

*Poe: Rest In Peace*

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## ONE

The last time I saw Edgar, he warned me to sleep with one eye open. I wasn't sleeping at all. When I fell asleep, it was out of sheer exhaustion and only lasted an hour at the most, interrupted by horrific images of Nina bent over me, her broken jaw hanging from her mouth in a terrible grin, Justin bent double over the gaping wound in his chest, and blood pouring from Frost's shoulder like a faucet as Nina twisted the knife in it.

Each night I was lucky to get more than two hours of restless sleep, gained only out of exhaustion's victory over my fear. I hated the night. I hated the drowsiness. For the first week after I was released from the hospital, I tried to self-medicate by switching between caffeine and sleeping pills to prevent the nightmares and to ward off sleep as long as possible. It didn't work and by the third day, Frost had figured out what I was doing. He had promptly evicted all my sources of caffeine, including gifting four cases of Coke to Justin and a bottle of energy-supplements to Liz. Part of me had been furious while the other part admitted that the sleeping pills weren't warding off the images haunting my dreams anyway. The end would never justify the means if the means couldn't get you to the end at all.

Frost was only faring better than me in the respect that he hadn't reached the point of risking an overdose to try and calm his fears. During the night, it seemed to be a fifty-fifty chance as to which of us would wake the other. He always woke screaming one of many names, usually Trina's. Next most common were Justin and I. Every now and then, "Mom" or "Anna" broke the litany.

We gave up on trying to calm one another with words on our second night out of the hospital. There were no words. It was not okay. We were not safe. It was not over. It was real, completely and inescapably.

When Frost got rid of all the caffeine, explaining to me in all too clear of terms that I was going to get myself killed, I wondered if, subconsciously, I was hoping to die in my sleep. Every time he awoke screaming I wanted to kill myself for what I'd done to him. It was only through association with me that any of the tragedies he had endured in the past few months had happened. Every time I looked at his scarred right hand, I heard Trina's screams. Every time he came out of the bathroom, his hair wet and messy from the shower, I thought of discovering Mrs. Frost and Ryan gone and the look on his face when he found out. Every time he winced when he used the damaged muscles in his right arm and shoulder, I saw Nina taking my apartment key after attacking me in the alley. Every time he touched me or kissed my forehead, I heard his exhausted voice whispering "I love you" for the first and only time. I had always thought the problem with our relationship would be me being able to love him, but after what I had allowed to happen to him, I didn't believe he could love me either.

Frost had suffered from a collapsed lung and damage to a ligament and several nerves in his shoulder. Additionally, he'd had a bad concussion from his head wound. He had been released from the hospital before me, but he would never recover full feeling in parts of his arm and it would be at least another month before he got full use of his muscles back. He had been allowed to return to the precinct, but only to work at his desk. Justin told me the Baltimore PD was nervous about him being able to use his shoulder well enough to be safe in the line of duty, but more so, they were worried about his mental state. They didn't want him handling a gun so

soon after what had happened to his family. I was surprised he was even working at a desk already. After all, it was only January 25<sup>th</sup>, less than a month after *The Raven*.

As I nursed an over-sweetened latte Liz had insisted I try, I told her about my concern. “He comes home at exactly five-thirty every afternoon, looking perfectly normal and healthy, and what happened never seems to cross his mind anymore. It’s not right,” I said.

Liz raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you sure he’s not just coping better than you are?”

I gave her a withering look. “Liz, he wakes up screaming at least twice every night. His family was murdered and he nearly killed himself only a month ago. He’s not coping. He’s burying it.”

“I think that’s between him and Dr. Grey,” Liz answered carefully. “You haven’t known him that long, Poe. Maybe this is how he needs to deal with it. Would it really be better if he were lying on the couch in his pajamas watching soap reruns all day?”

“At least I would know what he was thinking,” I said, biting my lip. “I worry that he’s just going to snap all of a sudden. Think of how he was back in December. How can that dissipate so quickly?”

“Maybe Grey has him on anti-depressants.”

I swallowed hard. Would Frost tell me if he was taking something like that? I was firmly opposed to anti-depressants, but that was because of how they’d affected my writing. “I would think he’d have mentioned it or I’d have stumbled across them. It’s not a big apartment,” I finally answered.

Liz gave me a sad look. “Poe, I really think you need to worry less and let him work through this on his own. You live with him and you don’t even have a job to leave him for anymore. You’d be able to tell if he was really...in danger.”

I sighed and slumped a little in my seat, staring down into my half cup of latte. “This latte sucks, Liz. It tastes like a milkshake they put in a microwave.”

“That’s what’s good about it,” she insisted halfheartedly. “Throw some cocoa powder or cinnamon in it. That’ll help.” After a long minute in which neither of us moved or spoke, she said quietly, “Have you applied for any jobs?”

“No,” I answered just as quietly, staring at a strange modernist painting on the wall nearby. The coffee shop was obscure and small, not a chain like Starbucks, and that had appealed to me at first. But the décor was doing strange things to my eyes and, cinnamon or not, that latte just sucked.

“I think it’d be good for you,” Liz said gently. “You should get out a little. Do something to take your mind off it. It sounds like it’s helping Frost.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what to do. I can’t do anything on my feet anymore.”

“I know,” she said wearily. Nina had nicked an important artery near my heart when she’d stabbed me on New Year’s Eve. Major surgery had repaired the damage, but there would be permanent scars in the muscles around my heart. Even if I could bear the strain on my muscles from my previous wounds, the damage to my chest meant the end of my career in the restaurant business. “Have you considered any desk jobs, though?”

“In this economy? I don’t have a business or communications degree, I have no experience in that line of work, and I have no computer skills. No one would hire me.”

Liz pursed her cherry-red lips to think for a moment. “What about... substitute teaching? All you need for that is a bachelor’s degree. If you go ahead and get the certification, you’ll even have a leg up.”

I frowned. “I’m not good with kids.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said flippantly. “Substitute teachers are *substitutes*. You don’t even have to learn the kids’ names unless it’s a long-term position.”

Inside, my stomach muscles clenched and cramped at the thought of standing in front of thirty middle school children. “I couldn’t...”

“Oh, come on. You hand out an assignment or turn on a movie and then you sit in the back of the room reading for the rest of the class. Maybe you send a kid or two to the principal’s office. Easy.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “It is not that easy and you know it. Besides, schools bring back bad memories for me.”

She finished her mocha and reached across the table to steal my latte. She took a long sip of it and smiled like a cat snuggling up in front of a fireplace. “This latte is fantastic. You have no taste.”

“I drink tea. You know that. I’m not used to gooey stuff.”

“Fair enough.” She thought for a moment again and narrowed her eyes at me in a challenge. “Go around to some of the schools, get some recommendations, go for the certification. If you get it, you win a free favor from me to be used at any time in the future. Absolutely anything.”

“I don’t want anything from you, Liz,” I said in exasperation.

“How about for me to stop badgering you about your weight? Or to borrow my credit card for three days? Or a trip to Florida? I’m going to an educational conference for psychiatrists in three months and I’d like to bring someone.”

“Bring Justin,” I suggested with a mischievous smile.

Liz choked on a sip of latte she’d been taking. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” I said, fully smiling now. “I’m sure Justin would love to go to Florida with you. You can have him rub suntan lotion on your back and go to couples’ massages and have hot sex in a Jacuzzi.”

Her jaw dropped and it was almost twenty seconds before she shut her mouth and spoke. “I didn’t expect that from you. Um...well. Um...Justin and I do not have a *thing*. We are not together, certainly will not have the kind of relationship where we go to Florida together three months from now. We haven’t even gone on a date, Poe.”

“Bullshit.”

“No!” she insisted. “Seriously, we haven’t!”

I tilted my head suspiciously. “Then why was he looking at you like he wanted to buy you flowers last Monday when we were at Tony’s?”

Liz narrowed her eyes to slits. “He was *what*?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Um, that shouldn’t be a cause for wrath, Liz. Take it easy.”

“I will not take it easy,” she said harshly. “The last thing I need is some hotshot buying me flowers like he can put me on a leash.”

For a long time, I just stared at her. After a few seconds, she seemed to realize what exactly she’d said and the anger melted from her face. She blushed a deep red and looked down into the latte. “Wow,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. What would the psychiatrist say about that, huh?”

My brow tightened in concern. Liz was so well put-together all the time. Even when Nina shot Justin at Tony’s, Liz had easily held onto her business-like attitude. The last thing I wanted to see were the chinks in her armor, especially not when I knew how hard she must work to hide them. “You don’t have to tell me. I think you should think about giving him a chance,

though. You encouraged me to go after Frost knowing my history. I don't know your history, but if I can keep up a relationship, dysfunctional or not, surely you can."

The muscles in her face and hands were tight, as though she were made of stone. After waiting for her to reply for a while, I sighed in defeat and said, "That will be my favor. If I get a substitute teaching job, you give Justin a chance. Not just going on a date with him, though. Genuinely giving him a chance. He's a good man and I know he's not just some hotshot. He's too serious."

"I don't want serious either, Poe..."

"When was the last time you got laid, Miss Romantic Guru?" I asked, only half snarky. She didn't look up or even consider answering, so I pushed her, "Three months? Six? A year?"

When she answered, it was quiet and sad. "Sixteen months. Bad relationship. I haven't dated since."

I immediately thought of Lex. I had refused to even look at a man for seven years, until I met Frost. When I met Frost, Lex was the only relationship I had ever had, the only kiss, the only everything. I didn't know what this guy had done to Liz, but I didn't want the same thing for her that I'd imposed on myself. "Whatever it is, you can't beat it alone. It'll only get harder to move on the longer you let it fester."

She swallowed hard. "It's not...it's not like Lex."

"It doesn't matter. He hurt you somehow and you don't trust men, not even enough to have a fling," I said. "Very little beyond that changes things. Whether or not I was stable enough to date in the past seven years, I wouldn't wish what I did to myself on anyone." I thought of the way I'd treated Frost when we'd first met, the way I'd gone out of my way to keep him at arm's length when it was obvious he had feelings for me, even after certain things we'd

been through together. I thought of him holding me and waking me from my nightmares, of his kiss on my scars, of the way he talked about Trina before she died and Anna after the rest of his family was gone. I thought of him dragging me out of the pool when I almost drowned myself, of the look in his eyes when I asked him to release Mr. Aaron from jail, of the whispered words *I'm going thank God you're alive every day, Lenore*. "If I've learned anything in the past two months, it's that there are truly good men out there who deserve chances."

Liz looked at me for a long time, her hard black eyes seeming to peer under my skin as she weighed my words. Finally, she sighed and nodded. "You're right. You would have let Frost go even though he's a great guy. And I'll never know if Justin is a great guy if I don't give him a chance." She took a pensive sip of the latte, then finished, "Fine. If you get a job as a substitute teacher, I'll ask Justin out and give him a genuine chance."

I smiled slightly and held out my hand. Liz's cherry lips turned up in a half-smile and she took my hand and shook it. Her expression only turned grimmer, though, as she released my hand and pushed the latte aside. "Anything more from Edgar?" she asked.

My stomach turned over the way it always did when I thought of the curse. "Nothing," I answered. "Not since the hospital. It was just a reminder that beating one nightmare wouldn't end the curse. There isn't anything stalking me yet." A part of me was relieved not to have had any contact with Edgar in nearly a month. However, another part of me was anxious at having received no further guidance from him. He'd given me a very distinct warning in the hospital when I woke up and saw Frost for the first time several weeks ago. To have gone without interrupting my sleep ever since was either a very good sign or very nerve-wracking.

There were very few people I cared about. I had never had anyone I cared about as much as I did the three people I'd met two months prior. My family had been dead and gone since I

was only two years old, so, though it was extremely painful for me to be without them and I still talked to them in the cemetery frequently, it wasn't the same as having someone breathing beside me who talked back. Even Justin, who still remained quite reserved around Liz and I, meant more to me than almost anyone else I'd ever met. And when you could count the number of people you cared about on one hand, suddenly it felt like they were that much more precious, that much easier to lose.

And before long, I would lose them all. The curse would take them from me, one by one.

Liz slid up the cuff of her red wool coat to check her watch. "My lunch break is almost over. I need to get back to Grey's office," she said, breaking me out of my melancholy. I shook myself free of the thoughts, at least for a moment, and stood at the same time she did. I wondered how close we were in height; she was always in heels at least four inches tall and I couldn't guess. Liz smiled tightly and said, "Worry less. Edgar will keep you posted. If you had anything to worry about, he would tell you."

I sighed and nodded. "You're right. He may not be as helpful as I'd like, but he did warn me before *The Raven* started."

"Exactly." Her eyebrows went up assertively. "I meant Frost too, though. He can take care of himself and Dr. Grey knows what he's doing. Take it from an expert on the subject; I spend eight hours a day with him. He's not an idiot and he's definitely concerned with Frost's well-being. He's doing all he can."

"What if it's not enough?" I asked quietly.

Liz looked at me seriously. "You know Frost. Does he trust you?"

"Yes."

"Does he want to keep you from being hurt?"

“Yes.”

“Then he has his best interests in mind, too, Poe,” she said firmly. “He knows how worried you are and would trust you enough to tell you if something was wrong. He knows what it would do to you if he lost control; he won’t risk that.”

My eyes burned with pinpricks of tears at the thought of Frost losing control, but I nodded. She was right. Frost was concerned enough with my sanity that he knew better than to risk his own. If he needed help, he would ask for it.

“I need to get going. Are you okay?” she asked. Her eyebrows had creased downward in concern and I wondered if my eyes had gone red with the potential tears. I swallowed hard to choke them back and answered, “Yeah, I’m fine. You’re right. I just need to worry less.”

“Good.” Liz smiled and touched my shoulder briefly in lieu of a hug. She knew my personal boundaries. “I’ll see you soon, then. Get a job.”

I laughed quietly and left the coffee shop with her, pausing to throw out our coffee cups and receipts as we walked. “I’ll try. Practice your pickup lines. I’m on a mission.”

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I went straight to the library after my meeting with Liz, waving to Carol as I passed through the doors and made for the computer terminals. She smiled oddly at me and didn’t try to spark a conversation. We never spoke anymore; she just gave me a pitying smile when we made eye contact.

I tried not to let it get to me, but it always did. There was no escaping *The Raven*. It would not go away, would not even fade. I imagined everyone in Baltimore knew the story from

the brief onslaught of sensationalist reporting in the first two weeks of January. The media had connected New Year's Eve to the Frost murders and fire, as well as Nina's history. It was a story that was tragic in so many different ways. Even the tragedy of it, though, could not erase the fact that I had killed a human being.

Because I had killed Nina in the apartment I was sharing with Frost as an act of self-defense, Maryland state law protected me. There wasn't even a hearing. Upon his request, one of Frost's cop friends had stopped by in the hospital to explain it to me and assure me I had nothing to worry about. But no matter the circumstances, I knew in my heart that I had murdered Nina. It had been self-defense and I had my injuries to prove it, but I had also wanted her to die for what she had done to Frost and his family, what she had done to me. I had wanted to protect the lives of Frost, Justin and myself, but I had also wanted revenge.

There was no sanctuary. Frost and I were trying to create one in the new apartment we'd had to move into, but even though the colors and layout were different and we still hadn't found places for all of the intact furniture, I still saw the bloody, shattered mirror in my peripheral vision.

I sat down at my favorite computer and produced my flashdrive. As I reached down to plug it in, I paused and frowned. There was a tiny slip of paper taped to the computer, right over the USB port. I tore it off and unfolded it, eyes narrowing as I studied it. It was a receipt from a coffee house for a vanilla latte. As my pulse gradually quickened, I checked the time stamp on it. It was printed with today's date forty minutes ago.

It was my receipt.

My knuckles turned white gripping the receipt between my thumb and pointer finger and my hand started to shake. The room seemed to disappear into a fog and I was only seeing that

time stamp. Then, I noticed a few speckles of ink that had bled through from the reverse side of the receipt. Shaking so hard that I nearly dropped it, I turned the receipt over and read the inscription.

*I miss you.*

My stomach dropped through my abdomen and the receipt fluttered out of my sight as I began to hyperventilate. I gripped the edge of the desk like a lifeline and shut my eyes so tight they hurt and tried not to picture *him*, tried not to hear *his* voice. I tried to focus on slowing the shaking in my muscles so my wounds wouldn't cramp up, but I couldn't do it. Wrenching pain seized my stomach, my side, and my chest one by one, my three stab wounds. I gritted my teeth hard enough to worry about shattering them and leaned back in my chair, massaging my stomach with my fist in an attempt to ease the stress in the muscles. When the pain began to ease, terror brought tears to my eyes and I struggled to regain my composure. I thought of my words to Liz only minutes prior. *There isn't anything stalking me yet.* There was something stalking me, something with hazel eyes that turned red up close and a voice so deadly calm and cold that you knew better than to beg for mercy. You just couldn't help but try.

The muscles in my torso constricted like a snake around my organs, strangling them and bruising them. Bile burned the back of my throat and I swallowed hard to keep from vomiting. I could hear my heart pounding inside my skull, as if mocking the fact that I was still alive where *he* could reach me. If I was dead, at least I'd be safe from *him*. My skin shivered and crawled along my flesh, remembering his touch in all too perfect detail, remembering the tearing and slicing that spilled so much blood, the purpling, livid bruises that would not fade, that glowing white scar down the center of my body that was the bane of my existence. Panic boiled the blood in my veins so it ran faster through my body, pressurized by stress and terror. Oh God, not

this. Anything but this. And not now...I could see the look of agony on Frost's face when he found me ravaged by that monster, the way he'd scream and claw at his own face until it ran with blood, the pain and hate in his eyes, the grief with a force like a tsunami that would overcome him. Lex would get me, he would destroy me, and he would make sure Frost was the one to find me dead and mutilated. If Lex was stalking me, I had no doubt that he'd found out about Frost already and that would make him angry.

Why hadn't Edgar warned me? How long had Lex been stalking me before he got bold enough to leave the receipt? He had easily tracked me to the coffee house with Liz, retrieved the receipt, and left it for me at my favorite computer terminal before I got here. He already knew my routine well enough to know I'd be here.

I didn't know what to do. Panic ruled me and I had no idea where to go or what to do next. Lex was probably still here watching me. I needed Frost. I needed him to protect me and tell me what to do. He would know how to keep Lex at bay and catch him.

Without a moment's hesitation, I dug out my stone-age cellphone, ignoring the library's policy, and selected Frost's number. The phone rang once, twice, thrice, then found his voicemail. *"Hello, you've reached Detective Caleb Frost. I'm on assignment right now or otherwise occupied, but if you leave your name and number, I'll get back to you as soon as I can."*

The voicemail beeped and I said quickly, "Frost, please call me back as soon as you get this. It's very important. I'm calling Justin next."

I hung up and called Justin immediately. His phone only rang once before he picked up. "I heard Frost's phone ring at his desk. He's taking a field exam," Justin said, his cold voice strangely comforting. "What is it?"

“Can you pick me up? Or send someone to pick me up?” I asked, my voice shaking and rapid. I hoped he understood what I was trying to say. “I’m in danger and I need to speak to you or Frost.”

“Shit...” he mumbled. “Stay on the line. Hey Bobby, cover for me! I’ll be back in fifteen!” I heard the bustling sounds of the precinct shift fade as he left his desk. “Where are you?”

“Enoch Pratt Library,” I answered.

“Go by the main desk if there’s someone there and wait for me. I’ll come in and get you. Do not hang up the phone.” I could hear his footsteps echoing on the other line when he stopped speaking. He was running.

I stood and retrieved the receipt from the floor, jamming it and my flashdrive in my pocket. Justin would want Lex’s fingerprints as evidence. Keeping the phone to my ear, I headed back to the entrance and hovered between the front door and the desk, pretending to be on hold. Carol and one other librarian looked at me confusedly, but went back to their work at the front desk. I heard an engine start up on Justin’s end and he peeled out of his parking space like a bat out of Hell. “Tell me what’s going on,” he said, not winded at all from his run.

I swallowed hard, trying to keep my fear bottled in. “I’m being stalked. He left a receipt of mine from this morning where he knew I’d find it.”

“Do you know who it is?”

My stomach twisted. “Yes.”

“Who?”

A shudder rippled through me and hot tears seared my eyes, then my cheeks as they fell.

“Do you know about...Lex?”

“Fuck...” Justin groaned. “Fuck. Yes.”

“Frost told you?” I asked, thinking I’d be hurt if I wasn’t so afraid right then.

“Of course not. I ran a background check on you when Frost mentioned you. Wasn’t hard to find. I’m less than five minutes away. Try to stay calm,” he said firmly. Despite his usual stony voice, though, it was clear he wasn’t calm. The fact that he was showing emotion at all was a good sign that I was in trouble. My knees began to shake and I had to tighten the muscles in my legs to keep them from buckling. “Poe, listen,” Justin said when I didn’t respond. “You’re safe where you are. You’re by people, right? By the front desk?”

“Yes,” I answered, my voice a mere squeak.

“You’re safe. He won’t come near you there. He’s not being that bold. I’ll be there in four minutes and I’m taking you straight to the precinct, alright?”

“Kay,” I choked out, fighting to retain control of myself. Four minutes. I could handle four minutes. If I moved from this spot or made a scene, I would only put myself in more danger. Composure was key. Once I was in Justin’s squad car, I could panic all I wanted.

Justin kept talking to me and insisting that I keep responding. I played by his rules, but couldn’t pull myself an inch from the brink of insanity until I saw him come through the library doors. I hung up the phone and rushed towards him, hugging him for the first time. He held me for a moment and I could feel him scanning the library for Lex. After a few seconds, he said, “Let’s go.”

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My heart was still racing as I sat in Frost's chair at the precinct, ripping my fingernails to the quick. When several minutes had gone by, Justin wrenched my hands apart and held one down to the arm of my chair. I glared at him, but he glared right back. "If you make them bleed, Frost will flip. In any case, you're driving me nuts."

I swatted his large hand with my free one and he released me, rolling his eyes. "If you want him to bitch at you, be my guest, but I'm not gonna watch you do it. It's like nails on a chalkboard." He got up from his chair across from me and made to wander away. "Do you drink coffee?" he asked.

I didn't want anything and I didn't want to ask him for anything, but I was thinking something hot might be good for my nerves. They felt threadbare, like the nerve-endings were barely holding together, and losing control would only make me more vulnerable. "Tea if you've got it," I answered. "Otherwise, I'm fine."

He wandered towards the breakroom and I watched him go. His shoulders were as broad as Frost's and his back just as tense, which was saying something. Depending on what was on his mind, Frost walked like he was crossing a floor made of broken glass. When Justin turned the corner and left my sight, the anxiety overtook me again. I tried to focus on the ruckus around me. There were phones ringing everywhere and office doors opening and closing. Three detectives were debating something near the left wall. Two beat cops escorted a fat man with broken Coke bottle glasses and a bloody nose down the hall towards the elevator. One of the overhead lights was flickering and I wondered if anyone had called maintenance yet. At least they weren't LED.

My true thoughts wouldn't leave me, though. I should get a gun. Frost would tell me how to get one and teach me to shoot it. How many guns did he have? I didn't even know.

There was at least his Berretta 9mm from the force, a Glock in the kitchen, and something that required a rather large gun cabinet in the bedroom closet. He had a switchblade too that he always had with him lately, but I'd never seen him with a taser or pepper spray. I suppose if he couldn't use his gun, he'd probably be pissed enough to do some serious damage with his knife or his fists. There was one time a few days after we got home from the hospital when we were packing and a box fell over in the bedroom. It had startled Frost and he had thrown his switchblade, lodging it hilt-deep in the wall.

How would he react when I told him Lex was back? A memory leapt to my mind from a week ago. We were packing and everything was in odd locations, including four lamps balanced on the coffee table. My muscles had cramped up suddenly and I'd collapsed in the living room, knocking the lamps over like dominos. I was in so much pain, I didn't even hear them smash, just heard my scream.

I lied on the floor, curled into a tiny ball with my chin drilling into my knees, trying to hold in more screams. Frost shouted a curse and ran to my side. I'd shut my eyes tight, but I could hear the *patter* of broken glass as he knelt beside me. I heard a rustle of fabric and he was muttering curses as he pulled me into his lap. I opened my eyes in surprise at the sting when he pressed the shirt he'd taken off against my head. I had sliced my temple on one of the lamps. As he held me, he gripped one of my hands on my stomach. I looked up at him. He was staring down at my stomach with a look of such hate and wrath that it was easy to see where his thoughts had taken him. If I hadn't been in so much pain, I would have tried to calm and comfort him.

But all the calming and comforting I could offer would never be enough. Even as a horror writer, I couldn't imagine the things Frost would do to Lex if he got his hands on him.

Even though we never mentioned Lex or what he'd done to me, it was obvious that Frost hated him more than he hated anyone, including Nina Faucett.

Thinking of Nina, though, brought up memories of Frost's bad days, of the horrible silence in December, when I'd been terrified to leave him alone even to use the bathroom. It reminded me of the look on his face when I'd held him in the Frosts' pool watching the manor burn and stopping him from killing himself on New Year's Eve by a fraction of a second. I thought of waking up to him screaming my name and reaching for his service weapon on the nightstand, of the way his eyes went to my wrists or stomach first when I woke him.

My first thought had been an image of Frost storming towards his motorcycle like a raging bull, his Glock in one hand and his Berretta in the other. But the second was of his face crumbling in horror, of him forgoing sleep indefinitely to stand guard in the living room, of him being afraid to leave me and go to work. He'd be lying on the couch watching soaps in the time it took for us to get home.

A shot of clarity sliced through the fear that had consumed me since I'd found the receipt. Justin sat down across from me, but I didn't take the cup of tea he offered me. After a few seconds of watching me stare at my hands, he set down the cup. I looked levelly at him and his face turned disturbed at the look in my eye. "We can't tell Frost," I said.

For the first time in over an hour, it was his turn to be panicked. "What are you talking about? Frost is the person who needs to know most of all. You live together."

"Yes, but he's recovering," I said resolutely. "He's at a delicate place, one step short of achieving normalcy. He might get to go back into the field soon. He's still having nightmares, but he's been doing very well otherwise. Considering what he's been through, that's worth a

great deal to me. After all I've taken from him, I need to give him his best chance at recovering. This will shatter him."

"He has to know, Poe," Justin said just as resolutely. "You need him to protect you and he deserves to know. What happens when Lex catches you off guard and Frost is the one to find you? What happens when he finds out that we didn't tell him even though he could have saved you?" I shuddered at the thought and wrenched my gaze from his. "This goes against everything I know," Justin said angrily. "As a cop, as a soldier, and as his partner. This is wrong, morally and logically."

Tears pricked my eyes and I shook my head, seeing the look of fear and hate on Frost's face, the look of agony as he remembered everything I'd told him about Lex. "I can't tell him, Justin. Not now, not like this. He's so close. You know what this will do to him!" I looked at Justin and he shifted in his seat, uncertain for the first time. I took that as acknowledgement and pushed harder. "This will push back his recovery time by months. It'll unbalance him and if that happens, it'll be easier for him to go back to grieving and blaming himself for *The Raven*. You know I'm right."

Justin shook his head slowly. "Yes," he said, "But I also know I'm right. I wish...I wish I knew he was okay. I wish I could trust him."

"But you can't," I said firmly. "When the right time comes, I will tell him immediately. I don't want to leave him out any more than you do and you're right, I need him to protect me. But I can't hurt him right now."

For a long time, Justin just stared at me, debating, weighing his knowledge of what was right against his fear for Frost's sanity. Finally, he said, in a voice laden with doubt, "Tell him Edgar sent you another warning in a dream. Nothing to alarm him, but something that will put

him on his guard. He'll protect you without having to know what's coming. I'll try to catch up to Lex, but from what I already know about him, he'll be hard to track."

"He's smart," I agreed, my composure plummeting again as what I was doing sunk in.

"He got hauled into court for several girls, not just me, and handled himself easily."

"If we can find him, we'll serve him with a restraining order. Then if he ever comes near you, we have something to charge him with."

"It won't stop him," I said shakily. "Not even if you find him."

"No, but it's something," Justin answered grimly. "I'll do the best I can, but what we really need is Frost."

"I know."