

Alistair's Escape

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It was time. I'd been hiding long enough. Tonight was the perfect opportunity. Simply put, I was tired of being alone.

The old glass doorknob rattled as the cantankerous latch gave free and the door opened on its rusty hinges. I flattened myself against the wall behind the now-open attic door. When I'd been alive, my six-foot five, two-hundred-ten-pound frame would not have fit in the slim space. Now—it was no problem.

John Allen took the creaky steps up to the attic two at a time.

Maggie Martin rested her foot on the bottom step. “The inflatable goblin should be in its box on the far side of the attic, under the window,” she called after him. This was the nice woman I'd spent the night with in the attic shortly after she'd moved into Rosemont. I'd made it seem like the wind had blown the door shut. I'd only wanted her to spend time with me in the attic. She'd sounded so nice when I'd heard her talking to her little dog.

I'd even managed to arrange our collection of vintage silver in one of the discarded cabinets. I'd spent the best part of every Saturday during my adult life, when I'd been Rosemont's butler, polishing the stuff. I wanted her to see it. How was I supposed to know that the lock would stick and she'd be stranded in the cold, drafty attic overnight? I'd helped her open the window, which had allowed her to summon help. The whole debacle had thrown me for a loop and I'd been sulking in the attic ever since—but not for much longer. Tonight was the night. Maggie and John were going to learn that Rosemont had another permanent resident—one that had lived here far longer than they had. They needed to know that Rosemont had a ghost in residence and I wanted them to understand that I was friendly, responsible, and helpful. Just as I had been during my life.

“Got it,” John said as he approached the steps.

“Good. I'll pour the candy into our big orange bowl while you get him set up and plugged in.”

They exited the attic and I slipped out after them. I floated down the stairs until we reached the first floor. I hadn't been in the living room in decades. The upholstered furniture was new, but I recognized every side table and the large stone fireplace.

Two dogs lay next to each other on the hearth rug. The small, terrier mix rose to a sitting position and stared at me, her ears erect and the hair standing up on the back of her neck. The golden retriever lifted his head, opened one eye, and then thumped his tail on the carpet in a gesture of recognition and approval. Dogs are intuitive creatures. The terrier looked at her companion, then settled back on her haunches and put her chin on her paws. We were going to get along just fine.

I shifted my gaze to the painting above the hearth. I knew they'd taken down the Thomas Cole masterpiece that had hung there in my day because it had been stored in the attic. I was prepared to dislike its replacement but found the painting of a woman and children picking blackberries in the sunshine quite pleasing. This couple had a refined eye for art. I approved.

To my right, Maggie poured the smallest Hershey's Chocolate Bars I'd ever seen into a bowl. They'd been my favorite candy. I crossed to the bowl as Maggie flipped a switch to turn on the entryway light and stepped out the front door.

"Where do you want him?" John asked.

"I think we should put him on the other side of the door," Maggie said. "He'll be in the way of the trick-or-treaters if we leave him where he is."

"I'll move him," John replied. "Just tell me when you're satisfied."

I watched, dumbstruck, as John wrestled the goblin into a new position. It dipped and bobbed, narrowly missing the pavement. That thing was almost as flexible as I was.

Maggie tilted her head to one side. "I'm not sure. Maybe we should put him back where he was in the first place."

John sighed and bent to pick up the contraption. A thought popped into my head. I returned to the bowl of candy sitting on the large round table in the foyer. Maggie had just filled the bowl to the brim. Acting as quickly as I could, I levitated a candy bar and steered it into the pot of a large white orchid that sat in the center of the table. This first piece was followed by another, and then another, until half of the candy bars had been relocated and the bowl was noticeably less full.

I pressed myself into the shadows as Maggie and John came back inside.

"It's almost dark," John said. "We should have trick-or-treaters any time now."

"We're all set and I've got...." She stopped in mid-sentence, pointing at the bowl. "This was full when I went outside."

John looked at the bowl. "You're sure?"

“Positive.”

I moved closer, giddy with anticipation. *Look in the orchid's pot.*

Maggie and John turned in unison toward the hearth. “Roman!” John said in a voice so serious and stern it made me jump back. “BAD DOG!”

Roman lifted his head, looking justifiably confused.

John crouched next to the big dog. “You know better than to get food off of the counters. What’s gotten into you?”

“Are you sure it’s his fault?” Maggie asked. “It’d be so unlike him.”

“Who else could it be? Eve isn’t tall enough.” John grasped Roman by the collar and, in the practiced motions of an experienced veterinarian, examined Roman’s mouth and took a whiff of his breath. “There are no signs of any wrapper scraps in his mouth and he doesn’t smell like chocolate. This is so odd.”

“Isn’t chocolate harmful to dogs? Do you need to pump his stomach?”

“It is, but I don’t think that’ll be necessary. I’ll keep an eye on him. He’ll probably throw up the whole lot in a little while. I’m going to put both of these guys on the back patio so we won’t have a mess to clean up in the house.”

“Good idea. I can see the first group of kids coming up the driveway.”

“I’ll be right back. Are you done with the pizza? There’s another slice left—and it’s got your name on it.”

“Just leave it in the box on the counter. I’ll go get it when there’s a lull in the action.”

“Right,” John said. He whistled for the dogs to follow him. I trailed along. I had never intended to get Roman into trouble. Just like when I’d caused the attic door to blow shut on Maggie, another of my schemes had gone awry.

John opened the kitchen door and signaled for the dogs to go outside. “It’s a nice evening—you’ll enjoy yourselves.” He bent and rubbed between Roman’s ears. “I’ll be back to check on you, boy. You shouldn’t have done that, but I’ll take good care of you.”

John shut the door and turned on the patio lights before hurrying to rejoin Maggie.

I needed to do something to make things right with Roman and Eve. I didn’t want to start off my downstairs time with them on the wrong foot. I was circling the kitchen island when my eyes fell on a large square cardboard box. I lifted the lid and took a whiff. It smelled like tomatoes and cheese. Was this that thing called pizza that John had been referring to?

Dogs had loved table scraps in my day and I felt certain that they still did. I levitated the remaining triangular piece and was quite proud of myself when I passed through the patio door, the pizza coming with me unscathed.

Roman and Eve got to their feet and came towards me, mouths open and tails wagging. I tore the slice into two, uneven pieces, giving the larger one to Roman. He ate it in one gulp, licked his lips appreciatively, and nodded to me. I was forgiven for the candy bar incident—I was sure of it.

Satisfied that I'd done something right, I headed for the front door. We hadn't celebrated Halloween in my time, but I found the high spirits of the children quite engaging. The only improvement I would make would be to the ridiculously unrealistic ghost costumes. I certainly didn't spend my days in a sloppy, dirty sheet—and I'd never seen any ghost with an oversized, gaping, menacing mouth. The older children were inclined to these macabre renditions. I was going to have nightmares about them for weeks.

A large group of kids moved away from the door. The next bunch had just started up the long driveway leading to Rosemont.

"I'm going to check on Roman," John said.

"Will you bring me that last slice of pizza?"

I bobbed in excitement. Surely they'd figure out I was here from the empty box.

"I'm getting hungry," Maggie said, "and I don't want to start eating candy."

"Will do."

Maggie smiled as the children climbed the wide stone steps to the massive front door. Six children cried "trick or treat!"

I floated into the space that John had occupied in order to get a closer look at their costumes.

Maggie held out the candy bowl and five of the children grabbed one piece. The sixth child, in an elaborate pirate costume, took a handful.

One of the adult men accompanying them stepped forward and told the boy that he could only take one.

The boy tightened his grip. "I'm a pirate!"

"That's okay," Maggie began, reaching into the bowl to give additional candy to the other children in the group.

The man shook his head. "My son has to obey the rules." He addressed the boy. "You're dressed like a pirate but that doesn't mean you can act like one."

Maggie stepped back.

I watched the other children as they waited patiently for their friend to do as he was told. I was admiring the caped red-and-blue costume with a large yellow “S” on the chest worn by one of the boys when I noticed that his shoelaces were untied. I knew that spelled trouble. I wasn’t sure I could remember how to tie a shoe but I gave it my best shot. I had it securely knotted by the time the recalcitrant child had come around and returned his ill-gotten booty to the candy bowl.

The group was hurrying away from the door when John returned from the kitchen.

Maggie glanced up at him. “What’s wrong? Is Roman alright?”

“He’s fine,” John said.

Maggie nodded “Good.” She pushed the candy bowl into his hands. “I’ll just go get that last slice of pizza.”

“That’s just it.” John furrowed his brow. “The box was empty.”

They looked at each other.

“That last slice was in the box when I put the dogs outside.”

“Neither of us left the front door until you did—just now.”

“I know. It’s so weird,” John said.

“TRICK OR TREAT,” yelled the next group of children.

Maggie and John turned back to the door.

By the time the last piece of candy had been given out and John had turned out the porch light, I was pooped. And a bit perplexed because they still hadn’t figured out I was here.

“I’ve got to turn in,” John said. “I’m scheduled for an early surgery in the morning.”

“I’m tired, too.”

“I’ll bring the dogs in,” John said. “Why don’t you go upstairs and start getting ready for bed? It takes you longer than it does me.”

Maggie leaned in and gave John a kiss. “You’re the best.” She climbed the stairs to the second floor and I went with her.

John was correct—Maggie spent a lot of time smearing lotions onto her face and then wiping them off before washing it and smearing more lotion onto her face. The whole thing seemed pointless to me—she looked the same both before and after. When she started on another involved process with her teeth, I decided to explore the bedroom.

The curtains that hung at the tall windows were new, but the view would be as I remembered it. The bed was placed as it always had been. I was scrutinizing the fireplace—remembering the fires that had burned there every evening from September through mid-May—when something glinted at me from below the bin that held kindling.

I moved closer. A pair of dark-rimmed spectacles caught the shaft of light from the bathroom. The shape of the frame made me think they were of recent vintage. By the size of them, I'd guess they were John's. I had just maneuvered them into place next to a man's wallet on the nightstand I presumed was his when John came into the room, trailed by the two dogs.

They both gave me a short wag of their tails as they headed for their baskets on either side of the bed.

John attached a thin, rectangular box with a glass screen to a long wire before placing it on his nightstand. He turned as Maggie switched off the bathroom light and moved to her side of the bed. "Where in the world did you find my reading glasses?" he asked, picking them up and gesturing to her with them.

Maggie's eyes grew wide. "I...I didn't find them. I haven't seen them in weeks."

John lowered his hand. "Are you playing a Halloween joke on me?"

Maggie shook her head slowly. "I wish I were."

John pursed his lips. "When I was a kid, there were stories about Rosemont being haunted. I didn't believe them at the time..."

"And now?"

John shrugged.

Maggie turned back the duvet. "I think those rumors may have been right. At least he seems helpful. Maybe he's a friendly ghost."

I hovered at the foot of the bed. We were making progress.

"What do you remember about this ghost of Rosemont?"

They got into bed and Maggie scootched next to John. He put his arm around her and drew her close. "Not much. His name was Alistair and he had been the butler here for over fifty years." He stifled a yawn. "I'll think about it tomorrow and try to remember more."

They fell silent. Soon, the only sound was the quiet snoring of the two dogs.

My work was cut out for me—I needed to show them how lovely it would be to live with Alistair—the decidedly friendly ghost. I retraced my steps down the hall and took myself into the attic. Even a ghost needs his beauty sleep.