. We'd need more information to prove or disprove it."

"And even if it's right..."

"Yes?"

"...we still have no idea how to stop it."

"True," said Egon. "But given that the United States still exists, and hasn't yet been renamed the United States of Xanthador, I think we can assume that someone or something stopped it in 1627."

"So it can be stopped."

"Presumably."

"Well, that's encouraging, I guess. Now, we just have to figure out how." Ray reached down and started the ignition. "Let's hit the books."

CHAPTER 14

By the next morning, the image was everywhere. Every newspaper was plastered with the photo. Every newscast led with the footage. It was hard to walk anywhere in New York City without seeing a dramatic shot of Ray and Egon charging out of a blazing inferno, half-carrying a female victim between them, and towing a bound, hideous spectre behind them.

"Look at this," Ted Golden said, holding up the newspaper. "You couldn't ask for a better image to place in the public's mind on the day of the debate. Not to mention top media coverage across the board."

Venkman looked at the photo yet again. "They look good. Don't they look good?"

"They look good," Dana agreed.

"Mm-hmm, they sure look good," said Winston.

"You don't sound all that excited," said Golden. "Don't you get it? We couldn't buy this kind of pub-

licity if we staged it ourselves. All right, so it would be better if the two of you were in the photo, too. But voters will make the connection anyway. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that by tomorrow, a lot of people will think you *were* in it."

"That's great," said Venkman, gazing absently around the walls of the dressing room.

"Well, I'd think you could work up a little more enthusiasm. This is *your* campaign we're talking about, after all..."

Milken stepped smoothly into the space between them and laid a soothing hand on Golden's shoulder. "Now, Ted, of course we're all excited. We've scored a significant PR victory and eliminated Lapinski's exorcist in one fell swoop."

"That's my point. I—"

"But let's be fair," Milken continued. "Peter's got a major debate in just over two hours. It's only natural for him to be a little preoccupied right now."

Golden paused for a moment, digesting the point. He quietly laid the newspaper down on a small table. "Right, right. Sorry, Peter. I didn't mean to imply..."

Venkman raised a hand. "Hey," he said. "Don't worry about it. *No hay problema.*"

Milken steered Golden toward the door. "Come, let's give these folks a little quiet time. We'll go find John and check on the audio hook-up."

As they exited, Milken turned back to say, "Remember, Peter: hair and make-up in forty-five minutes. And be sure to empty your pockets. The lines of your suit need to hang straight."

Venkman formed his fingers into a gun and pointed at Milken in reply. "Forty-five minutes. Pockets. Gotcha."

As the door eased shut, Winston picked up the newspaper and stared at the front-page photo. "We should've been there," he said.

"Looks like they handled it okay without us," Venkman said, trying to convince himself as much as Winston.

"Yeah, but look." Winston pointed at the photo. "Chasing ghosts in a burning building? We're not talking about a standard get-the-poltergeist-out-of-the-attic situation here. They could've been killed."

"I know. But we've been over all of this already. You know what Gary said. We've got responsibilities here, too."

"I guess..."

"Another week or two, and we'll work out a schedule to split our time better."

Winston nodded, then turned to Dana. "You're an impartial third party. What do you think?"

Dana had been quiet throughout the conversation, listening thoughtfully. "I don't think there is a simple answer," she said. "It sounds like you need to decide on some priorities."

"That's where the words 'easier said than done' come in," said Winston. "There's a lot of good we can do with the Ghostbusters. But there's a lot of good we can do from the mayor's office, too."

All of Winston's talk about "doing good" was starting to make Venkman even more uncomfortable than he already was. "Hey," he said, changing the topic. "Do either of you know if the guys are coming down to watch today?" The cable news station had limited seating available in the studio where they were holding the debate, but Venkman had managed to

snag a few tickets for Dana and his teammates. He could use some friendly faces in the audience.

Winston shrugged. "Haven't spoken to them."

"They weren't around when I dropped off the tickets with Janine," said Dana. "I'm sure they'll be here if they can."

Venkman nodded. "Yeah," he said, trying to sound as nonchalant as he could. "If they can."

Dana eyed him cautiously. "How are you feeling about the debate?"

"Who, me? No sweat. I'm Doctor Smooth, remember?"

"Nervous, huh?" said Winston.

"You could say that."

"Scared out of your wits?"

"Mm. You could say that, too."

Dana slipped her arms around Venkman and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You'll do fine," she said.

"Funny," said Winston, "I told him the same thing yesterday."

"Did you kiss him while you said it?"

"No, but now that you mention it..."

Venkman grinned and raised a fist. "Try it, and you'll be the world's first politician to be assassinated before getting elected."

Dana chuckled, then kissed Venkman tenderly on the lips. "How's that?"

Venkman licked his lips and gave her a squeeze. "Mmm...a little better," he replied. "Of course, if you want me to *really* feel better..."

"Down, boy," she said. "You don't need to feel that much better."

"Sheesh. Get a room," Winston said with a smile.

Dana eased out of Venkman's arms and held out a hand, palm up. "Now, hand it over."

"What?" asked Venkman.

"The wallet, cell phone, everything."

"That's a little steep for one kiss, don't you think?"

Dana gave his shoulder a friendly shove. "You need to clean out your pockets, remember? I'll hold it all for you."

"Oh, okay. But I'm warning you: I counted the spare change."

"Big spender."

Venkman chuckled and started to pull a variety of objects out of his pockets. One by one, he handed them to Dana, who stashed them safely in her shoulder bag.

Once his pants pockets were cleared out, Venkman reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, and pulled out the brochures that she had given him for the Museum of Natural History and the planetarium. He started to hand them to her, but she raised a hand to stop him.

"Why don't you hang onto those?" Dana said. "It's a good reminder."

"Subtle. Real subtle," said Venkman. But he returned them to his pocket, just the same.

Off to the side, Winston idly noticed the newspaper that he was still holding in his hand. He raised the paper up to eye level.

"It is a nice picture," he admitted.

The Mayor hurled the newspaper across his dressing room. As the pages fanned out and separated, the front page photo of Ray and Egon fluttered to the floor.

"This is a disaster!" he shouted.

"It's a setback," Wong admitted. "There should be ways to overcome it, though."

"Oh, really? Out of all the papers in the city, the *Post* is my biggest supporter. Remind me, what's on their front page? Pictures of me kissing babies? Oh, no, that's right—it's a photo of Venkman's friends, saving the day!"

"I know things look bad right now..."

"Bad? The *Hindenberg* looked bad. This is terrible!"

"You're still ahead in the polls."

"For now."

"And you have a chance to keep it that way by trouncing Venkman in the debate today—that shouldn't be hard. But you can only do it if you stay cool and keep your temper under control. If you let everything get to you, it'll show."

Lapinski stopped and took a deep breath, exhaling heavily. "All right. You've got a point."

"I'm not saying anything you don't already know yourself. Now, shall we finish reviewing the additions to your talking points?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Goodraven."

"I don't bring him up during the debate. We hold off on making a statement until I can do it without a stage full of candidates standing there."

"And if someone else brings him up?"

"Goodraven was using a respected technique, and had it tightly controlled. When the Ghostbusters barged in, they disrupted the procedure and things went out of control."

"So you're still using him?"

"No. Yesterday's experience has made me realize

that, despite Goodraven's extensive safeguards, interference by less experienced parties can still cause an indirect threat. Since I'm not willing to take even a small chance with the safety of the citizens of New York, we have come to an amicable and respectful parting of ways with Mister Goodraven. We are currently considering several alternate options, and plan to announce something soon."

"Excellent. Venkman?"

"Emphasize his inexperience and unreliability. Talk about the demands and stress of the job. And when the opportunity arises, I slip in the fact that he was committed to a mental hospital."

"Even though it was a previous administration that had him committed—for a day. Before Klotch reversed his decision. But you don't have to mention that."

"No, but *he* will, if he has a lick of sense. When he does, I move on to his arrest record."

Wong nodded slowly. "It'll work. You'll take the debate in a walk."

"I'll bury him."

Ray hadn't had the chance to see the photo yet. He'd been a little occupied.

Actually, he'd planned to wake up at six A.M. and get an early start on digging through the next batch of Babylonian documents, in search of further information on Xanthador. But after everything he'd gone through the day before, he wound up oversleeping until ten past eight. When he did wake up and saw the clock, he tried to jump out of bed, only to discover the aches that ran through nearly every part of his body. That was enough to convince him to move a little more slowly. So, by the time he pulled

himself out of bed, showered, and got dressed, it was already after nine o'clock.

Ever since Ray had moved back into the quarters above the Ghostbusters offices, one of his favorite parts of the day was his morning commute down the pole that remained from the days when the building had been a fire house. Today, however, the impact as he landed at the bottom of the pole made him realize (just a little too late) that sliding down was probably a mistake this morning. As he slowly straightened up, he whimpered a greeting to Janine and Egon. They had already arrived and were hard at work, plowing through stacks of research material.

Ray settled in with some yellowing fragments of parchment, a cup of black coffee, and a bagel. As he chewed the bagel, he discovered that even his teeth ached. "How are you feeling?" he asked Egon.

"Fine," Egon said, with some mild surprise in his voice. "Why do you ask?"

Ray wasn't sure whether Egon was putting him on, or whether he should just be disgusted. He decided to let it pass. "So, where are we up to?" he asked.

"Nothing so far. I have Janine going through an English translation of tractate *Avodah Zarah* from the *Babylonian Talmud*," Egon replied. "In the meantime, I'm about a third of the way through the court records from the Nebuchadnezzar dynasty, but it's slow going. I have to admit that my Aramaic is a little rusty."

"I can't imagine why," Ray looked around. "No Louis today?"

Janine held up several small, rectangular pieces of cardboard. "Dana dropped these off yesterday. They're tickets for Doctor Venkman's debate," she

explained. "Louis decided to go. He said he's never been to a live municipal debate before. There's a ticket for you, too, if you're interested."

Ray thought it over briefly. Truthfully, he felt a bit torn. On the one hand, Peter was his best friend, and he wanted to be supportive. But at the same time, Ray knew that he needed to be here, looking for an answer before Xanthador hit the city with something even worse.

"Thanks," he said, "but I'd better stick around here."

The next hour or so passed quietly, with the three of them skimming through various texts. Their only accompaniment was the police scanner and the usual background noise of Slimer gobbling down everything in sight.

"Bingo," said Ray.

Egon looked up. "You found something?"

"Paydirt," said Ray. "It's right here, in the journals of Bar Ulla."

"Bar Ulla," Egon said, throwing up his hands. "Why didn't I think of the journals of Bar Ulla?"

Ray ran his finger across the yellowed page of parchment. "Some of it isn't really legible anymore..."

"Spending two thousand years in a clay jar in a cave will do that."

"And 'Xanthador' isn't the easiest name in the world to spell in Aramaic."

"Or in English," said Janine.

"But I'll bet that 'Zantador' is the same being," said Ray. "It refers to him as 'Zantador, lord of fear.'"

"That supports our hypothesis," said Egon. "He's a fear demon."

"Or he plays one on TV."

"Does it say how to stop him?"

"No, but there is a prophecy. Blah, blah, blah, 'reign of terror'...blah, blah, blah, 'devour the fears of man'...blah, blah, blah, 'rain down fire and brimstone from the heavens'..."

"Sounds like pretty standard stuff," said Egon.

"Mostly. But there's also a date attached."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I guess Bar Ulla liked his prophecies specific," said Ray. "Xanthador is supposed to attain his ascendance when Saturn aligns with Venus and Mars."

"It sounds like you found the Aramaic lyrics to *Hair*," said Janine.

"Nope, it's right here. Look, there's even a diagram." Ray held it up to show them. There was an array of small circles and dots, with three of them lined up in a row and connected by a straight line.

"So if we can find the next time the planets are due to align in that configuration," said Egon, "we'll know when to expect Xanthador's major offensive."

"What do you want to bet it's next Tuesday?"

"Uh-uh," said Janine. "You won't see an alignment like that for at least another...hundred and fifty years. Maybe more."

Egon and Ray stared at her.

"Oh, don't look so surprised," she said. "I know stuff, too."

"Yes, but..."

"You've gotta know about orbits and stuff if you're serious about astrology. Like when I worked out your star charts, remember?"

Ray remembered. Janine had predicted that he would take a long ocean voyage with a purple muskrat. So far, it hadn't happened yet. But it soun-

ded so wonderfully bizarre that Ray was still hoping it would.

"A hundred and fifty years, huh?" he said.

"Give or take," said Janine. "I'd have to plot out the charts to be completely sure, but it's something in that ballpark."

He flashed an inquisitive glance at Egon, who shrugged slightly in reply.

"We should probably double-check your figure with someone at NASA or one of the observatories," Egon told Janine. "But if that's correct, it takes some of the heat off. It means the full-blown attack is more than a century away."

Janine got up and crossed the room to answer a ringing phone.

As she moved out of immediate earshot, Egon whispered to Ray, "Do you think she's right?"

"I dunno. Could be."

"We should double-check."

"Sure," said Ray. "But it could be good news."

"Very good news."

"Of course, if this is what it's like when the heat's off," said Ray, "I'd hate to see what it looks like when things get hot."

"True," Egon replied. "But at least there's a good chance that it won't get any worse anytime soon."

Ray stretched his arm and winced. "That's something, I suppose."

"Let's take another look at what Bar Ulla has to say..."

Before they could do more than smooth out the parchment, though, Janine hung up the phone. "We've got another one," she called over to them.

"What is it this time?" asked Egon.

"A multiple sighting in Riverside Park."

"We're on it," said Egon, getting to his feet.

Ray picked up the parchment as he rose. "I'll bring this with us. Let's see if we can get any more out of it while we're on the way."

Egon laid a hand on Ray's arm to stop him. "Do you really want to take a fifteen-hundred-year-old parchment into an encounter with a hostile paranormal?" said Egon. "Not to mention carrying it around in the streets of New York?"

"Good point," Ray replied. "I'll make a photocopy."

CHAPTER 15

"**T**hat's very helpful, Doctor," said Egon. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," said the voice on the other end of the speakerphone. "Glad to be of help. Good luck."

Egon hit the button to break the connection. "Well, there you are. NASA confirms it," he said. "Xanthador isn't scheduled to ascend to power for at least another hundred and seventy-three years."

Ray steered the Ectomobile onto Seventy-second Street and headed west. "So this is what he's like with one hand tied behind his back. I'd hate to see him at the top of his game."

"You and me both. We'd better make sure that it never gets to that point."

Riverside Park wasn't the biggest park in New York City, but it was easily one of the longest. More than four miles in length, it stretched along the banks of

the Hudson River, spanning nearly the entire expanse of Manhattan's Upper West Side. Its three hundred acres encompassed numerous sports fields and courts, more than a dozen playgrounds for children, a handful of dog runs for urban pets, and the tomb of an American president. Even multiple ghosts could take a while to find in a space that vast.

Fortunately, the call for help had placed the ghosts in a cluster near the Seventy-ninth Street boat basin. Ray and Egon couldn't be certain that there weren't more of the entities lurking elsewhere in the park, but it was the obvious place to start, at any rate.

The Ectomobile cruised up Riverside Drive until it reached Seventy-ninth Street. Ray pulled over into an illegal parking space beside a fire hydrant and a towering oak tree. After years of New York driving, he knew all too well that finding a legal parking space in Manhattan often could take longer than the trip itself. As a result, he had long since come to the conclusion that it made more sense to grab any open space in an emergency and try to fight the parking ticket later, if need be.

"See anything yet?" he asked, as he straightened out the car.

Egon craned his neck to scan the area, but between the foliage in the park and one of the city's ever-present construction sites across the street, the view was largely obscured. "It's impossible to see from here," he replied. "Perhaps we'll have a better view when we get out and stand up."

He started to open his door, only to have it stop short as it banged into the tree beside the car. The two-inch clearance between the two wouldn't have

been enough to allow a mouse to get out of the vehicle.

"Sorry. I'll see if I can move the car enough to let you out," said Ray.

Everything that happened next took place in the space of less than ten seconds. Ray turned to check the traffic, just in time to see a cloud of black smoke and hear a mechanical roar as the driver of a passing cement mixer gunned the engine. The truck barreled out into traffic, tearing across the busy thoroughfare in reverse. The air was filled with the sound of screeching brakes and squealing tires as cars skidded and veered to avoid the runaway truck.

But the thing that mattered most to Ray was where the cement mixer was going: straight for the side of the Ectomobile.

The rear of the truck loomed larger and larger. Split seconds before impact, Ray released his seat belt and lunged sideways into Egon's lap. Behind him, the driver's door crumpled as the Ectomobile jumped with the force of the collision. Egon and Ray were pelted with a hail of shattered glass as the cement chute on the back of the mixer came smashing through the side window and stopped inches from their heads.

Ray's first reaction was shock, followed by anger. But all of that vanished when he saw the glowing, skeletal arm that waved to him from the cab of the cement mixer.

"Oh, no," said Ray.

"Please don't tell me this is another urban legend," said Egon, who was pinned beneath him.

"Hurry! Get out of the car!"

"We can't! The tree, remember?"

Ray's head jerked back and forth as his attention

jumped between the tree on one side of the car and the cement mixer on the other. Egon was right. They weren't going to get through either door anytime soon.

"Out the back!" he said.

"The back?"

Ray struggled to squeeze over the seat to get into the back of the Ectomobile. Despite the awkward angle, Egon pushed as best as he could, trying to give him a boost.

Egon grunted with the effort. "Since when is a traffic accident an urban legend?"

Ray's breathless voice reflected the strain as he wedged himself through the space between the top of the seat and the roof. "A cement truck driver comes home early from work. His wife was planning to surprise him with a fancy new car. But when he sees the car, and the stranger with his wife—"

Suddenly, Ray's body became unstuck. He shot through the space and fell headfirst, to crash on the floor in the back seat. He fumbled around to bring himself upright and grab the door handle.

"He thinks she's having an affair?" asked Egon, hoisting himself up over the seat.

Still sprawled across the floor, Ray got the back door open and reached up to pull Egon over the seat. "He gets furious. Insanely jealous."

Egon's skinnier frame slid through the space without incident. He landed on top of Ray and scrambled across his body toward the open door. "So he rams the car with his truck."

"No!" Ray managed to follow him out the door just as a river of cement started to gush down the chute

and through the broken window. "He fills the car with cement!"

The two Ghostbusters tumbled painfully out onto the sidewalk. "We're spending far too much time lying on sidewalks these days," said Egon.

Ray watched the cement flowing into the Ectomobile with despair. "Our beautiful car!"

Egon set his jaw with grim determination. "Come on," he said. "Let's salvage the equipment before it all turns into a giant paperweight."

They stepped briskly to the back of the vehicle and opened the rear hatch. Moving quickly, they started to pull out proton packs, ecto-traps, PKE meters, and other tools of the trade.

As Ray continued to rescue whatever he could get his hands on, Egon strapped on his proton pack and switched it on. Without another word, he moved around the car, drew out his nutrona wand, and zapped the cackling ghoul who was driving the truck. He tightened the ion stream, yanking the creature out through the window.

"Ray!" he called. "Trap, please!"

"Huh?" Preoccupied with the equipment, it took a second for Ray to register what was happening. Once he saw the ghoul struggling in the grip of the ion stream, his face darkened. He grabbed an ecto-trap and slid it across the ground. "Here! Get the spud!"

Egon caught the trap with his foot and stamped on the pedal. There was a brilliant flash, and the ghoul was gone.

Satisfied, he sheathed his nutrona wand. He hoisted himself up on the step beside the driver's door and reached through the open window to shut down the cement mixer. The massive drum on the back of the

truck slowly stopped turning, and the flow of cement dribbled down to nothing.

Once the cement stopped flowing, Egon rejoined Ray at the back of the Ectomobile. They continued to unload a variety of instruments from the car as they talked.

"Xanthador's gone too far this time," Ray said. "He trashed our car. Our *car*!"

"It could be worse," Egon replied. "I don't think the cement had time to travel far beyond the front seat."

"Even so. Replacing the door? Unbending the frame? Chopping out concrete? Do you realize how hard it is to scrape two hundred pounds of cement off upholstery?"

"Still, compared to the last few days, you have to admit that this incident was relatively easy to handle."

"I guess so. I..." Ray froze in mid-sentence, struck by a thought.

"What's the matter?" asked Egon.

"Didn't Janine say there were *multiple* sightings?"

That was when they heard the explosion.

Louis stood up and waved his arms wildly. "Dana! Dana! Over here!"

Dana looked in the opposite direction, pretending not to hear as she struggled to maintain the slightest shred of dignity. *There must be another empty seat* somewhere, she thought.

Truthfully, she felt badly about trying to ignore Louis, but the fact was that she always felt uncomfortable standing out in a crowd. It was one of the reasons why she was so content to be part of a large orchestra—she wasn't the type for a solo career. Even at the MOMA dinner a couple of nights before, she'd

been able to sit unobtrusively in her seat while everyone focused on Peter and his speech.

Things didn't tend to work that way with Louis, though. He was a nice enough guy and he always meant well, but subtlety wasn't exactly his strong point.

And here's a perfect example, she thought. Much as she might have been trying not to see Louis, the same couldn't be said for anyone else in the studio. The more she tried not to notice him, the more frantic his attempts became—and the more heads swiveled in her direction.

By this point, he was jumping up and down and yelling, "Dana! Yoo-hoo! Dana!" Then he lost his balance and fell on top of the man sitting in front of him, knocking off the man's toupee in the process.

Dana craned her neck to scan the studio one more time. She would have taken any possible seat. But even at a glance, she could see it was in vain. The rest of the studio was packed.

She could watch on the monitor in the dressing room, she supposed. But that wouldn't be the same as watching Peter live, and he wouldn't be able to see her when he needed a bit of support. No, there didn't seem to be any other way.

Louis was awkwardly hoisting himself back to his feet in his own row, the toupee dangling from his shirt button. He yanked at it with one hand while he continued waving at her with the other. Everyone but Dana seemed to be enjoying the show tremendously.

She waited until Louis pulled the toupee loose and dropped it back on the man's head, where it landed at an odd angle. As the red-faced man fumbled with it, Dana looked over at Louis and smiled as though

noticing him for the first time. She screwed up her courage, waved sweetly, and walked down the aisle to his row. "Hi, Louis."

"Hi! Come on over. I saved you a seat."

"That's so nice of you. You, um, you shouldn't have."

"Oh, no problem."

Excusing herself repeatedly, Dana squeezed past the other people sitting in the row until she reached the empty seat and sat down as quickly as she possibly could.

"This is going to be really good. Look, I've been preparing for it," said Louis. He unfolded an oversized sheet of paper that not only covered his lap, but also Dana's and the woman sitting on his other side, too. "See, I made up a grid to keep track of what all the candidates say about each of the issues. White is for their initial statements, yellow is for rebuttals, and pink is for follow-up. Here's Peter's column over here. Then I've got a section down here for cross-referencing when appropriate."

"That's, um, very impressive, Louis," said Dana. "Very organized."

"I figure there's going to be a lot of ideas flying back and forth today. When things start to get hot and heavy, all these people in the audience are going to have a hard time keeping track if they don't have some kind of tool to help them stay on top of it all."

"Ah."

"But that's not all."

"No?"

"Not by a long shot. See, I don't know if you've thought about it, but I figure that we've got to support Peter in the debate."

"Uh-huh."

"So I painted his name on my chest. I got the idea from seeing a commercial for professional football. Or maybe it was soccer—I get those things confused sometimes. But anyhow, whenever Peter makes a really good point, I'll jump up and tear open my shirt and cheer. You want to see?"

Louis started to reach for his shirt, but Dana quickly grabbed his wrist. "No!" she exclaimed, more loudly than she intended. Heads started to turn again at the unexpected outburst. She flushed and lowered her voice. "Um, Louis, that sort of behavior—painting your chest and all—well, it's true that some people do it at sporting events."

"Yes, and I used fluorescent paint so it would show up really well..." He started to reach for his shirt again.

Dana caught his left wrist. "But it's not really the kind of thing people do at political debates."

"No?"

"No, not really. It might make people think that Peter's not as serious as he should be."

"Oh. Well, I wouldn't want that to happen."

"No, I'm sure you wouldn't."

"It's just that I've never been to one of these before. I wasn't sure what was expected."

"I understand."

"I guess I probably shouldn't wave the pennants that I made, either."

"Probably not."

"Oh. Okay."

Louis reached down with his right hand and fingered a few obviously homemade flannel flags. "VENKMAN #1" had been written on the first one.

The second said, "GO VENKMAN!" against a background of tiny "RAH"s. The third one read, "VENKMAN OPPOSES PASSAGE OF ORDINANCE NY-237, WHICH PROVIDES TAX RELIEF FOR THE TOP 2% OF WAGE EARNERS WHILE SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASING—" Dana wasn't completely sure why it stopped in the middle of a sentence. She assumed that it continued on the other side.

With a look of mild disappointment, Louis stashed the pennants beneath his seat. Still, even after they were safely stowed away, Dana waited a moment to make sure the message sank in before she felt secure that the danger was averted. She breathed a sigh of relief, and slowly released her grip on his wrist.

It was only then that she noticed the woman who was sitting on Louis' other side. She was a small African-American woman, probably in her sixties, and she was chuckling heartily. She caught Dana's eye. "Say what you want, but the boy surely does have spirit, don't he?"

Dana smiled weakly, but couldn't quite bring herself to answer.

Louis, on the other hand, was his usual irrepressible self, apparently immune to embarrassment. "Dana, do you know Mrs. Zeddemore?" he said. "We met out front before. She already has her nephew handling her income taxes every year, but she's a nice lady anyway. Mrs. Zeddemore, Dana Barrett."

"Now, Louis, what did I tell you?" said the older woman.

He smiled and hung his head like a little boy who'd been caught in a bit of mischief. "Right. Sorry. I meant 'Mama.'"

She extended an arm across Louis to shake hands

with Dana. "Evangellean Zeddemore," she said. "But you can call me 'Mama.' Everybody does."

Dana smiled and tried to regain her composure. "Pleased to meet you. I've heard so much about you. I'm Dana."

"Oh, yes. You're Peter's young lady, aren't you?"

Well, actually, I wouldn't call myself anyone's young lady, Dana thought. But instead, she said, "Something like that."

"Those boys of ours are surely something, ain't they?"

"Yes, I'd have to say they're something, all right."

"Bet you never expected to be in a place like this, watching your fella argue with a bunch of other gentlemen to see who'd get to run this city, now did you?"

"No, I can't say as I did."

Mama Zeddemore beamed from ear to ear. "Me neither. But I don't mind telling you that these last few weeks, I've been right over the moon. I always did know my baby would do me proud, but all of this... I'd be up on the roof every morning crowing like a rooster if I could." She chuckled. "Oh, but listen to me going on and on like an old lady. Why, I don't need to tell you all that. You must be feeling the same way yourself. Isn't that right, dear?"

Maybe it was just Mama Zeddemore's infectious enthusiasm, but Dana realized that she did, indeed, feel the same way. Over the years, she'd enjoyed Peter. She'd appreciated him. She'd been infuriated by him on occasion. She'd even loved him, although she had no illusions about hearing him say the same anytime soon. And whenever he put his life on the

line to save the world—or even Oscar and herself—she'd been proud of him, too.

But this felt different, somehow. Dana couldn't quite put her finger on it. Maybe it was the way Peter was dressing up in nice suits every day, or the attention he was paying to serious issues. Or maybe it was the way he was spending his time in meetings instead of chasing ghosts with a ray gun. It almost felt like...like Peter was growing up.

She looked back at Mama Zeddemore with a broad smile. "Yes," she agreed. "I know exactly how you feel."

From the floor of the studio, the stage manager called for the audience's attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be going live in just over five minutes. When I call for quiet, please refrain from all conversation, and hold your applause until you see the applause signs lit."

"You know, Mrs. Zed—Mama," said Dana, "Winston won't be appearing on camera today. Peter's the only one who'll be in the debate."

"I know, dear."

"So what brings you all the way out here today?"

Mama Zeddemore looked at her in surprise. "Why, for my boy's running mate, naturally. Those boys are a team. It might not be Winston up there on that stage in person, but it's surely his team. What kind of mother would I be if I didn't come out to show my support? Ain't nobody going to know I'm proud of my boy if I don't act like it. I've got to wear that pride for all to see, now don't I?"

Dana considered the point for a moment, letting it sink in. "Yes," she said slowly, "I suppose you do."

She turned to Louis. "Can I have one of those pennants?"

It took him a second to realize why she wanted it. Once he did, his face lit up. Immediately, he started to grope around beneath his seat to find the flags. "Sure! We can each wave one!" He handed one of each to Dana and Mama Zeddemore, holding onto the last one for himself. "Does this mean it's okay for me to open my shirt?"

"Don't push it," Dana replied.

They were racing across the park, heading downhill toward the boat basin, when they saw the first one. It was a boy, about ten years old with tousled hair, standing beside the fountain in the rotunda near the marina. He would have been thoroughly unremarkable if not for the fact that his skin, hair, eyes, and clothing were all the same unearthly shade of pale green. And if he hadn't been translucent.

And if there had only been one of him.

Ray spotted a second, identical figure on the footpath that led down to the boat basin. Egon caught sight of a third standing among the sailboats that were docked down below. There was no way to know how many more of them might be scattered across the miles of greenery that comprised the park.

Ray waved his arm at Egon to get him to stop. "Hey," he said between wheezes, "hold up a minute."

There were several reasons why Ray wanted to stop. Admittedly, some of it had to do with the physical exhaustion that came from running the equivalent of a few city blocks with an unlicensed nuclear reactor strapped to his back. Part of it came from not wanting to collide with the dozens of pan-

icked park visitors who were fleeing the area after the explosion that he and Egon had heard.

For the most part, though, it simply reflected an understandable level of caution. Most of their encounters with Xanthador's wraiths had been potentially lethal. Ray didn't want to rush too far in before they had the chance to figure out just what they were dealing with.

For its part, all the trio of youthful spectres did was stare directly at him and Egon.

"What do you think?" asked Ray, catching his breath.

"Difficult to say. Clearly, it's a class-three, full-body manifestation with multiple concurrent instantiations. But until one of them actually does something..."

"...it's hard to know what they're capable of," said Ray, completing the thought.

"Do you know any urban legends about triplets?"

"Not off the top of my head."

The ghosts continued to stare at the two Ghostbusters. The young wraiths still hadn't budged. "Maybe they just came out to enjoy the river view," Ray said dryly. "It is a nice day out here."

Without taking his eyes off Ray and Egon, the ghost near the fountain reached into its pocket and took out a small packet. It tipped back its head and poured the contents of the packet into its mouth.

"I think we're boring it," said Egon.

"What's that noise?" asked Ray.

Egon cocked his head and listened. Sure enough, there was a faint fizzing, crackling noise coming from the general direction of the ghost near the fountain. There was something oddly familiar about the sound...

"Fizzy candy!" Egon realized.

"What?"

"Fizzy candy. It's made from a base of sodium bicarbonate, so it fizzes and pops inside your mouth. I haven't seen any since I was a—"

"Look out!" Ray shouted. "He's got a cola!"

"For Xanthador!" cried the ghost.

With a wicked smile, the spectre raised a translucent can of soda to its lips. Without a moment's hesitation, Ray grabbed Egon and hit the ground, taking cover behind the broad trunk of a nearby tree.

And not a second too soon. The young ghost took a long swig from the can. Instantly, its head swelled to several times its previous size...

...and exploded with the force of a mortar shell.

The blast sent debris flying in all directions and shook the very ground. Egon and Ray could feel the force of the shock wave pass over them, but the tree saved them by taking the brunt of the impact.

As soon as the blast subsided, the Ghostbusters were scrambling to their feet, nutrona wands at the ready. "Fizzy candy and cola," said Egon. "Even I should have recognized that legend."

"You knew that one?" said Ray, swinging his nutrona wand in an arc as he surveyed the scene.

"Are you kidding? When I was a child, I spent weeks conducting experiments to try to replicate the phenomenon."

"Did it work?"

"No. But not long after, I discovered nitroglycerine."

The explosion had torn up the area around the rotunda pretty badly. The fountain was completely gone. The only vestige that remained was a jagged, broken pipe that protruded from the ground, spewing

a geyser of water up into the air. The blast had even blown the spectre's head clear off its shoulders.

Not that it seemed to bother the headless ghost much. The spectre continued to stand nonchalantly beside the spot where the fountain had been, letting the water rain down through its ethereal body.

Ray took aim at the decapitated spirit, but Egon laid a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "Later. We've got more pressing problems to deal with first."

Ray looked around and immediately saw what Egon meant. Both of the other two ghosts were raising identical packets of candy to their mouths.

Egon zapped the closer one, pinning its arms to its sides as he bound the ghost in an ion stream. Not wanting to take any chances, he reeled the ghost in quickly to capture it in an ecto-trap before it could reveal any other surprises. As the ghost vanished into the bright light of the trap and the top snapped shut, Ray briefly wondered what would happen if the spectre triggered an explosion inside the trap.

In the meantime, he had drawn a bead on the final spectre, who was down at the slips where the boats were moored. The distance was considerably greater, which posed a problem for the range of their weapons. However, there was no time to try to get closer. He took the shot.

Not surprisingly, his first shot went wide. But by pure luck, the stray blast snagged the ectoplasmic packet of fizzy candy instead. Ray used the ion stream to yank the candy packet away from the spectre's grasp.

Enraged by the unexpected intervention, the ghost lunged for the candy. Ray saw his opening. He cut the ion stream, letting the packet fall, and immediately

fired again. As the spectre snatched at the empty air where the packet had been a moment earlier, he caught and bound the ghost in a second stream. He hoisted the spectre into the air, reeled it in, and imprisoned it in a second ecto-trap.

That left only the wraith near the fountain, who wasn't happy to have its "brothers" thwarted so easily. While Egon and Ray had their hands full with the other two spectres, the one near the fountain raised its packet of candy and poured out a mouthful...

But without a head, the ghost had no mouth to fill. The candy simply showered down to bounce harmlessly off the stump that had been its neck.

Ray and Egon looked at each other and exchanged bemused smiles. "After you," said Ray.

Egon adopted a much more leisurely pace this time. He took aim at the headless spirit and fired. Before another minute passed, the spectre joined its twin in one of the traps.

Ray surveyed their surroundings one more time. "You think that's all of them?"

"Let's see," Egon replied. He sheathed his nutrona wand and replaced it with a PKE meter. He turned in a slow circle, scanning the park in all directions. "Nothing in the immediate vicinity. Still, we should probably check the rest of the park to be on the safe side."

Ray slipped his nutrona wand back in its sheath and wiped his brow. "There's the car to deal with, too."

Egon powered down the PKE meter and sighed. "Oh. Right. I'd say we've got our day cut out for us."

Even if the two of them weren't involved in a conversation, there would have been no reason for them

to notice the tiny bubbles that were starting to ripple up in the river just beyond the boat basin.

"Want to check the park out together, or should we divide and conquer? You take the park, and I'll take the car?" asked Ray.

"Hard to say," Egon replied. "With a park of this size, it's going to take some time to check all of it."

The bubbles were starting to get a little bigger now. They probably would have attracted attention if anyone had been watching as they burst on the surface. But no one was.

"It'll be easier to clear the car out if we get started before the cement hardens all the way," said Ray.

"True," Egon agreed. "However, depending on the number of remaining apparitions, it may take both of us to handle the situation."

"Good thing Xanthador's not operating at full strength."

The bubbles continued to grow. They were coming faster now, and rocking the nearest sailboats when they burst.

"We could reduce our search time considerably by dividing the park in half," said Egon. "You start at the north end, and I'll start at the south."

"And we meet in the middle," said Ray.

"Or, if one of us encounters something before then, we can radio the other for assistance."

Ray switched on the radio attached to his collar to make sure it was working. The resulting crackle of static assured him that it was.

"And when we're done," he said, "we'll figure out how to deal with the car. Sounds like a plan."

"All right. I suppose the most efficient—what's that?"

Ray turned to see where Egon was pointing. The boat basin seemed almost alive, as dozens of boats bobbed, rocked, and swayed at awkward angles.

Ray looked up at the clear sky. "Whatever it is, it's not natural. The weather's calm."

Egon directed the PKE meter at the boat basin. "Not natural' may be the understatement of the millennium. If these readings were Twinkies, you could feed the entire nation of Ghana for a year."

Ray looked at the scene with a puzzled expression. "What do you think is causing it? Poltergeists? Possessed boats?"

Egon shook his head. "It's not originating in the boats. Take a look at the water."

They edged closer toward the bank of the river, studying the surface of the water. The water near the boat basin was bubbling furiously now—with bubbles as much as three feet in diameter. Fascinated, they kept their eyes glued to the anomaly and slowly drew their nutrona wands.

"It's as though that one portion of the river is boiling," said Egon.

"But there's no steam—no heat," said Ray. "With that much water boiling at that high a boil, you'd be able to feel it clear over here."

"You don't happen to know of an appropriate urban legend that would shed some light on this, do you?"

Ray shrugged. "Sorry. I got nothing."

"In that case, let's consider this logically. Bubbles form when heat is applied, or the molecules are sped up in some way."

"Or if air or some kind of gas is forced through it, like exhaling underwater or blowing through a straw."

"In any event, it doesn't happen by itself," said Egon. "Some outside force has to act on the water to cause the phenomenon."

"So if it's not the water itself..."

"And, as far as we can tell, it's nothing above the water..."

"Then it must be..."

Before Ray could finish his sentence, the surface of the river erupted. The head of a tremendous serpent reared up out of the Hudson River. Its neck and head alone towered above the boat basin, stretching more than fifty feet into the sky. Its scaly hide was draped with moss and lichen, and reeked of rotting fish. The creature roared, its jaws gaping open to reveal rows of razor-sharp teeth.

"...underwater," said Ray.

"The Loch Ness Monster!" exclaimed Egon.

In an unearthly screech, the monster howled, *"FLEE! FLEE IN TERROR BEFORE THE MIGHT OF XANTHADOR!"*

"It may not be urban," said Ray, his voice quiet with wonder, "but it'd be hard to find a bigger legend. I just never heard of any sighting where it could talk."

"It's not possible!" said Egon. "The power levels that would be required... They're thoroughly inconsistent with anything we've seen Xanthador exhibit so far!"

"Don't look now..." said Ray.

More of the water was starting to bubble and churn. A moment later, two more of the creatures thrust their heads above the surface.

"...but he brought the family."

"Fifteen minutes to air, Doctor Venkman. Time to take your mark on stage."

A flicker of anxiety flashed through Venkman's eyes as he looked at the young production assistant, but the candidate recovered quickly. "Showtime!" he said, clapping his hands together with forced enthusiasm. "Make sure they get my good side."

Milken clapped him on the shoulder. "This is it, Peter."

Fielding shook his hand. "Time for the competition to eat your dust."

"Isn't that next week's debate on the Food Channel?"

Milken chuckled. "Go get 'em, tiger. Remember, we'll be watching from here on the monitor. And if you get into any trouble, Ted will be standing by to prompt you through your earpiece."

Golden spoke quietly into a microphone. Venkman heard his voice in his left ear: "Let's do one last test to see if this works."

"What did you say about the Turks?" he asked.

Golden went pale. "It's not working? We have to find a new unit before—"

Venkman raised his hands in front of his body. "Easy, boy. I'm kidding."

"Kid...? That's not funny!" Golden snapped.

"I dunno. I thought it was funny," said Venkman. "Winston, did you think it was funny?"

"Oh, no, no," said Winston. "You're not dragging me into this one."

"Doctor Venkman?" said the production assistant, a little more anxiously this time. "Thirteen minutes."

"Go, go," Milken said with a soothing smile. "We'll be here to back you up. Break a leg."

"Okay. Thanks," said Venkman.

"I'll walk you out," said Winston.

They followed the production assistant out of the room and into the hall. Once they were away from the room, Winston grinned. "Yeah," he said quietly, "it was funny."

"I thought so."

"You up for this?"

"Sure, no sweat."

"Uh, gentlemen...?" said the production assistant. "We have to move quickly."

"You got it," said Venkman, picking up the pace. "On the way. No more interruptions."

As the trio headed down the hallway, they passed a bank of video monitors that were mounted on the wall. All of them showed identical images of a group of rampaging sea serpents. "Hey, a Harryhausen movie!" said Venkman, stopping in his tracks.

"Doctor Venkman! They're waiting for us!" said the production assistant.

"Kidding. I'm kidding." He started walking again. "Although I don't think I've seen that one before..."

"That's not a movie," said the production assistant. "That's the news feed. It's on air right now."

"It's real?" Venkman stopped again as they passed another monitor. "Is that the Hudson River?"

Winston looked more closely. "Is that Ray and Egon?"

"If it is, they better have a National Guard regiment standing behind them."

"Holy... It is them! They'll be killed!"

The production assistant was checking her watch repeatedly, and getting more nervous by the second.

"Doctor Venkman! We need to get to the studio! There's eight minutes to air!"

"They can't handle that alone!" said Winston.

"Knowing them, Egon's probably trying to give the things a physical," Venkman replied.

"Doctor Venkman!"

Winston started to hurry back the way they came.

"Where are you going?" called Venkman.

"To help them!"

"By yourself?"

"We'll handle it! Don't worry about it—I'm off-camera anyway! You stay here! You've got a debate waiting!"

Winston shoved open an emergency exit door and disappeared from sight.

"Doctor Venkman! Six minutes! Are you coming?"

Venkman stared blankly, first into Winston's wake and then at the video. "Yeah..." he said. "Coming...right with you...sure."

CHAPTER 16

Venkman laid the index cards with his notes on top of his podium and looked around the studio, trying to get his mind to stop racing. What with the impending debate, attacking sea serpents, and everything else that was going on right now, his thoughts were a blur at the moment. A little focus would have been welcome.

He looked out at the audience that sat in collapsible metal bleachers behind the row of television cameras. He searched the crowd for Dana or any other friendly faces, but with the studio darkened and bright lights shining in his eyes, he couldn't see any of the audience members well enough to recognize them.

In fact, he didn't even recognize most of the candidates who shared the stage with him, although he could see them just fine. Each was standing at a separate, identical podium, spaced evenly across the

stage. Of course, he did recognize the Mayor, who was standing behind the podium at the opposite end of the stage. Lapinski caught Venkman's eye and glared at him. Venkman blew him a kiss in return.

In Venkman's opinion—and, to be fair, many observers' opinions as well—the presence of the other four candidates was more than a little pointless. Everyone knew that the race was really down to the two leading contenders: Venkman and Lapinski. However, equal time legislation meant that the televised debate had to include all six of the candidates who were officially on the ballot, whether they had any real shot at winning the election or not.

The moderator sat behind a desk, facing them from the front of the stage. She was Jenny Nguyen, anchor for the news station's local newscasts and New York correspondent for their national coverage. In the space of just a few short years, she had already racked up a shelf full of journalism awards and built herself a reputation as a serious reporter who pulled no punches, whether she was dealing with gangsters or the governor.

Not that Venkman recognized her from her newscasts; he didn't really watch the news, since he generally found current events too dull to bother with. But it was hard to miss her print ads, which were plastered on buses and billboards all over the city. Even if the sheer exposure hadn't been enough to make her stick in his memory, there was also the fact that, in his humble opinion, she was a babe.

At the moment, Nguyen was leaning back in her chair with her feet on the desk as she paged through her own notes. A large clock was mounted on the front of her desk. It stared out at the candidates to

make it easier for them to stay within their appointed time limits.

"Five seconds," said the stage manager.

Venkman cleared his throat and straightened his tie. Nguyen showed no signs of moving from her comfortable position. He wondered if she'd heard.

"Four."

Nguyen still hadn't moved.

"Three. Two."

The movement was so smooth and practiced that, if Venkman hadn't already been watching, he would have missed the whole thing. As the stage manager said "two," Nguyen slid her feet off the desk, sat up in her chair, laid her papers and hands on the desk, and looked cool and professional just as the red light on the television camera lit up.

"Hello and welcome," she said. "I'm Jenny Nguyen, and this is the New York City mayoral debate. With only a little more than four weeks to go before the municipal election, we've brought the candidates together to discuss their platforms and address the issues."

The cameras flashed on briefly for a close-up of each candidate as Nguyen recited each name in turn. "With us in the studio today are His Honor, incumbent Mayor Arnold Lapinski, Republican Party."

The Mayor nodded to the camera with a wink and a confident smile.

"Democratic Party candidate David Sumner."

"That's 'Sommer,'" said the candidate.

"Oh. Excuse me. Sommer," said Nguyen. Quickly, she moved on. "Green Party candidate Dylan Karma-Gonzales."

The candidate in the pony tail raised two fingers in a peace sign.

"Chartreuse Party candidate Libby Kay."

"Hello," said an impeccably coordinated woman in matching suit, shoes, lipstick, and eye shadow.

"Right to Smoke Party candidate Wallace Schlunk."

"How ya doin'," said a shaky, sallow-faced man, taking a drag on an unlit cigarette.

"And New York State Independent Party candidate Peter Venkman."

Venkman looked deeply into the camera lens with the most sincere expression he could manage. "Hi."

There were whoops from the audience—or, to be precise, what sounded like a couple of voices in the audience. Through the glare, Venkman thought he saw a couple of silhouetted arms waving in the bleachers. Or maybe they were flags. *Is that...Louis?* he thought. *And Dana?*

"Each candidate will be given two minutes to deliver an opening statement," said Nguyen. "Subsequently, I will ask the candidates a series of five questions. Each candidate will have one minute to offer a response, followed by thirty seconds for a rebuttal. Finally, each candidate will have two minutes for a closing statement."

Venkman barely heard Nguyen as she laid out the rules for the audience. Despite his best efforts at focusing his thoughts, his mind was still racing. Nervousness over the debate would have been bad enough by itself, with facts and figures smashing up against each other in his head. But the knowledge that his friends were out there, fighting for their lives against giant reptilian monsters, made it even harder to stay centered. Somehow, the danger of looking

foolish or exceeding his time limit just didn't seem all that serious when he weighed it against the possibility of being chewed up and swallowed alive.

"The order of the speakers has been determined by a random drawing," said Nguyen. "The first opening statement will come from Mister Schlunk."

"Thank you," said Schlunk. He was then seized by a coughing fit that consumed the first fifteen seconds of his two minutes.

Venkman screamed at himself silently. *Hey!* he thought. *Get it together!* It was one thing to space out during the rules—after all, he'd been briefed on them until he could recite them backward and forward. But not paying attention when his opponents were speaking was just plain stupid. He needed to stay sharp to catch their openings and weak spots, and to defend himself against anything that was thrown his way. He took a deep breath, then turned to face Schlunk and catch the rest of his statement.

"...Fascist oppression of our precious personal freedoms," Schlunk said between wheezing breaths.

"Thank you," said Nguyen. "Ms. Kay, may we have your opening statement?"

"Certainly." Kay looked into the camera with a prim smile. "Over the past few years, we've heard a great deal from the present administration about addressing the issue of 'quality of life' crimes. Yet, one of the most serious crimes against our quality of life continues unabated and unenforced.

"As a certified color life consultant, it is obvious to me that, at its heart, New York is a Spring city. However, rampant mismanagement and mis-coloring has left it dressed in colors that say Winter—or Autumn, at best. Immediate action must be taken!

We must begin an extensive program of renovation and re-painting to better align the aura of the city with..."

Venkman found himself starting to drift again. He pulled himself back with a sharp mental yank. *Enough already!* he scolded himself. *This one's for all the marbles.* If you could believe the latest polls, he had a serious shot at the Mayor's office right now. And once he was planted behind that desk, the sky was the limit. Easy Street was just around the corner.

But if he wanted to get there, he was going to have to ace this debate. As Milken explained it, there probably weren't going to be all that many people following the debate in real time on TV or the radio. Afterwards, though, the results would be carried by every newspaper and news program in the metropolitan area. And every account would lead off by saying who won.

The debate was big. He couldn't afford to blow it.

He forced his attention back to everything that was proceeding around him. Kay was saying something about more positive color schemes instilling a sense of pride in the city and discouraging crime.

He hoped the other Ghostbusters were all right.

Oh, he was rational enough to know that, whether he was there fighting beside them or not, the outcome was probably going to be the same. The threat was too big for one person to swing one way or the other. Either they were going to figure out a way to stop it (and everyone would go home happy) or they weren't (and no one in New York City would ever go home happy again).

But he still felt as though he should be there.

Yet he also knew that he had to be here.

Was it any wonder that he was having so much trouble focusing?

"Thank you, Ms. Kay, for a colorful statement," said Nguyen. The audience chuckled.

Venkman heard Golden's voice through his earpiece. "Nothing to worry about so far, but those are the lightweights. Peter, you're scheduled to be up next. Get ready."

Venkman cleared his throat and shook the mental cobwebs out of his head. *Showtime*, he thought.

"Next, we'll hear from Peter Venkman," said Nguyen. "Doctor Venkman, your statement?"

Venkman nodded to the camera. "Thank you," he said. "I look on New York..."

Everyone watched him expectantly, waiting for the rest of the sentence. But nothing more seemed to be coming. He just stared at the camera and remained silent.

The seconds were ticking by.

Golden's voice sounded desperate through the earpiece. "Oh geez—he's frozen!" With forced calm, he said, "Peter, it's okay. You're okay. Just say the words with me. 'I look on New York as a city filled with potential...'"

Venkman didn't say anything.

"Doctor Venkman?" said Nguyen.

Finally, he relaxed his shoulders and spoke. "Look, I'm sorry," he said to the camera. "I really want to be mayor. Really."

Golden's electronically-filtered voice screamed in his ear. "Peter, what are you doing? Don't start ad-libbing! Stick with the statement we rehearsed!"

Venkman removed the earpiece from his ear. "But here's the thing," he continued. "Right now, some

friends of mine are risking their lives to try to stop a bunch of big, ugly, giant lizards from destroying New York. Oh, don't get me wrong—they're good at this kind of stuff. They're the best. But there's no way they can do this one alone.

"Now, I don't know if I can make any difference against these things. It's not like I'm John Wayne or anything. Maybe we'll all just end up as one big blue plate special of Monster Chow. But I've got to try."

He loosened his tie and gestured toward the other candidates. "All of these people up here have plenty to say about the City and the issues and what they want to do. It's important stuff, and you should listen to what they have to say. But I can't be part of it right now. I've got to go.

"Maybe this will cost me the election. Maybe not. I don't know. But in the vast scheme of things, it doesn't really matter. Because, y'know, some things in life—like friendship, or saving lives... Well, they're more important than politics."

He started to step away from the podium, then stopped himself and looked up into the audience. "Oh, and Dana?" he said. "I love you."

With that, he ran out of the studio.

For nearly a full minute, the studio was silent. Everyone—the audience, the candidates, the moderator, the television crew—stared, slack-jawed, at the door that was slowly swinging closed.

Over in the control booth, the director told the crew to switch to the camera that was focused on Nguyen.

It took her a few seconds to realize the red light on the camera was on.

"Um...yes, well..." Nguyen said, shuffling through

her notes as she tried to get the situation back on track. "Um...thank you, Doctor Venkman."

The crowd stirred behind her, as roughly half of the news reporters rushed out to follow the story that was breaking elsewhere. The ones who stayed behind were all whispering into cell phones, creating an undercurrent of hushed noise that even the candidates could hear.

"Our next statement will come from incumbent Mayor Arnold Lapinski," said Nguyen. "Mister Mayor?"

Lapinski looked as though someone had just punched him in the stomach. Slowly, he turned to the camera and smiled weakly.

"Okay. Right. Uh...thank you, Jenny. In my, uh, many years of service to this great city..."

"All right, I think I have the answer now," said Egon. "After careful consideration, weighing all of the possible scenarios, and coupled with the relevant environmental and topographical factors, one plan of action emerges clearly."

"Yeah? What's that?" asked Winston.

"We're going to die," said Egon.

At the moment, it seemed difficult to argue the point. Ray, Egon, and Winston were holed up behind the Seventy-ninth Street overpass that separated Riverside Park from the West Side Highway and the river beyond. It was far enough away from the river bank to be nearly outside the creatures' reach. Actually, the largest one could stretch its neck a little beyond the overpass. However, its neck wasn't flexible enough to let it twist around to reach them—not as long as they stayed plastered to the far side of the

overpass. If they tried to step away, though, they'd be fair game.

Fortunately, by this point, they didn't have a lot of bystanders to worry about. The police had cordoned off the highway and the streets immediately adjacent to the southern end of the park. There were plenty of emergency personnel, reporters, and rubbernecks just beyond the police line, but the park was essentially clear. Unless the creatures turned out to be amphibious and started walking out of the water (which wasn't something that any of them wanted to think about right now), the civilians should be safe.

So that just left themselves to worry about.

"Hi, guys. Nice to see you. How've you been?"

They looked up to see Venkman throwing himself against the overpass beside them. Like Winston, he was wearing a proton pack over his expensive suit and overcoat.

"Fine, thanks. And you?" said Ray.

"Oh, you know. Can't complain."

"Shouldn't you be on television right now?" asked Winston.

Venkman gestured up toward the cameras at the police line. "I think I am, actually. Smile."

"I meant the debate."

"Oh, that. I blew it off. It was getting dull."

A flurry of thoughts flashed through Winston's brain. He thought about the time and effort they'd put into the campaign. He thought about what Venkman's absence during the debate might cost them. Most of all, he thought about how disappointed his mama would be. Then he thought about what she would tell him to do. He shrugged. "Aah, I guess I would've done the same thing."

"In fact, if I recall correctly, you *did* do the same thing," said Venkman.

Egon pointed at Venkman's proton pack. "And you stopped off to pick up your equipment along the way?"

"Y'know, you guys shouldn't leave the Ectomobile unlocked like that," said Venkman. "I mean, this is New York, after all. Just anybody could come along and walk off with this stuff."

"So I keep hearing," Egon said.

"By the way," Venkman added, "love what you've done with the car. The concrete's a nice touch. Very downtown-exposed-brick-bohemian."

With a deafening roar, one of the monsters slammed into the top of the overpass.

Venkman turned to look at Ray. "What are you grinning about?"

"Nice to have you back," Ray replied.

Venkman returned the grin. "So what's the deal with the geckos?"

"They're obviously some sort of fully corporeal ectoplasmic manifestation," said Egon. "Judging from the water displacement, these aren't insubstantial phantoms or wraiths. They're solid."

"And from the way they keep screaming about Xanthador, it's pretty clear where they came from," Ray added. "But what to do about them? That one's stickier."

"The cops tried bullets," said Winston. "Guess what—it didn't do a whole lot."

"I'm shocked," said Venkman.

"Yeah, but Ray and Egon didn't have much luck with nutrona wands, either," said Winston. "The things are just too powerful."

"So how do we get rid of them?"

"Good question," said Egon. "Technically, Nessie and her family shouldn't even exist."

"Giant sea serpents in the Hudson River?" Venkman shrugged. "Gotta tell ya, it wouldn't surprise me *what's* in that water."

"Besides that," said Ray, "manifesting solid creatures that big takes major power. We're talking Gozer-level power. Xanthador shouldn't be that strong. Not yet, anyway."

"Xanthador's strength has been growing as he feeds off people's fear. That's why the severity of the incidents has been increasing steadily," said Egon. "But even so, according to the prophecy, he should be a good century away from the kind of power levels it would take to manifest something on this scale."

Approximately one block uptown, one of the smaller creatures whipped its head through a cluster of trees. The Ghostbusters pressed their bodies back against the overpass as one of the trees went hurtling past.

"'Prophecy'? What prophecy?" asked Winston.

Ray reached into his pocket and produced his photocopy of the parchment. He unfolded it and passed the paper to Venkman and Winston. "Here, see? Xanthador's not supposed to hit these kinds of power levels until Saturn aligns with Venus and Mars. And that's not going to happen for another hundred and seventy years."

Venkman studied the drawing with a curious expression.

"What's up?" asked Winston.

"I don't know. It just looks...familiar."

"From your extensive studies of astronomy? Or a ticktacktoe board?" Egon said dryly.

"No, really. I can't place it, but..." Suddenly, Venkman's eyes lit up. "Wait a minute."

He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and drew out some papers. He shuffled through them for a moment to find the one he was looking for. "When's the soonest that the planets are supposed to line up that way?"

"One hundred seventy years from now," Egon replied.

"Give or take," Ray added.

"Nope," said Venkman.

"'Nope'?" asked Winston.

"Nope. I can show you a place where it happens five times a day."

"Huh?" said Ray.

Venkman held up Ray's photocopy to display the drawing. Beside it, he held up a brochure with an illustration that showed the three planets in the same position as in the drawing.

"Of course!" said Winston.

"The star show!" said Ray.

Venkman nodded. "At the Hayden Planetarium."

Judging from his expression, the reporter was saying something very earnest and intense, but Janine couldn't hear what it was. She had long since turned off the sound on the television in the Ghostbusters' headquarters. There were only so many times she needed to hear about how vast the danger was, and how her "heroic, noble" friends and employers were facing certain death.

Instead, she left the picture on while she continued

to pore over the various reference materials, searching for some scrap of information that might help turn the tide. From time to time, she glanced over to see images of the rampaging serpents or—more often—endless series of talking heads as self-proclaimed "experts" speculated about the danger, possible strategies, and what might happen next.

Maybe it was the stress that came with her concern over the Ghostbusters' safety. Or maybe she had spent so many days with ancient texts that she simply burned out. One way or the other, Janine felt as though she just couldn't bring herself to face another crumbling, yellowed page. So she decided to play a hunch instead, and turned to her computer.

She was clicking her way through the Web site of the New England Genealogical Society when she found what she was looking for.

"Oh, my," she muttered.

"So Xanthador's power is coming from the Hayden Planetarium?" said Winston.

"Not exactly," Egon replied. "Xanthador's power comes from fear. But the planetarium show sets the stage for his ascendance by satisfying the conditions of the prophecy."

Attached to the Museum of Natural History, the Hayden Planetarium had long served as an introduction to astronomy for countless children and adults from the New York area. One of the most popular features of the planetarium was its star shows, in which images of constellations and heavenly bodies were projected over the heads of the audience against the 360° backdrop of an immense, domed ceiling.

"So if we can stop the show, we should be able to disrupt Xanthador's power," said Ray.

"Theoretically. Even if it fails to disperse his current level of power, it could prevent him from growing any more powerful," said Egon. "Yet, there's also the possibility that it might accomplish nothing other than proving the prophecy wrong."

"Unless anybody's got any better ideas, I'd say it's worth a shot," said Winston.

"That's great, guys. Really," said Venkman, throwing back a thumb to point back over his shoulder. "But don't you think we oughtta do something about these things first?"

As if to emphasize his point, the ground shook as one of the gargantuan serpents lunged forward to strike the far side of the overpass once again.

"If our hypothesis proves to be correct, once we disrupt the star show, these creatures should vanish," said Egon.

"But Peter's right," said Ray. "We can't just let these things run around loose while we head off to the planetarium."

"What do you suggest?" said Egon. "It would take simultaneous ion streams from all four of us just to bind one of the creatures. While we're all busy restraining one creature, we'd be sitting ducks to be devoured by the other two. Besides, even if we could avoid being eaten alive, what would we do with them? They're solid, remember? Ecto-traps won't work, and we have no way to contain them. We can't just stand here holding them forever."

"That's right. They're solid..." Winston said thoughtfully.

"A little too solid," said Ray.

"These things aren't any smarter than alligators, are they?" said Winston.

One of the creatures slammed its head into the overpass once again. "I'm not seeing any candidates for Mensa here," said Venkman.

"Then I've got an idea," said Winston.

Slipping his nutrona wand out of its sheath, Winston walked out into the roadway. From where he stood, he could see all three of the creatures through the short tunnel beneath the overpass.

"Uh, Winston, as your running mate, I'd have to say this is a very bad idea." Venkman turned to Egon. "Does he know what he's doing?"

"Doubtful," said Egon.

"I hope you have a backup candidate lined up for that deputy mayor slot, Peter," said Winston.

"I could," Venkman said with a hint of sarcasm, "but Ray's always been a little soft on the whole crime issue thing."

"Winston!" shouted Egon. "Come back!"

"Nah," said Winston, trying to appear calm despite the cold sweat that was already coating his face and hands. "No problem. I've got it covered."

The raised voices seemed to catch the attention of the closest creature. Winston said a quick, silent prayer and took advantage of the opening.

He raised his nutrona wand and fired short bursts at the other two serpents. "Hey! Over here!" he yelled.

"Puny mortal!" hissed the nearest one. *"Flee in abject horror before the minions of Xanthador!"*

"Flee? From you three?" Winston shouted back, incredulous. "Yeah, right! I'm gonna kick your sorry Scottish haggis all the way back to bagpipe land!"

Behind him, he could hear Ray say, "Um... He did

hear us when we said traps don't work on these things, right?"

"I sure hope so," Venkman replied.

Winston had the attention of all three monsters now. They eyed him curiously as the more distant ones sailed closer through the water. None of the beasts were attacking yet, but there was no mistaking the air of impending doom that surrounded them.

"Yeah, that's right! I'm talking to you! Y'know, I thought I'd seen some ugly mess come outta that river, but that's like roses compared to you freaks!" He punctuated his speech by striking the creatures with more short bursts from his nutrona wand, alternating among them. The bursts made the monsters wince, but their only real effect seemed to be making them even angrier.

"He's lost his mind," said Egon.

By this point, all three serpents were clustered together around the far side of the overpass. Growling, their heads bobbed back and forth as each of them sized up the proper instant to swallow their minuscule prey.

Winston looked up at them through the opening in the overpass, dwarfed by their sheer scale. It occurred to him that the just the visible parts of the creatures were as tall as the apartment buildings in his neighborhood. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all...

No. No time to worry about that. Got to stay focused, he told himself, pushing the thought out of his mind.

"Man, Xanthador must really be scraping the bottom of the loch with you three!" he shouted. "I wouldn't bother to scrape you off the bottom of my shoe!"

He peppered the three beasts with an extended series of short ion blasts. They roared, more out of rage than pain. Then, as one, they all lunged at Winston with jaws gaping wide.

It was the moment he had been waiting for. He leaped aside, out of the roadway, and kept running, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the creatures as they thrust their heads through the opening beneath the overpass.

Seeing that they had missed, the serpents tried to rear back for another strike. But as they pulled back, their heads jammed together and wedged against the ceiling of the tunnel.

The creatures looked startled as, over and over, they slid their heads back and forth, trying to free them. But it was no use. Alone, any one of them could have slipped out of the space without much effort. With all three of them jammed together, though, there simply wasn't enough room to maneuver.

The reinforced overpass held. All the trapped creatures could do was roar in helpless fury. Which they did. A lot.

Taking care to stay outside the serpents' considerably shortened reach, the Ghostbusters started to head out of the park.

"Not bad," Venkman told Winston, giving him a slap on the back.

"Just observing the leash laws," said Winston.

"Next stop, Hayden Planetarium," said Egon.

"And the main event," added Ray.

"Smile for your public, boys," said Venkman.

As they reached the street beyond the park, the crowd burst into cheers and applause.

Egon took a deep breath. Under his breath, he

muttered, "So much for the preliminaries. Now for the hard part."

CHAPTER 17

It was only about one mile from the south end of the park to the Museum of Natural History and the Hayden Planetarium. With the front seat of the Ectomobile full of semi-hardened cement, it looked as though the Ghostbusters were going to have to get there on foot. Fortunately, after reining in the serpent trio, it took Venkman less than a minute to coax help out of one of the police officers stationed on crowd control.

Now, they were speeding through the streets of the Upper West Side in a police car with lights flashing and sirens blaring. Ray sat up front with the driver, and the others crowded together in the rear. Even as he drove, the officer was already on the radio, requesting immediate support from a SWAT team, and a cordon around the museum.

"Better ask for a couple of fire trucks and ambulances too, just in case," said Ray.

"Yeah, okay. Good idea," he decided. He made the call.

Egon watched the scene with wonder. The Ghostbusters' relationship with the police had always been cordial at best. The friendly interactions and level of accommodation they'd experienced over the past few days were a quantum leap forward from what they were used to. He wondered if the relationship would hold up at some point in the future, when they inevitably wound up arrested again.

Winston nudged Venkman. "Maybe we should call the museum, so they can start clearing out the civilians."

With a nod, Venkman reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. As he switched on the power, the phone was already ringing. He winced.

"Your adoring public, I presume?" said Egon.

"Probably Gary and the party boys again," said Venkman. "They've been calling nonstop to find out what's going on."

"So you turned off the power?" said Winston.

"Wouldn't you?"

Egon looked down at the cell phone to read the telephone number that flashed onto its display. "That's not the party. That's our office."

Before Venkman could react, he snatched the phone from his hand and answered it. "Hello? Janine? Why are you calling on Peter's line?... Right. We had a little difficulty with some cement... No, I'll explain later. What's up?... Yes..." The conversation continued along those lines for another minute or so, until

Egon thanked her, broke the connection, and handed the phone back to Venkman.

"Can I do anything else for you?" said Venkman, a little miffed.

Egon didn't seem to notice. "That was Janine," he said, loud enough for Ray to hear him in the front seat. "She was going through seventeenth century genealogical records, trying to identify the exorcist who defeated Xanthador in 1627. Guess whom she found?"

"Pocahontas?" said Venkman.

"Jonathan Goodraven," said Egon.

"Are you serious?" asked Ray.

"Janine says the name seems to match the blurry entry in the diary."

"It can't be the same guy," said Winston.

"Although it would explain his cutting-edge fashion sense," said Venkman.

"It's more likely that the present-day Goodraven is the descendant of the historical one," said Egon.

"You think he can tell us how to beat Xanthador?" said Winston.

"Easy enough to find out," said Ray. "Look over there."

The Museum of Natural History loomed up ahead. Police cars were already starting to converge on the site, and barricades were going up. Clouds were gathering and turning dark. The air felt cold and dank. Lightning split the sky. A mass of screaming patrons was pouring out of the museum, toting cameras, maps, and children.

Standing across the street from the museum, as grimly impassive as ever, was the unmistakable figure of Jonathan Goodraven.

"Well at least he doesn't appear to have set the museum on fire," said Egon. "Yet."

The police car pulled up to a nearby curb. With a quick thank-you to their driver, the Ghostbusters poured out of the car and grabbed their equipment from the trunk.

Strapping on his proton pack as he walked, Venkman approached Goodraven with a broad grin. "Johnny, Johnny. Fancy meeting you here. Hey, didn't I hear you got fired?"

Goodraven gave no sign of acknowledging that Venkman even existed. He continued to stare at the entrance to the museum—or, perhaps, the crowds fleeing through it. But then, his deep voice intoned, "My mission depends not upon the whims of mortal men."

As the other Ghostbusters caught up, Ray pushed in front of Venkman to try a more politic approach. "Hi, Mister Goodraven. Ray Stantz. We met the other day."

Goodraven said nothing. His gaze remained fixed on the museum.

Ray continued, undaunted. "I gather that one of your ancestors once faced a demon named Xanthador."

For the first time, Goodraven's face almost registered emotion. He was silent for a moment, then turned his head to look Ray in the eye. "My ancestor."

"Yes, um...the first Jonathan Goodraven?"

Goodraven's eyes narrowed. It seemed to only intensify the fire that burned deep within them. Involuntarily, Ray started to fidget.

"Indeed," said Goodraven, "in eons past, my honored progenitor did do battle with the nether-

spawn Xanthador. A fearsome creature it was, of great and terrible aspect. Truly, it was unmatched by any other that has walked this mortal plane."

"Oh, dandy," Venkman muttered to Winston. "Well, that sure inspires confidence. I can't wait to hear his halftime speech."

"But your ancestor did defeat him, right?" Ray asked.

"The price of victory was dear, yet, 'tis true. When the final word was writ, 'twas Goodraven who stood alone upon the field of battle. The ancient power of Xanthador was banished once more from the world of men."

"You wouldn't happen to know how he did it, would you?" asked Winston.

"I am in possession of some small charms and traditions, yes."

Egon looked skeptical. "They don't involve flamethrowers, do they?"

Again, Ray stepped in. "You see," he told Goodraven, "the thing is, we're pretty sure that Xanthador is after something in that building over there. And there's a good chance he's inside right now."

Goodraven closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "Aye, Xanthador is near. I sense the stygian scent of the Lord of Fear e'en here."

"Well, I was thinking: Considering your knowledge and experience," said Ray, "how would you like to work with us on this one?"

In unison, Egon and Venkman exclaimed, "What?!" "You presume much," said Goodraven, with a sneer.

"I require no assistance."

"No, I get it. I see what Ray's getting at," said

Winston. As he spoke, he looked back and forth between his teammates and Goodraven, trying to convince both sides at the same time. "Listen, judging from everything we've seen so far, Xanthador's not going to give this up without a fight, right? And it's a safe bet that, whatever's he's got going on, he's not alone in there. We can handle the assorted weirdies, but you're the only one who knows how to fight the big guy himself. We can make sure you get up close and personal with Xanthador. Then you can finish him off."

Goodraven mulled it over briefly. "Thy words hold some measure of merit. You propose to deliver me to the seat of Xanthador's power?" He nodded slowly. "Very well. Let us join forces for the present."

Grudgingly, Egon said, "I suppose it makes sense."

"Guess that settles it," said Venkman. He tried to throw an arm around Goodraven's shoulders, but found that he couldn't reach all the way around them. Instead, he settled for clapping Goodraven on the back. "Welcome to the team, Johnny. Let's go see a man about a ghost."

Most of the fleeing crowd had subsided by the time the Ghostbusters and Goodraven climbed the steps that led toward the main entrance to the museum. If any living people remained inside, there probably weren't many of them—a fair number of the museum's security guards had joined the mass exodus.

"Guess we didn't have to bother calling to tell them to evacuate," said Winston.

"There are forces at work here that span millennia, and terrors untold in the history of man," said Goodraven.

"That would explain it, then," said Winston.

Egon kept his PKE meter trained on the museum. "I can't vouch for how old they are, but there are 'forces' in there, all right. If these readings climbed any higher, they'd pass out from lack of oxygen."

As the group neared the entrance, Venkman took the various pamphlets out of his pocket and found a floor map to the museum. He paused for a moment on the steps and studied it. "The planetarium's pretty big. It spans a couple of floors," he said. "But according to this, the entrance will be to our right and down one floor once we get inside the museum."

Ray pulled down a pair of high-tech goggles from the top of his head, and adjusted them to cover his eyes. Ordinarily, he preferred not to wear them—they restricted his peripheral vision, and besides, they made his eyes sweat. But the goggles were useful for particularly tough jobs. Not only did they protect his eyes, but the scopes that protruded from the front of the rig were handy in detecting spectres whose forms lay outside the visible spectrum. If the opposition waiting inside the museum was as formidable as they expected, he and the other Ghostbusters were going to need every advantage they could get.

"Hey, Ghostbusters!" said a gruff voice behind them.

They turned to see a grizzled SWAT commander in a cap and flak jacket, jogging up the steps behind them. He wasn't even winded by the time he reached them.

"Awright," he barked, "I've got my men fanning out around the complex now to cover the exits. Word is, we're letting you go in as the first wave. We'll hold

our position for twenty minutes. Then my guys go in."

"With all due respect, we're highly trained scientists specializing in paranormal activity," said Egon. "If we are unable to bring the situation under control, then I fail to see how your—"

Ray broke in before Egon could get them further in trouble. "Twenty minutes should be plenty, sir. Thanks."

The commander gave a grunt that sounded like he was unconvinced. But he walked back down the stairs.

"So, anybody got a plan?" asked Ray.

"Blast anything that moves, get Johnny into the planetarium, kick Xanthador's butt," said Venkman.

"Works for me."

They entered the building together, then looked around the vacant lobby. Apart from the diorama of dinosaur skeletons, there was no sign of life, past or present.

Cautiously, the Ghostbusters fanned out to peer down the hallways that extended down either side. Ray ran his hands along one of the walls and pressed his ear against it to learn whether anything might be lurking inside. Goodraven continued to stand near the entrance, almost eerily still, as his narrowed eyes studied their surroundings.

At first glance, all seemed quiet.

"Nothing yet," said Ray.

"Yeah? So why were all those people screaming?" said Winston.

"Maybe they saw the admission price," Venkman replied.

Egon held his PKE meter upright at arm's length

as he checked for ambient psychokinetic activity. "It's close," he said. "Very close."

He started to pass the PKE meter in a slow arc to isolate the source of the activity. But as soon as he began the arc, there was no longer any need for it.

"FOOLISH MORTALS!" boomed a voice, echoing off the museum walls and floor. **"YOU HAVE DARED TO INTERFERE IN THE AFFAIRS OF THE ALL-POWERFUL SOVEREIGN OF HORROR! KNEEL BEFORE THE FEARSOME VISAGE OF XANTHADOR! KNEEL IN ABJECT TERROR AND SUBMISSION!"**

"KNEEL—OR DIE!"

"Up there!" shouted Ray, pointing at the head of the tallest dinosaur.

Sure enough, a small, round demon was perched atop the dinosaur's skull. Without missing a beat, all four Ghostbusters let loose with their nutrona wands. The ion streams shot toward the demon with the speed of light. But the demon was already rolling off the skull and catching on with one hand, swinging down to hang beneath the skull. The streams sailed over him, converging to blow a blackened, smoking hole in the ceiling. Before they could fire a second time, the demon held up his free hand.

"Hey! Whoa! Chill out!" yelled the demon. "I'm only goofin' on you!"

The Ghostbusters hesitated. They looked at each other, confused.

"You're...not Xanthador?" said Winston.

"Nah, not by a long shot." The demon swung itself back up onto his perch on the dinosaur's skull. "The name's Geezil. I just work for the big guy."

As one, the Ghostbusters took aim with their nutrona wands.

Geezil covered his eyes. "Whoa! Hold it! I just wanna tell you something!" When they still hadn't fired after a second, he peeked down with one eye. "Sheesh, and they say demons have hair-trigger tempers..."

"What is thy message, demon?" demanded Goodraven, his booming voice reverberating around the room.

Geezil looked toward him as though he hadn't noticed Goodraven standing near the entrance before. A flash of fear crossed his face. "Oh, it's y-you. I—I didn't see..."

"Thy message!"

"Message. Right. Right."

"Amazing what happens when you can make these things burst into flame with your hands," Ray muttered to Egon.

"Anyway," said Geezil, "on behalf of Xanthador, supreme master of panic and almighty liege of anxiety, I offer you one opportunity to escape with your miserable lives. Although you are as mere fleas before the power of Xanthador, foolish persistence may render even a flea into a bothersome nuisance. As penalty for your recurring interference, your very lives are forfeit.

"Yet, all know that Xanthador is ever merciful. Thus, you may save yourselves by becoming this era's first worshippers, for the sight of this realm's defenders in his unholy service shall unnerve the populace and hasten the rise of Xanthador."

"You're kidding," said Venkman.

"Pass," said Winston.

"No," said Egon.

"I don't think so," said Ray.

Geezil shrugged. "Your choice. Guess I'll have to kill you now."

"Oh, yeah?" Ray snapped. "You and what army?"

"This one," said Geezil.

Instantly, the dinosaurs' eye sockets glowed red with an unearthly light. The huge skeletons turned their heads toward the Ghostbusters. They would have licked their lips if they still had tongues.

The team couldn't focus on the dinosaurs for long, though. The sound of marching came from one of the hallways, as scores of empty suits of armor advanced toward them. Stuffed lions and tigers—as lithe as they were when they were alive—came from the other. Ancient warriors, mastodons...from every wing of the museum they came. And all of them were out for blood.

Venkman turned to Ray with a look of disdain. "You and what army.' You've really gotta stop saying stuff like that..."

CHAPTER 18

“Peter!” shouted Egon. “Take Goodraven and get over to the planetarium! We’ll handle things here!”

“We will?” said Ray.

“Right!” said Venkman. “Come on, Johnny!” He grabbed Goodraven by the arm and broke into a run—or started to, anyway. At first, Goodraven remained in place, and his considerable mass made Venkman jerk to a sudden stop. But then Goodraven began to move with him, and the unlikely pair was on their way.

Venkman made a beeline for the nearest stairway. His nutrona wand cut a swath through the advancing hordes. The ion stream ripped through suits of armor and preserved mammals. Each one exploded into bits, sending showers of metal, fur, and ectoplasm into the air. With neither time nor traps to spare, he didn’t have the luxury of binding or trapping the spirits that

had possessed the exhibits. Each quick burst of the nutrona wand sent an angry and disoriented spectre swirling around in the flying debris, before it returned to the attack.

The ghosts gave Goodraven a wider berth, though—particularly after he grabbed one of the disembodied spirits and it burst into flame. The fact that he had done it without so much as breaking stride was nearly as impressive as the effect.

Venkman vaulted over the hand railing and dropped down to the stairs below. Goodraven followed close behind, moving swiftly without seeming to hurry.

Some of the creatures chased them down the stairs. But scores of them continued to push toward the remaining Ghostbusters.

Ray, Egon, and Winston stood their ground, back to back, facing the sea of creatures that swarmed around them on all sides. They fired blasts into the crowd, ripping through the spirits’ borrowed “bodies,” and stamped on the pedals of ecto-traps whenever any of their attackers came too close. But still the creatures kept coming. Now, the tallest of the dinosaurs was craning its neck down toward them, too.

“Pseudo-organic possession,” said Ray, blasting through a pair of thirteenth century Teutonic knights.

“Just like the dummy at the sporting goods store,” said Egon, triggering one of the traps to suck the ghost out of an Aztec warrior.

“Careful, though,” said Ray. “A lot of these things are priceless artifacts. It’ll be a lot harder to replace them than a display dummy.”

“That’s a nice thought, Ray, but it’s kind of hard to replace us, too,” said Winston, nailing a flock of

penguins. "Those things'll tear us to pieces if we don't stop them!"

"The traps can't hold this many," said Egon. "It'll overload the systems."

"So what do we do?" asked Winston.

"Hope that Pete and Goodraven stop Xanthador in time," said Ray. "And in the meantime..."

"Dominos," said Egon.

"Dominos?"

"Fire strategically," said Egon. "Place every shot for maximum effect."

As if to illustrate his point, he fired upward. The ion stream blew away the spectre that was inhabiting the largest dinosaur skeleton and shattered the skeleton into bits. With a nervous squeal, Geezil leaped from the creature's skull, catching himself by embedding his claws in the wall. Heavy bones rained down, smashing open suits of armor and knocking limbs off dummies that were dressed like Inuit hunters.

"Dominos," said Winston.

He fired over the heads of the nearest attackers to strike a charging mastodon skeleton, blowing it apart. The long, heavy tusks alone took out nearly a dozen of the creatures.

Yet, despite their small successes, there was only so much that they could do; the sheer press of numbers weighed heavily against them.

Little by little, the creatures surged forward. The unliving circle around the Ghostbusters was tightening. It was only a matter of time before the undead attackers overwhelmed the team's defenses.

Venkman and Goodraven tore down the stairs, with

a hodgepodge of animated warriors and snarling beasts of prey in hot pursuit.

"Just stay ahead of them!" Venkman said, as an African spear sailed past his head. "We'll be okay as long as we don't get cornered!"

He was so preoccupied with what was behind them that he was only a few steps from the bottom by the time he looked down. When he did, he swallowed hard. A huge brown bear was lying in wait for them. As they approached, the bear reared up on its hind legs and roared.

Acting mostly on reflex, Venkman reached out, grabbed the bannister, and swung around to vault over it. The drop wasn't far, but with his heavy proton pack throwing him off-balance, he hit hard and went sprawling across the floor.

That still put him in better shape than his pursuers, though. The mob of possessed museum exhibits was too big to react quickly. Indeed, the ones in the rear couldn't even see what was happening in front of the pack. So when the creatures in the lead stopped to follow Venkman, the ones behind them kept going. The result was that all of them wound up tumbling down the stairs in a tangled mess, where they smashed into the waiting bear and bowled it over.

"And that's why you shouldn't run on stairs," Venkman said. He took advantage of the momentary confusion to get back to his feet.

But where was Goodraven? He hadn't made the leap, and Venkman couldn't go on without him.

Just then, the tall, unscathed figure of Goodraven emerged from the chaos, walking calmly. He straightened his tunic as he walked. "Let us proceed," he said.

Beyond Goodraven, Venkman could see most of

the creatures—the ones that hadn't been demolished in the fall—regaining their footing. He turned to see a monstrous blue whale, more massive than a city bus, inching its way toward them from the other direction. "Oh, you've got to be kidding..."

He grabbed Goodraven and headed for the signs that marked the entrance to the planetarium.

The Mayor stormed back into his dressing room in a cloud of determination and rage.

"G-great job in the debate, sir," said an aide, edging out of his way. "You r-really—"

"What's going on at the park?" snapped Lapinski.

"They're not at the park anymore," said Wong.

"What about the ghosts?"

"Sea monsters. They trapped them. Now, Venkman's crew is at the Natural History museum."

"The museum?!" he demanded. "Why?"

"I don't know. We have early reports of patrons fleeing in a panic."

"That's all the police could tell you?"

"Not the police." Wong gestured toward the television monitor that stood in a corner of the room. "The news."

For the first time, Lapinski registered the image on the television screen. The news channel was carrying a live feed. A reporter was standing on the street, talking into the camera. In the background, the museum and planetarium were clearly visible—as was the crowd that had already gathered outside.

"Perfect! Just perfect!" shouted the Mayor. He kicked a chair across the room, where it crashed into the wall. "What else can possibly go wrong?"

Wong looked uncertain how to reply.

"What else can go wrong, Nathan?" Lapinski repeated.

"Well... Goodraven's with them."

The Mayor froze. Only his reddening face and the vein that bulged from his temple attested to his growing rage.

"Arnie?" Wong said, in a soft, tentative voice. "Mister Mayor?"

"Venkman set this up!" said Lapinski.

"What?"

"It's the only explanation that makes any sense! The timing's too neat! He planned all of this!"

He crossed the room to the television monitor and stared into the screen. "This stunt's going just like you wanted, isn't it?" he hissed at the screen. "What are you up to?"

Built on the site of its predecessor, the original Hayden Planetarium, the Rose Center for Earth and Science was a tremendous, seven-story blue sphere housed inside an even larger glass case. Inside the case, smaller spheres circled around the main one, giving the impression of orbiting planets. It was a remarkable sight.

At the moment, the events inside the planetarium were equally remarkable.

Venkman and Goodraven raced into the lower half of the sphere, to find a reddish open space nearly fifty feet in diameter. Out of the corner of his eye, Venkman spotted a bright flash of white light and a group of spectral forms.

"Ghost!" he cried, still on the run. He whirled to fire a blast from his nutrona wand, and smacked into a transparent plexiglass barrier that ringed the center

of the room. The impact took him by surprise, causing him to drop the wand and fall onto a matching circle of plexiglass flooring.

As he hit the transparent segment of the floor, he saw that the source of the phenomenon wasn't supernatural at all. They weren't ghosts, but images of cosmic phenomena, projected onto a bowl-shaped screen that was recessed below the floor.

Only then did he notice the recorded female voice that was speaking all around him in surround sound. "It is believed that the Big Bang was the source of all..."

The urgency of the situation was marked by the fact that Venkman didn't even make a "Big Bang" joke.

Goodraven was already on his way up a sloping walkway that extended from the far side of the room. Venkman got to his feet and followed.

He ran along the walkway, circling the perimeter of the mammoth sphere and ignoring the scenes of cosmic evolution that decorated the walls on either side. He was more interested in catching up to Goodraven, but the distance between them and the curvature of the walkway kept the exorcist out of view. *He moves fast for a big guy in old clothes*, Venkman thought.

Then, suddenly, he was out of the walkway and in a vast, open space. For a second, he thought he was outdoors, staring up into a nighttime sky filled with stars...but then he remembered that it was the middle of the afternoon.

He was standing in a round theater, surrounded by hundreds of seats that faced the center of the auditorium. At the center stood a large, spherical Zeiss projector that resembled a steel ball covered in lenses.

It rotated and pivoted as it projected the bulk of the images that could be seen all around him. The effect of the projection was deceptive, but Venkman assumed there was a dome-shaped ceiling somewhere up above him. The visuals were accompanied by voice-over narration that was introducing him to the wonders of the universe.

More important, he saw Goodraven standing on the far side of the projector and gazing at the display on the ceiling. But Xanthador was nowhere to be seen.

Venkman caught his breath long enough to breathe a sigh of relief. "Yo, Johnny! We got here first!" he called to Goodraven, shouting to be heard over the narration and music. "Xanthador must've stopped to check out the gift shop."

Goodraven ignored him.

"Fine," muttered Venkman. "Last time I waste my A-list material on you."

He walked to the center of the theater to examine the projector. "We'd better pull the plug before those planets align. There's got to be an 'off' switch here somewhere."

Taking care to keep his eyes away from the blinding light that streamed from some of the lenses, Venkman studied the body of the projector and the pedestal that supported it. He ran his fingers along their surface. But it was no use—he couldn't find any controls.

He took a step back, and watched the precise movements of the spherical projector as it swiveled first one way and then the other. He looked around to see if someone was operating the device, and confirmed that, apart from Goodraven and himself, no one was around.

"Must be run by computer," he concluded.

He turned away from the projector and started to walk through the darkened theater, looking for a control panel. The task would be easier, he decided, if the lights were on.

For his part, Goodraven continued to stare upward, watching the program unfold above his head. Venkman gave an exasperated grunt. "Hey, Johnny!" he yelled, his raised voice dripping with sarcasm. "I don't want to pull you away from your show, but can I get a little help here?"

Slowly, Goodraven's gaze moved from the ceiling to focus on Venkman. His eyes were ablaze with a fiery red glow.

"Uh, Johnny..." Venkman said in an uncertain tone, "you shouldn't watch so much TV. It's bad for your eyes..."

Goodraven's lips parted into a broad and nasty grin. The sight was so disquieting that it made Venkman wish he'd go back to showing no emotion at all.

Then Goodraven started to laugh.

Oh, great, thought Venkman. *Now I get a laugh.*

It was an unnerving sound that held no mirth or joy at all. It reverberated around the theater, growing in intensity until it drowned out the soundtrack from the planetarium show entirely.

Then its body started to change. At first, Venkman thought it was an optical illusion—one caused by the light and shadows cast off by the projector. But it soon became clear that it was no illusion. Goodraven's body swelled and grew, ripping through his ancient garb.

His shape was changing, too. His skin turned dark and scaly. His body grew slender and sprouted a long

tail that was tipped with bony spikes. His fingers grew long and menacing claws. His eyes—all seven of them—turned a sickly shade of yellow. His jaws extended to reveal rows of gleaming, razor-sharp teeth.

When it was done, Goodraven no longer looked even remotely human. He towered high above Venkman, crouching to fit beneath the forty-foot ceiling. A sizable portion of the star show was now being projected on his body instead of the ceiling.

Venkman stared, wide-eyed, at the creature that used to be Goodraven. "Let me guess..." he said.

"TREMBLE, MORTAL," said the creature. "FEEL THE ICY GRIP OF FEAR UPON YOU! PLEAD FOR YOUR WORTHLESS LIFE BEFORE THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE WRATH OF XANTHADOR!"

CHAPTER 19

Venkman hit Xanthador with everything he had. The blinding light of the ion stream instantly transformed the nighttime scene to a theater at high noon. He ran the searing beam up and down the demon's body, from head to tail and back again. Yet, when the smoke cleared, nothing had changed. The barrage hadn't bound Xanthador. It hadn't even singed his flesh.

Without warning, Xanthador's tail whipped out to wrap itself around Venkman's torso and snatch him off the ground. Venkman's arms were pinned to his sides as Xanthador hoisted him up to eye level, near the peak of the domed ceiling. Venkman writhed about, struggling to free himself, but to no avail.

Even with the situation as dire as it was, the irony wasn't lost on him. A Ghostbuster bound, dangling high above the ground, and unable to struggle free?

All Xanthador needed was an ecto-trap and a jumpsuit to make the picture complete.

"FOOLISH MORTAL!" Xanthador hissed, in a voice that made the very walls shake. *"YOU DARE TO MAKE YOUR FEEBLE ATTEMPTS AT MY TIME OF POWER? YOUR CHILDISH TOYS ARE AS NOTHING BEFORE THE SUPREME MIGHT OF THE OVERLORD OF DREAD!"*

"Sorry," said Venkman. "My bad."

"YOU HAVE EARNED A SLOW AND PAINFUL DEATH. I SHALL SAVOR THE TASTE OF YOUR SCREAMS AS THE FEAR WELLS UP WITHIN YOU."

Venkman swallowed hard, but he forced himself to remain calm. The last thing he needed was to add to Xanthador's power. "Y'know, I never thought I'd say this, but I think you were a nicer guy when you were Goodraven."

Xanthador smiled, which only served to emphasize his lethal fangs all the more. *"GOODRAVEN WAS BUT A SHELL. A SHAM."*

"Taking a walk on the wild side, huh? Seeing how the human half lives?"

"CERTAIN PREPARATIONS WERE NECESSARY, IN ORDER TO READY THIS WORLD FOR MY IMMINENT SOVEREIGNTY. AS I COMPLETED THOSE PREPARATIONS UPON THIS PLANE, IT AMUSED ME TO TAKE THE FORM OF THE MORTAL WHO SOUGHT TO OPPOSE ME IN EONS PAST."

"And who kicked your extradimensional tail, the way I hear it."

Xanthador's smile was gone. His seven eyes narrowed.

The demon's tail shot out, thrusting Venkman headfirst toward a particular portion of the ceiling. It

stopped without warning, his nose scant inches from impact. When Venkman dared to open his eyes, he found that his shadow blocked part of the display in front of him, but he could still make out the distinctive rings of Saturn.

"OBSERVE, MORTAL! THE TIME IS UPON US. IN MERE MINUTES, THESE WORLDS OF LIGHT AND IMAGE SHALL ATTAIN THE PROPHESED ALIGNMENT."

Sure enough, Saturn was starting to expand now, as the computer-generated movie zoomed in on the planet. By craning his neck, Venkman could see the other planets moving into position as well.

"YOU ARE HONORED INDEED THIS DAY. YOU SHALL BE THE FIRST TO WITNESS THE ASCENDENCE OF XANTHADOR. YOU SHALL BE THE FIRST TO QUAKE WITH A TERROR THAT PIERCES THE VERY MARROW OF YOUR SOUL. AND THEN YOU SHALL RECEIVE ONE FINAL HONOR: YOU SHALL BE THE FIRST TO DIE!"

"Guys?" said Winston. "This isn't good."

The three Ghostbusters were jammed together now, back to back, as the surrounding hordes of the undead continued to close in. It didn't seem to matter how many of their attackers they blew apart—as long as there was an entire museum full of displays and artifacts just waiting to be possessed, there was no end in sight.

Their only advantage was the fact that, as the circle around them tightened, the creatures were getting increasingly in each other's way. Fewer of them could attack simultaneously. But on the other hand, the close quarters were making it harder for the Ghost-

busters to use their weapons without inadvertently blowing off parts of their own bodies in the process.

High above, Geezil clung to the wall with one hand, his claws sunk deep into the marble. His other hand held a sandwich that he munched on as he watched the spectacle unfold below him. "Go, go! Bite his head off!" Geezil cheered. "Ohhh! Don't worry—you didn't need that leg anyway!"

Down below, the Ghostbusters had long since realized that there was no time for strategy or domino effects anymore. All they could do was keep firing, and hope to avoid being overrun.

"How much longer are we going to have to keep this up?" asked Ray. "I'm getting a cramp."

"If you don't keep this up," Egon replied, "a cramp will be the least of your worries."

"Where's the cavalry when you need them?" said Winston.

"I'd settle for Pete beating Xanthador," said Ray.

The echoes could be felt throughout the city.

It was more than storm clouds and clammy air now. A psychic presence—a tangible emotion—was descending upon New York City and closing its grip.

It began with the animals. Dogs howled inconsolably. Flocks of birds took to the sky. Mounted policemen were thrown from their saddles as their horses reared up skittishly.

Then the ripples spread. Housewives found themselves speaking in hushed tones, without knowing why. Office workers sat frozen at their desks, unable to remember what they were about to do. Telephone lines were jammed and bars were flooded with mid-

afternoon customers, as thousands sought solace in loved ones or liquor.

For reasons the inhabitants could neither understand nor explain, every living soul in the city of New York—whether rich or poor, young or old, male or female, black or white—was haunted by the same all-consuming, undeniable conviction:

Something bad is going to happen...

The creatures were swarming over them now. The ecto-traps were long since out of reach, although they still sprang to life occasionally when one of the animated exhibits stepped on the pedal by accident. The Ghostbusters still held their nutrona wands, but with so many adversaries at such close range, they could only use the wands against a small fraction of the creatures. At this point, the crush was so bad that they couldn't even see their own hands, let alone their feet.

"I have an idea," said Egon.

"Well, I'd say this is the time to use it," Ray said, an edge of desperation in his voice.

"Unfortunately, it requires having enough space to get my arms free."

Ray and Winston groaned.

It's funny what you think about at times like this, Venkman thought. As he hung above the ground, watching the movement of the planets mark the countdown to Armageddon, he would have expected to see his life flash before his eyes. But it didn't. Instead, he found himself thinking about the future—a future that, in all likelihood, would never be.

It didn't look like he'd ever get to be mayor now.

He'd never get to show Oscar the dinosaurs, let alone watch the little guy grow up. He'd never get to repay the five dollars he owed Ray...but, then again, he hadn't really been planning to do that anyway.

Most of all, though, he thought about Dana.

And that thought filled him with determination. Dana was everything to him. There was no way he was going to let some backwater demon kill him before he got to see her again. Besides, he'd just told her he loved her on live television. He had no intention of dying before he heard her response.

Of course, all the determination in the world wasn't going to make any of this any easier. He was still dangling far too high in the air, and a quick attempt at moving his arms confirmed that he was still pinned tightly. Still, there had to be something...

That was when a series of explosions blew the emergency exit doors off their hinges.

Through the clearing smoke, Venkman could see a squad of men in dark clothes and flak jackets pour through the doors. With a precision that showed their extensive training, they fanned out around the theater, taking up their positions and leveling semi-automatic weapons at the towering demon. Even in the dim light of the theater, Venkman recognized one of them as the SWAT commander he'd met outside.

"Police! Freeze!" shouted the commander. "Put down the Ghostbuster, then lie on the floor, hands on top of your...er, head!"

"It's about time!" Venkman called down to him. "Where've you guys been?"

"You wanted twenty minutes, you got twenty minutes!" the commander called back.

"Seemed longer in here!" said Venkman.

"INSIGNIFICANT FLEAS!" said the demon. *"YOUR INSOLENCE HAS SEALED YOUR DESTRUCTION! KNEEL BEFORE XANTHADOR, AND YOUR END SHALL BE SWIFT!"*

"Fire!" the commander ordered.

The rapid-fire muzzle flashes of semi-automatic weapons created a strobe effect, illuminating Xanthador from below as the bullets bounced harmlessly off his scaly hide.

The planets were getting closer.

Venkman wasn't surprised to see that the bullets had no effect. He was more surprised when, for a brief moment, it looked as though Xanthador wavered slightly and reduced in size by a hairsbreadth. The effect was so small that he dismissed it as a trick of the light, caused by either the projector or the muzzle flashes. And yet...

Encouraged, he struggled once again to free himself. As he expected, it was no use; Xanthador still held him too tightly. But something had changed. Maybe it was because the demon was distracted. Maybe it was simple overconfidence. Either way, a nearly imperceptible bit of slack had crept into Xanthador's tail. It wasn't enough for Venkman to wriggle free, but he could just barely move his right arm now.

The planets had nearly reached alignment.

Xanthador swatted at the rescue squad with one of his feet, effortlessly tearing up rows of seats in the process. Nevertheless, the police unit maintained the deadly barrage.

Gritting his teeth against the effort, Venkman thrust his hand down below the coils of Xanthador's tail. He flexed the muscles of his hand a few times to get the blood flowing again. Then, straining mightily, he

reached down to where his nutrona wand dangled from the cable attached to his proton pack. It took several tries, but by the fourth attempt, the weapon was in his hand.

Despite Xanthador's preoccupation with the would-be saviors, one of his eyes spotted Venkman grabbing the nutrona wand.

"FOOLISH SPECK!" Xanthador told him. *"HAVE YOU NOT YET LEARNED THAT YOUR PUNY WEAPONS ARE AS NOTHING AGAINST XANTHADOR?"*

"Who said I'm shooting at *you*?" said Venkman.

A brilliant streak of light shot downward, as the ion stream tore through the projector below. It exploded in a deafening roar and a shower of sparks.

Instantly, the starscape around them vanished.

"NO!" shrieked Xanthador.

Outside the museum, the crowd was getting restless.

They had already been experiencing a nameless feeling of dread. And the sounds of gunfire and explosions coming from the museum weren't helping. Without knowing what was going on inside, all anyone could do was imagine the worst, fidget...and wait.

The longer things went on, the worse the tension became. So when the big explosion hit the planetarium, one of the firefighters turned to the rest of her crew. "We've got to get in there," she said.

They glanced at each other. Then, with a mutual nod, they grabbed their gear and ran toward the building.

Once they saw the firefighters on their way into the museum, it wasn't long before the remaining police

officers headed in, too. A moment later, the EMS medics followed suit. Then, with no one manning the police barricades to stop them, the reporters and television crews were on their way.

That left only the crowd. The bystanders looked at each other, confused and not sure what to do next.

Xanthador was under siege. His foes were everywhere, battering him from all sides. Dozens of people were shooting him with bullets, spraying him with high-pressure water hoses, and pelting him with rocks, bottles, and whatever debris was close at hand.

He was still far too strong for the attack to cause any physical damage. However, he was noticeably smaller now, stretching a mere twenty feet or so above the floor. And judging from the way the demon was writhing and screaming, there might not have been any physical damage, but the psychic pain was incredible.

Venkman was still imprisoned in the coils of Xanthador's tail. However, the look on his face was triumphant.

"That's the secret, isn't it?" he shouted at the demon. "The physical attacks can't hurt you. But you feed on fear. It's the special of the day at the Xanthador Grill. So if fear is the entrée, then courage..."

"...Courage is like poison!"

Only fourteen feet tall now, the demon reeled back. His tail drooped and went slack, letting Venkman drop to the floor. The fall was short enough that, even with the after-effects of being constricted by Xanthador's tail, Venkman landed on his feet.

"You know your mistake, big guy?" Venkman told

Xanthador. "Of all the places in all the world, you had to go pick New York City!"

"See, the thing is, you need fear to survive. You need us scared. And if there's one thing the past couple of years have taught us, it's this: When things get bad, I mean *really* bad, and all Hell's breaking loose, then New Yorkers don't get scared—they get *pissed!*"

Venkman fired his nutrona wand, binding Xanthador in an ion stream of pure white light. The demon struggled against the luminous bonds. He gritted his rows of teeth, straining with the last of his strength. Slowly, the ion stream began to give...

The stream shattered, sending shards of light in all directions.

Xanthador rose to his full, fourteen-foot height. He thrust his arms upward and cried, "*TO ME, MY MINIONS!*"

They seemed to come from everywhere. Spectres, phantoms, and ghouls of every shape and size poured in through the planetarium's walls, ceiling, and floor. The humans on the scene pulled back as the wraiths flocked around their master and faced Venkman with menace in their ethereal eyes.

"*IT SHALL NOT BE XANTHADOR WHO PERISHES THIS DAY!*" Xanthador told Venkman. "*ALL MANKIND SHALL LEARN THE BOUNDLESS LIMITS OF MY WRATH!*"

"*YET, YOU SHALL NOT BEAR WITNESS TO MY TRIUMPH, MORTAL—FOR I SHALL ADORN MY CHARIOT WITH YOUR SMOLDERING BONES!*"

The lobby was so densely packed that it took a while for Winston to realize that some of the combatants

on the fringes of the crowd were actually fighting each other. And even then, Egon and Ray didn't realize it, because they were facing in other directions.

"Hey, guys," said Winston, "we got company!"

"Thank you for stating the obvious," said Egon, trying to shake off an Incan priest while blasting a warthog.

"No, new company!"

"Who is it?" asked Ray.

"I can't tell," Winston replied, stretching to see over the crowd. "I think it's the cavalry."

The dozens of new arrivals weren't armed with the Ghostbusters' high-tech arsenal. But the ghosts were inhabiting tangible objects, and they were operating at nowhere near Xanthador's level of power. That meant they could be hit—and their borrowed bodies could be broken. Police officers swung billy clubs to knock stuffed heads off the bodies of wild animals. Teamsters shattered walking suits of armor with crowbars and tire irons.

Now that the odds were approaching something more even, the pack of animated exhibits was starting to thin as spirits were displaced from their hosts and forced to go off and find new bodies to inhabit. Not that there was any shortage of ghouls to battle, but once the ghosts had to split their attention across more than three living targets, the pressure on the Ghostbusters eased a bit. At the very least, they could move their arms and legs freely again.

"Didn't you say you had an idea?" Ray asked Egon.

"Yes," said Egon. "As I said earlier, fire strategically. Place every shot for maximum effect."

With that, Egon whirled. He fired upward, trapping

Geezil in the grip of an ion stream. "Why waste time with pawns, when you can capture a knight?"

Egon started to retract the beam. Geezil squirmed and struggled to maintain his grip on the wall, but it was no use. The relentless beam yanked the demon from his perch and pulled him down toward ground level. Geezil looked down at the waiting Ghostbusters with more than a little anxiety.

"Hiya, boys," said Geezil as he reached the Ghostbusters' eye level. "Hey, whaddaya say we go settle this whole misunderstanding over a cold beer? My treat, okay?"

"Call them off," said Egon.

"I'd like to. Really," said Geezil. "But it's my boss, y'see. He gave strict orders, and he has this real problem with employees showing personal initiative—"

"Call them off," said Egon, a little more insistent this time. "Now."

"Wish I could, but it's out of my hands," said Geezil. "I'm just middle management. All the big stuff—possession, transmogrification—that's my boss's turf."

"Call them off," said Egon, "or I'll shove you into an ecto-trap and slam the door when you're halfway through."

"Can he do that?" Winston whispered to Ray, as he zapped a charging rhinoceros.

"Nah, the traps don't work like that," Ray whispered back. "But five bucks says he starts working on modifying them tomorrow."

Suddenly, without warning, all of the ghosts soared up out of their hosts and zoomed off in the same dir-

ection, through the wall and out of sight. The exhibits they left behind collapsed onto the floor, lifeless.

Geezil looked as puzzled as the humans. "Don't look at me," he said. "I didn't do anything."

A moment later, Geezil, too, was yanked out of the ion stream by an unseen force. He disappeared into the distance.

The disembodied spirits hadn't returned to the netherworld. All of them—scores of wraiths—were inside the planetarium, facing Venkman at Xanthador's side.

The other humans weren't shooting or using hoses now. Cowed by the threat and, to be honest, the sheer spectacle of it all, they stayed back and tried to attract as little attention to themselves as possible. As for the other Ghostbusters, they were still inside the museum proper.

Venkman was going to have to handle this one on his own.

"Y'know, Johnny," said Venkman, "there are a lot of things that scare me. Looking dumb on live TV? That scares me. Cafeteria mystery meat? Yeah, that scares me. And commitment? Don't get me started on commitment."

As he spoke, Venkman surreptitiously slipped a hand behind his back. His fingers found the appropriate rheostat on his proton back. He turned the power up to its highest setting.

"But this pathetic bunch of spuds?" Venkman continued. "Well, sorry, Johnny, but you just reached strike three. 'Cause while there might be plenty of things out there that scare me, I've gotta tell ya..."

Venkman whipped out his nutrona wand and blasted Xanthador square in the chest with an ion

stream at full force. Venkman had never dared to risk that magnitude of firepower before, but the way he figured it, he had nothing left to lose. Turning his head to shield his eyes from the blinding glare, he kept pouring it on. Xanthador roared with fury as he writhed in pain.

Just then, Venkman's teammates came jogging in through the entrance from the museum. Their jaws went slack at the sight that was waiting for them. "Holy..." said Winston, stopping dead in his tracks.

"Get the big guy!" yelled Venkman.

They didn't need to be told twice. Snapping out of their awed fascination, Ray, Egon, and Winston joined in the assault. Each of them fired at a different part of the demon's oversized form, taking care not to cross the ion streams. As each one struck Xanthador's body, his screams were redoubled.

Venkman had only expected to restrain the demon. But as the barrage continued and intensified, Xanthador's body began to collapse in on itself. It started slowly, as his chest buckled, caved in, and disappeared into nothingness. Then, as if in the grip of a black hole, the rest of his body started to follow suit. His torso folded in on itself and was sucked into the empty space where his chest had been. His limbs and head went next. By the time the tip of his tail was gone, all that was left was the distant echo of Xanthador's screams.

None of the humans who were present could feel the effects of the powerful suction. However, for the ghosts assembled in the theater, it was an entirely different story. One by one at first, but then in larger numbers, the wraiths found themselves caught in the unbreakable pull, following Xanthador down into the

void. Their terrified shrieks filled the room and several city blocks beyond. Once the vortex took hold in earnest, some of the phantoms realized what was happening. They strained desperately to fly away, but there was no escape. Geezil was the last to go.

And then there were none.

The Ghostbusters shut down their proton packs, and a hush fell over the theater. It took a couple of minutes for everyone to fully process the idea that the threat was over. But once the thought had a chance to settle in, the planetarium erupted into a cacophony of cheers, laughter, high fives, and slaps on the back. And the Ghostbusters were the guests of honor.

As the celebration carried on, Ray was struck by a sudden thought. He looked around, then tapped Venkman on the arm.

"Hey, Pete?" he said. "Where's Goodraven?"

CHAPTER 20

Xanthador's defeat came a full month before Election Day. From that point on, though, the rest of the mayoral campaign was basically irrelevant. As it turned out, running out on the debate hadn't cost Venkman the election. It bought him the election.

Images of him blasting Xanthador were everywhere, alongside shots of Winston binding sea serpents. There were testimonials from the police, the fire department, and the International Brotherhood of Exorcists. Occult and New Age groups praised Venkman for being the only candidate to consider the "pan-dimensional issue," while Evangelical Christians admired his taking a strong stance against the forces of evil.

Even more remarkable, in an era of two-second sound bites, every newscast in the Tri-State Area played what later came to be known as Venkman's

"New Yorkers Don't Get Scared" speech...from start to finish.

The Mayor tried to recapture good will by announcing a new counter-demon security initiative and funding a complete renovation of the Museum of Natural History and Rose Center, but it was far too late. Apparently, after seeing one candidate put his life on the line while the others stood around debating, most New Yorkers had already made up their minds.

Rumor had it that Lapinski fired a dozen random staffers in a rage after someone hung one of Venkman's "Who Ya Gonna Call?" campaign posters on a bulletin board in City Hall.

When all the votes were tallied, it was the biggest landslide in New York municipal history. Once the new year arrived, Arnie Lapinski would become a private citizen, and the Honorable Peter Venkman would be named the next Mayor of the City of New York.

Typically, in such situations, the mayor-elect spent a good deal of time around City Hall before January, meeting with the outgoing mayor and getting up to speed on policies and procedures. But it didn't work that way this time, mainly because Lapinski banned Venkman from City Hall for the duration of his term. Or as he phrased it to the appropriate personnel, "If that maggot sets one foot inside that door, shoot to kill."

The legality of such a move was questionable, to say the least, but with only two months left until the administration changed hands, it didn't seem worth fighting about. So it wasn't until the morning after

his inauguration that Mayor Peter Venkman finally got to tour his new office.

The new Mayor arrived early, eager with anticipation. As a courtesy, his predecessor had been invited to join him. But the outgoing Mayor was nowhere to be found, blaming his absence on the same convenient case of the flu that had kept him away from the inauguration ceremony.

"Your office, sir," said Venkman's new administrative assistant.

Venkman stepped through the door that bore his name, and found himself in another world. At the far end of the sizable room was a heavy oak desk, with an overstuffed leather chair and an American flag behind it. The desk was adorned with an expensive desk set, a phone, and a computer. A large vase of fresh flowers sat in the middle of the desk. Matching oak bookshelves lined one of the walls, providing a backdrop to a small conference table and chairs. Against the opposite wall, a sofa and more comfortable chairs surrounded a coffee table for more informal meetings—or, Venkman imagined happily, frequent naps.

"And here are the documents you requested."

"Thanks...Mindy, right?"

"Yes, sir. Will there be anything else?"

"No, I think that will do it for now."

"Shall I hold your calls while you acclimate yourself?"

"You read my mind. Thanks."

Mindy walked out of the office and closed the door behind her, leaving Venkman alone.

He grinned from ear to ear.

Venkman hopped behind the desk, laid down the

files, and slowly eased himself down into the chair. Leaning back, he found that it was even more comfortable than he had imagined. He closed his eyes for a moment, just to savor the feeling. He played with the buttons on his phone and hit a few random keys on his computer keyboard. Then he leaned forward and opened the file.

It was like manna from Heaven. There, lying before him in a thick sheaf of figures and notations, was the fiscal year budget for all of New York City. His eyes gravitated straight toward the figure in bold type that represented the total. He nearly started to drool, just looking at the number of digits.

Now, what should I buy first? he thought.

There was so much that the city needed. A yacht to inspect bridges and river traffic. A personal tailor to ensure that the Mayor's wardrobe reflected well on his constituents. A villa in Europe to maintain good relations with New York's international neighbors...

Decisions, decisions...

As he considered his options, Venkman's attention drifted toward the vase of flowers. A small envelope was protruding from the bouquet. Curious, he reached over, picked it up, and removed the gift card inside.

The card bore a handwritten note that simply read:

I'm proud of you.

Love,

Dana

Venkman sighed. A warm smile crossed his lips.

He fingered the card for a moment, and then looked back at the file of budget information.

And he made a decision.

* * *

Holding Oscar in one arm, Dana walked to the door. "Who is it?" she called.

"Delivery," was the reply.

"Delivery?" she said to Oscar, undoing the various locks and latches on the door. "We weren't expecting anything, were we?" She slid off the chain and opened the door.

Venkman was standing on the other side.

"Peter?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting my best girl, the love of my life. What's it look like?" He tousled Oscar's hair, and received a delighted giggle in reply. "Yo, Butch. Whassup?"

"B-but it's your first day! You should be at work!"

Venkman kissed her lightly and sauntered into the apartment. "No problem. They've got everything under control."

Dana was so stunned that she could barely speak. "P-Peter! Be...being mayor...the city...It's a very responsible job!"

"That's what they tell me." He took Oscar from her arms and lifted the child high above his head.

"You—you've got to go back! Right now! I...You're the Mayor!"

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"I quit this morning."

"Very funny."

"I'm serious."

And he was. She could tell.

Dana turned pale. She was speechless. The only sound in the room was the airplane noise that Venkman made as he swooped Oscar around in a circle.

He looked at her. "Are you okay? Can I get you some water?"

The words exploded out of Dana. "Peter Venkman, you have pulled some stunts in your day, but this...! Do you have any conception of what you've done? You're playing with eight million people's lives! Of all the self-centered, irresponsible..."

"Don't you want to ask me *why* I quit?"

"No! I want you out of here! And give me back my son!" She grabbed Oscar out of his hands. The toddler started to cry.

Venkman stayed calm. "It's because the people deserve someone better."

"What?"

"I'd be a terrible mayor," he said. "I don't know about all that stuff. And I don't much care about it either. The city needs someone who understands the in's and out's of all those issues. Someone who's not just parroting the answers that somebody gave him. Someone who cares enough to want to make life better for everyone, not just himself. Come on—really, now. Does that sound like me?"

Dana looked at him for a long time. Absently, she bounced Oscar in her arms to calm him. But other than that, she was motionless.

Quietly, she asked, "Then why did you run in the first place?"

"I dunno. It sounded good, I guess. But I was only thinking about what was in it for me. I wasn't thinking about what would be good for everyone else. When I finally did, there was only one thing I could do."

"But you're leaving New York without a mayor."

"You'd be surprised. It turns out they've got all kinds of rules and procedures for just this kind of thing. They'll have my replacement set up by the end of the day."

"An awful lot of people are going to be furious with you."

"It's not the first time."

"Don't you think it's a little late to be making this decision?"

"Probably. But it's the responsible thing to do."

Dana nodded slowly, digesting the flood of information that Venkman had handed her. "So what about you? What will you do now?"

He shrugged. "Go back to chasing ghosts, I guess. But first, I was wondering...Would you and Oscar like to come with me to look at the dinosaurs?"

"Now? We can't."

"Your two-year-old has a meeting he can't reschedule?"

"No, it's not that. The museum's being renovated. Nobody's allowed inside for months."

"The Mayor is."

"You're not the Mayor."

"They don't know that."

Dana laughed and shook her head. "You're incorrigible."

"But adorable."

"Here, hold Oscar. I'll get my coat."

The second inauguration ceremony was cobbled together hastily, so there was none of the pomp and spectacle that had been present the day before. It was held in one of the larger conference rooms at City Hall. The crowd was small, limited to the mayor-elect, his family, a handful of city officials, and a few select members of the press.

The new mayor held his hand on a Bible as he repeated the words to his oath of office: "...do sol-

emly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution of the State of New York; and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office of mayor according to the best of my ability."

As soon as the words left his lips, there was a flurry of camera flashes, hearty handshakes among politicians, and jubilant hugs and kisses among the family. When the excitement began to die down, the president of the city council whispered in the Mayor's ear. The council president took him by the arm, and stepped forward toward the press people.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the council president said, "it is with great pride that I present His Honor, the Mayor of New York City...

"...Winston Zeddemore."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A freelance writer since 1984, SHOLLY FISCH is the author of three children's books and co-editor of an academic book on the educational impact of *Sesame Street*. His short stories and novellas have appeared in the anthologies *X-Men Legends*, *Five Decades of the X-Men*, and *The Ultimate Hulk*. His other writing credits include numerous comic book stories (for titles ranging from *Batman Chronicles* to *Clive Barker's Hellraiser* to *Looney Tunes*), as well as television scripts, magazine articles, and material for the World Wide Web. A developmental psychologist and former vice president at Sesame Workshop (a.k.a. Children's Television Workshop), Fisch is founder and president of MediaKidz Research & Consulting, through which he provides educational consulting, hands-on testing, and writing services for children's media.

THEY HAVE THE TOOLS.
THEY HAVE THE TALENT.
BUT WILL IT BE ENOUGH THIS TIME...?

It's been two years since the events of *Ghostbusters II*, and the group finds themselves once more neck-deep in ghosts and ghouls as some of the most unsettling urban legends—like the hook-handed killer in *Lovers' Lane* and The Vanishing Hitchhiker—all come to deadly life!

But the worst is yet to come for Ray Stantz, Egon Spengler, and Winston Zeddemore—and quite possibly the people of New York. The Ghostbusters' leader, Peter Venkman, has been chosen by an independent political party to be their candidate... for Mayor!

With the city reeling under a supernatural reign of terror, can the Ghostbusters stop the arrival of an ancient fear-demon in time to save Election Day—or should Venkman start looking for another job already?

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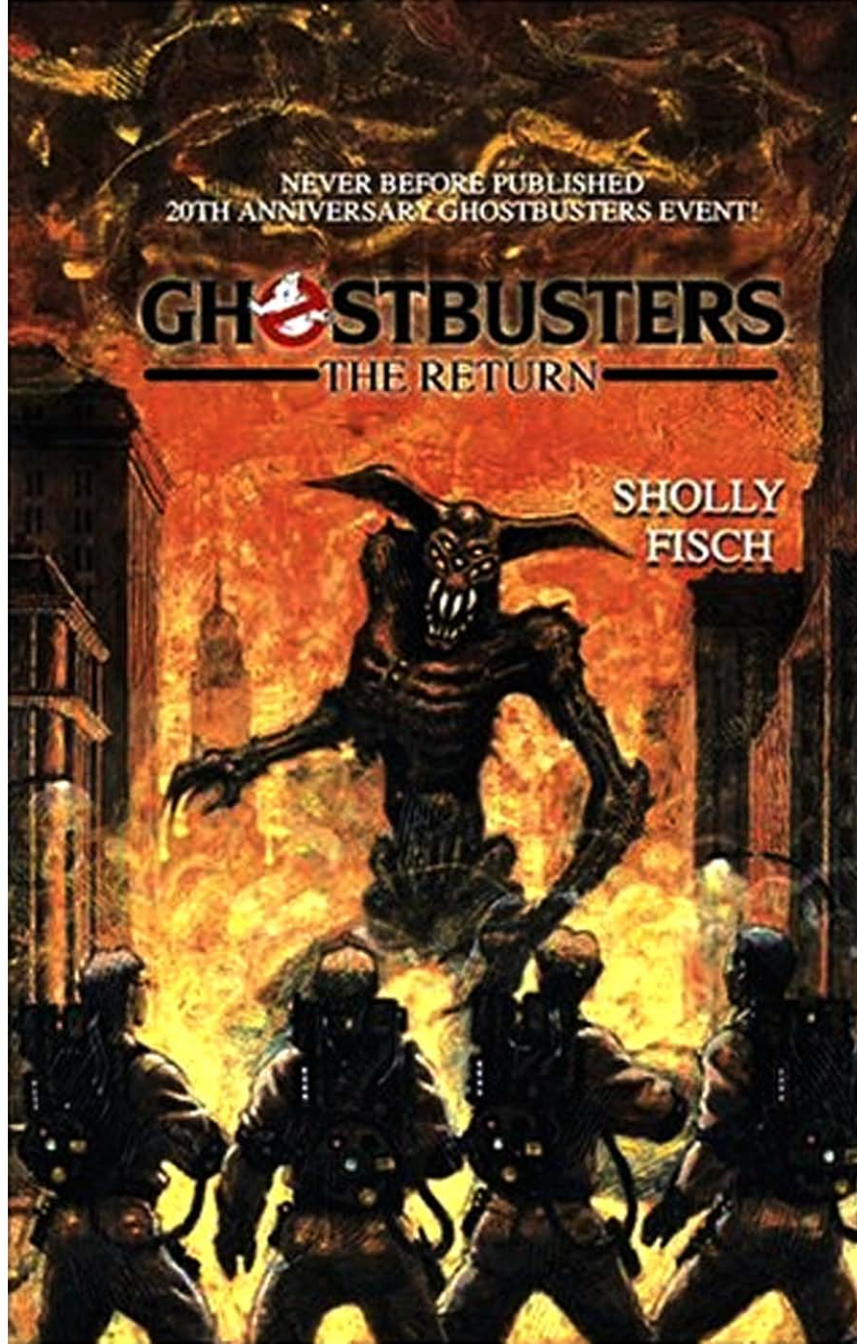
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THE RETURN

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