

ALONE!

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Thanks to my family for their support !

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PROLOGUE

Woods. Tree stumps. Rumbling sounds.

Molehills.

The clearing was as wide as they came. She twirled around inhaling the earthy smell that accompanied the humming of the tiny insects making their mark on Earth's glory. With feet shuffling through the detritus, she hummed some Irish folk song picking the wildflowers that danced idly in the light breeze. She lifted her face, letting the light and shadow dance across her skin, paying no attention to the little sandflies that took refuge in her dirty blonde hair. The sound of bees humming in and out of the flower bed mixed with the sounds of leaves rustling on the trees, made her smile in contentment. She inhaled the minty smell of the pennyroyal she had just picked and stuck a piece in her hair while holding her basket in the other.

The ominous droning sound did not go unnoticed by the woman who had moved further into the clearing, and was not picking up some flowers by the lake. She looked up, checking to see what made the sound but shrugged when she could not find anything; it was probably an airplane or something of that sort. She sighed in contentment, thankful that she had gone through with her plans to go on a solo trip to the woods, where she had all the time to not think and just live. She removed her sandals and set her feet

into the warm lake, sighing as the water did things to her body, making her relaxed and in less than ten minutes, she was answering nature's call to sleep.

...The trees lashed and crashed against each other like swords in the hands of warriors. The rumbling of thunder overhead created a scary atmosphere that made her heart beat faster. The cold dewy leaves sliding across her skin made her shiver in fear as she looked around trying to point out where the swooshing sound had come from. Parts of her skin were torn from the thorns that scratched her skin from the numerous falls she had encountered while running.

...she ran fast. Faster. Faster still. Not once stopping. Refusing to look behind her. Scrapes and cuts on hands from falling in the dark. She twisted and jerked at every unfamiliar sound, holding her hands out in front of her to ward off unseen obstacles.

Smack. She fell to the ground bearing the full brunt of the blow from the unknown. She whimpered but picked herself up, diving behind a wide cedar trunk just off the trail she had mapped out to keep her safe. With her heart slamming violently against her ribcage, she gulped in the stale air of the night, trying to slow her breathing. She heard the rustling of leaves from around her and held a bloody palm to her lips to prevent herself from screaming loud in terror.

Back in the shadows, branches thrashed and snapped as the creature slithered past, engaging its prey on a

sinister game of hide and seek.

The woman was exhausted now- sunset had finally drained out of the sky, sheathing the woods in shadow. She pressed her face against the bark of the tree, the ridges biting into her skin, hoping to become one with the tree and invisible to the world.

There was an ear-piercing shriek coming from above her and before she knew what was happening, she was pushed down by a force leaving her face a bloody mess. She screamed and groveled as she was dragged through the ground back to the clearing where she had just come out from.

She lifted her hands to block the slaps and blows that rained on her face from the invisible creature.

Suddenly she was whipped up from the ground and thrown against a tree, the bark digging into her back. Her screams bounced off the clearing, going unnoticed by the outside world. She dragged her body up but was held against the man whom she could not see. She started to scream but he wrapped his hand over her mouth, raising her in such a way that her legs ran on their own accord as if she was running in the air. And then it became slow. Slower still. And it stops.

He released her and she fell to the ground, her face kissing the leaves. Before she was able to get up, the creature picked up her legs and dragged her across the ground into a cave and then there's darkness.

Chapter One

“Can you state exactly what is wrong with you? Because from all the tests we’ve conducted, you seem to be doing pretty fine.” The doctor said, staring at his patient who looked like he could bolt out of the room in just one second.

“I already explained to you before, I have this really bad migraine that makes me feel like my head is going to explode. It comes and goes and then sometimes I get this dizzy spell. My girlfriend suggested that it’s probably due to blood shortage and so I changed diets to help me with that and got supplements as well.” Eric was getting irritated by the way the doctor kept asking him the same questions repeatedly.

“And because you’re here, I’ll take it that it did not work.”

“No it didn’t.”

“Do you drink or take narcotics?”

“No I do not smoke but I do have a glass or two now and then, but not too much to be classified as an alcoholic.”

“What brand of alcohol do you take?”

“The occasional whiskey when I’m out with friends at the bar and Heineken when I’m watching the game at home.”

Eric Morales replied, wondering what his choice of alcoholic beverage had to do with his problems. For all he knew they weren’t the cause of half of the things that happened to him. The headaches he got were more intense and more painful than the hangovers he got from too much fun at the club. His head throbbed painfully as he tried to focus on what the man was writing. This was the second time he was here in one week and he did not want to admit just how awful each visit made him feel once he left.

“Hmm” the doctor stroked his non-existent beards.

“You think it’s the cause?” Eric raised a brow.

“Well sometimes it’s possible that you can get dizzy spells or some form of reaction when you’re trying to quit narcotics or alcohol, I mean it’s common knowledge.” The man said with a smug expression that annoyed Eric.

“Well I’m not trying to quit them because I’m not

addicted to either, although I will admit I've undergone a few lifestyle changes over the years but it mostly had to do with what I ate and that was only because I found out that I was deathly allergic to them."

"Hmm, that is interesting and you did mention that you had a hard time falling asleep as well, any reason why?"

"No, I just find it hard falling asleep. I didn't want to take any pills until I had come to the doctor's just in case."

"Do you drink a lot of coffee?"

"Only when it's necessary and in my line of work, that is very necessary."

" what do you do?"

"I'm an editor at a renowned publishing company."

"Interesting. I have a few guesses on what might be wrong with you but I do not want to come to any conclusions at least not yet until the test results are out."

"You'll conduct some tests again?"

"Yes, we have to be sure of what's happening to you,

I do not want to make my diagnosis based on just assumptions but I can assure you that by tomorrow, the results will be out and let us hope it's something that won't be serious."

"Well what do we do about the sleep problem? I need to sleep or else I won't function properly at all."

"Try staying off caffeine for a while."

"I can't. If I'm not sleeping at night, I'll get tired at work and if I'm tired there's no way I'll be able to take care of the mountain of work that will be waiting for me." Eric argued.

"I'll prescribe some sleeping pills for you. You do not have to take them always, just when you're having difficulties sleeping." The doctor replied, writing something down on a piece of paper which he handed over to Eric who was tapping his foot impatiently on the floor.

"How was it?" Claire asked, stirring the contents of the pot.

"Terrible." Eric sighed softly, coming to peck her

cheeks. He removed his coat and placed it by the door, "what're you making? It smells delicious."

"Just sauce for the pasta. You need to go grocery shopping by the way, your fridge is almost empty."

"I wasn't really expecting you to make dinner, I was thinking we'd go out to eat so I didn't really bother to keep anything for Martha to do the weekly grocery run."

"You're such a big baby, what would it take you to go to the store yourself?"

"Time which I do not have and you know stuff like that."

"Really? You're just lazy. Go freshen up, dinner's almost ready and I'm not sure I'll wait for you before I'm done. I'm really hungry."

"Right back at you babe." He said before making his way upstairs to change.

Claire watched his retreating figure with a smile. He had been so stressed lately but somehow she was impressed by the fact that he never seemed to say no to food. She remembered the first time she had found him staring at the distance while he sat on the

table. She had woken up to find his side empty and had thought that he had gone down to get some water. She had come down only to find him sitting with a glass of water on the table and his laptop in the other. At first she had been scared thinking something bad had happened to him or something along that nature but it was none of that.

"Babe are you okay?" she had asked, concern etched in her voice.

"Yeah I'm fine, just came to drink some water."

"You look like you haven't slept a wink at all."

"Yeah well I couldn't sleep, it's probably all the coffee I took today that's messing me up but that's just temporary."

"If you say so." She pulled out a chair and sat beside him, taking a sip of his water.

"What about you? Why are you up? Shouldn't you be in bed now?"

"I woke up to cuddle but I didn't see you beside me so I had to come down to see if you were okay."

"Well, aren't you the sweetest." He smiled at her,

kissing her palms. He sighed tiredly, shutting his eyes for a moment and when he opened his eyes he found her staring at him in concern.

"The truth is I'm not okay babe, I've been having really bad headaches and it's just making things a lot more difficult than it is. I've been popping advils like crazy and it's not working at all. It's like they're playing rugby in my head with metal that is and it's really messing me up."

"Have you been to the doctor's?"

"No not yet. I'll go next week, I have an appointment scheduled for Monday."

"okay. It's possible you're just stressed with work. I've got some sleeping pills that should help you relax, I could get them for you if you want."

"No I don't want that, I just want you to hold me and sleep. You do not have to stay awake on my account, you have work tomorrow."

"but then you'll be bored all alone."

"I can always re-watch Dynasty or Brooklyn 99."

"Great, let's watch them together. We'll use the TV upstairs just in case I fall asleep."

They had binge watched season one of *Game Of Thrones* and she had dozed off along the way but ever since they had been looking for ways to solve his sleeping problems.

Eric came down shortly, yawning slightly. He had showered and was now wearing simple sweatpants and a faded black top. His hair was still a little bit messy and wet from the shower but Claire did not mind. She had just finished pouring some freshly squeezed orange juice into his glass when he brought out something wrapped like a box.

"What is that?" she raised a brow.

"Well it's nothing. I just picked it up from an antique store on my way back and I thought you'd like it."

"What's in it?"

"Well why don't you open it and see."

She rolled her eyes at his red face and unwrapped the present. It was a locket that had space for both their pictures. It was simple and sweet, she thought, smiling sweetly.

"You like it?" he asked, raising a brow. He took a sip

of his juice while he watched her reaction.

"I don't even know what to say. I never pegged you for the cliché romantic kind of guy but this is really sweet and thoughtful and I love it so much."

"So where's mine?" he grinned, "it's our anniversary week and well you know how we do all of these, the best present wins."

"Well you're drinking your gift." She said, smirking at him. He immediately looked down at the glass of juice in front of him with raised brows.

"Excuse me? You're joking right?"

"oh no I'm not."

"You got me a glass of juice?"

"You sound surprised." She said with a straight face barely keeping herself from laughing.

"I am. I mean normally you're the one who's the most excited about the gift exchange and you're always trying to win and it's very unlikely that you would pick a glass of juice as your gift. Come on, be serious now."

"Your gift is right in front of you and I'm not joking, don't tell me you haven't noticed it yet." She was

chuckling now.

Eric got up and began looking around him, not understanding what she was saying.

"Come on, just tell me already."

"Remember what happened to the last dining table we had?"

"You mean the one we wrecked while having fun?"

"That's a very responsible way to put it but yes."

"So what about it? We already fixed it."

"Did we? Look in front of you." She said again, now grinning widely. He looked in front of him and only then did he notice the table in front of him. It looked handmade and when one looked closely, they could easily find their initials on the table, the very same one that was on the locket which he had gifted her.

"No you didn't." he said, staring at her in surprise.

"Well we did a really bad job putting the other one together and I needed one that would be sturdy enough you know, just in case."

"Wow. This is one fine mahogany." He said, getting up and wrapping her in his arms. They kissed passionately and only pulled away to get some air.

“God you’re so perfect, what did I do to deserve you?”

“Oh you don’t deserve me darling, but we can always do something about that.” She joked.

“I can’t wait to get married already.”

“Well you’ll just have to wait. In just nine months we can do whatever we want. My mother would have a fit if she found out that I’m spending the entire week here.”

“Let’s just not tell her, she doesn’t need to know about everything we do.”

“Come on, let’s eat.” She said pecking him.

They sat on the table and immediately began digging into their meal.

“Here take this.” Claire handed him a book, making him confused.

“What is this?” he looked at the book with raised brows.

“Well since you’re having a hard time falling asleep, I had taken the liberty of compiling a few of my favorite short stories that I haven’t really gotten

around to reading, and that way we could read them together.” She said, pecking his cheek.

“No offense babe, I’m currently not in the mood to read anything, I just want to watch something and take some pills and sleep off.”

“Well that is why I am reading them to you. It’s the thriller stories I compiled for you.”

“There is a really good reason why I do not like that genre at all, I feel it’s a waste of time and I do not have the level of patience required for the work.”

“Well a lot of studies have shown just how effective reading is in combating stress and since we’re saying a big NO to your anxiety pills, this should help.”

“So your grand idea is to read me a whole collection of Edgar Poe's work? Why not someone else?”

“Because he’s the author that has tried to make me love reading and since he helped me when I was a child then this would help you as well.”

“ And that is what you think.”

“Yes, now go get yourself some snacks from the kitchen and let my soothing voice read you to sleep.”

"What are we reading first?" he asked when he came back from the kitchen.

"Murders in the rue morgue by Edgar Alan Poe."

"You sound excited for it."

" Yeah I am, it's my first time reading it and I'm so glad I get to read it with and for you."

Murders in the Rue Motgue by Edgar Alan Poe

...Residing in Paris during the spring and part of the summer of 18--, I became acquainted with a Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin. This young gentleman was of an excellent -- indeed of an illustrious family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world, or to care for the retrieval of his fortunes. By courtesy of his creditors, there still remained in his possession a small remnant of his patrimony; and, upon the income arising from this, he managed, by means of a rigorous economy, to procure the necessaries of life, without troubling himself about its superfluities. Books, indeed, were his sole luxuries, and in Paris these are easily obtained.

Our first meeting was at an obscure library in the Rue Montmartre, where the accident of our both being in search of the same very rare and very remarkable volume, brought us into closer communion. We saw each other again and again. I

was deeply interested in the little family history which he detailed to me with all that candor which a Frenchman indulges whenever mere self is his theme. I was astonished, too, at the vast extent of his reading; and, above all, I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of his imagination. Seeking in Paris the objects I then sought, I felt that the society of such a man would be to me a treasure beyond price; and this feeling I frankly confided in him. It was at length arranged that we should live together during my stay in the city; and as my worldly circumstances were somewhat less embarrassed than his own, I was permitted to be at the expense of renting, and furnishing in a style which suited the rather fantastic gloom of our common temper, a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstitions into which we did not inquire, and tottering to its fall in a retired and desolate portion of the Faubourg St. Germain.

Had the routine of our life at this place been known to the world, we would have been regarded as madmen --although, perhaps, as madmen of a harmless nature. Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. Indeed the locality of our retirement had been carefully kept a secret from my own former associates; and it had been many years since Dupin had ceased to know or be known in Paris. We existed within ourselves alone.

It was a freak of fancy for my friend (for what else shall I call it?) to be enamored of the Night for her

own sake; and into this bizarrerie, as into all his others, I quietly fell; giving myself up to his wild whims with a perfect abandon. The sable divinity would not herself dwell with us always; but we could counterfeit her presence. At the first dawn of the morning we closed all the messy shutters of our old building; lighting a couple of tapers which, strongly perfumed, threw out only the ghastliest and feeblest of rays. By the aid of these we then busied our souls in dreams --reading, writing, or conversing, until warned by the clock of the advent of the true Darkness. Then we sallied forth into the streets, arm in arm, continuing the topics of the day, or roaming far and wide until a late hour, seeking, amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city, that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford.

By the time she was done with the first page, Eric could feel himself getting impatient with how slow it was getting. He was tempted to tell her to skip to the ending but the calmness that was emitting from her being made him keep quiet. He laid down on her laps and played with the hem of her dress as she continued reading.

... Let it not be supposed, from what I have just said, that I am detailing any mystery, or penning any romance. What I have described in the Frenchman,

was merely the result of an excited, or perhaps of a diseased intelligence. But of the character of his remarks at the periods in question an example will best convey the idea.

We were strolling one night down a long dirty street, in the vicinity of the Palais Royal. Being both, apparently, occupied with thought, neither of us had spoken a syllable for fifteen minutes at least. All at once Dupin broke forth with these words:

"He is a very little fellow, that's true, and would do better for the Théâtre des Variétés."

"There can be no doubt of that," I replied unwittingly, and not at first observing (so much had I been absorbed in reflection) the extraordinary manner in which the speaker had chimed in with my meditations. In an instant afterward I recollected myself, and my astonishment was profound.

"Dupin," said I, gravely, "this is beyond my comprehension. I do not hesitate to say that I am amazed, and can scarcely credit my senses. How was it possible you knew I was thinking of ___?" Here I paused, to ascertain beyond a doubt whether he really knew of whom I thought.

___ "of Chantilly," said he, "why do you pause? You were remarking to yourself that his diminutive figure unfitted him for tragedy."

This was precisely what had formed the subject of my reflections. Chantilly was a quondam cobbler of the Rue St. Denis, who, becoming stage-mad, had

attempted the rôle of Xerxes, in Crébillon's tragedy so called, and been notoriously Pasquinade for his pains.

"Tell me, for Heaven's sake," I exclaimed, "the method --if method there is --by which you have been enabled to fathom my soul in this matter." In fact I was even more startled than I would have been willing to express.

"It was the fruiterer," replied my friend, "who brought you to the conclusion that the mender of soles was not of sufficient height for Xerxes et id genus omne."

"The fruiterer! --you astonish me --I know no fruiterer whatsoever."

"The man who ran up against you as we entered the street --it may have been fifteen minutes ago."

I now remembered that, in fact, a fruiterer, carrying upon his head a large basket of apples, had nearly thrown me down, by accident, as we passed from the Rue C__ into the thoroughfare where we stood; but what this had to do with Chantilly I could not possibly understand.

There was not a particle of charlatanerie about Dupin. "I will explain," he said, "and that you may comprehend all clearly, we will first retrace the course of your meditations, from the moment in which I spoke to you until that of the rencontre with the fruiterer in question. The larger links of the chain

*run thus --Chantilly, Orion, Dr.
Nichols, Epicurus, Stereotomy, the street stones, the
fruiterer."*

There are few persons who have not, at some period of their lives, amused themselves in retracing the steps by which particular conclusions of their own minds have been attained. The occupation is often full of interest; and he who attempts it for the first time is astonished by the apparently illimitable distance and incoherence between the starting-point and the goal. What, then, must have been my amazement when I heard the Frenchman speak what he had just spoken, and when I could not help acknowledging that he had spoken the truth. He continued:

"We had been talking of horses, if I remember right, just before leaving the Rue C___. This was the last subject we discussed. As we crossed into this street, a fruiterer, with a large basket upon his head, brushing quickly past us, thrust you upon a pile of paving-stones collected at a spot where the causeway is undergoing repair. You stepped upon one of the loose fragments, slipped, slightly sprained your ankle, appeared vexed or sulky, muttered a few words, turned to look at the pile, and then proceeded in silence. I was not particularly attentive to what you did; but observation has become with me, of late, a species of necessity.

"You kept your eyes upon the ground --glancing, with a petulant expression, at the holes and ruts in the pavement, (so that I saw you were still thinking of