



What looked like gas-powered lamps illuminated cobblestone streets. Clacking hooves and creaking carriage wheels turned my stomach again. People in Victorian clothing glared, as if I were some sort of pus leaking leper.

I turned back to where I had just emerged from. Enormous golden angels stared down from the white building that looked like it belonged in another time. The very building I had told my mom and Sarah about earlier in the night.

It can't be. The Palais Garnier...

Like a punishment, the dizziness returned. My hands flew to my stomach and my knees locked to keep me upright.

Before I knew it, my Michael Kors heels had me moving along the sidewalk absentmindedly. Maybe if I walked long enough, I'd wake from this absolutely fucking nightmare.

It could be just a different part of NYC? Like, Central Park has horse-drawn carriages, right? But the lack of trees and tall buildings told me otherwise. Was I drugged? Was this a hallucination and I was just out walking the streets of New York but... No. That'd be one hell of a hallucination. And I hadn't ingested anything.

Was I dying?

Confusion leaked down my face as my feet carried me. Nothing was familiar nor were there any signs of rational thoughts in sight.

"*Hey, jolie dame,*" a man's voice called from a distance. Jumping onto the sidewalk, a man with a skinny mustache and another with curly red hair bee-lined for me with smiles on their faces.

Something in those smiles set off alarm bells. I turned on my heels, trying not to break an ankle, and started back the way I came.

They caught up quickly, grabbing at me like I was a toy. "*Hey, jolie dame,*" the one with the mustache said again.

"*Pourquoi es-tu seule, ma fille?*" the other asked.

"Get off me!" I pushed against them, breaking free.

They laughed and grabbed at me again. Red was unfazed by my nails in his flesh as his hand slid up the opening in my skirt. Skinny Mustache ran his tongue over a toothy grin as he watched in delight.

My elbow met the sternum of the man holding me against my will, and yelled more gibberish before letting me loose.

Whack!

Skinny mustache rushed to his friend, shouting at the police officer who'd hit him with a club. They yelled back and forth for a moment, as the baton bounced in the cop's palm.

The two roaches flipped him off and scurried away as if someone had switched on the lights.

I had never been so happy to see a cop. But nowhere near relieved.

The officer grabbed my arm. Curious dark eyes raked over me, like all the faces since I had stepped out of the restroom. "*Vous allez bien, mademoiselle?*"

I shook in his grip even with the sincere smile resting on his boyish face. He tipped his hat and gestured down the road, "*Ça ira bien. Par ici.*"

With lack of a better option, I nodded and walked along with him.

My mind hurt as it tried to make sense of everything. What was I going to do once we got to the station? I'm sure they totally had a phone that would call the 21st century. *Wait, was I actually in another century?*

I hissed as the back of my head met something solid.

Ripped from the chaos in my mind and into the dark alley, I was unaware we'd turned down, the man who had helped me had forced me against a wall. His mouth mashed to mine and his hands mauled at my hip, trying to get under my skirt as I clawed at him. His rank tongue tried to slide between my closed lips as I pushed against him, hit him, tried to wriggle away, but it just seemed to egg him on.

He threw me to the ground, knocking the wind from my lungs. I coughed, inhaling some of the dry dirt from the plume caused by the fall. I shouted for help, but even without gasping for air, I wasn't very loud. I might as well have been invisible—like every day of my life.

The buttons of his uniform snagged on my dress as he ascended my body and forced my legs apart with his. He was heavier than he looked. I was paralyzed beneath him as he pinned my hands down. In the dark, his wild face contorted like a demon breaking free of the human flesh it had stolen. A face my mother had seen so many times before.

The rattling of a belt being undone was the last thing I heard before darkened eyes that had instilled fear, widened in surprise.

His hand flew to the one I had pressed against his throat. Liquid splattered onto my face as he coughed. Then, like a broken dam, his life pumped out between his fingers as I pulled my stubby knife from him.

I thought I was going to drown with how much hit me.

His bloody hand fumbled at a whistle hanging around his neck as he stumbled away. The gurgling it made stilled my soul until the whistle fell silent and empty eyes stared from across the alley.

What did I do?

I loved horror movies. I never wanted to live in one.

Shouting from men in the distance started, followed by shadows dancing within a glow of bouncing light against the walls.

With no time to think about what had just happened, I cut the straps to my once beautiful shoes, and staggered to my bare feet. Before I was fully upright, I was already moving away from the voices.

I hadn't seen the inside of a gym since before the Covid lockdown, even then, in my best athletic shape, I'd never had the lungs for long distance. They already burned and my chest ached as I ran. Every breath was like someone had a hold on my throat while running razors along it.

But if I stopped...

The thought of getting caught by a gang of angry men was enough to keep me going until I blacked out, at least.

My heart pounded like an alien trying to burst out through my chest. I don't know how many alleys I'd run down, or corners I'd turned. Everything looked the same and unfamiliar all at once.

Blurry vision and tired legs that tried so hard to keep me moving, weakened with every step.

I turned what had to be my last corner and nearly collapsed into the darkness of a doorway. My body shook so violently that I almost couldn't muffle the wheezing, while the other hand frantically grasped the doorknob.

It was unlocked!

I slipped in, and shut it quietly, as I peered through the window in the door. No sign of them, but their voices were growing loud again. I rushed to the door at the other end of the entryway, only to find luck hadn't struck twice. "SHIT!"

I pushed against it, trying to force it open. Nothing happened.

My tired eyes fell to an iron gate in the floor next to it. Moonlight reached just far enough to show a bit of stairway beneath the bars.

Shadows ran across the surrounding walls again. *They were here.*

I lifted the heavy gate with haste and squeezed underneath.

As I backed down the stairs, I watched for them to come, dreading when they'd bust through the door.

The pads of my aching feet hit the hard packed ground at the bottom of the stairs. Black tunnels stretched in every direction. If this was the catacombs beneath the city, I was fucked, no matter which way I chose. Still a better option than what waited for me above.

Abruptly, a firm, gloved hand covered my mouth, and another wrapped around my waist, cutting off my thoughts. Then faster than humanly possible, I was flipped around and snatched again. With my arms pinned at my sides and drained of any strength, I was powerless to fight back. I was done.

Light glinted in what I assumed were eyes staring down at me. "*Que fais-tu ici, petite souris?*" the man in the shadows growled in a low tone.

The door above crashed into the wall, stealing his attention. Shouts and stomping from boots echoed through the cold, stale air. A silent cry escaped my lips. My heart seized and my eyelids slammed shut.

The people I loved. The life I wouldn't have. Everything I did and didn't do ran through my mind in a flash.

This was it. *This* was the end.

The man's grip tightened and, like I weighed nothing, my feet lifted and barely grazed the dirt as he moved us around the corner.

His grip loosened for a split second, and I took the opportunity. I only got one step away before he was wrapped around me again, pulling us into the wall. Cold dragged across my back as we crammed farther inside, until the light around us was gone.

Voices bounced off the walls, making it impossible to pinpoint how close they were. I shook and wiggled,

trying to break away again. Like a snake, his grip only constricted more with every movement. “*Non*,” he whispered with warning. The hand on my mouth lifted and a single finger pressed against my lips. “Shh.”

It was apparent my attempts to break free were pointless. He wasn’t letting up. I gripped the lapels of his jacket and buried my face as far within as possible. My temple strained against his collarbone as I tried to crawl inside him and hide.

A calm heartbeat met my face through a barely rising chest. Was he not worried about being found? Or that I might have just killed us both?

In an attempt to calm myself, I inhaled deeply. A familiar scent emanated from him. Damp, cold—wrapped in a sulfur blanket, laced in cedar, maybe? Like a campfire in the forest after a rainfall.

If this was it, I was going to be thinking of something that made me happy.

I fell into memories of camping as a child. Sarah was a brat, as always. Mama was so young and full of life, before all the bad. She’d wrap us up in a blanket so we didn’t freeze as we sat under the tarp watching the fire dance and the rain fall.

I focused so hard on that memory; I almost didn’t notice the officer walking past us.

Almost.

My temporary savior’s cheek pressed to the top of my head as I tried to step further into the dark. His grip was unwavering as the hand at my nape moved in a small gentle motion. Somewhat soothing, but not enough.

The cop’s feet drug against the dirt and flickering light from the torch brightened through my closed eyes, pulling me from the safety of the memory.

The glow crept up the arm of the man that held me. My nails dug through the layers of fabric into the palms of my hands, causing a pain to concentrate on. We had nowhere left to go.

“*Quelqu’un l’a vue?*” someone yelled in the distance.

Oh god, they found us!

The glow lingered for a few moments longer and the pulsing in my ears grew louder with the thumping in my heart.

Then the light vanished, followed by a herd of footsteps.

When the door slammed shut, I jolted against the stranger, and we were left in silence.

I don’t know how long we stayed there — too scared to move.

The thought of what this man had done or could still do filled me with a deep sense of dread, but the thought of leaving too soon was even more petrifying. They could be outside the door. Waiting.

Ease and panic shot through me when he adjusted his grip.

Still holding my knife, I let go of his lapels and ripped myself away. I backed out through the opening where he hid us, trembling as I pointed my blade at him.

We weren’t far from the place where he had grabbed me. The fact they didn’t find us was a miracle.

I watched him like a hawk as I backed towards the stairs that led to the gate. It was like being stalked by Michael Myers. No sound. Only a shape, a shadow in the dark, inching towards me, seemingly getting closer, though I was moving faster.

Moonlight reflected off his black shoes and matching slacks as he stepped into it.

“Stop!” I commanded.

At his side, fidgeting, gloved fingers raised slowly. “You’re hurt.” His voice was warm, almost worried.

A stabbing pain demanded my attention to the dirt-crusted blood that covered my foot. I lifted it to find a shard of broken glass wedged into my skin. I winced as I touched it, then yanked out the shard and tossed it. The relief only lasted for a moment and then an unfamiliar pain emerged and threatened to double me over.

“No! Don’t!” I shouted, noticing he had inched closer again.

I had already made the mistake of trusting someone that sounded safe. That was supposed to be safe. How could I give that to a man hiding in the dark?

The light halted at his chest, revealing a white dress shirt that was covered in the same color of death as my hands.

Was I afraid of him? He’s the one who should be afraid. I had killed someone. It was all over me. And now him.

“I just wanna go home,” I cried, taking another step upwards.

The gate slammed closed behind me, and I rushed past the bloody footprints to the door. I had literally left a map to where I was.

With no cop in sight. No one, actually, I twisted the knob and opened the door, ready to run into the night.

Don’t turn around.

Against my better judgment, I did.

At the bottom of the stairs stood my temporary savior. My “Basement Angel”. But for how long, though?

His fingers moved curiously at his side again. Like they were fighting to reach out or controlling another urge of some kind.

It didn’t matter what it was. I wasn’t sticking around to find out.



Run, run little mouse. Before this monster changes its mind.

The door latched as she left me, startling me in a way it shouldn’t have. She had slipped into the night and left this creature with his thoughts. Where I should have been celebrating the fall of *le Garnier’s* grand chandelier as the

vermin scurried below, I was left empty, staring at the space the little mouse had occupied only moments ago.

What hid beneath that silver and black mask? No horror worse than my own?

The urge to grab her again, take her below to my world of night, gnawed at me like a starving dog on a fleshless bone. It would have been so easy to subdue the scared little thing. If she had waited any longer to reach the top, that may have been her fate. Yet, I'd been stilled in my actions. Turned me from all things planned. *Interesting.*

The affection I have for my pupil, my rising star, the one who would take the world, and in time, know me and love me as I do her. Yes, my love for Christine must have stopped me, no doubt.

'Is that so?' the *Ghost* that dwells within my mind taunted.

A draft from the tunnels scraped over this body, threatening to erase the moment which passed too quickly. My lungs had forgotten their purpose, and pathetically, my hands rushed to my chest. For the first time, my heart pulsed between them, attempting to jolt them to life.

Never in this treacherous existence have I held another. *Alive.* The warmth where she laid her head lingered, yet also threatened to fade in the cool air with every passing moment. Hands, with which I laid a finger upon her lips, boiled within the tailored leather they're wrapped, trying to preserve the memory a bit longer.

How would her hair have felt entwined in these fingers had they been bare?

The sole of my shoe touched down onto the ground step of the stairway. The other followed behind and planted on the one above it.

Though frightened as she was, part of this creature wondered if she would have come willingly. Her final glance was certainly debating whether to depart from the man who saved her. *Saved.*

I took another step, looking upon hands that have taken many men from this world.

'You lie to yourself, Erique. She only ensured that you were far from her. You may have done worse had the Gendarmerie not come. Remember, there's only one that will bring you what you want. Without Christine, we are lost.'

My jaw clenched as I fought to bare teeth at the voice that's always haunted me with the truth I never desired to see.

However, on this night, these same hands that take life chose to protect, and in return, received rewards beyond what dreams could grant.

'This girl's of no significance. Leave thoughts of her behind in this place and go where you are meant to be. Christine's our hope and only a short time away. Waiting for you while her grandmother sleeps. Waiting for her teacher. Her Angel.'

She would be in wait. To please me with her voice as our lessons resumed. To listen as I told her of the accident that fell upon the stage tonight. And how her father in heaven missed her.

Unredeemable, not only were my hands.

'Erique. Go to Christine.'

My fingers wrapped around the iron bars of the gate.

'You will regret this detour if you continue,' the *Ghost* warned.

"It is only to repay a debt in which I do not wish the weight of."

'Liar.'