



STITCH

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ISBN: 0985804602

ISBN-13: 978-0-9858046-0-2

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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 that'd ravaged her lungs all night; 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 had known this was a risk when she'd been briefed on her mission, and she had accepted it anyway. Now she cursed her own arrogance, and the sorry luck that had landed her here. She had failed in her mission, and now she was going to reap her recompense.

She was only glad that *he* wasn't close enough to hear her impending screams. One by one she had listened from within her own lonely chamber as the others cried out in agony, and she'd been unable to drown them out with nothing but her fingertips to plug her ears. After the riot they had staged early on, the guards had learned that it was necessary to separate her from him, and she hadn't seen or heard from him for weeks, maybe months, so she knew for certain that he wasn't nearby. That one small mercy almost made the ordeal ahead of her bearable. Almost.

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

1. DISTRACTION

Alessa dropped her pen and looked longingly at the clock. She had little more than twelve hours until the exam and she just could not focus on the words swimming on the page in front of her. Instead, all she could think about was the ghost.

She turned back to the diagram in her textbook, but it was no use. The only image she could see was his piercing sapphire eyes, brimming with melancholy and longing. What could he be so sad about? The little information she'd been able to dig up about the history of her sorority house contained nothing which might indicate who the soulful young man she'd been seeing was or what he could possibly be thinking of as he stared out into whatever plane of existence he was inhabiting. Alessa guessed she'd probably never know.

She let out a quiet groan of exasperation which drew withering glances from the handful of other students studying in this corner of the library. She supposed it was probably time to go. She certainly wasn't being productive, sitting here with a

head filled up with fantasies about a person she didn't even know. A person who wasn't even alive, no less.

Alessa closed the lid on her laptop and slid her pen into the spiral of her notebook. She was resigned. If she didn't know the basics of physics by now, she certainly wasn't going to learn them by tomorrow.

She'd never really been the studying type and had spent her high school years relying on the knowledge she absorbed during class to get her through exams just fine. She was lucky to have the ability to learn quickly, usually only having to pay attention to a subject once or twice before she mastered it. As a result, she just didn't understand how everyone in this library had the patience to devote hours to reading and re-reading all the same material they'd been learning day in and day out all semester long. Alessa just couldn't do it.

At least the midterm was open book. She may not get the A she was used to, but she was confident that she'd be able to wring out at least a B without wasting any more time staring at a textbook page she couldn't bring herself to actually read. She slid her belongings into her backpack as quietly as she could, hoping not to provoke any more derisive looks from her neighbors.

Alessa needed to stop obsessing about the ghost. Her disdain for studying notwithstanding, her new fixation was getting in the way of her grades and her social life. Ever since she'd started seeing him a few weeks ago, he'd been all she could think about. And the unnerving recurring dreams she'd been having weren't helping either.

At first the ghost had scared her senseless – a normal enough reaction to waking to a strange man standing at the foot of her bed while she slept or appearing out of nowhere behind her in the bathroom mirror – but after three or four encounters it soon became apparent that the ghost wasn't even aware of her presence. Once she realized that, her fear was overtaken by curiosity and she took to studying the elusive figure whenever she got the opportunity, instead of sprinting from the room in terror.

What she'd learned in the latest handful of encounters hadn't amounted to much. Though she'd resolved to stick around and see what she could learn, the ghost apparently had different ideas. His apparition never lasted more than a few seconds, which wasn't a lot of time for Alessa to gain much insight. Overall she'd probably spent less than a minute in his presence in the seven or eight times she'd seen him over the first 12 weeks of the semester.

So far she'd been able to determine that he seemed about her age – maybe a little younger than her 19 years – and that, judging by his clothes, he was probably from the early twentieth century. Besides the clothes, he looked like any other athletic male teenager she'd known – tall and lean, with tousled brown hair and unbridled energy brimming just below the surface of his skin.

The only thing particularly notable about him was his eyes. Despite the transparency of his form, his blue eyes shown clearly, flecked with green and gold and shining with a subtle indigo light. They looked like the eyes of a television or movie

actor, just unnaturally blue. Alessa had never seen eyes like that in real life and had always thought that those actors were digitally enhanced. Now she wondered if people really did have eyes that vivid.

Even more striking than the color of his eyes, however, was the hint of torment that they almost always conveyed. He was constantly gazing out at the distance, a wistful look upon his face. Often Alessa had seen him clench his jaw and swallow, then breathe deep and close his eyes, exhaling with an almost imperceptible shake of his head. It was as if he were fighting back a feeling, resolving himself for some struggle ahead.

Only on one occasion had Alessa seen him anything other than distraught. He'd turned rapidly, as if in response to someone calling his name, and looked directly through Alessa as his face lit up with the most beautiful smile she had ever seen, one so genuinely overflowing with love and pride and just a hint of amusement that it brought tears to her eyes. That was the way Alessa's parents used to look at her, before everything happened.

So she had no idea who the ghost was, or what he was thinking about, or why he kept appearing to her, and these questions had become the only thing she could focus on, much to the detriment of her schoolwork and the few friendships she'd begun to develop in the first weeks of the semester.

And then the nightmares had started – always the same immobilizing fear buzzing through her in that dark, dank cell – and the lack of sleep was only compounding the distraction she felt in her waking hours. Alessa knew it wasn't healthy to let a

specter take over her life, but she felt powerless to resist. Who or whatever he was, she was determined to learn the truth.

2. MEMOIR

As Alessa stepped out onto the quad, she breathed deep and let the crisp fall evening wash over her. She always felt better being outside. Her head felt clearer than it had all afternoon 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. She'd been cramped at that uncomfortable library desk for six hours and had little to show for it besides a sharp pang of hunger welling up in her gut. She decided to grab a sandwich and head back to the house to see what Janie was up to.

Wandering her way across the quad, Alessa headed toward Van Husen Hall, hoping the student-run café in the basement was still open. Leaves crunched beneath her feet as Alessa made her way towards the stately brick building ahead of her. The façade was laced with ivy and decked by massive old-growth trees still clinging to their last clumps of foliage as winter threatened to descend. The facilities department had

carefully placed up-lighting behind the trees, highlighting the building's grand turn-of-the-century architecture and casting dramatic shadows across the entrance. The campus was beautiful, that much she had to admit.

Alessa had not been thrilled when she'd received her acceptance to the university. She'd felt relieved she supposed, but in truth, she was more disappointed than anything. Up until her senior year of high school, her grades had been flawless and she'd racked up an impressive resume of extracurricular accomplishments. As her last year of high school had begun, she'd known she was on the right path towards achieving her dream of getting into one of the elite private universities she'd always strived for. Then everything had gone wrong.

On a Friday a couple weeks into the school year, her parents had had plans to go to a party at the nearby home of a family friend. Alessa had been invited, but she had plans to go to the big homecoming game and join some friends at another party afterward instead. That morning on her way out the door to school, Alessa had gotten in a big fight with her mom over something petty.

Her memories of that day were a blur, but it might have been the length of her shorts – the summer heat had persisted well into September, and Alessa's old-fashioned mother always had something to say about her attire. Alessa had expressed her frustration a little too vividly and her mom had grounded her for the night. Alessa had been fuming as she left for school and refused to speak to her parents when she got home,

marching straight up to her room and slamming the door behind her, a move she knew would get right under her father's skin.

Despite her bratty behavior, her ever-patient parents had come up to say goodbye before they left for the party and to remind her that they'd be home by midnight. Alessa had still been furious about being grounded and refused to let them in, so they had said an exasperated, "I love you," through the door, a sentiment that Alessa had begrudgingly returned. She was immensely grateful now that she did; it was the last thing she'd ever say to them.

Alessa had fallen asleep on the couch that night watching reruns of some terrible reality show, so she hadn't noticed when midnight rolled around with no sign of her parents. It wasn't until the doorbell rang at 1:15 in the morning that she'd realized something was wrong. She'd stumbled to the door in a stupor to find a pair of grim looking police officers. "Are you Alessa Khole?" they began. And in a matter of moments, her entire world had come crashing down.

Her parents had been killed in a car accident, hit by a drunk driver who, incidentally, was coming from the same party that Alessa had planned to attend. They'd been on a dark, winding road and something, maybe a deer, had caused the young driver to swerve into the oncoming lane, smashing head on into Alessa's parents. Everyone had been killed instantly.

It was an all too familiar story, almost a cliché, and Alessa could not believe that her parents were gone. When she had

woken in the morning, she'd thought that perhaps it was all a bad dream, until she'd gone downstairs to an empty kitchen.

Alessa had been on her own since then. She'd turned 18 a few days before the accident, so she was legally empowered to make her own decisions in the aftermath. She assumed control of her parents' finances and decided to stay at her house and finish out her last year at her own school, instead of moving in with her cousins who lived on the other side of the country. In retrospect, this may not have been the best decision, but at the time, Alessa just couldn't imagine losing her whole life in addition to her parents. So she'd stayed put and made do.

As might be expected, the ordeal had taken a major toll on her performance in school. She struggled to accept the reality of the situation and fell into a thick depression which left her unmotivated to do her work or devote time to her activities, or even show up to class. The fall passed by in a haze and when December had rolled around – bringing with it college application season – she was practically failing out of school.

She'd tried her best to pull together a few halfway decent applications to the list of selective schools she had been planning to apply to, and had asked the guidance counselor to include a note in her recommendation explaining what had happened in Alessa's personal life. She'd hoped that the admissions officers would have some sympathy and give her a pass for this year's academic performance, in light of the strength of her transcript from previous years. But they didn't – these schools only had room for exceptional students, young people who were ready to change the world. At this point,

Alessa could barely even change her own clothes, and it showed.

Reality had set in once the rejection letters started piling up in late March. Alessa began putting more effort into her schoolwork to salvage her GPA, and her teachers had taken pity on her and given her passing grades. When it had finally sunk in that her old dreams of collegiate glory were out of her grasp, she'd taken stock of her options and decided to apply to some less selective schools. It turned out that a few big state schools were still accepting rolling admissions, and one – Eastern State University, home of the Fighting Gophers – was willing to overlook the disaster of the last seven months.

That was how Alessa had ended up where she now stood, reaching towards the door of Van Husen Hall in search of a late dinner. Alessa caught a glimpse of herself in the glass and was surprised at how haggard she looked. Mercifully, her long, dark hair hung straight in neat layers that framed her face. That was about the only thing her hair would ever agree to do and the only reason why she looked halfway presentable, since she certainly hadn't taken any measures to tame her appearance.

Thanks to her glossy chestnut locks, if an outside observer didn't look closely, they might not notice the bags under her green eyes, or her lackluster skin, or the jeans hanging loosely from her hips after months spent absent the desire for food. Alessa realized the sandwich she was about to buy was the first thing she'd eaten all day.

She entered the hall and steered toward the large marble staircase directly ahead of her, trailing her hand on the heavy

mahogany banister as she descended to the basement. Alessa was relieved to find that the café was indeed still open. She grabbed one of the premade sandwiches out of the refrigerator case and paid at the counter with a swipe of her meal card.

Heading back outside, Alessa turned onto the wide cobblestone path that led to the far side of campus where her sorority house resided.

Approaching the porch of the chapter house, Alessa took note once again of the myriad surveillance cameras flanking her from every side. A widely-publicized hazing scandal had embroiled the university in a drawn out lawsuit, a disastrous PR spectacle which could have ended months ago with proper video evidence to prove that the university's expulsions had been justified. The administration had learned from their mistake and promptly installed a state-of-the-art surveillance network across the entire ESU campus.

Though Alessa could only see two cameras on the porch – one pointing down towards the front door and one looking out towards the walkway she'd followed here – she knew there were others as well, peeking out of bushes and camouflaged behind rocks and benches.

Alessa had first noticed the hidden cameras on one of her first days on campus. She'd been sitting on a bench between classes eating a sandwich and doing some reading, and when she'd gotten up to toss her wrapper in a nearby garbage can, subtle movement in the bush across from her had caught her attention.

At first she'd thought it was a squirrel, but the glint of sunlight off glass had held her eye as the camera followed her movement. Curious, she'd approached the bush for a better look, but before she could brush the leaves aside, a burly security guard had appeared out of nowhere. "Please do not disturb the foliage, miss," he'd commanded. It was an innocent enough request, but the menacing look that had accompanied his entreaty had chilled her straight to the bone.

Alessa knew the cameras were there for her own protection, but something about their presence made her uneasy. She didn't like the feeling of being watched whenever she left her home. And worse, a lot of the students didn't even seem to notice that they were under constant surveillance. Something about the whole setup just seemed like a violation.

She eyed the camera on the porch, her lips pressed into a hard line. The relentless gaze of that cool glass lens just felt somehow insidious to her – she couldn't explain exactly why.

On the plus side, the administration's over-the-top reaction *had* enabled Alessa to score a great room in this beautiful old house, instead of one of the standard cinderblock cells usually reserved for freshmen. To discourage future hazing incidents, in addition to the camera system, 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.

Though Alessa had never really been interested in joining a sorority – she didn't consider herself the "sorority type" – after

living alone for most of the last year, she'd thought it might be good for her to be around other people. So she had picked the house she liked the most – Zeta Epsilon Pi's big white farmhouse with a wraparound porch – 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 another freshman, Janie, who had quickly become Alessa's closest friend at ESU.

The chapter house itself turned out to be a dream come true. Just as the photo on the housing application showed, it was a gorgeous old white colonial farmhouse with stark black shutters, more of a mansion than a house really. Outside it had a large wraparound porch stretching the entire front and right side of the building – which came in handy when the sorority's parties got a little too congested – and it looked out over acres upon acres of rolling green hills, what was once probably farmland.

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.

Alessa was lucky enough to have gotten one of the fireplace rooms, though she was disappointed to find that all of the hearths had been boarded up for safety reasons. She'd been pleased to find that her room was somewhat larger than those in the solemn gray freshman dormitory, and much more homey, with thick carpeting and chair rail moldings instead of linoleum and white-washed cinderblock walls.

The bathroom renovations were the one area where the university had unfortunately gutted most of the house's charm in favor of a more functional approach. The only spot they had overlooked was a finely-crafted old clawfoot tub housed in a tiny bathroom on the attic floor. Alessa supposed it wasn't worth the university's time or expense to remove the heavy fixture, so it remained perched on the top floor overlooking a round porthole window and was rarely used, though Alessa had been surprised to learn that it was still functional.

So even though the last year had not gone at all as Alessa had planned, in the end she supposed she was grateful for where she had ended up. After all, if it wasn't for this house, she would never have met Janie. And she would never have seen the ghost.

3. OBJECTIVE

The door to Janie's room was propped open invitingly, so Alessa poked her head in. 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 dropped her bag and crossed the room to sit down on Janie's bed. Janie'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 and raised her eyebrows, “*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. “Best I could do at this hour.” It may have been a poor excuse for a sandwich, but putting food in her stomach took the edge off her hunger almost immediately, which 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 often struggled to come up with things to talk about. They were nice enough, but Alessa often found that they were more concerned with boys and parties than Alessa had the stomach for. She had so little in common with them that it was difficult to even fill a 30 second exchange in the bathroom, and lulls in their

conversation 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. Janie felt the same.

The only other freshman in the house, Janie had had an easier time assimilating – she had a natural charisma that helped her get along with anyone – but privately, Janie had expressed the same frustrations that Alessa felt. It was clear that she and Janie were different from the other girls in the house and they knew that they would never truly fit in. Alessa was just glad that they had found each other.

Janie was the one bright spot in an existence that Alessa had had difficulty feeling more than apathetic about lately. A spunky, sharp little bundle of energy, Janie had the same fire in her that Alessa had once had, and Alessa found that being around Janie made her forget about her troubles for a while. 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. “So, how are things with your phantom boyfriend?”

Alessa laughed. “I know it's ridiculous. I feel like I've spent so much time obsessing over this when I should be focusing on my grades or trying to hang out with some people we met during freshman orientation –”

“Or trying to find a *real* boyfriend,” Janie interrupted. She gave Alessa a meaningful look.

“Or trying to find a real boyfriend, yes. It’s just... I don’t know. I guess it’s the first time I’ve felt excited about something since my parents died.”

“I just don’t understand what you’re hoping to get out of this. If what you’re seeing really is a ghost – and I’m not entirely convinced yet that it’s not just some kind of mental break –”

“Thanks.”

“You know what I mean. I guess what I’m saying is, I just don’t see what the end game is here. He’s dead, you’re not – so where is this going?”

Alessa sighed and hung her head. Janie had a point. Where was this headed? Certainly nowhere useful. “I know, I know. I’m just so curious to find out who he is, why he’s hanging around here. You know?”

Janie’s expression softened. “I’m just worried about you, Less. You’ve been so distracted lately...” Her tone changed back to goading. “And you look like shit.”

Alessa tossed a throw pillow at Janie’s head.

Janie deftly swatted it to the floor, feigning insult. “What! Seriously, you look like you haven’t slept in days. Have you been studying that much?”

“Oh God no. I just haven’t been sleeping well. I keep having these dreams...”

“What kind of dreams?”

“Like a recurring dream. It’s not exactly the same every time, but I’m always in some sort of jail cell waiting for

someone to come do something horrible to me, but I'm not exactly sure what."

"Sounds miserable."

"I can't even describe it. It's just this overwhelming sense of foreboding and despair, but at the same time I feel relieved."

"Why relieved?"

"Because, well, the ghost is there, and I know he won't be able to hear me being tortured or whatever."

"The ghost is there?"

"Yeah. I never actually *see* him, but somehow I know he's there with me, in the prison. I actually don't see much of anything because it's very dark and the whole thing is a bit hazy. 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."

There was a knock at the door and Lizzie Green bounded into the room 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 exited the 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.”

Alessa chose not to respond.

“Oh! That reminds me.” Janie started digging 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."

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

Janie shrugged. "The timeline seems about right and that Brighton lady made it sound like a whole family died."

Alessa nodded in agreement and 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. "Thanks for this. 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 as she widened 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 your ghostly beau?”

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. “It just seems strange to me that you’re the only person who’s ever seen him. It doesn’t seem to fit with any other ghost story I’ve ever heard.”

“Well maybe I’m not the only one.” Alessa’s interest was definitely piqued. “I’ll stop by the library after the physics exam tomorrow and see if I can find that Brighton woman.”

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, of the seven long questions on the midterm, she was confident about four, less

certain about two, and had at least written *something* for the last. 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. At first it was a little exciting – so different from her high school experience – but eventually she grew to loathe the scratchy fabric seats, the dim overhead lighting, and those cramped little desks that folded out from beside the chair. It just didn't feel like a classroom.

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.”

“I'm sure they will.” The last thing Alessa wanted to do right now was rehash every question on the midterm. What's done was done, and there was no sense in agonizing over something they couldn't change now.

“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 Janie 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." As they headed out of the building, Alessa and Janie commiserated on the injustices of midterm scheduling until they reached the quad.

Alessa stopped walking and motioned toward the library. "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. Like most of the main campus, the library had been built in the late 1800s, a time when labor was still cheap enough that buildings were treated as detailed works of art as much as construction projects. The architectural details in the library were stunning, from the intricate woodwork in the moldings to the stained glass windows to the Versailles-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. Alessa hated feeling unsure of herself. "I saw that a Mary Brighton was quoted as an expert in an article from *The Burrow*," – the university was overrun with seemingly endless references to the ridiculous 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 stacks upon stacks of books, Alessa wondered how many tomes were housed in the building. The rows seemed almost endless.

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 like a caricature, displaying every trait one might attribute to a stereotypical librarian, right down to the over-large book 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 didn’t want to be known as “the poor girl who was seeing things,” even to an old spinster that she didn’t particularly know. Alessa 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.”

A few moments later, Alessa was seated at another uncomfortable study desk, this time in the back corner of the library’s third floor. Mary Brighton had known exactly where to find all the old town records, dating all the way back to the 1700s. Alessa was pretty sure that the ghost was from the late 1800s or early 1900s based on his clothes, though her limited knowledge of historical fashion was gleaned mainly from movies, and who knew how accurate they might be. There was

a thick book for every decade from 1760 to 1999, after which Ms. Brighton had explained that the records were 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. The book was broken down by year, then the properties were listed alphabetically by address. There was an entry any time a property was built, destroyed, or changed hands, with the date and any involved parties listed alongside it. Alessa 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.

Unfortunately, though, it would have to wait. Alessa glanced at the clock and realized she had only 20 minutes until her physics lecture, and she still needed to run home and grab her laptop, which she had forgotten in her rush to get to the midterm that morning.

Alessa jotted down the information she had found and resolved to come back the next time she had a few free moments. She stacked the volumes of records chronologically and carried them back to the shelves from which Mary Brighton had taken them. She took one last look at the clock – 17 minutes. That was just enough time to dash across campus, grab her computer, and meet Janie at the science building.

5. ENCOUNTER

Alessa climbed the steps to her house with 13 minutes to spare until the start of her lecture. She hastily bounded to the second floor and tried to remember if she had anything edible in her minifridge. She thought there might be a few string cheeses left and made a mental note to grab one as she swung around the doorway into her room.

Alessa stopped short. Standing at the window not ten feet from her was a tall solitary figure, partially cast in shadow. He was looking out the window, breathing gently, one slim lace up boot perched on the low windowsill, narrow suspenders pulled taut across a broad, flat back and fastened to the narrow waist of his trim brown slacks. Lost in his own thoughts, he gazed pensively across the 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.

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

He was contemplative, as usual, gazing through the window but not focused on anything in particular. He dropped his left arm and ruffled 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 mid-winter.

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. But at the same time, she felt the firm tug of a powerful longing, the depths of which she'd never experienced before. She couldn't have torn her eyes from him if she'd tried.

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 above a strong, straight nose and thin pale rose lips.

Transfixed by his face, Alessa couldn't get a grip on her emotions. She was frightened and anxious, every impulse in her body telling her to run. But at the same time she felt strangely drawn to him, and she knew she couldn't have forced her feet to move even if she'd wanted to. She was frozen in place, powerless to act, waves of anguish washing over her,

drowning. And on top of all this, that ever-present, searing longing that rooted her in place despite her best instincts towards self-preservation. How did this strange apparition invoke such turmoil in her?

Alessa knew somewhere inside that she needed to connect with the ghost, needed to break through the barrier that separated them, but she didn't know how. The only thing she could think to do was speak, but what would she say? How could she start? And did he even know she was there? How would he react to her intrusion?

Alessa was building the courage to try to communicate 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.

She gasped for air; she didn't realize she'd been holding her breath. The entire encounter had only lasted a few seconds, maybe ten at the most, but she was overcome with exhaustion. Her heart was still pounding and she was trembling from her fingertips to her toes.

Worse, her entire mental state was in shambles. Alessa didn't understand the tumultuous emotions that had hammered through her and she was still reeling from the experience. Seeing the ghost was thrilling, but it was also alarming and strange, and it shook her straight to her core. That was a normal enough reaction to this kind of situation, but there was something else, too, something specific to this ghost.

Her attraction to him was magnetic, and it went beyond her natural curiosity. And yes, he was an incredibly appealing guy – the kind she would have pined over in high school – but it was more than that too. It was like she *knew* him. She just couldn't explain it.

Whenever she was in his presence, she desperately wanted to reach out to him, to tell him he wasn't alone. He was forever gazing out over some landscape that Alessa was blind to, hard lines of melancholy scored into his face. But she just couldn't bring herself to interrupt his reverie, held hostage as she was by her body's impulses.

The sound of footsteps approaching from down the hall brought Alessa back to reality. She quickly closed the door behind her. The last thing she wanted to do right now was exchange pleasantries with one of her housemates.

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 emotionally drained, and she didn't have time to deal with it today. She had to get to class.

She looked slowly around the room. Everything was in its place – the oversized original fireplace mantle to her left, her twin bed and nightstand beyond it against the wall, then the double window and finally her desk and fridge across from the bed. To her right was the large sliding door sealing off the double closet. 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.

She crossed the room and snapped the lid of her laptop shut, unplugging the power cord from the back of the machine as she awkwardly attempted to scoop it up with the other hand. She regretted once again that she hadn't splurged on a higher-end model constructed of lighter materials as she exchanged the heavy textbook in her backpack for the heavier computer in her hand and closed the zipper. Looking at her bedside clock, she noted that she had 10 minutes to make it back across campus.

Alessa turned towards the door and then she remembered the string cheese. The scene inside her refrigerator was dismal. The shelves were lined with half-rotted fruit and takeout leftovers from who knows when. On the door she found a few cans of diet soda. Checking the bottom drawer, she hit upon the package of string cheese with three individually wrapped sticks remaining. She grabbed one and accidentally slammed the fridge door as she headed out, the adrenaline still ringing through her body.

Springing down the stairs of the house, Alessa set a quick pace down the cobblestone path that led back to the quad. She peeled the plastic back from the string cheese as she went, anxiously swallowing bites as she strode past ambling students. Janie would throw a fit if she could see; she viewed not peeling string cheese into strings as virtually sacrilegious.

A couple frat boys were tossing a frisbee across the quad while some freshman girls stood huddled under a tree, stealing glances at the guys and giggling to each other. Alessa watched a comic 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 bags. Taking in the ordinary college scene around her, Alessa began to feel almost normal again.

It'd been a couple weeks since she'd last seen the ghost, and she had forgotten how unsettling it was. It was as though for a few moments her whole world turned upside-down. Ghosts weren't supposed to exist. She shouldn't be wandering into her room in the middle of the day to find a strange man standing there, only to watch him disappear into thin air seconds later. It was true that much of her life in the past year didn't make sense to her, but at least it was still firmly grounded in reality, on a planet with clear laws of nature that no one could break.

This ghost thing turned all of that on its head. She was sure that what she was seeing was real, despite Janie's half-joking hints to the contrary, and that knowledge made her wonder what else she had mistakenly taken for granted.

There had been her family's stability for one. She'd always counted on her parents to be there for her, to be a guiding voice and a security blanket whenever she needed them. In spite of the constant fighting in recent years, Alessa needed her parents. And one moment in the wrong place at the wrong time had taken them from her, forever.

Then, of course, there was her own infallibility. Alessa had been so wrapped up in her dreams for the future that she had failed to prepare for reality. Yes, her parents' death was a curveball she hadn't anticipated, and her reaction – depression,

withdrawal, breakdown – had been pretty understandable. But even if they had survived the accident and things had gone back to normal, Alessa had a sneaking suspicion that she might still be in the same boat.

She had thought she was invincible, but in the end she was just deluded. Yes, she was a talented student and a good leader with a strong resume, but there were thousands of others just like her. She didn't know what had ever made her think that she was entitled to admission to only the best schools in the country. She should have known that getting accepted to any of the schools on her list was a shot in the dark, and she should have put more time into evaluating other more realistic options that might actually have been a good match for her.

She'd always preferred to be a big fish in a small pond, and she could have had her pick of decent colleges, even after all the devastation of the accident. Instead, she'd squandered her opportunity and had to settle for this massive university where she was nothing but a number.

Arriving at the door to the lecture hall, Alessa felt more lost than she ever had. She didn't know what to believe in anymore. Certainly not her own judgment, certainly not her parents' permanence, and certainly not the laws of science. In the past year, if there was one thing Alessa had learned, it was not to trust herself, not even down to the most basic truths. Like that ghosts were only stories. She knew now that there was much more to this world than it had seemed.