

*“His cue, which was to perfect an imitation of myself, lay both in words and in actions; and most admirably did he play his part....and his singular whisper, it grew the very echo of my own.”*

*from “William Wilson”*

*“There is something in the unselfish and the self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man.”*

*from “The Black Cat”*

## Chapter 1

The eyes in the chiseled skull looking back at Edgar felt as empty as his heart.

He dropped his pencil and sketchbook onto the grass beside him, and leaned back against the tombstone. Coming to the graveyard to write poetry and draw usually gave him a sense of peace, but that morning, after yet another argument with his adoptive father, he felt incredibly sad.

The sound of a bird's raucous call nearby caused Edgar to look up; a blur of dark wings disappeared into the foliage. From the corner of his eye he thought he saw something larger move.

“Hello? Is someone there?” Edgar stood and took one cautious step toward the small mausoleum. Its walls were so densely covered in ivy, the stone was nearly invisible. Edgar took another step but stopped when he heard low laughter, or more precisely, someone trying to stifle a chuckle unsuccessfully.

“Robert, is that you? I warn you, I’m not in the mood for one of your pranks.” Edgar unclenched his fists and crossed his arms, subconsciously assuming the exact same posture as his father hours earlier.

“Edgar.” The hoarse whisper was muffled; it echoed as if it came from within the crypt. Edgar edged his way cautiously over to its entrance and saw the iron gate protecting the wooden door stood unlocked and ajar. The stained-glass window of jewel-toned abstract shapes kept him from being able to see inside.

The sound of more laughter behind the thick door made Edgar’s skin crawl, but his unease was quickly replaced by anger as he imagined how his friend would tell the story later. Edgar lifted the iron latch on the door and opened it slowly. He found it difficult to see in the gloom of the crypt at first, but soon he could discern what appeared to be covered enclosures built into the walls on either side that likely held caskets. As he stood in the doorway with the sunlight spilling around him into the dusky room, his breath caught in his chest. Something crouched in the far corner.

At first it appeared to be an inhuman creature, one of many that inhabited Edgar’s dreams. But when it stood, Edgar saw it was a man, a boy actually, a few years from adulthood like himself. This person wore clothing like his own and was of similar height and build. As he smiled at Edgar, the grin grew horribly wider and wider—*like the grin of the skull I was sketching*. Edgar thought the boy must be mad.

“And so we meet,” the boy said in a hoarse, soft voice barely above a whisper. The speaker tilted his head oddly as he smiled which sent a shiver up Edgar’s spine, but then an even more horrifying realization struck Edgar. The boy looked like him. Exactly like him.

Edgar shut his eyes tightly as the sound of crazed giggling bounced off the stone walls, enveloping him like the gloom and wrapping him in its cold embrace so that he no longer felt the warmth of the sun on his back. When the laughter faded, Edgar reluctantly opened his eyes and found he was alone.

Edgar spun in the doorway and desperately searched the graveyard for movement but, seeing nothing, forced himself to turn back and look again within the crypt. With his heart pounding, Edgar stepped further into the mausoleum and made his way to the back wall where the boy had been. No sign suggested that anyone had been there. The stone floor was clear of any dirt or dust, so the absence of footprints meant little.

Edgar left the crypt and shut the door and the iron gate, frowning for a moment as he paused to stare at the entrance. Shaking his head, he made his way back to the spot where he had been

sketching. He picked up his pencil and book from where he had dropped them and stood, surveying the gently rolling hills of the cemetery as he pondered what had happened.

A movement to his right caught his eye: a dark shadow streaked low along the ground before disappearing between two tombstones. Edgar's eyes searched the adjacent crosses and statues, not sure whether he hoped to see the figure again or not.

A small dark shape caught his eye as it jumped up onto the top of a low, flat stone bearing a bronze plaque. With relief Edgar saw it was a cat, solid black except for a small patch of white on its chest. It lay down on the warm stone and licked the top of its paw which it then used to clean its face and right ear. Abruptly it stopped its cleaning and stared at Edgar.

*What's wrong with its face?*

Edgar took a step toward the cat, but it jumped down from the small memorial and ran quickly off through the cemetery and into the nearby woods.

The familiar pang of loneliness that swelled in Edgar's chest was overwhelming.

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"Hello, what's this?"

Edgar's eyes flew open and he sat up from where he had been dozing in the warm summer air against the trunk of a large oak tree.

"Give that back," Edgar said. He reached for the sketchbook Robert had snatched from his lap and held open barely out of Edgar's reach. The book was angled so that the sketch of a ghoulish, crouching figure glared out from its pages. "I thought you were reading."

"This is much more interesting than *The Iliad*," Robert said, ignoring Edgar's extended hand and returning his attention to the sketchbook. "I don't know how anyone is supposed to keep up with all those Greek names. But, seriously, Edgar, these drawings are fantastic. I thought you just wrote sad little poems in here." He flipped the book around to study the picture again. "But I must say, this picture is..." He paused, searching for the right word. "...well, disturbing. What would make you draw such things?" He turned several pages which displayed images of various robed specters and skeletons and then stopped to look at his friend. "I mean, they're all very good, but..." His voice trailed off.

Edgar shrugged. "I don't know. I like drawing them."

Robert studied his friend. “Sometimes you’re so withdrawn, so gloomy, I’d think you were brought up in an orphanage run by sadistic nuns if I didn’t know otherwise.” Edgar frowned. Robert’s eyes widened and he raised his hands defensively. “I didn’t mean anything by that, Edgar. You know that. But your life is so good. Now with your father’s business doing well, you live in the finest house in town. And you’re set to be his partner, a man of means yourself. There’s not another boy in Richmond who wouldn’t trade places with you.”

“You have a much rosier view of my future than I do,” Edgar said. “It’s true, my father’s inheritance has changed our lives a great deal. But even with this new wealth, that man can pinch a penny until it bleeds. It is only by my mother’s pleading that I have even a small allowance to buy things like that sketchbook. And as far as becoming his business partner...” Edgar shook his head. “I don’t see it. And to be honest, I don’t think I want it. I don’t want to be a merchant; I’d rather pursue the arts. Like my real parents.” He picked at a hangnail for a moment before looking up again. “But not a day goes by without him reminding me of my ‘questionable’ roots.”

“I would think that your birth parents being famous actors would be something he would be proud of,” Robert said.

“I’m not sure you could say they were famous, exactly,” Edgar replied. “Maybe my mother. She had quite a following from what my adoptive mother says. But John Allan has no great love for the arts. Actors might—and I emphasize ‘might’—rate a step above thieves and harlots in his book.”

Robert gave his friend a small smile. “Mrs. Allen seems very kind.”

Edgar nodded. “She is. She was friends with my mother.” Robert studied his companion for a moment in silence. Deciding to change the subject, he held up the sketch book again with the ghoul facing toward Edgar and asked, “But what about this particular picture? What made you draw it? This would give me nightmares.”

Edgar waited before answering, debating whether to tell Robert the truth or not. He took a deep breath and looked into his friend's eyes. “The other day I saw this in the graveyard.” Robert’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened again but he held his silence and waited for Edgar to continue. “Well, *I thought* I saw this. I was sketching images from some of the tombstones when I heard a voice speak to me.”

“Someone had been spying on you?” Robert asked. He leaned toward Edgar, eager to hear more.

“I don’t know. That’s what I thought. At first, I thought I heard leaves rustling, like someone sneaking around in the graveyard. Then I heard a voice—hardly more than a whisper really—call ‘Edgar.’”

“They knew your name?” Robert asked.

“Yes. And then I heard laughter. Not very loud, only a chuckle, as if it were coming from the Blankenship tomb.” Edgar paused, and then confessed sheepishly, “I thought it was you.”

“Me!” Robert protested. And then he laughed. “Well, that is something I might do. But I swear it wasn’t me.”

“I know that now.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I went inside.”

“It was unlocked?” Robert asked. His voice indicated his doubt.

“It was. And I saw something crouching in the corner...” Edgar pointed to the drawing, “...like that.” Robert shivered but smiled, encouraging Edgar to continue his story. “But here’s what’s strange.” Robert inched closer as Edgar lowered his voice. “At first, I thought the creature didn’t have a human face. Or rather, I should say, a living human face. It looked like a skull.” In spite of himself, Edgar was clearly enjoying telling Robert his story, and Robert clearly enjoyed hearing it.

“The cemetery would have been a faint image in the dust behind me at that point,” Robert said.

“I was terrified,” Edgar admitted, “but it was as if I were trapped. Frozen. But then the figure slowly stood, and I could see the face had flesh after all. It wasn’t a creature; it was a boy, dressed as you and I are. But here’s the part that really chills my soul.” Edgar blinked and wet his lips. “The boy’s face changed.” Robert’s eyes narrowed as he waited for Edgar to continue. “I saw it looked exactly like me.”

Robert stared at Edgar in silence. Eventually Edgar continued, his voice so quiet that Robert had to lean in even further to hear him.

“And then he laughed. It was a horrible, low laugh, so horrible I couldn’t stand to hear it. I closed my eyes until the laughter stopped, and when I opened them, he was gone.”

“Would you boys like something to drink? A switchel or a lemonade, perhaps?”

Edgar and Robert jumped, startled by the sudden presence of Robert's mother who covered her mouth to hide her smile as the boys stood. They averted eye contact with her as they brushed the grass from their trousers.

"I'm sorry," Jane Stannard said. "I thought you heard me coming. What on earth had you both so captivated?"

"Edgar was just telling me about—" he looked at Edgar who shook his head slightly, "a bear he thought he saw near the river."

Jane's eyes narrowed but she didn't press him for clarification.

"But, Mother," Robert said in a new, playful tone accompanied by a sense of mischief sparkling in his eyes as he held up Edgar's sketchbook. "Did you know that our Edgar is quite an artist?" Edgar's eyes grew big as he silently begged Robert to stop. Robert thumbed a few pages back from the frightening image of the ghoulish boy in the cemetery, and Edgar grew even more nervous.

"Robert, no! Give me that!" Edgar said.

Batting Edgar's hands away, Robert continued. "Mother, you've inspired a budding artist!" He held the book out to his mother so that she could see the portrait of a very pretty woman who obviously resembled her. Edgar's cheeks grew red and he stared at the ground. Jane took the book and read the lines of verse that accompanied the sketch.

*On desperate seas long wont to roam,  
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,  
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home  
To the glory that was Greece,  
And the grandeur that was Rome.*

"How wonderful!" she said. "A poem written in ancient, classical style. Did you write this, Edgar?" He nodded and she returned her gaze to the sketchbook where she read more of the poem. "It's about Helen of Troy, if I'm not mistaken. That's hard to do well, Edgar, but you've captured it masterfully." She ran her fingers over the portrait above the verse. "The sketch is beautiful, too. And how clever of you to use local people as models for your subjects, as the Renaissance masters did." Edgar looked up at her, relief clearly evident on his face.

"Should you need a model for a poem about a rowdy, rude boy, I know where to find one." She cast a side glance at Robert but smiled to take the sting out of the mild rebuke.

"Thank you, Mrs. Stannard," Edgar said. He felt something brush against his leg.

“Oh, we have a visitor,” Jane said. The three of them looked at the black cat who had stepped from Edgar to Robert and then to Robert’s mother, pausing to rub its side briefly against each of them before returning to Edgar. Edgar knelt down and reached out to stroke its head but jerked his hand back when he saw the cat’s deformity.

“I’ve seen that cat here before,” said Robert, and Edgar thought back to the cat he had seen in the graveyard. “It must be lost, or maybe someone has abandoned it. I know it’s him because of that missing eye.” He reached over and rubbed the cat’s head, which didn’t appear to be troubled in the least by his touch. The cat purred but then turned to rub against Edgar’s knee again. Edgar shifted from his kneeling posture and sat fully on the ground, making a lap for the cat of which it took full advantage. It purred contentedly as he pet it and settled in as if it had known him for years.

“I think it’s a female,” Jane said. “She seems to be looking for a home, poor thing. However she lost that eye, she seems to have adjusted fairly well.”

“It’s so odd,” Robert said as he looked at his mother. “Another one-eyed cat!” Jane frowned. Edgar asked, “There’s been another?”

“My aunt and uncle had a black cat like this...”

“Robert, no,” Jane interrupted softly.

“It happened, Mother. You might as well accept it.” Turning to Edgar, he explained. “My uncle is an alcoholic. And he’s mean when he gets drunk.” Jane clenched her lips tight but didn’t stop her son from speaking further. Robert settled on the grass beside his friend and continued the story. “My aunt really loved that cat. It had a white spot on its chest just like this one. Well, anyway, one night Uncle Julius came in from another night of drinking at the tavern and the cat made him mad. Aunt Olivia saw it rub against his leg, something cats are prone to do as you can see. Regardless of whether the cat tripped him or he stumbled due to his drunkenness, he fell, hurting his shoulder in the process. Swearing like a sailor, he blamed it on the cat and worked himself into a fury. He grabbed a knife and stabbed it in the head, taking one of its eyes out in the process.”

Jane shut her eyes and shook her head. Edgar frowned and continued to pet the cat while murmuring a soft apology to the creature for the cruelty of humans. He raised his head and asked, “But that’s not this cat?”

“No, not at all,” Robert answered. “Aunt Olivia’s cat died from the injury. I buried it for her, so I’m sure this is not the same cat.”

“It certainly is odd for another cat like that one, black with a white spot and missing one eye, to show up here,” Jane said. She looked down at the cat in Edgar’s lap as they stood in silence for a moment. “I’d love to give her a home, but Robert’s father has a sensitivity to cats which makes him sneeze. They give him fits. It wouldn’t do to have it here.”

“He sure seems to like you,” Robert said to Edgar. The cat purred loudly, obviously content in Edgar’s lap. “Maybe you could adopt it.”

Edgar shrugged and raised his eyebrows. “Maybe. My mother would be fine with it, but my father is another story.”

“She’d be a good mouser, I bet,” Robert said. “Even with only one eye. Your father ought to like having a cat around, especially in your horse barn.”

Edgar nodded. “That’s true.” The cat looked up at Edgar and reached a paw up tentatively, eventually touching his chin lightly. The three humans looked at each other and laughed. “I think my mother will be able to convince him to let us keep her. She’s got such a soft heart; I don’t think she could say no to this. I’ll take her home with me and we’ll see what we can do.” Edgar gently moved the cat from his lap as he and Robert rose again.

Edgar turned to Mrs. Stannard and said, “I hope it’s still all right if Robert goes with me next week to make that special delivery for my father. I could really use his help.”

“I think we can spare him for a day or two. I understand you plan to stay overnight?”

“Yes. I’d rather make camp in the woods near the estate, but my father says Mr. Tamerlane will have a room prepared for us and that we shouldn’t risk offending his client by not accepting the offer.”

“Not a problem for me,” Robert said. “I’ll never pass up a soft, warm bed over a bedroll on the cold, wet ground.”

“Mr. Stannard and I are glad for Robert to be able to help,” Jane said, ruffling her son’s hair. “And you should both be proud that Mr. Allan is trusting you to carry out this assignment alone.”

“Well, he doesn’t have to pay us, which I imagine is the greater motivation,” Edgar said. “But speaking of my father, I should be checking in with him at the warehouse, I suppose. He doesn’t like for me to be idle too long.”



“It is always nice seeing you, Edgar,” she said. She looked at Edgar with a sad smile for a moment before turning to go back to the house.

The boys said their goodbyes and Edgar picked the cat up and began his walk home. After a few steps the cat squirmed and leapt down to the ground.

“Oh,” Edgar said. “Well, walk then, if you want to be that way. I guess we’ll see whether you want to live with me or not.” He continued across the Stannards’ lawn to the dirt street and the cat followed him with its tail pointing skyward.

“I suppose we ought to find you a name,” Edgar said looking down at his new companion as he slowed to match the cat’s pace.

*Morella.*

The feminine voice sounded as clearly as if someone had spoken aloud.