

## Alone With Everybody

By Chris Castle

She left the party well after midnight. Her friends were off making out with boys, people were swimming or drunk or laughing. The music made her head drum and even as people talked to her, all she could do was look to the hills in the distance. A boy called after her, called her names, but she didn't care. All she could think of was the forest.

She started to walk up the steep path, feeling the noise fall away from her. She enjoyed the sensation of the party dying away and for the first time that night she smiled. She walked further into the darkness, knowing she should be scared. Instead, she walked further into the dirt, letting the moonlight lead her, until at last there was nothing but silence all around her.

When the path died away she began to look for the track that led to the ravine. For a while it was nothing but rocks and vines, until it spilled out onto the open clearing. In-front of her the water spread out, a silver pool lit by the moonlight. It was still, looking almost like it was frozen, even in the midst of the midnight heat. She forced herself to look past the water and onto the forest surrounding it. He was here, somewhere, she could feel it. There was a fire close by, some junk scattered close to it.

The rumours about the man started in the last year. Some said he was a park ranger who was horribly scarred in a forest fire. Others said he had contracted a virus and was quarantined in the woods, away from the community. Boys said he was a sex offender, and a murderer. She sat crossed legged against a tree and waited for him, looking at the silver pool of water as she did.

"What do you want?" A voice called out, from the far reaches of the woods. "You're not supposed to be here."

"I'm just watching the water. There's no rule that says I can't," she said, trying to hold her voice steady. "Anyway, who says you're supposed to be here?"

"I just want to be left alone, in peace," the voice called out again. This time it sounded less angry, a little fainter. "Please."

If he hadn't said that last word, she might have gone. She might have lost her nerve, decided it was best just to go home and be done with it. But he sounded so alone when he said that, so...haunted, it almost gave her strength.

“My name’s is Rachel. Rachel Adams. I’m pleased to meet you.” It was the first time that night she had wanted to be introduced and introduce herself. Away from all the confusion and the noise. She looked around, but there was still nothing but the trees and the silver light.

“Please...my grandfather saw you...he worked for the mill and came up here sometimes to measure soil and things. He knew about you. He told me all about you. I just wanted to come and meet you, is all...he died recently.” She heard a rustling in the wood, saw a few rocks dislodge and sprinkle into the water, causing ripples in the still pools.

Rachael had heard her grandparents talking in the garden as she wrote in her bedroom. She heard the sadness in her grandpa’s voice, a sorrow she’d not heard since her parents had died. It had made her listen to every word, measure everything that was said. Something inside all of it stopped her heart dead. Now he was gone she wanted to know everything there was about him before it was too late.

“What have you heard?” There was panic in his voice now, even as it grew lower. She pulled herself up off the floor and brought her hands up, trying to settle him down. She knew he could see her, might even be close by. But she wasn’t scared.

“Just that you were hurt and you came up here to live in peace and quiet. I don’t blame you. If I could I’d stay away from everyone too.” It was true. Rachael didn’t want to be part of the scene, or swept along in the buzz of the city. All she wanted was to look at the world when it was still and beautiful, like now.

“You’ve come from that party. What do you know about being alone?” His voice was trying to be angry, but it sounded more curious than anything else.

“I don’t know...I just go because everyone else goes. I never enjoy going to them, though. The music’s always too loud and no-one...no-one tells the truth.” She started to blush but knew she had gone too far. Instead she looked up and let him see her, full on, lit by the moon. “I just feel...I just feel alone with everyone, you know?”

“You got others with you? You bring you’re friends up here?” His voice was edgy and she was aware of him nearby, scanning for others.

“No. No, there’s just me. Why?” She tensed a little, ready for him if he suddenly attacked her. She knew self-defense and was a fighter too, thanks to her grandpa.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Don’t be ridiculous.” His voice shifted then, sounded almost light, like he was sharing a joke.

“Is that any harder to believe than me wanting to walk on my own?” She said not sure if

she liked the idea of him laughing at her, teasing her. She kept her head up, defiant and waited.

There was a break in the leaves and he walked out of the dark. He was dressed in a heavy shirt, jeans and boots. He wore a hat that covered most of his face. He stopped a good few feet from where she stood.

"I'm Eddie. Eddie Ranch." He held up his hand to say hi and Rachel did the same. He walked as if he was facing a stiff wind with each step, bracing himself and struggling. He crossed his arms and stayed looking at the ground.

"So what was you're favourite rumour about me? I liked the one about me being infected by an alien the most." He kept talking in a low voice, although there was something like a low hum of laughter when he spoke.

"Me too. My grandpa said you were caught in a fire. Nothing more, nothing less." Rachel kept looking at him, not looking away, though she knew he wanted her to. "All the others stuff's boys trying to be funny and just sounding stupid." There was a sudden burst from the party and the two of them turned to look down the ridge. They stayed looking as the lights fizzed into life and the music got cranked to impossible levels and people cheered.

"Did those boys ever say anything horrible about you?" His voice was still clear, even over the distant rumble of noise. She didn't look back to him, even as she felt him edge closer. Instead she kept looking at the party, the hollering increasing as some of them jumped into the pool.

"They said I got pregnant and had an abortion. They said I used to take home the truckers that came into the café where I worked." She followed one boy who zigzagged up to the pool and crashed into a table before he could dive in. "They left jars with dirty water in my locker, to make it look like a foetus or something."

"I'm sorry." He said. Below, another boy made it to the pool, while a boy and girl started making out on the steps. They all looked like hungry ants from where she stood, jittery and ugly. She turned away to find him, saw he was only a few feet away now.

"Don't be sorry. They weren't worth one of my tears, they sure as hell ain't worth your apologies, I can guarantee you that." She tried to smile, but couldn't quite force it out. Instead she looked over to him, began to see the edges of scars trailing over his face.

"It's not right if they said that. Someone should be held accountable. Someone should...pay." His voice trembled then, but it wasn't with fear but anger. She shook her head and took a step closer to him, making him back away.

“I don’t care what they think. I’ve told you a secret, Eddie. Are you going to tell me one?” She looked at him. She had never spoken this way before, so directly. She imagined it was how real people talked, the ones who understood the world.

“You want to know about what happened to me?” His voice was weary now, drained of the fight she’d heard in the other times he’d spoken.

“No. I don’t want to hear the things people expect you to say.” It was true; now she was here, the idea of hearing about what had happened to him had slipped from her mind. She didn’t care about the things that had hurt him. “I want to hear a secret. Something no-one knows about you.” She edged closer to him and this time he didn’t edge back. His hair was dark and long and hung close to his jaw. He ran his hands up to his chin, and then looked back, close to her, almost into her eyes. Somewhere in the far off party, a girl screamed. It was followed by a low murmur, people’s voices calling out. But neither of them looked back over the ridge. Instead he pointed to a ruck sack, where a bag lay opened and sprawled against it. And something else too, like a crumpled poster.

“That’s my keep-sake stash. I began it when I moved up here. It’s all the thing people leave behind when they camp here. Even the sack was left behind. So many lost things.” He walked over to it, not looking back. When he reached the bag he looked down for a while, as if he was thinking something through. Then he looked over and waved her over. Rachael walked to him and crouched nearby, so they were only the width of the bag apart.

“Some of it’s trash really, but I still think it’s beautiful. Just because it’s thrown away, doesn’t mean it’s not worth something, right?” he began to look over, then stopped himself and looked back down.

“Right,” Rachel replied, hooking a medal off the floor. “Someone took the time and effort to win this right? Just because they didn’t want it anymore, doesn’t mean it’s not important to someone else, like family, or the guy who lost out.” She held it up to the light, saw it catch the moonlight.

“Some of it’s sad. I found these buried not far from here.” He handed her a wedge of photographs, held together with a rubber band. A baby smiled, a man and a woman each side. They were all like this, each flecked in dirt.

“I tried to clean them up as best I could, but they’d been put in pretty deep.” He set other things on the ground for her to look at, like a stall. She set the photos down on the ground carefully, amongst a silver flask, a paperback book.

“I have a dream sometimes, that I find each of them, the people and return their stuff to them. Some of them are angry, some of them are happy. I don’t know...” He picked up the photo’s set them inside the bag.

“At least it all means something to you, now. I mean, look at the book,” she held it up, opened it. “That’s what I thought. Someone’s signed it, corners are turned over in it; it’s like memory-fingerprints, the traces and scuff marks on it.”

“Plus it’s a really good book,” he said. She saw the flicker of a smile, his teeth, flash across his face for a second. He looked away, and then looked back. Slowly he lifted the hooded top from his head; let it slip onto his shoulders.

“There.” It was all he said.

Rachel looked down to the things scattered on the dirt, then looked back up. There were three or four thick lines running across his face, the colour run out of them now, so they were more ridges on his skin. Parts of him were torn, but much of him remained untouched.

“They offered me this job, the rangers, as part of the settlement. Seemed like a good trade. No-one really bothers me. You’re friends come up here from time to time, throw bottles and rocks at the cabin, but it’s small time stuff.” He absent-mindedly ran a finger to the scar on his neck as he spoke, caught himself doing it and brought his hand down.

“They’re not my friends,” she said, feeling herself getting angry. She looked at him full-on, feeling herself growing flushed.

“No, I don’t think they are. I meet you’re grandpa from time to time, he drops off fuel. I was sorry to hear about him. My condolences. I sent a telegram to the house. He was a nice old guy. He knew my father, back when he worked at the mill for a time.”

“That’s why you talked to me?” She asked, suddenly understanding, feeling a new wave of hurt over her grandpa swirl in.

“I’m not one for company, so much.” He smiled and when he did, the scars seemed to retract, fought down by the beauty of his smile.

“I barely notice it when you smile,” she said and felt herself blush again, for entirely different reasons. “I mean...”

“I think it would be nice if more people in town thought like you, Rachel. But they don’t.” He nodded and looked away and she was glad he had deflected her embarrassment. “You’re grandpa, we’d talk. He reminded me of my old man. He’d seen enough so that nothing much fazed him. Spoke highly of you, too. You holding up okay?”

“Yeah...I mean, my friends got me to go to that party, but I never liked them before and it's not going to change now. I'm gong to college soon, so I guess it'll be okay...” she shrugged. She didn't know. She didn't know anything. She hated lying to this guy as much as she hated lying to herself. She didn't want that.

“I mean, I'm scared, is all. I don't know if I'm doing the right thing and now he's gone, I don't feel like I got anyone I can ask, you know?” She looked over. The scars on him looked as natural now as ears or eyes.

“It's okay to be scared, Rachael. It's okay to not know everything.” He held the paperback in his hands, tapping the cover. She noticed there were spider trail scars on his hands too. “People want everything and...sometimes just something is enough.”

They sat looking over the bag and everything around it for a while. There were no other sounds. Without thinking Rachel stood up and walked back to the top of the hill; there was no one outside the party, the music was over. All that was left was overturned chairs and the dirty water of the pool. All the lights were off save one, where a single person walked behind the drapes in silhouette.

“Guess the party's over now,” she said returning to him, the bag. The moon was starting to fall a little now and the stars seemed to fade. She sat back by the bag, memorising each item in front of her. Finally she looked behind the bag to the kite she had mistaken for a crumpled poster. She reached over and touched it, how cool it felt.

“I found that suspended in one of the trees; took me almost half a day to climb high enough to get it down. It's a good one, too. The material's tough. Probably cost more than I make in a month.” He poured coffee, offered her some.

“Can we try it?” She didn't care if she sounded childish or stupid now. She leant further over and put both her hands to it, held each side and lifted it into the air so she could see all of it. He didn't say anything, but instead pulled himself up, dusted down his jeans and let her put the kite into his open hands.

It sailed high into the night sky without too much trouble. She had been used to cheap kites at the seaside, launching high and crashing immediately. This was something different. It seemed to latch onto whatever breeze there was and simply...glide over the sky. After a while he let her take the rope, pulling the strings to sail left and right, high then low. She followed it as it cut against the stars, the moon. She hoped the stranger in the house was at her window and could somehow manage to see it in the sky.

She looked round once or twice; watched Eddie extinguish the fire; put the stash back into the bag. It was the end of things. She looked back up to the kite, watched as the night seemed to drip away in front of her eyes, the stars slipping away one by one, the moon disappearing, until it was almost day. She followed everything as one by one it left her and felt a single tear roll down the edges of her cheek as she steered the kite back down to the ground and the dirt.

They stood by the top of the clearing, both of them looking to the house where the party had been. Now, the house looked a tired, worn thing, the white paint scuffed, and the garden full of trash. Rachel looked round to him, as he pulled the hood back over his face, almost in time with the rising sun.

“I’d like to come back and visit before I leave,” she said, looking to him, watching his face slip back into darkness. “I think I’d only ever come at night.”

“Only with the night. Good luck, Rachel.” He held out his hand and she shook it. It seemed oddly formal, but then everything felt as if it had shifted with the sunlight. She edged away, back to the lip of the pathway. She turned and began to say something, but then stopped herself. Instead she just lifted her arm and waved and watched him wave back. Then she turned and walked back down the dirt trail.

She kept walking, unsteady with tiredness and after a little while she fell. She pulled herself up, unhurt and collected up her coat, which had slipped from her waist. As she did, the paperback book fell from the pocket onto the floor. She stooped and collected it, held it for a second. She looked at it and opened it up, saw the scuffs and marks. She turned round; she was too far down to go back. Instead she kept walking, holding the book against her chest, giving her renewed strength, as she made her way home.

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