

poe: death's mark

CHAPTER ONE

Stop it. How dare you talk to her like that? Edgar ground his teeth together in silent fury as a drunken John Allan shouted curses down on his cowering foster-mother. He stood in the dim corner of the parlor near the door, watching Allan's silhouette gesture wildly at Frances Allan's in front of the fireplace. Mrs. Allan's lovely eyes were wide in fear and hurt, the shame of her husband's cruel words tinging her cheeks in red. *How dare you? Have you no sense of respect, of decency?*

"You stupid harlot! I'll do what I want, go where I want, and see who I want! I am the man of this house and you would do well to shut your mouth and be grateful!" Edgar's foster-father roared. Mrs. Allan squeaked a sob, curling inward on herself to drown her tears in her hands. Allan reached awkwardly for the crystal decanter on the end table and tipped it back gracelessly. He set it back down with a heavy *slam*. "As if you have a right to question *me* when everyone in Richmond knows whose beds you've been in."

That was a line he would *not* cross without consequences. "Shut up!" Edgar snapped.

Silence fell. Mrs. Allan's red-rimmed eyes leapt to meet Edgar's, her pupils wide with terror. Slowly, Allan turned on him, his face red and his eyes like blades. "What did you say to me, boy?"

"You heard me," Edgar said venomously. "Don't you dare talk to her that way."

Smack! Edgar's face spun hard to the right with the force of the blow and he staggered. Mrs. Allan screamed in horror and when Edgar stood upright again, his lip swollen and bloody, it wasn't to face his enraged foster-father. His eyes went directly to the closest thing he had to a

mother, to her tear-streaked face, her weak, shaking hands, her arms that he knew were caked with bruises under the sleeves of her gown. An image sliced through his brain of the silhouettes of a woman and a man holding an ax. In his mind, he heard the woman scream, heard the way the cry cut off suddenly. Watched as her husband buried the ax in her skull.

Please no...not her...not like that....

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There is a darkness inside us all. It takes different forms and every day we battle it. At the end of the day, some of us win. Some of us lose.

That was what I was thinking as I peeled away the last of the bandages on my legs, revealing a patchwork of scars. Frost and I had both been lucky to sustain only partial second degree burns that had healed fairly quickly and didn't require skin grafts. Only two weeks after "The Cask of Amontillado," all that remained of my burns was a little discoloration that would fade in three days. But, thanks to the layers of scars I had sustained over the years, my Frankenstein legs still looked grotesque and crude. Every day I looked more and more like the broken vase Frost had imagined what seemed like years ago: something that had been beautiful long ago, but now just looked like a disturbing reconstruction held together by glue.

What made the scars so hard to stomach was the fact that they were the least of my worries right then and when tragedy and stress team up on us, all of the little things become so much more powerful in our minds. Emotionally, my final confrontation with Lex had set me back to the same place I had been seven years ago, the last time I'd tried to take my own life. I was a hollow shell; there was nothing but bad memories left in the hole where he had ripped out

my soul. Meanwhile, I longed for that brief almost-happiness Frost and I had shared, that feeling of being protected and needed that I did not think would ever belong to me again.

Staring down at the jagged scars, I thought of Trina. Physically, Nina, Lex, and Gigi had done her no harm. Internally, I didn't want to know what darkness she battled. I did know from the glimpses of it I had seen in her eyes that it would never fade. Between that darkness and the ever-lingering grief over the loss of the rest of their family, Frost and Trina's reunion was more bitter than sweet.

"I thought I'd saved her," Frost had whispered to me. There were tears in his eyes and a strange slackness to his face, as if he was at a funeral, staring into the casket. "I was too late, wasn't I? I failed her."

I had considered Trina's state carefully, measuring her countenance and every shadow lying beneath it. "You didn't fail her, Frost. You got her out alive. But you're right...you haven't saved her yet."

You haven't saved her yet. I had not saved my charge yet either, and not because I didn't realize the danger she was in. I just had not thought of a rescue plan that ended in her favor.

When I had first woken up in the hospital after escaping "The Cask of Amontillado," I had been immediately greeted by two fresh nightmares. The first was that I was not the sole direct descendent of Edgar Allan Poe as I had assumed, which meant that I had at least one living family member out there who was as close to death as I was. The second was that the Poe family curse had already chosen its next victim: my former foster-mother, Mrs. Aaron, who was destined for a grisly death at her husband's hand, echoing Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat." I winced and tried to stop the words from invading my mind again, but I could not prevent them.

Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my

hand, I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan.

I shuddered at the fate Edgar had penned nearly two-hundred years ago, the fate I had not yet worked out how to prevent. I could not just kill my foster-father; that was not how the world worked. Instead I had to work out a way to convince Mrs. Aaron to leave him and help her escape successfully, a feat which would surely be impossible. She had never been particularly strong-willed and Mr. Aaron's increasingly volatile nature would not convince her that leaving was the safest choice.

Groaning in frustration and misery, I rolled down my jeans to once more cover my deformed legs and tried to shake off the wicked thoughts. Before I could smother them, though, the most memorable part of an argument I'd had with Frost about "The Black Cat" resurfaced.

"Even if I can make her leave, he'll come after us," I had said slowly, my pain seeping into every syllable. "Mostly her and me, but he'll lash out at all of us."

"All of us?"

"You. Maybe Trina. He's too volatile and he'll think you're helping me plot against him." I'd swallowed hard and gritted my teeth. "He'll kill us and it won't get us any closer to saving her life."

"No, no, no..." Frost had said quickly. "Not this again. Don't back yourself into a corner, Poe. We'll find a way."

He'd had no answer when I said, "You know what he's capable of. There isn't a way that won't be bloody." He had just hugged me tight to his chest and kissed my hair.

I turned to face the bathroom mirror, challenging my reflection with my sunken insomniac eyes. “Enough,” I told myself firmly. “Time to grow a backbone and hold yourself up. It’s Frost’s first day back in the field and he’s counting on you to stay in control for eight hours. He can’t be worrying about you and Trina when he’s supposed to be chasing murderers. It’s not going to be easy, but the darkness can’t win today. This isn’t optional.”

Saying the words out loud was the kick in the shin I needed to wake up and pull myself out of the gloom. After one last glare at my own pale, sunken face in the mirror, I left the bathroom.

The apartment Frost and I shared, now with Trina as well, was dark and silent as I padded across it to the kitchen. The winter had begun cold and angry, but had grown weary at the end of February. No light crawled along the edges of our heavy red curtains at six a.m. yet, but as March dawned Baltimore had begun to glimpse a warm spring.

I paused halfway across the living area to peer through the ajar bedroom door at Frost and Trina, still mercifully asleep. Frost had his arm wrapped around Trina’s shoulders, protecting her even in sleep. From this distance, they looked almost peaceful, but I knew that proximity would reveal the lines and shadows of insomnia on their faces.

“*Mow?*”

I bent to rub Church’s silky ears as she weaved around my legs. It was a two-bedroom apartment, but Frost and I had piled the second bedroom high with unopened moving boxes. The plan was to finish moving in and eventually make that Trina’s bedroom, but Frost and I had quietly agreed not to start that process until Trina could sleep through the night again. She woke from nightmares almost as often as Frost and I, which was why our first night home I had demanded that she and Frost sleep together and I take the couch for a while.

In any case, I wasn't sure how Trina would react to me sleeping with her brother, even if all we did was sleep.

"*Mow...?*" Church interrupted again.

"Alright!" I hissed at her, pushing aside the thoughts on my way to the home-for-moving-boxes, where Church's litter box and food dish resided. Liz had fostered Church while Frost and I were in the hospital, which I had appreciated until I realized how much she spoiled her own cat. Church had gained at least a pound in two weeks eating out of Chili Cheese Steak's bowl.

As I filled Church's bowl, I looked around the shadowy room at the boxes and spare furniture. Frost and I had pooled together a bizarre hodge-podge of stuff when we had gotten the apartment together and there was plenty that had no home now that we had a new home. I sighed and bit my lip, thinking that I should at least open the boxes today and see what was all here. Maybe it would be good therapy.

Church prodded the bag of food after I had sealed it and set it aside. I narrowed my eyes at her. "Your dish is full, you little pig. Finish that first." Church tipped her head, flashing her lamp-like green eyes up at me. "Quit begging! Aunt Liz spoiled you rotten...."

It took more willpower than I had expected to leave the home-for-moving-boxes without overfeeding Church. When I did, I went to the kitchen to brew a mug of tea and pretend to have eaten breakfast. Frost had been obsessing over Trina's and my eating habits and he had a right to. Trina had lost fifteen pounds from her already slight frame while in Gigi Faucett's care and, though I was sometimes physically capable of eating, my stress level had not improved enough over the past few weeks to bring my weight back up. I kept to my custom of wearing dark, baggy clothing and lied to Frost about eating breakfast in the morning before he woke, but he saw through the façade and went on worrying. Yesterday I had teased him about badgering me

like an old woman all the time, which had mercifully earned me a half-smile from Trina, but Frost had not taken it kindly. His response had been: *Then stop giving me things to badger you about.*

I was so happy to have gotten Trina to smile, even just a little, that I didn't care about offending him. The little girl I had known back in December was long gone. As I had known her, Trina had been wise well beyond her years. She had walked out of childhood very young, having survived the car accident that killed her oldest sister Anastasia. But now Trina had gained a cynicism and darkness that reminded me far too much of myself for comfort. Spending nearly two months with Gigi and Lex had poisoned her view of the world.

I withdrew a cereal bowl from the cupboard and put it immediately into the sink, then filled it with water so I could pretend I'd used it. That done, I sat at the little café table with my tea and bounced the tea bag in the hot water like a yoyo. Frost believed that breakfast was the most important meal of the day, but for the past month I had not managed to eat a breakfast I didn't vomit up within a few hours. It wasn't worth the price of Corn Flakes. If I could bring myself to eat in the first place, I usually kept lunch and dinner down pretty well, but it wasn't enough to satisfy Frost's worries.

Gritting my teeth, I stood to throw out my tea bag and grab a book to read in the dark. My mind was running circles around me and I needed a distraction before it ran back around to...

...Lex.

I sat back down in my chair like I was falling into it. My book lay on the table, forgotten instantly as I stared down into my tea. The cuts and bruises were gone. No knife slashes on my cheek or thigh. No livid handprints on my breasts or legs. But no matter how completely the

marks faded, when I looked at my skin I could still see them as plain as the white scars on my wrists. I was a broken vase and even as the days since I had put a bullet in Lex's brain piled on top of one another, I still recalled with no less certainty that though Frost could see past the places where I had been broken, I could not. A vase does not hold grudges or struggle to trust. A woman does.

To never have suffered would be to never have been blessed.

My scowl deepened as Edgar's words rose up in my mind. *What have I ever been blessed with?* I returned.

A gentle *creaking* echoed from the bedroom and I sipped my tea while I waited. Quiet footsteps pulled the door shut most of the way behind them, then padded to click on the living room lamp. "Why is it you're always sitting in the dark?" Frost asked.

I shrugged. "I'm used to the dark. Besides, I didn't want the light to wake either of you."

"Thanks." Frost came up behind me and very cautiously laid his hands on my shoulders. When I didn't react, he decided it was safe to stoop and kiss the top of my head. "Did you get some sleep? I heard you cry out twice."

"More than I usually get," I lied. Having Trina safe in his arms was easing Frost's insomnia, but mine had not changed. I still fought to get four hours a night.

"Did you eat breakfast already? I was thinking about making pancakes."

"I had cereal."

"Did you actually eat it or just dump it down the drain?" he muttered critically.

"You know I don't waste anything."

He snorted. "So you put a clean bowl in the sink."

I bit my lip. After a moment's thought, I decided it would be easier to go with honesty. "I'm getting better with later meals, but I still can't keep breakfast down. I'm not going to push myself and flare up my muscles."

Frost was silent. My muscle spasms and the reminder of how I had gotten the old wounds were almost as painful to Frost as they were to me and he knew very well that throwing up sometimes triggered spasms that lasted for hours, even days. "Fine," he finally whispered. "I'll drop it. I'm just worried about you. You're skin and bones."

I shrugged again. "I'm fine."

Frost sighed, then stooped down beside me. Before I realized what he was doing, he had slid his arms behind my shoulders and knees and scooped me into the air. As I hissed a complaint, he sat in my chair and set me on his lap, still firmly locked in his arms. His eyes, blue and shining like molten ice, not entirely frozen or liquid, brightened as he locked gazes with me from inches away. "Fine is not good enough."

"Fine has been my goal for ten years, Frost," I said coldly.

"Maybe it's time for a new goal." I didn't answer, just sat there studying his features. They were an unrelentingly shocking combination of softness and fierceness. His jaw was iron and his eyes were ice, but his brow and lips were gentle and wore his emotions plainly, without fear or guile. Just looking at his mouth was enough to light a spark in my nervous system that had been gone for two weeks. When he spoke again, the rise and fall of his chest was just enough to break me out of the trance. "Maybe it's time to reach for more."

"More what?"

"Confidence." I would have rolled my eyes if he had not said it with such sincerity. Confidence, I was pretty sure, was a trait I had been born entirely without. "Don't look at me

like that,” he said softly. “Remember the way you held me when I told you how many people I’ve killed? What did you say to me?”

I swallowed hard, knowing full well how much it must bother him to mention that occasion. Frost had a complicated view of justice that I did not yet fully understand. The important part was that he carried five lives as burdens on his soul, more if he still blamed himself for “The Raven” and Anna’s car accident. I held his weighty gaze, but not without reservation. “I said, ‘I’ve got you this time.’”

“Yes.” Frost pushed my dark hair out of my face and cupped my jaw. “I’ll never forget the look on your face or the way your arms felt around me. You were stronger than me...and in that moment, you knew it. That’s still in you somewhere. We just have to find it and draw it back out.”

“Why bother?”

“Because you’re never going to forget or forgive. That’s not the answer. The trick is learning to live with it and use it to make you stronger.”

I took his hand in mine and gripped it firmly. “You want me to be strong again.”

Frost stroked the back of my hand with his thumb. “That’s what attracted me to you in the first place. When I met you, I could see that you had been badly broken, but had rebuilt yourself to be as tough as nails. Scalding yourself with boiling coffee didn’t faze you. And I’m not saying that reverting fully back to that coldness is the answer, but I love knowing that that solidness is there beneath all your passion, gentleness, and selflessness and that it can rise up. You’re easy to admire.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That is something I have never been told before.”

“That doesn’t make it less true.” Frost kissed my forehead just above the bridge of my nose.

The bedroom door creaked open again and Frost relaxed his grip on me to look over his shoulder. A sleepy Trina shuffled into the living room, squinting against the lone lamp. Her white-blond hair hung in a long, loose braid over one shoulder and she wore the fuzzy pajamas with the white cats on them that Justin had bought for her. All of her possessions had been lost in the fire and while she, Frost, and I were in the hospital, Justin had purchased her a week’s worth of clothes. Trina had cried when he delivered them and he had blushinglly asserted that he’d just made a quick stop, but the look on Trina’s face said something different. Justin had grown up with her as a sister as well and had clearly chosen each item meticulously. Frost told me later that Justin had taken the tags off and washed the clothes using the same detergent Mrs. Frost had used so they smelled like home.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Frost said gently. “Do you want some pancakes?”

Trina petted Church absentmindedly as she wound herself around her ankles. “Sure. Am I interrupting something?”

I tried to stand up off of Frost’s lap, but he held me fast. “Nope,” he said. “I was just badgering Poe again. I picked her up to prove how light she is.”

“How romantic,” Trina said dryly.

“Isn’t he?” I extricated myself from Frost’s arms and took my tea with me to an unoccupied seat. Even as I sat, though, I drew the silver necklace Frost had given me from beneath the collar of my sweater and pressed the tiny diamond heart between my fingers. Frost watched me with a glowing smile for a moment, then stood and made for the kitchen.

As Frost unpacked the pancake ingredients and measured them carefully into his favorite mixing bowl, I watched him for signs that he wasn't ready to go back to the field today. He had once more passed his physical to return to the line of duty and yesterday, after a few days back to work and two visits to Dr. Grey, he had managed to also pass his psych evaluation. His hands were already fully functional and almost normal-looking. As he prepared breakfast, they did not shake at all and he looked far better rested than I was. In fact, when Frost had peeled the last set of bandages from his hands he found that the scar on his palm from Trina's ballerina bracelet was missing. The burns he'd sustained had ripped away the top few layers of his skin and excised the scar almost entirely...all that remained now was a narrow shadow trailing across his palm.

In my mind, though, I worried that Frost was not ready for fieldwork, physically or emotionally. I imagined him being injured chasing a suspect or even killed. I pictured him standing frozen over a dead body, his mind taking over him and tormenting him. Despite my fears, though, I was proud that Frost was managing all we'd been through better than me.

Trina joined Frost in the kitchen, where he helped her find a large frying pan for the pancakes, then let her mix the batter. Trina still had not returned to school, but late last week Frost had picked up all of her school books and she had begun studying a bit at home to catch up. She was well loved by the faculty at her middle school and they had not cleaned out her locker since December. She had also been forgiven all the assignments and tests she'd missed, though she would need to do quite a bit of studying to get caught up in her math and science classes. She had started seeing a child psychologist once a week and was not opposed to going to the appointments, but I didn't know how much they were helping. Frost was afraid to ask whether

she wanted to reenroll in her dance classes. After all, the night of her recital had ended as the worst night she'd known.

We were all trying to go back to a normal life, but that life was dead. Things would never be the same and, as I agonized over how to protect Mrs. Aaron from the curse, I could not make myself believe that they would ever get better. There would always be another nightmare.

Trina did a better job of acting normal for Frost's sake than I did, but she only ate two pancakes before putting her plate in the sink and hugging Frost goodbye. She was in the shower before he had finished his own breakfast. As she shut the bathroom door, sealing herself away, Frost's face melted in concern and he looked to me. "Did I do okay? She had a rough night again."

"You did everything right, Frost," I said sadly. "The best thing for her right now is time."

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Trina was still in the shower when Frost left for the station. He waited a few minutes past the time he should have left, hoping to say goodbye to her, but she didn't emerge. Poe managed a half-hearted smile and a goodbye wave to him from where she sat hunched over her second cup of tea at the table, but no more than that. No blown kiss, no real kiss, and certainly no "I love you." He tried not to let her see how much that stung, how much more he wanted, and fought to drown it inside of him. It didn't work, and, as he descended the stairs from the apartment, he found himself wishing that he had killed Lex when he had the chance, before he hurt Poe again.

The thought stopped him midway through the lobby door, frozen. *Not now. I can't think about this now.* There was no undoing what had happened. He had to be strong for Poe and Trina and had to help them become strong again despite everything that had happened these last few months. Losing control on his first day back in the field would not accomplish that.

He shook off the lingering guilt and drove his motorcycle fast enough that the cool air slapped his face and left it burning. He needed a reality-check. By the time he got to the station, he felt like he could feel the earth beneath his feet again. It was a good thing too, because Captain Blake was waiting for him to check in, ready with an assignment. Justin, Michael, and Raul were already at an address in Bolton Hill and, after assuring Blake that he was ready for this and would be just fine, Frost headed right back out the door to his motorcycle.

Bolton Hill was not far from the Homicide Department and when Frost arrived he found a few squadcars and Justin's black Avenger, but Sallow's forensics van had not yet been loaded. Frost showed his badge to one of the beat cops, who directed him into the apartment building and up to the third floor. "What have we got?" Frost asked as he ducked under the crime scene tape. The room was covered in blood and filth. It looked like it had been abandoned for years aside from the murder.

"Victim is Chelsea Hallering, age twenty-five," answered Michael, who was standing over the body, watching Sallow examine her. As they got closer, Frost could see the girl was zip-tied to the radiator and covered in her own blood, her grey eyes were open wide, and she was mostly naked, her clothes shredded around her. Her skin was layered in livid bruises and congealed blood dripped from a gash in her head. "Landlord got a tip from a tenant about telling the neighbors to keep it down at night, but there hasn't been anyone living here in months. He came up to check thinking there might be squatters and found this instead."

“Cause of death?”

Sallow tilted his head and looked up at Frost and Justin, who had made his way to Frost’s side from the front window. There was a sadness in Sallow’s eyes that he only betrayed at the messiest crime scenes. “She’s so beat up, it’s hard to tell at this point. Most likely blunt force trauma to the head or internal bleeding. Body temp puts time of death between one and two a.m. last night. Before that, she was raped.” The words felt like a kick in the gut. Frost swallowed hard and gritted his teeth. Sallow pointed to the bruises around her wrists from the zip-ties. “I’ll need to get her to the lab to be positive, but so far I don’t see any defensive wounds on her hands or arms and her fingernails look clean. Right wrist is broken but that’s likely from struggling against the zip-ties, which indicates she didn’t try to fight until she was tied to the radiator.”

“She knew her attacker,” Justin concluded.

“Most likely,” Sallow said. “He had no problem getting her here or incapacitating her. Like I said, I don’t want to jump to conclusions until I have her at the lab, but odds are he was someone she trusted. He may have drugged her.”

Frost turned away, pretending to examine the rest of the crime scene. In reality, he wasn’t seeing any of it. He was seeing the look in Lex’s eyes as he said *I’m going to make you watch me fuck her to death.*

“Frost?”

He turned to face Michael, gaining Justin’s attention as he did so. His partner’s onyx eyes were probing and when they found what was wrong, they filled with misery. “I’m sorry, man,” Justin said quietly.

Michael frowned deeply and stepped around the body...Chelsea...so he was blocking Frost's line of sight. "You don't have to work this one, man. Blake will understand. This is too soon."

Frost swallowed hard and looked away from both of them. Every time he blinked, he saw Poe pinned against that wall with Lex's hands on her. "I'm fine," he forced himself to say. He could not sit at his desk doing paperwork forever. He was a detective, a homicide detective, no less. There would always be murders and rapes and messy crime scenes. This was his job and he had to find a way to do it.

Sallow stood up, his small frame and curly red hair making him look comical standing between Justin and Michael. "You're not fine," Sallow said. "It's too similar, too soon. Go back to the precinct."

Frost didn't move or speak. He felt weak and stupid, pathetic, but he could not force himself to see the crime scene or meet Sallow's eyes. He was still in that damn kitchen, covered in Lex's blood, wishing he could wrap his arms around Poe but stuck latched into his own handcuffs. After what seemed like forever and mere seconds at once, he said quietly, "She's the same age, same crime...same dead eyes."

Justin put his hand on Frost's shoulder firmly. "There'll be another case, probably by the weekend. Don't push yourself. We've got this one."

Frost tried to make himself focus, to think about the crime scene like a cop would and go through the motions in his head, to do his job, but he couldn't. He could only think about it one way, and that placed him squarely in his personal Hell. After a moment he nodded, in a daze. "Fine." Without another word, Frost turned his back on the crime scene, and left. His footsteps echoed down the dilapidated stairwell slowly, defeated.

When the footsteps had faded and the roar of Frost's motorcycle had died away, Justin shook his head. "He needs some vacation anyway. Looks like a fucking zombie."

"He needs more than a vacation," Sallow said grimly. "He needs a lobotomy. I don't know how he passed his psych eval. Poor bastard."

"She's doing better," Michael said. "They're both still basketcases, don't get me wrong, but when she came to the station the other day to bring him lunch they smiled, talked, he even kissed her once. You'd have thought they were a normal, happy couple."

Justin nodded, still staring at the open door Frost had vanished through. "They are. The thing is, though, they're only like that when they're together. Liz told me Poe's barely functional on her own. She's on enough anti-depressants to make a cow do cartwheels, but still spends most of the day lying on the couch with her cat, staring at the ceiling. It's scary."

"Jesus..." Michael hissed, bending down over Chelsea. "Well, let's get this one over with. The sooner it's solved, the less shitty he'll feel about missing it."