



# STITCH

STITCH TRILOGY BOOK 1

Samantha Durante

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## PREFACE

She woke to the sound of heavy boot steps marching down the hall and the familiar pang in her hip bones wrought from too many nights on a rigid metal cot. The back of her throat ached from the icy air ravaging her lungs; she could almost see her breath as she let out a weary sigh, resigned to another day in this hell.

What time was it? It was always difficult to tell from within her dim windowless cell. She listened as the footsteps approached, attuned to the jangle of the keys in the guard's pocket and the soft clap of the rifle against his back. Then she heard something she hadn't noticed before – a second set of footsteps, softer than the guard's, following slightly behind.

She shot up with a quick gasp, adrenaline surging through her body and firmly shaking off the last wisps of her semi-peaceful slumber. The footsteps paused outside her door as

she registered the soft whooshing of a lab coat and the gentle tapping of fingertips against a tablet. She was certain now that they had finally come to fulfill their grisly promise.

She'd known this was a risk when she accepted her mission. Now she cursed the misguided hero complex and sorry luck that had landed her here. She had failed, and now she was going to reap her recompense.

As the heavy automatic locks on her cell door released with a tumultuous clang, she turned to face her captors, steeling her resolve for whatever unspeakable nightmare awaited her.

She was only glad that *he* wasn't close enough to hear her screams.

## 1. DISTRACTION

Alessa dropped her pen and looked longingly at the clock. She had less than twelve hours until the semester's first exam, and she just could not focus on the words swimming on the page in front of her. All she could think about was the ghost.

She turned back to the diagram in her textbook, but it was no use. All she could see were those piercing sapphire eyes.

Alessa sighed, gently thumbing her laptop closed. She was resigned. If she didn't know the basics of physics by now, she certainly wasn't going to learn them by tomorrow. At least the midterm was open book.

She plunked the textbook down on the far corner of her desk with a resolute thud.

Alessa knew she needed to stop obsessing about the ghost. Her fixation had taken over her life, much to the detriment of her schoolwork and the few friendships she'd begun to develop at the start of the semester. She was barely sleeping, her mind abuzz dusk to dawn with questions about the ghost. And then

the nightmares had started – always the same immobilizing fear pulsing through her in that dark, dank cell.

No, this was not *at all* what Alessa had envisioned for her first semester of college.

Alessa pushed back from her desk and stood up, poking her head out into the hallway. As she'd hoped, the door to Janie's room was propped open invitingly. Perfect – a little Janie time was just what she needed to decompress. Alessa dug into her small refrigerator for a day-old sandwich and headed down the hall towards her friend's room.

Janie was sitting at her desk, her small frame hunched over her computer as she typed furiously, short brown hair tucked behind her ears. Alessa remembered that in addition to the physics exam, Janie also had a paper due tomorrow.

“How's it going?”

Janie finished the sentence she was keying and swung around in her chair. “Well, I might bomb physics, but at least I won't show up empty-handed to psych.”

Alessa crossed the room to sit down on Janie's bed, noticing that her friend's usually neat chin-length bob was mussed, dark wavy layers sticking out in all directions. It looked like Janie could use some reassurance.

“I'm sure you'll be fine. You took physics in high school, right?” She began unwrapping the crinkled cellophane around her turkey club.

“Yeah. But unlike *some* people –” Janie turned her chocolate brown eyes toward Alessa, eyebrows raised, “*I* didn't get the highest grade in the class.”



Before Alessa could explain that it was chemistry she had mastered – physics was after the accident, and she had barely scraped by – Janie reached for the sandwich.

“Whatcha got there?” Sooner than Alessa could react, Janie had already stolen a bite. Despite her pixie-like proportions, Janie had a considerable appetite. She was chewing in a loud, dramatic fashion. “Mmm, dry turkey, tasteless vegetables, and soggy bread. Let me guess – Van Husen basement?”

Alessa loosed a small smile and nodded as she swallowed her own bite. “Culinary excellence at its finest.” Yes, it was a poor excuse for a sandwich, but putting food in her stomach – even these meager provisions from the pitiful student-run café – immediately took the edge off her hunger, and vastly improved her mood. “Got anything to wash this down with?”

Janie swung open the minifridge to her right and pulled out a can of iced tea. She placed it on the edge of the desk nearest Alessa. “Here you go.”

Janie turned back to her paper while Alessa finished off the sandwich. Alessa loved that about Janie. Neither of them ever felt a need to keep the conversation going just to fill the space.

With the other girls in the house, Alessa struggled to even manage a 30 second exchange in the bathroom. Her sorority sisters were nice enough, but Alessa often found that she had so little in common with them that many interactions were palpably awkward. But not with Janie. Alessa was content just to sit in the same room as her, knowing that she’d be there to talk to if anything interesting occurred to her. And Janie felt the same.

The only other freshman in the house, Janie had had an easier time assimilating – her natural charisma helped her get along with anyone, even people whose only interest seemed to be boys and parties – but privately, Janie had expressed the same frustrations that Alessa felt. Alessa was just glad that they had found each other.

A spunky, sharp little bundle of energy, Janie had a fire in her that helped Alessa forget her troubles for a while – no small feat, given the long, lonely, painful year Alessa was coming off. For some reason that Alessa couldn't fathom, Janie had been drawn to Alessa as well, and the two had become fast friends.

As Alessa drained the last few sips of iced tea, Janie tapped a few keys with a sense of finality and sat back in her chair, a satisfied smile on her face as she turned towards Alessa. “Now that that's done... What do you say we get out of here?”

A break was exactly what Alessa needed. “Let me just grab my bag.” She headed back down the hall, looking forward to some fresh air after a long, fruitless day staring at a textbook she could barely bring herself to read.

Crossing the threshold into her room, Alessa stopped short. Standing at the window not ten feet from her was a tall solitary figure, partially cast in shadow.

Alessa stifled the urge to scream. Adrenaline rushed through her body and panic threatened to overtake her as blood throbbed through her temples, her muscles tensing for action. But she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, so she just stood still, watching.

He was looking out the window, breathing gently, one slim lace-up boot perched on the low windowsill, suspenders pulled taut across a broad, flat back and fastened to the narrow waist of his trim brown slacks. He gazed pensively across the wide expanse of the lawn, his chin perched gently upon the knuckles of his left fist, white shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow. She could see the muscles in his forearm flex as he clenched and unclenched his hand.

He dropped his left arm and tousled a hand through the short waves of his soft brown hair. His skin was pale, but not the pallid color of sickness, more the luminous porcelain of midwinter. As usual, he was contemplative, and didn't seem to notice her presence.

But Alessa's body refused to calm, her insides churning as she fought the mayhem stirring in her chest. Terror mixed with agony, her heart sinking with each beat, overwhelmed with an aching sorrow she couldn't explain. Her every impulse screamed at her to run, but she was rooted in place, transfixed, waves of anguish washing over her, drowning.

At the same time, though, she felt the firm tug of a powerful longing, searing her from the inside out. She couldn't have torn her eyes from him if she'd tried. How did this strange apparition invoke such turmoil in her?

His image glowed faintly, the lines of the windowpane just barely visible through his semi-translucent form. For a moment, his head inclined in her direction and she could see the gleam of one sea blue eye, flecks of green and gold shining above a strong, straight nose and thin pale rose lips.

She watched, rapt, as he clenched his jaw and swallowed, breathing deep then exhaling with an almost imperceptible shake of his head, hard lines of melancholy scored into his face.

Alessa was building the courage to try to reach out to him when the ghost began to fade. It started with the hazy glow around him, which grew strong for a moment then rapidly drew inward, erasing his presence as it went. Alessa thought she saw a small flicker and then the form was gone.

## 2. MEMOIR

Alessa quickly closed the door behind her, gasping for air; she hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath. The entire encounter had only lasted a few seconds, but she was overcome with exhaustion. Her heart was still pounding and she was trembling from her fingertips to her toes.

She leaned her back against the door, spreading her palms against the cool wood. Alessa looked up at the ceiling, releasing a deep sigh. These encounters always left her shaken and drained.

She didn't understand the tumultuous emotions that had hammered through her. The shock, the fear, the confusion – that was all natural enough. But her inexplicable attraction to the ghost... It was disturbingly magnetic.

She looked slowly around her room. Everything was in its place – the oversized original fireplace mantle, her twin bed and nightstand by the double window, her desk and minifridge across from the bed, and the large sliding door sealing off the closet to her right. It was amazing how such a familiar place

could for those few moments feel so foreign to her, like another world she didn't belong in.

The sound of footsteps approaching from down the hall brought Alessa back to reality. She stepped toward the mirror to wipe away the tears that'd begun pooling in her eyes just as Janie popped through the door.

"Ready to go, Less?" Her bright smile faded into concern as she caught sight of Alessa's face. "Hey, what is it?" she implored, crossing the room to place a reassuring hand on her friend's arm. Searching Alessa's eyes, understanding slowly crept into Janie's countenance. "Alessa, did it happen again?" she asked gently.

Alessa puffed a deep sigh. She knew Janie was intrigued by her ghost sightings, but she really wasn't feeling up to discussing the latest one just yet.

All of a sudden, the room felt stifling. Alessa grabbed her bag and headed for the door. "Let's just go."

Janie set her mouth in a dissatisfied line, but she knew better than to push. Alessa appreciated that somehow after only a few weeks of knowing each other, her friend had already intuited that she would only talk when she was ready. "Okay..." Janie yielded.

Springing down the stairs of the house, Alessa set a quick pace down the cobblestone path that led across the sprawling lawn and back toward the quad, Janie following close behind.

She breathed deep and let the crisp fall evening wash over her. She always felt better being outside. The dizzy humming in her head started to clear as the cool November air lightly

stung her eyes and worked its way from her lungs into her bloodstream, bringing the feeling back to her limbs.

Alessa could feel Janie eyeing her with concern as they wound their way across the quad, leaves crunching beneath their feet as they ambled past the stately brick buildings lining the walk.

A couple frat boys were tossing a frisbee across the lawn in the last rays of the fading sunlight while a gaggle of freshman girls stood huddled under a nearby tree, stealing glances at the guys and giggling to each other. Alessa watched a comically clichéd-looking professor in a classic tweed blazer replete with elbow patches hustle a stack of papers a foot tall towards the faculty offices. On the far side of the quad, a team of facility workers were blowing fallen leaves into a pile and raking them into the mountain heaped on the back of their truck. Taking in the ordinary college scene around her, Alessa began to feel almost normal again.

Alessa let her eyes rest on the façade of Van Husen Hall up ahead, its edifice laced with ivy, the heavy doors bedecked by massive old-growth trees still clinging to their last clumps of foliage as winter threatened to descend. The carefully placed up-lighting behind the trees highlighted the building's grand turn-of-the-century architecture and cast dramatic shadows across the entrance.

Janie followed Alessa's gaze. "I know it's not everything you'd hoped for," she murmured, "but the campus is beautiful, that much you have to admit."

Alessa nodded in agreement. She hadn't been entirely thrilled when she'd received her acceptance – Eastern State University wasn't exactly the elite private college she'd always dreamed of – but she supposed she was lucky to have been accepted anywhere after the debacle of the previous year.

Alessa sighed. “I just want everything to be normal again, Janie. Everything I ever knew is all just... gone.” She held her empty palms out in front of her before dropping them feebly at her sides.

Janie flung an arm around her friend's shoulders and pulled her in for a firm squeeze. “I'm sorry, Less. I can only imagine what it's been like for you. Sounds like a nightmare of a year.”

“You could say that again,” Alessa somberly agreed. Alessa had started her senior year of high school with a flawless resume and her dreams right at her fingertips. Then everything had fallen apart.

Janie sighed. “I know your parents would be proud of you, for how you've handled everything.”

Alessa shrugged, water pricking at her eyes. What she wouldn't give to hear them say it.

“Tell me again what happened,” Janie pressed gently.

“It's not going to change anything,” Alessa protested. She'd already told her the story what felt like a dozen times.

“It's better not to bury your memories, even the hard ones.”

She wasn't sure why, but Alessa thought she caught a glimpse of desperation in Janie's eyes before she glanced down at the neatly lined pavers under their feet. Maybe Alessa was seeing things... she wouldn't put it past herself lately, she



thought with a wry smile. With a heave, she once again recounted the worst night of her life – an abbreviated version, since she knew Janie already knew the details.

“My mom grounded me after a stupid argument the morning before homecoming, I don’t even remember about what.” Alessa clenched her hands in frustration. She had so many regrets about that day. “And that night, my parents went out to visit a friend, and I’d fallen asleep on the couch watching re-runs of some terrible reality show. And then... and then...”

Alessa could still hear the ding of the doorbell in her head, still feel the confusion knotting a pit in her stomach when she stumbled to the door in a daze. She knew right away when she answered it, didn’t even need the officer to speak – his face said it all. “Are you Alessa Khole?” he began. And in a matter of moments, her entire world had shattered.

“My parents were in an accident,” Alessa whispered. She took a deep breath. “There was nothing they could do. They were already dead.” She swallowed, the familiar shroud of stone settling over her countenance.

Over a year later now, Alessa still couldn’t quite believe that this was her story, that this was her life. She still couldn’t quite connect to it. When she actually said it out loud, it felt like she was talking about some character from a book or movie or something. It felt surreal. And yet, it had *happened*, just like she’d heard of it happening to other unlucky families over the years. She just never thought that one day it’d be hers.

Alessa glanced up at her reflection in the neighboring building, her tired green eyes shadowed deep in the dark

window nestled into the ornate mahogany doors. She was surprised at how haggard she looked. Mercifully, her glossy chestnut locks hung straight in long, neat layers that framed her face. If an outside observer didn't look closely, they might not notice the bags under her eyes, or her lackluster skin, or the jeans hanging loosely from her hips. But Alessa noticed, and she didn't like it – she didn't look like herself. She realized the sandwich she'd just had was the first thing she'd eaten all day.

She wrapped her arms around her midriff, hoping to quell the queasy, unsettled despair that had descended on her since her latest run-in with the ghost. That dark, heavy haze brought Alessa right back to the previous fall, when the world had come crashing down around her.

Not surprisingly, her grades had nosedived in the wake of her parents' accident, as she struggled through a thick depression. And when December had rolled around – bringing with it college application season – she'd tried her best to pull together a few halfway decent submissions to the list of selective schools she'd been planning to apply to.

But reality had set in once the rejection letters started piling up in late March. Luckily, a few big state schools were still accepting rolling admissions, and one – Eastern State University, home of the Fighting Gophers – had been willing to overlook the disaster of the last seven months.

And that was how she'd ended up here, still clumsily picking up the pieces of a life that she didn't even recognize anymore. Whenever that life wasn't being ransacked by a ghost, at least.

“Hey,” Janie interjected softly. “I’m glad you’re here now.” She smiled gently.

“Thanks, Janie. I’m glad *you’re* here,” Alessa reciprocated. “I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she added quietly. And she meant it. Janie was the one bright spot in an existence that Alessa had had difficulty feeling more than apathetic about lately.

Janie was quiet for a moment, then her smile widened into an impish grin. “Probably be holed up in your room with an even sadder social life,” she ribbed, snickering.

Alessa moaned and rolled her eyes, even though it was true. “Come on,” she griped, cracking a smile in spite of herself. “Let’s head home.”

### 3. OBJECTIVE

Approaching the porch of the chapter house, Alessa and Janie strolled in companionable silence, each lost in her own thoughts.

Glancing up at the front door, Alessa took note – not for the first time – of the myriad surveillance cameras flanking her from every side, an uneasy shiver slithering down her spine.

“Those things give me the creeps,” Alessa muttered, motioning towards the two cameras pointing down towards the door and the path. She couldn’t see them, but she knew there were others as well, peeking out of bushes and camouflaged behind rocks and benches.

“I don’t know why. They’re here for our own protection,” Janie shrugged, averting her eyes.

That was true, Alessa supposed. The year before she and Janie enrolled, a widely-publicized hazing scandal had embroiled the university in a drawn out lawsuit, a disastrous PR spectacle that had dragged on for months longer than would

have been necessary if the university had had proper video evidence to prove that their expulsions were justified. The administration had learned from their mistake and promptly installed a state-of-the-art surveillance network across the entire ESU campus.

“I know. I just... I don’t like the feeling of being watched every time I step out of the house, I guess. And I feel like a lot of students don’t even seem to notice that we’re under constant surveillance...” Alessa trailed off. “I don’t know. The whole setup just seems like some sort of violation, you know?”

Now pointedly digging through her bag, Janie paused briefly before responding. “Eh, I think you’re being oversensitive. Who cares? You have nothing to hide. Right?”

Janie’s tone was nonchalant, but the tense undercurrent radiating off her didn’t jive with the casualness of her words.

Puzzled, Alessa persisted. “I just think it’s weird. One time I was sitting on a bench between classes eating lunch, and when I got up to toss my garbage, there was movement in the bushes. At first I thought maybe it was a squirrel, but then I caught a glint of sunlight off glass as the camera actually *followed* me. So I walk up to it to get a better look, and this huge guy appears out of nowhere and practically snarls at me to back off.”

“What’s so crazy about that?”

“It’s not what he said, it was *how* he said it. All I did was *look* at the camera, and then, I don’t know, it was just so unnecessarily –” she grappled for the right word, the memory still sending a chill through her bones, “– menacing.”

Janie finally quit rummaging through her purse, a key clutched in her fingers, and looked up at Alessa with an exasperated sigh.

“Less, I think you’re just reading into things. I’m sure the cameras are expensive. I’m sure you weren’t the first freshman he’d had to reprimand that week. I get that you aren’t used to it, but it’s really not that big of a deal. I don’t hear anyone else complaining about it, anyway.” And with that, Janie pushed through the front door, abruptly bringing the conversation to an end.

Alessa eyed the camera on the porch one more time, her lips pressed into a hard line. Maybe Janie was right – maybe she was being hypersensitive. But the relentless gaze of that cool glass lens just felt somehow insidious to her – she couldn’t explain exactly why.

As Alessa followed Janie over the threshold, she realized that on the plus side, the administration’s over-the-top reaction *had* enabled Alessa to score a great room in this gorgeous old house. To discourage future hazing incidents, the school had also done away with rush week. Instead, they decreed that any freshman who wished to join a Greek organization had only to read the descriptions of each house and check a box on their housing form, and it’d be up to the lottery system from there.

Though Alessa had never really been interested in joining a sorority, she’d been drawn to Zeta Epsilon Pi’s big white colonial farmhouse with a wraparound porch, so she’d checked the appropriate boxes, and hoped for the best. By a stroke of

luck, Alessa had won one of the two available rooms; the other had gone to Janie.

The house had a big kitchen, dining room, and living room on the main floor which the sorority used as shared space. The upper floor had been divided into 14 bedrooms, half of which still had the elaborate original fireplace mantles. Throughout the home, large windows framed by stark black shutters looked out over acres upon acres of rolling green hills.

Janie was waiting for Alessa at the bottom of the stairs. “Coming up?” Any traces of the uncomfortable tension from their conversation on the porch had evaporated; Alessa guessed Janie was just stressed about her schoolwork and ready to head back to her desk.

As Alessa crossed the foyer, there was a clatter of high-heeled footsteps from the kitchen and Lizzie Green bounded down the hallway in all her blonde, buxom glory. “Hey girls! Just wanted to remind you two that dues need to be paid by the end of the month. Is that cool?”

“Sure thing,” Janie replied with a grin. Alessa forced a smile and nodded in agreement. She tried not to hate Lizzie – she really did – but it was just so easy.

The sorority president had never been openly hostile towards Alessa, but at the same time, it was clear that she would never have approved Alessa’s “sisterhood,” as Lizzie liked to call it, if it weren’t for the university’s policy. And the fact that Lizzie was a walking male fantasy and obviously reveled in the fact – while simultaneously pretending that she was oblivious to her own physical gifts – inspired nothing but

loathing in Alessa. Even at seven o'clock in the morning, Lizzie always managed to look perfectly put together, not even an eyelash out of place. It was nauseating. Alessa knew that she was simply feeling envious of Lizzie, but all the same, she just couldn't shake her dislike.

"Okay, great! Have a good night, girls!" Lizzie continued into the living room with an exaggerated swing of her long golden waves and Alessa promptly feigned a mild gag. Janie rolled her eyes at Alessa's behavior, but her smile betrayed her accord. "She's not *that* bad," she mouthed, mounting the stairs to their rooms.

Alessa chose not to respond.

As they reached the top of the staircase, Janie exclaimed. "Oh! That reminds me." She walked purposefully into her room and started rifling through her desk drawer. "I came across something that I thought might be of interest." She handed Alessa a printout of an article from the school newspaper. A photo showed Lizzie and the other board members in front of the sorority house. The headline read:

**ESU'S ZETA EPSILON PI CHAPTER CELEBRATES  
40 YEARS**

"What's this?" Alessa asked.

Janie sighed. "I figured you hadn't been reading your emails. There's a big anniversary coming up in a couple days and the board hosted a small celebration with some university officials, including a local historian who works at the library. Read the third paragraph."



Alessa scanned the page. In the middle of the article was a quote from a Mary Brighton, the librarian Janie was referring to.

Local historian and university librarian Mary Brighton took a few moments at the commemoration ceremony to share the history of Z-E-Pi's chapter house. According to Ms. Brighton, "The house which is now occupied by the Zeta Epsilon Pi sorority was one of the first properties acquired by the university during the expansion drive of the 1930s. Eastern State officials were able to purchase 200 acres of land including the home for a very reasonable sum after the passing of a wealthy family who had owned the property. From that time until the founding of the Zeta Epsilon Pi chapter, the building was used for offices and storage."

Alessa looked up. "Do you think this has something to do with the ghost?"

Janie shrugged. "I thought it seemed pretty promising. You saw the 'passing of a wealthy family' part? And you said his clothes look like they're from around the turn of the century, right?"

"Yeah," Alessa agreed, though she didn't mention that her limited knowledge of historical fashion was gleaned mainly from romance movies with questionable attention to factual detail. Regardless, this was the best lead she'd gotten yet. "The timeline does seem about right. Thanks for this."

Alessa folded the printout, tucking it into her pocket. She'd read a little about the building on the ESU website, but it didn't mention anything about the original owners. "I haven't put a

ton of effort into researching the house yet, but nothing I came across so far went back further than the founding of Z-E-Pi. This is the first thing I've seen which might actually be related."

"I thought maybe that librarian might know who the family was and what happened to them. Or if there are other reports of *hauntings*." Janie spoke the last word in a dramatic eerie hush, a smile in her eyes.

"Don't mock me!" Alessa giggled at Janie's theatrics. She couldn't remember the last time she'd giggled at anything.

Janie grinned. "I'm just kidding. Seriously, though, aren't there usually multiple reports of sightings or other 'disturbances' when a place is haunted? Have you heard anyone else talk about seeing anything?"

Alessa ignored Janie's teasing and shook her head. "No, but they'd be more likely to tell *you* about it than me. Everyone seems hesitant to send more than a quick hello and goodbye in my direction."

Sarcasm oozed from Janie's reply. "I wonder why. Couldn't be your inviting demeanor and abundant enthusiasm for life." She gave Alessa a scolding look before continuing. "But no, no one's said anything to me either, and I certainly haven't experienced anything myself. But who knows, maybe someone has and they're just afraid to say anything because everyone will think they're crazy."

"Like you think I am?"

"Exactly." Janie laughed. Alessa knew Janie believed her, even if she didn't want to admit it.

Janie's expression softened. "In all seriousness, though, I'm a little worried about you, Less. You've been so distracted lately..." Her tone changed back to goading. "And you *kinda* look like shit."

Alessa tossed a throw pillow at Janie's head. She was right, but still.

Janie deftly swatted it to the floor, feigning insult. "What! I'm sorry, you just look like you haven't slept in days. Have you been studying that much?"

"Oh, God, no." Alessa took a deep breath – she hadn't told anyone about the nightmares yet. "I just... haven't been sleeping well. I keep having these dreams."

"Ooooh, sexy dreams?" Janie raised an eyebrow.

Alessa glared at her and reached for another pillow.

Janie laughed, throwing her arms up in defense. "Okay, okay, I guess not!"

"Definitely not," Alessa confirmed. Even now, she could feel the panic from her nightmares welling in her gut. She tried to shake it off before continuing. "It's not exactly the same every time, but I'm always in some sort of jail, just waiting. It's like I know someone is coming to do something horrible to me, but I don't know exactly what."

Janie grimaced. "Sounds miserable."

"I can't even describe it," Alessa agreed. "But at the same time, it's weird because I feel almost... relieved, I guess."

"Relieved?"

Alessa hesitated for a moment – she knew how this must sound, but it was the truth. “Yeah, because, well, I know the ghost won’t be able to hear me being tortured or whatever.”

Janie suddenly looked up from the hole she’d been picking at on her jeans. “Wait, when did the ghost get there?”

“I never actually *see* him,” Alessa explained, “but somehow I know he’s there with me, in the prison.” She was at a loss to explain *how* exactly she knew this, but she did – she guessed dreams were just like that. “It’s weird because the feelings are really vivid – it’s so disturbing that I have trouble going back to sleep after – but besides that, things are pretty fuzzy.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah.”

Janie thought for a minute. “And why exactly are you in a prison?” she wondered.

Alessa shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. All I know is that it’s a futuristic sort of prison, but I’m not sure how I know that since I only ever really see the inside of a dark cell.” A dark, cold, desolation-filled cell, she recalled, her skin crawling with an involuntary shudder.

She thought she saw something flash in Janie’s eyes, but Janie only grunted in response, her attention focused again on the rip in her jeans. After a moment she looked up, and whatever strain Alessa thought she’d seen in Janie’s face was gone.

“So, what’s your plan with the ghost?”

Alessa considered. She’d only seen the apparition a handful of times over the course of the semester, and it’d never lasted

more than a few seconds. Besides her guess about him being from the early 1900s, so far all she'd been able to determine was that he seemed about her age. And that he had the most brilliant blue eyes she'd ever seen. And that she couldn't stop thinking about him, no matter what terror his fleeting visits may invoke in her.

Alessa sighed. It was definitely time to get to the bottom of this.

Fingering the article in her pocket, Alessa resolved that tomorrow would be the day.

"I think I'm going to stop by the library after the physics exam. Let's see what that Brighton woman knows."

## 4. RECORDS

“Pencils down!” The shrill voice of the proctor rang throughout the lecture hall as the sound of scratching graphite faded to the gentle shuffling of paper against paper. Quiet murmurs sprang up in every direction as Alessa looked over at Janie to see how she had fared. Janie shrugged apathetically.

Alessa was about to relay her own expectations when the proctor’s voice pierced the air once more. “No talking until all exams are turned in!” Alessa swallowed back her comment and returned Janie’s shrug instead. They gathered up their textbooks and calculators and headed towards the front of the class to turn in their exams.

The open book didn’t turn out to be as helpful as Alessa had hoped, but nevertheless, she still felt relatively good about her answers. It turned out that Alessa remembered more of the physics she’d learned in high school than she had thought. Despite last night’s failed attempt at studying, she guessed that – depending on the curve, of course – she would probably

wring out a B, maybe better. That was going to have to be good enough. She had other things on her mind.

Alessa and Janie turned in their booklets and filed out the door, swept in amongst the stream of students. Alessa hated these big imposing lecture halls with auditorium-style seating for 400 and their scratchy fabric seats with cramped little fold-out desks. She couldn't wait to get outside.

The moment they crossed the threshold, Janie began drilling Alessa. "What'd you get for number four?"

"The ball rolling off a ramp one?"

"Yeah."

Alessa thought for a moment. "12.4 meters."

Janie swore under her breath. "Hmpf. Hopefully they'll give partial credit."

Alessa replied with an optimistic shrug as they exited the building onto the quad.

"I can't believe Professor Liu is making us go to lecture today," Janie moaned. Janie wasn't the biggest physics enthusiast and she was taking the class just to fill a science requirement. Alessa had convinced her to transfer in a few weeks into the semester so that they could have a class together, so she felt partially responsible for Janie's dread. It did seem unfair that the university allowed professors to schedule class on the same day as the midterm.

"I know. I'm not looking forward to it either. But at least he didn't assign any homework."

Alessa and Janie commiserated on the injustices of midterm scheduling until they reached the library, Alessa stopping as she

motioned toward it. “Have time for a little paranormal research?” she asked.

Janie smiled but shook her head. “I’ve got to go turn in that psych paper. But good luck! Let me know how it goes.”

“Will do.” Alessa and Janie parted and Alessa headed up the few steps towards the library door.

When she stepped inside, the musk of old books hit her immediately. It wasn’t an unpleasant smell exactly, but it was a violent contrast to the fresh fall air outside. Alessa looked up and admired the tall vaulted ceilings and heavy wood rafters. The architectural details in the library were stunning, from the intricate woodwork in the moldings to the stained glass windows to the patterned tile floor. From the entranceway, Alessa could look up four stories straight with nothing to block her view except a grand old chandelier.

She headed to the information desk and the student behind the counter looked up with a smile. “How can I help you?”

Alessa wasn’t quite sure what to ask for. “Hi. Um, I’m trying to learn more about the history of my sorority house?” She cringed at the uncertain inflection of her own voice. “I saw that a Mary Brighton was quoted as an expert in an article from *The Burrow*,” – the university was overrun with references to the school mascot, and the campus newspaper was no exception – “and I think I read that she’s a librarian here?”

“Yup! Ms. Brighton has an office up on the third floor. Just take the steps and make a right. It’s down past the local history section.”



“Thanks,” Alessa breathed with a smile. She turned towards the large staircase on her left and headed up to the third floor, passing seemingly endless stacks of books on her way.

The dense hush of the library was broken only by the occasional peal of laughter from a table of student-athletes in the corner. One of them – a strapping, tan-skinned guy with neat black hair sporting a fitted windbreaker in ESU’s colors – suddenly looked up, meeting Alessa’s eyes as she passed. She thought she might have caught his lips curling into a smile before she looked away, cheeks flushing under the intensity of his gaze. He couldn’t possibly be smiling at *her*, could he? She fought the urge to glance once more in his direction.

Reaching the office, Alessa noted that the door was open. Inside was a smallish older woman, gray hair pulled back in a severe bun, thick black glasses perched low on her nose, her neutral outfit neat but frumpy. Alessa almost had to laugh – Mary Brighton was a perfect caricature of a librarian, right down to the over-large tome she was patiently paging through.

Alessa knocked gently on the wall. The librarian pushed her glasses back to the bridge of her nose and looked up. “Hello, dear. What can I assist you with?”

“Hi. I was actually interested in learning more about the history of my sorority house, Z-E-Pi, and I saw that you were at the commemoration ceremony a few days ago?” Alessa tried not to be awkward. She didn’t know what she was going to say if Ms. Brighton asked *why* she was interested. She wished she had thought this through a bit more.

“Oh, absolutely. 33 Mason Manor is one of my favorite properties on the campus. What did you want to know?”

Alessa wondered if it would be possible to avoid the subject of the ghost. She took a deep breath and hoped her reply was casual enough to not betray her lie. “I’m working on a project for my history class, about the lifetime of a building. I’m supposed to choose one building and write about all the notable people who lived or worked there.” She looked at the librarian expectantly.

“Of course. I can help you with that. Just one moment.” Mary Brighton closed the volume she’d been reading and Alessa was hit with a puff of that old book smell again. Ms. Brighton stood up. “Come with me.”

She swiftly led Alessa back through the section she’d passed on her way here, pausing only to chide the rowdy table of athletes in the back. Mr. Tall Dark & Handsome from before winked an apology in Alessa’s direction as they passed, the sparkle in his rich, dark eyes making her heart skip a beat. Realizing he actually *had* noticed her, she nervously tossed her hair, blushing as she mustered a quick smile before following the librarian deeper into the stacks.

A few moments later, Alessa was seated at an uncomfortable study desk in the back corner of the local history section. Mary Brighton had known exactly where to find all the old town records, dating all the way back to the 1700s. There was a thick book for every decade from 1760 to 1999, Ms. Brighton had explained, after which time the records became electronic. Alessa was worried she’d have to page through all 24 books to

keep up the pretext for her research, but the librarian had given her a break when she mentioned that the house was built in the 1870s, knocking almost half the books off her list.

Alessa picked up the first book and paged through to get acquainted with the organization. She started with 1870 and skipped to the M section, scanning the page for 33 Mason Manor.

Nothing.

She tried 1871. Still nothing.

Alessa continued in this manner until she came across the first entry in 1878:

Mason Manor, No. 33. New Construction, completed October 14th on 148 acres. Owner: Albert B. Mason. Residents: Albert B. Mason & Elizabeth Mason, children Albert Mason Jr., 3, and William Mason, 1.

Now she had a start. If the young man she was seeing was from the 1890s, it could be Albert Jr. or William. She noted that the last name of the residents was the same as the address – she supposed they had named the property after the family.

Alessa continued reading. There was nothing more in the first book, nor in the second or third. It was in the fourth volume – 1900s – that Alessa had another hit:

Mason Manor, No. 33. New Owner, Albert Mason Jr., as of April 25th. Residents: Albert Mason Jr. & Martha Mason, children Isaac Mason, 6.

That entry was from 1906, adding Isaac Mason as another possibility. Alessa read for a few more moments, and found

one more related record in 1908. The family had acquired another 40 acres of land adjacent to the property and there was an additional entry beside Isaac under the children, a one year old Josephine Mason.

If it was Isaac, the ghost she was seeing was probably from between 1915 and 1920. She knew from the Z-E-Pi article that the university had purchased the property in the 30s, so that left two or three volumes to go through to narrow down the possibilities.

She was beginning to think she wouldn't find anything useful when she came across an entry in 1917:

Mason Manor, No. 33. New Owner, William Mason, as of May 3rd. Residents: None.

She pressed through the rest of that volume and onto the next, not finding any additional entries until 1933:

Mason Manor, No. 33. New Owner, Eastern State University, as of September 4th. Residence converted for office use.

So in 1917, when Isaac Mason would have been 17 years old, his family vacated their home and transferred ownership of the property to Isaac's uncle, William. And judging by the fact that there was no entry stating it'd been converted to a residential rental or office space, it sounded like the house had stood empty from 1917 until the university acquired it in 1933.

Alessa tried to list the plausible explanations for this series of events in her head. She thought perhaps it was possible that the family had just moved away and sold the property to

William. That didn't explain why he had chosen not to live there or at least to rent it out to another family, though she supposed that perhaps he was wealthy enough that an empty second home wasn't a concern.

Inspecting her notes, Alessa remembered something vague that the librarian said in the article that Janie had clipped, something about "the passing of a wealthy family." If Isaac's family had died, that could provide a sound rationale for why William didn't live there. Maybe the house was still damaged from whatever tragedy had struck them, or maybe William just couldn't bring himself to do it. It might have been too painful to be in the house where he'd lost his brother's entire family. And it would also explain why he eventually relinquished his family's farm to the university, since it wasn't going to do him much good sitting there abandoned.

Of course, with this little information to go on, it was impossible to know which of these theories might be correct, or if there was another explanation entirely. But Alessa had a hunch.

She felt fairly certain now that Isaac was indeed the ghost. He seemed to be the only possibility given that William and Albert had apparently lived well past their teenage years. It also seemed like an uncanny coincidence that all record of Isaac's family mysteriously vanished at the same time when Isaac would be the right age to fit the description of the ghost she was seeing.

Alessa circled the name Isaac Mason in her notes, then pressed her pen closed with a satisfied click.

She glanced up at the clock – only 20 minutes until her physics lecture, and she still needed to run home and grab her laptop.

Alessa briskly stacked the volumes of records and carried them back to the shelves, then snatched up her bag and headed toward the stairs, savoring the sound of Isaac's name as she turned it over and over again in her mind.

She'd have to make a mad dash across campus and back if she had any hopes of getting to the science building on time. But this had definitely been worth the trip.

## 5. REVERSAL

Isaac paced to the window, the frosty bite of winter pressing against him through the glass. His breath fogged in a small circle on the windowpane as he looked eastward out over the property, in the direction of the city. This many miles away he couldn't see the dense array of golden lights emanating from the nearby township, but he knew they were there, twinkling in the evening light.

With a sigh, he looked out over the expanse of dry midwinter fields beyond. In a matter of weeks, it would be time for the farmhands to plow the long rows and sow this year's crops, a prospect that Isaac was dreading.

He'd lived in this same house on this same farm for almost as long as he could remember, and yet he'd never quite felt at home here. Isaac thought perhaps moving to the city might soothe his restlessness. But for the moment at least, his only respite was the occasional mischief stirred up by his little sister,

Josephine. And more recently, a certain striking dark haired mystery that he hadn't been able to get out of his head.

Isaac's mother, Martha, bustled into the study, an oversized basket of yarn dangling from her forearm.

"No matter how many times I look at this pattern, I just can't seem to get it right," she huffed, sliding a thick volume into place on the bookshelf. She smiled easily at Isaac. "Oh well. How did you pass the afternoon?"

Isaac turned his back to the window and shrugged. He couldn't tell his mother he'd wasted most of the day daydreaming about, well, *her*, whoever she was.

"I, uh, just caught up on some reading," he fabricated.

Martha raised an eyebrow and cracked a gentle grin – Isaac had never been much of a liar. She sighed amusedly. "Oh, to be young again. Come on, who's got my darling son all tied up in knots?"

Isaac's face flushed.

Martha laughed good-naturedly. "Is it that 'housemaid' you'd asked about?"

Isaac groaned inwardly. He never should have said anything. When he'd first seen her a few weeks ago, he'd thought that perhaps she was a new servant. He inquired with his mother about her – nonchalantly, he'd thought – but of course, she'd seen right through his ruse, and she'd been teasing him ever since. Now she was itching to know who the object of his affection was, but Isaac – for obvious reasons – hadn't been able to put his mother's curiosity to rest, seeing as he didn't want her to think he was going stir-crazy.



In any case, the woman certainly didn't dress like any servant – or *anyone* – that he'd ever seen. Isaac still wasn't quite sure if he *wasn't* just imagining the whole thing... But even if he was, she'd made the long winter much more interesting than in the past, and he was grateful at least for that.

Martha placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "It's okay, honey, you can keep your fancies to yourself. She's a lucky lady, whoever she is." She shuffled quietly out of the room, leaving Isaac alone with his thoughts.

Isaac sighed. Meddlesome as she was, he would really miss his mother someday soon.

Even from his earliest childhood, he'd never been able to shake the feeling that he just didn't belong, that something important was missing from his life and it was somehow his own fault. There'd always just been this lingering cloud of discontentment hanging over him.

Now nearly a man grown, the only thing Isaac could think to do about it was to go – venture out beyond the farm and see what he could make of himself in the world. But at the same time, the thought of ditching his responsibility to the estate, and leaving his loved ones behind, left his resolve wavering.

*Ping!*

A bell from the kitchen interrupted Isaac's dark ruminations and alerted him that dinner was served.

His stomach grumbling, he gathered up the pile of books from his favorite armchair and turned to place them on the desk, then – glancing up – promptly dropped the entire stack to the floor with a thump.

There, standing not four feet from him, was the woman.

She was on the other side of his father's desk, her back to him, as she swung a brightly colored bag unlike anything he'd ever seen off her shoulder.

His heart reverberated in his chest and his breath caught in his throat.

"Hey!" he managed to choke out, panic resonating through his body as inexplicable waves of anguish racked his heart.

But as always seemed to be the case, she didn't hear him.

He watched in frustration as she rummaged in her bag, the bookcases lining the far wall faintly visible through the curtain of her long, dark hair.

He thought about crossing to the other side of the desk to get her attention, but he was afraid if he moved that she would disappear before he could reach her, as she had so many times before.

Suddenly, she whirled around in Isaac's direction, her hair fanning out behind her as her form rapidly grew more faint.

Isaac caught one quick glimpse of shock in her bright emerald eyes, and then just as quickly as she'd appeared, she was gone.

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