

## “Poe: Nevermore” – Rachel M. Martens

### ONE

*Everything is bathed in red light, as if blood had splattered over the light fixtures and its color is being cast about the room in horrific brilliance. The tips of my fingers skim across the walls, leaving thin white lines of cleanliness on the otherwise blood-soaked wallpaper beneath which someone’s life drips. My shoes pick up red stain with each step I take on the swamp-like plush carpet, each of those steps accompanied by a nauseating squishing sound. A door waits at the end of the hallway, hanging ajar by a mere inch, just enough to reveal the darkness in the room beyond. My pulse quickens and I can feel my ribcage expanding and contracting with each breath, can hear my heart beating louder, louder with every step towards that door.... The stench of blood thick in the air begins to twist my stomach and make me gag. The pounding of my heart in my head is inducing a migraine and with each thump of the muscle, my eyes shiver and the entire hallway seems to vibrate. Or, perhaps, the vibrations of the hallway are not a result of the migraine, but of my heart pounding with such force that the sound emanating from within my chest is so loud as to shake the entire house. My skull feels as though it has been caught within a slowly tightening vice, crushing me in its iron jaws, sending warm blood trickling from my ears.*

*I reach the door and slowly extend my hand before me, the pain in my head growing exponentially as I close the distance. I press my palm flush against the blood-spattered pane. I can hear a creaking sound exploding in my ears, and I'm screaming as my skull begins to crack under the pressure. With one last step forward, I push the door open...*

*The world falls away beneath my feet, my stomach, my heart, my breath in my throat, water in my legs. And I'm falling, falling, falling, falling....*

A scream jolted me awake and I sprang upright in my bed, eyes wide as saucers as they darted around. Just as the knee-jerk reaction to find the source of the scream and offer help nearly took hold, I realized the screamer was me.

My shoulders slumped and I put one hand to my temple to hold up my head while I tried to slow my racing pulse and concentrate on the room around me, on reality. *Relax, Poe. That wasn't real.*

Of course the nightmare wasn't real, they never were, but its source was all too alive in my memory and that was what always made the nightmares difficult to recover from. It wasn't sleep deprivation or graphic images that were the real Death's Heads that haunted me. It was the emotional wounds that never really heal, the scars that can so easily be torn open again by a masochistic subconscious.

I took another deep, slow breath and then, with the nightmare sufficiently dispelled that my hands were no longer shaking, took my hand from my head and turned on the lamp on my bedside table. As the tiny, dingy apartment bedroom was flooded with light, I grasped the water glass I had left near the lamp and took a cautious sip. Slowly, I returned the half-empty glass to its place and adjusted the pillows so that I

could lean back on them against the black rummage sale headboard with hand-Sharpied silver scrollwork. The room was very small, so the poor lighting given off by the solitary lamp was enough to throw nearly the entire space into relief, soaked up only in the thick black curtains hiding the lights of Baltimore from my view. The bed was a full-size mattress as thin as a pillow, acquired at the same rummage sale as the headboard, with three thick quilts on it to defend against the apartment's nonexistent heating system. The bed took up the vast majority of the floorspace, but I'd managed to wedge a large dresser with a tiny mirror balanced on it against the opposing wall. Nearly a dozen cleverly placed paintings and drawings I'd done over the years hid water stains and peeling plaster on the walls. The cost of living in Baltimore wasn't obscene by any means, but being only two years out of college with no family or inheritance to help me get by meant I was extremely lucky to afford even an apartment this lousy. Battered paperbacks and water-damaged hardcovers filled rickety bookshelves along the walls and continued out into the living area. Just looking at the hundreds of books surrounding me, no matter their condition, was enough to chase away the nightmare.

I turned back towards the bedside table and checked the display on my stone-age alarm clock. Sure enough, it was five o'clock. The damn thing hadn't gone off.

Throwing off the quilts, I shivered and slipped out of bed, wincing when my feet connected with the cold hardwood floor. Quickly, I flung open the closet and retrieved a black turtleneck, jeans and sneakers, then proceeded to the dresser for a bra, panties, and socks. The bathroom had looked like something straight out of parasite-heaven when I'd first started renting here, but I'd since scrubbed it and smothered every surface in bleach enough times that it no longer made me nauseous to shower in there. I showered quickly

and dressed, then blow-dried my long, thick, dark brown hair, a task which took me no less than ten minutes when I was rushed, as on this occasion, and left it mostly damp. Hurriedly, I flung open the door to dispel the steam, wincing when it crashed against the wall with the broken doorstep, and wiped the fog off the mirror with a towel. I rushed to apply some cover-up to conceal the triple-bags under my eyes, scars of an insomniac, before the steam overtook the glass again. In the kitchen, I retrieved an apple from the refrigerator and grabbed my jean jacket and some cash, exiting the apartment and locking the door before descending the stairs at a run.

The trouble with working at Starbucks is that you often have to work in the early hours of the day. It's a good job for someone who doesn't sleep much, though; I was awake every morning by five anyway.

My apartment was only about five blocks from the Starbucks location where I worked, so I liked to run there every morning for my shift. Living in downtown Baltimore meant that during most of the day, the sidewalks were crowded and not exactly a good environment for running, but in the early hours of the morning like this, there were only a spare few people around. The sky was thick with dark grey clouds, though it was nearly six o'clock, and a fresh dusting of snow covered the sidewalk, disturbed only in thin tracks left by joggers and dog-walkers. Few other people were dedicated or crazy enough to be out on the streets so early in late November.

I pumped my legs and broke into a sprint, my sneakers pounding on the cold-hardened cement. It takes either coordination or pure stupidity to run on fresh snow and ice like that and I'd done my fair share of skidding to the pavement with my clumsiness. Today, though, I managed to stay upright even while crossing the side streets and

jumping over piles of slush stirred up by passing cars. My heart beat faster, my lungs pumped harder, and I felt a smile ever-so-slowly stretching across my face as the freeness of the icy air and the city flying by me swept the night's terrors away.

Starbucks was quiet when I arrived; only a jogger or two and one man with a laptop were seated at the tables. There was one employee at the counter, a high school drop-out named Gavin. Gavin spent his days working at this less than fine establishment and playing World of Warcraft. I knew because on the rare occasion we'd tried to force a conversation, within about two exchanges the subject inevitably shifted to his maniacal obsession with the game. As a result, I tried not to encourage conversation, which wasn't too difficult. The kid was usually so busy daydreaming or whispering to himself that he barely had a free moment to talk. He did register my arrival, though, and rewarded me with a not-quite-half smile, along with a 'Hey, Poe.'

In the back room, I punched in and hung up my coat, replacing it with my Starbucks uniform, which I hurriedly threw on, along with the silly green hat, apron, and non-slip shoes. I even labeled my punch-cards 'Poe', though that wasn't my first name. I went by my last name on account of an unfortunate choice by my parents: Elenora Allison Poe. I hated my first and middle name passionately. Besides, being a huge fan of Edgar Allan Poe made borrowing the last name as my first all too desirable.

I headed out to the counter, tying my apron as I went and rolling my eyes upon spotting the manager in his office, whiling away his time on the computer, no doubt watching porn as was his custom. I really pitied his wife. He wore a gold band on his left ring-finger despite the fact that I couldn't imagine a woman who would stoop so low as to marry him. Then again, I was not one to judge. Mrs. Aaron had married my foster

father after all. If Jonathan Aaron had once been sane enough to be marriage material, then it wasn't so hard to see that a surly coffee-shop owner with a profound interest in Internet porn could have been as well.

I continued to my post behind the counter, delivering a small smile to Gavin as I relieved him. Without a word, he scampered into the back room to grab his monstrous Star Trek hoodie and deposit his hat and apron. I slipped my apple out of my pocket and hid it away under the counter to save it for the off-chance I would have time to eat it during my shift. Within a minute or so, Gavin was stalking through Starbucks to the front door and, ultimately, the nearest bus stop, his iPod blasting quirky techno music through his earbuds. I had tried more than once to tell him he would be deaf within a few years, but only earned myself a few sneers and dirty looks as payment for the advice.

I did not really mind working at Starbucks. It was not the cushiest job in Baltimore and I was not the full-time writer I dreamed of being yet, but it wasn't bad. The coffee shop generally smelled good and the music the manager selected was soft and relaxing, as opposed to the grocery store music I had endured at other establishments. As a bonus, the pay was a few dollars better than minimum wage, which was more than could be said of most of the other places I had held jobs at since I was fifteen.

As my shift wore on, I found myself falling deeper and deeper into my memories. It was not nostalgia by any stretch of the imagination, though I was not happy with where I was in my life. It was more like a cancer that you can keep cutting out only to have it resurface in another part of your body, the sort that can never really be cured or forgotten. I tried to avoid letting the memories consume me, as they so often tended to do. They

slowly ate away at the wall I had carefully constructed to bury them at the back of my mind.

Up until I turned fifteen, I had had the luxury of my bare essential clothing paid for by my foster-parents, who also permitted me to use the spare bedroom upstairs. When I had turned fifteen, though, I had come home from school to find all my possessions that the Aarons had paid for at the curb. The bed frame was broken, the mattress was torn, the sheets and curtains ripped, the nightstand and dresser kicked in. I would never forget the way my stomach had dropped when I had stood in the threshold of my former bedroom, staring into my foster-father's new study as he smiled at me lecherously from behind a huge desk. He was fingering the gaudy ring he always wore with the big engraved 'A' on it, the ring he loved more than anyone else in the world combined. "Happy birthday, Elenora," he'd said slowly, as if he was savoring the words.

My foster-parents from then on refused to contribute to my state of living any more than providing me with one meal a day and allowing me to live in the basement, where I slept on an ancient couch missing its springs until I left for college. I had to find a way to pay for any other comforts myself.

To be honest, I was glad to be in the basement, far away from the bastard.

Hot coffee overflowed the cup I was filling and I snapped out of the depressing reverie, wincing and smashing my palm on the 'stop' button. Carefully, I set the cup down on the counter and wiped the coffee from it and my hands, then brought the cup to the customer, a young blond guy in jeans and a heavy leather jacket. He was not the type we usually got in Starbucks, but I was not about to object. He raised his eyebrows, looking down towards the counter, and muttered, "Jeez."

I realized he was looking at my scalded red hands and shrugged, half-smiling grimly, “It’s nothing. High tolerance for pain. I barely even felt it.”

I realized it was a bad answer as I said it, accurate as it might be, but he did not give me an odd look, as I had expected him to. Instead, he frowned in unwavering concern and handed me a ten-dollar bill. “If you say so.”

I made no response and opened the cash register, depositing the ten and counting out his change for him. When I held out the change and his receipt to him, he touched my hand and met my gaze. I felt my heart skip a beat, not only at the foreign warmth of his hand, but also at his face, which had not really registered until that moment. One of the side-effects of poor self-esteem was not usually meeting the eyes of others, but this man’s eyes were brilliant, a silvery blue that was like ice but simultaneously molten like liquid steel. They were not blue and not silver. They were not merely like water or metal; they were molten ice, something frozen and smoldering all at once. His face was chiseled, his jaw strong, his mouth soft and compassionate, but it was those eyes that held me frozen like the ice swirling in their depths.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked.

For just a moment, I wondered if he was really asking about my hands or something else. Then I swallowed in disappointment as the steel door I had built in my mind slammed shut, sealing away my emotions as a necessary evil. I nodded and gave him a fake half-smile I knew he did not buy. “I’m fine,” I said unemotionally, one step short of coldly.

He frowned deeply and I felt those eyes piercing right through my skin, as if he could see straight into my soul. “Okay. Thank you,” he said. After a hesitant moment,

he took the receipt, but left me the change, leaving the coffee shop behind. Long after he had gone, the nerve-endings in my hand still felt strange and tingly and I was sure it was not because of the coffee. I had never been touched like that. I had never seen someone look at me with so much concern, as if they actually cared. As if I mattered.

*No. No, no, no.* I pushed down the bizarre new emotions trying to break the surface, shoving the man with the blue eyes violently from my mind. He was just a random customer I would never see again. Besides, I was probably imagining the way he looked at me and what was meant by it. Why should he feel concern for me, particularly when he knew me as no more than a Starbucks barista?

Even if I was right about the way he looked at me and even if by some strange stroke of...what? Luck? If by luck, if that was really the correct word, I saw him again, it would never develop into anything worthwhile. He would either turn out to be yet another scumbag, or I would be too worried that he was to let him in. I had been broken one too many times.

They say that the hearts of the dead are never silent. They say that they live on, beat on, love on forever. But what of the hearts of the living? What of those ones who have been broken so many times that they would be better off dead? I knew that their hearts fell silent because mine had done just that. I was broken, empty, dead inside...a hollowed out, ravaged shell of the girl I was. There are those among the living who walk about, breathe, speak, eat, drink, sleep...all while dead. I was one of them.

I had been broken one too many times and torn in one too many pieces. My heart beat with the same passion as the common ghost. I felt nothing anymore: not pain, not passion, and certainly not love. My question was not whether the living could go on

dead, because I knew they could, but rather whether the person they once were, the shadow of their shattered soul, could ever be resurrected.

I used to hope such a thing would one day be possible for me. That was before I was broken again, and again, and once more again. I also used to wonder if the pain would ever end until one morning I woke to find that it had gone, much like a nightmare disappears in the light of a new day, only to be replaced by a coldness so much worse than grief, a lack of emotion and feeling, a steel door that hid all my potential for normalcy any time an opportunity to live again arose. The number of offers to ‘hang out’, ‘check out a party’ or ‘study together’ in college that I had turned down were evidence of that. Since I was seventeen, I had not allowed a single person to walk into my life and the few almost-friends I had had quickly fell away. I tried to hold on to my foster-mother, Mrs. Aaron, because she was so sweet and tried to help me, but I could not. I was not the same person anymore.

As Gigi, the girl who would take my shift, entered the coffeehouse, she waved a quiet hello and vanished into the back room. Watching her, I reflected on what I had lost. Not many friends. I had never been good at making friends, especially because my family had died when I was only two years old and ever since I started preschool, other kids made up cruel rumors about me. One of the worst had actually been Gigi’s older sister, who was my age and frankly sociopathic, Gigi’s foil in many ways. She had a large portion of the student body convinced until high school that I had somehow caused the death of my family and that was why I had been the sole survivor of the tragedy. By high school, no one believed that anymore, but the damage had already been done and befriending me was social suicide.

As a result, I had never had friends nor learned the ability to make friends. I never met anyone in college I spoke to regularly and my roommate had avoided me because I had honestly scared her. I did not blame her and did not mind. I had grown used to the silence.

Gigi tapped me on the shoulder, breaking me out of my reverie. She smiled nicely at me, her perfect white teeth, curly red hair and bright green eyes positively glowing in her attempt to make nice. She was a sweet girl, trying to earn her way through college despite the fact that her parents were very wealthy. It also seemed she was trying to make friends with me and fix me. “It’s noon, Poe.”

I smiled tightly back at the poor girl. She was wasting her time. “Thanks, Gigi.” Just as I was heading for the back room, I remembered my apple and returned to fetch it. As I headed to the back room for my coat and to punch out, I caught Gigi out of my peripheral vision looking at me with concern, no doubt guessing that that was all I was eating for lunch.

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I am so cold. Always so cold. The cell is like an icebox. The walls are damp, a wet chill hangs in the air, the cell block reeks of unwashed bodies.

I am sweating. Sweating icicles that drip down the center of my back, over my face, along my chest and arms. I’d kill her. I’d kill them all. I’d kill her and I’d kill that bastard and I’d kill the weak stupid bitch he chose over me and I’d kill them all.

When I got out. Only a few days now, the writing was on the wall, their numbers were up. I'd pick them off one by one, just as it should've been years ago. I know exactly how to do it. I'd planned it perfectly. There were no flaws, no chinks in the armor, nothing. No possibility for failure. If I played my cards right, no one would ever even know I was the dealer. No one had known the last time, or the time before. So much misery, all my beautiful work. And I'd do it again. But this time, it would be final.

They will die. They will die. They will die....

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I had a few hours to kill before my shift at the restaurant where I worked, so I walked several blocks to the Enoch Pratt Library. I spent hours every day in that library because it was old, it was architecturally beautiful, there was a great collection of books, and, best of all, it was free and I was poor. Usually, I spent my time there at one of the computer terminals, writing. I did not have the money for a computer of my own.

When I passed through the main doors of the library, the head librarian, Carol, smiled brightly and waved to me. "Nice to see you, Poe."

I smiled slightly. "Nice to see you too, Carol. How was your vacation?"

Carol grinned and her eyes turned reminiscing. "Oh, George and I had a wonderful time. You know, Barbados is wonderful this time of year. The beaches were the perfect escape from this dreadful cold weather. I don't think we've had a winter this cold and this early in years."

I shrugged. “I don’t mind the cold too much. But with how clumsy I am, that ice is terrible.”

“Winter in general is terrible!” Carol insisted, her voice growing humorously impassioned about the issue. “All that ice and slush and whatnot...although,” she added after a thought, “My kids will be home from college soon for the holidays, so that will be lovely. It’s always so nice to have the family together.”

My smile turned tight and it felt as though a stone had settled in my stomach, but I nodded. “Yes. I’m sure that will be wonderful.”

With nothing more, I slipped through the library to one of the computer terminals Carol couldn’t see from the front desk. I rested my elbows on the desk and placed my head in my hands. I did not cry, the wounds were too old for that, but there was the sick aching in my chest that was always there to remind me of how hard it is to escape from such a massive loss. One parent or sibling would be painful enough to lose, but both parents and both siblings? I did not even have other relatives. My entire family had been wiped out, leaving me with nothing at the age of two. Somehow I could still recall glimpses of them, but I was not sure if that made the loss any less difficult. In fact, it might have made it worse.

I pushed away the painful memories, logging into the computer with my library card and taking a flashdrive from my pocket. I plugged it into one of the USB ports and scrolled through the files, selecting one after some deliberation, and began to work on it. I was not even a page in when someone took a seat in the chair next to me. I stopped typing, my jaw tightening. I knew that every other terminal was open. There was no one

at the computers around me when I had sat down and I would have noticed if someone had appeared since then. Why then was this person sitting *right* next to me?

I was just starting to calm myself, telling myself for the thousandth time that I was being paranoid, when a familiar voice asked, “What are you writing?”

As I tried to slow my racing heart, I gradually twisted in my seat to look at the individual seated next to me and suddenly froze, my gaze locked by eyes that could only be described as molten ice, if such a thing existed. After a brief moment, I recovered and my eyes narrowed. “How did you find me here? Are you stalking me?” I accused. “Who are you?”

The blue-eyed young man I had met earlier at Starbucks smiled, seeming to take note of my defensiveness and mentally file it, then skirt around it. “Coincidence. I happen to like the library too and saw you sitting here. I recognized you,” he said.

“Right,” I snapped, shifting my legs around the chair to face him head-on. “I’m not interested, I do not like to be followed and I am not attractive enough to be worth stalking. You are wasting your time and I am not someone you can mess with. Leave me alone.”

He smiled patiently, his eyes smoldering, the corner of his mouth twitching slightly in an attempt to hide a smile. “I just wanted to talk to you again, maybe over a drink? It’s not every day you meet someone who’s genuinely interesting and you’ve only reinforced that view since I sat down.”

I raised an eyebrow and gave him a sidelong glance. “‘Genuinely interesting’? What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that I think you seem unique and have a depth that most people lack and I like that about you,” he answered, his blue eyes shining with humor. “Besides, I think you are attractive enough to be stalk-able.”

I gave him a dark look and answered dryly, “Like I said, I’m not interested. Please leave me alone.” I turned back to my computer, noticing that his smile tightened as I did so. He did not leave, but faced forward in his chair and cracked open a book I had not noticed in his hand. The cover seemed familiar in my peripheral vision and I chanced a glance in his direction. The title read: *Selected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*.

He noticed my less than stealthy glance and smiled slightly. “Do you read Edgar Allan Poe?”

I shrugged nonchalantly and turned my attention back to my computer screen. Coincidence. “Isn’t he some horror writer?”

He chuckled quietly. “He wrote a lot of humorous things too. One I can think of, perhaps you’ve heard of it, I believe is called *The System of Doctor Fether and Professor Tarr*.”

I gritted my teeth and couldn’t help correcting him. “*Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether*.”

“I knew you read him,” he said with a broad smile. “You seem like the type.”

I sighed inwardly, unable to resist a conversation about Edgar Allan Poe. “I wrote my senior thesis on him. He was a genius.”

“A man with that depth of emotion, creative ingenuity and sheer brainpower ...brilliant. Simply brilliant. Have you heard that he was the first to come up with the idea of the Big Bang Theory?”

A smile stretched across my face, despite my attempts to stop it. I couldn't remember the last time that had been a problem for me. "I never thought I'd meet someone else who knew that about him."

"He also never went by 'Edgar Allan Poe', it was always simply 'Edgar Poe', which incidentally brings us to the subject of names. I'm Frost."

I raised an eyebrow and turned to face him again, shaking the hand he offered me. His hand was as warm and soft as I'd remembered it from this morning and sent the same weird warmth through my veins. "Poe. Do you have a first name, Frost?"

"I never go by it. Just Frost. Do you have a first name, Poe? And is the name coincidence?" he asked with a grin.

I answered with a much smaller smile. "I never go by my first name either. And 'Poe' is my real name, though of course I'm quite sure it's not from blood relation. I don't have connections to any of his cousins and obviously I'm not a direct descendant."

Frost nodded, his eyes sort of mysterious, as if he was filing away every word I said for future study. He released my hand and looked to my computer. "So, what are you writing?"

"Um..." I hesitated, self-conscious. "Well, I suppose right now I'm working on a novel."

His eyebrows shot up and he chuckled in surprise. "You're kidding."

"No. Aside from being a Starbucks barista, I'm an aspiring writer."

Frost smiled and met my gaze again. "That's incredible," he said honestly. "I wish I could write. I bet it's nice to fall into some other world. Something completely under your control."

I frowned slightly, intrigued by the insight. “Yes,” I said quietly. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

Frost’s eyes had glazed slightly, as if his mind was drifting somewhere else, perhaps somewhere less pleasant. With a blink of the eye, he shook it off and smiled crookedly. “So, about that drink?”

I sighed and shook my head, bad memories of my own racing through my mind. “I don’t drink, actually. Thank you for the offer, though.”

“Neither do I. I suggested it because a drink is far less pressure than dinner.”

I swallowed hard and looked to him sadly. “I’m working tonight. Sorry.”

“When are you not working?” he asked with a mischievous glint in his icy eyes. “I suspect you don’t say ‘yes’ often, but you’re far too interesting for me to give up on easily.”

I smiled tightly and saved my writing, then logged off the computer. “I can’t. I work five nights a week and any free time I have I need to be writing. Otherwise I’ll never publish anything and I’ll be stuck at Starbucks forever.” I stood and pushed in my chair, awkwardly avoiding his piercing gaze as I said, “I enjoyed talking to you, Frost. It was nice to meet you.”

With that, I quickly stepped around him, wrapping my arms around me to hold myself together, and left the library, letting the ice-cold wind sweep me away down the city street.