

AUSTRALIA D. KINCANNON

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Cover Artist: Australia Kincannon

Illustrator: Australia Kincannon

Editor: Jyl Glenn

Interior Formatting: Australia Kincannon

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Dedication

For all the other tired little weirdos who need an escape. And like masked men.

Help Index

- How to pronounce: Erique (Er-eek) or (Erik)
- Monsieur (mister/sir) will be replaced with M. in front of several names throughout the book.
- There is use of the French and Italian language within a few of the chapters. You are meant to feel as lost as Melody, the main character who doesn't speak those languages..

If you would like to read the translations, please visit the link below where you will find page numbers for the corresponding translation.

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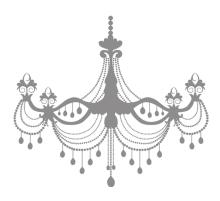
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"The Opera ghost really existed. He was not, as was long believed, a creature of the imagination of the artists, the superstition of the managers, or a product of the absurd and impressionable brains of the young ladies of the ballet, their mothers, the box-keepers, the cloakroom attendants or the concierge. Yes, he existed in flesh and blood, although he assumed the complete appearance of a real phantom, that is to say, of a spectral shade."

- Gaston Leroux

The Phantom of the Opera





Pear is the enemy of all. Change its companion. To change means overcoming fear. Venture into the unknown, venture outside of one's comfort. We fear what we can't change. Because the unknown is terrifying.

Maybe second to having someone else take your photo.

Fear didn't have me tonight, though. At least that's what I kept telling myself as I readied for the occasion I had been dreaming about since I was sixteen.

Nope. Tonight, I was in New York City for the first time, and about to see one of the greatest shows ingrained into every band, choir and theater kid since the '80s. And no, not *CATS*.

"Come on, Melody," Sarah, my younger sister, said from across the table of our small hotel room. "Let me do your makeup. Please?"

"That brush has seen better days," I said as I wiped the partially laid foundation from my face. "It was like Freddy Krueger was giving me a facial."

Makeup wasn't something I did in my day-to-day for no other reason than it wasn't my hobby, so the abuse was unnecessary.

She sighed and set the brush down. "We're all getting dressed up, Mel. You should want to look as beautiful as possible for Phantom tonight."

She said it like I had forgotten why I had taken this trip across the country in the first place. Like I wasn't in desperate need of some sort of "magic". To feel something other than the drying of the well that was my life.

It seemed so stupid to think a show I knew so well could be that magic, maybe. But, after thirty-five years on Broadway, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* was closing. And I already had too many regrets to add that one to the list.

I huffed and turned to the dining table covered in Sarah's makeup and other random things we'd pulled out for the night, including three homemade Phantom masks I had brought. One was black and silver, another silver and blue, and of course, the classic all white. "I'm wearing a mask, anyway. Just focus on you," I said, running my fingers over the smooth surfaces of each one.

"You still have half a face to show off. Maybe..." Sarah wiggled her eyebrows suggestively, "it could get you some attention."

Even when well intentioned, the notion that I had to be something other than myself to get someone's "attention," irked me.

I'm always beautiful when I'm someone else... And I hate it.

I picked up the white mask and held it to my face. "I'll stay ugly. Thank you."

"Cute," Sarah quipped, and rolled her eyes.

"And unless he's a mask-wearing tortured soul who's completely obsessed with me and musically inclined, I don't want it," I said. A deep chuckle rumbled within my chest as I set the mask down. "We're also leaving tomorrow, remember?"

"At least let me do your eyeliner," she said.

I reluctantly took a seat in the chair opposite her. "Fine."

As the tip of the black liquid liner touched my skin, I held back any remnants of the chuckle I had. Never in a million years would I have thought my sister would be the best person to go on vacation with. This trip had been more than just an escape from my empty reality. We had connected like we hadn't in a long time. Or maybe ever.

The past few days as we walked the city, and I daydreamed about moving to a place like this - a hub for creatives, we planned our next trip. Europe! We would do all the Phantom inspired things in Paris. See the original show in London, the works! Maybe I would even find myself a boyfriend along the way.

Ha.

It was only thanks to the generosity of my boss that I could even afford to get us out here in the first place.

It's amazing how an extra few hundred dollars can change someone's life. Even for a moment.

Guess it was lucky for Mom that another trip or moving couldn't happen. She was almost too fragile to fly to NYC. Europe would be out of the question, and there wasn't anyone to stay with her if I just left.

Sometimes I wonder what life would be like if she didn't wake up...

Sick at the reoccurring thought the moment it crossed my mind, I sighed, trying to relieve the sudden tension in my shoulders coupled with an instant headache.

"I'm just saying. It's been like what, four years since your last relationship? It's time to get out there," Sarah said.

"Excuse you. I've been out there," I said.

She let out one of those high pitched "huh" sounds, like she didn't believe me.

It's not her fault, though. She's been married to the same amazing man for eleven years with whom she built a flourishing business with, that afforded them whatever they wanted. Kids. A white picket fence. Everything. The "perfect" life.

I mean, I knew it wasn't really perfect. They have their issues, but they always pull through.

I had always wondered what that would be like to have someone love you so much that they choose to grow with you. That they choose you.

Then there's me. An overweight thirty-five-year-old cashier who failed at the two things I loved most. All while struggling to keep my head above water as the soul-crushing weight of capitalism and failed relationships stomped out any hopes and dreams of living a creative, love filled, content life with enough time or energy to take care of myself, as it pushed its spike soled boots down on my neck.

I'm tired.

"No one wants anything real. I would rather just sit at my computer and write stories no one will ever see when I'm not taking care of our mother. Plus, men are terrible. Just look at Mom."

Luckily, Mama was still asleep in the bed nearby when we glanced over. Sarah and I have had so much fun, we almost forgot she was with us. She'd been asleep for most of the trip.

"Not everyone's like that," Sarah said. "So... you're still writing, then? I thought you gave up?"

Stupid big mouth.

"No?..."

She set the tube of liner down and twisted up her lips. "Well, anyway, there! You're all done."

Eagerly, I turned to the mirror. My brown eyes popped at the center of the black liner and mascara. "Wow. You really killed this! I never get the wings right." Having hooded eyes made it seem futile. Yet here my sister was, making it look so easy.

"I know. The perfect wings," she said, pleased with herself. "Are you sure you don't want blush or something? You're just so pale."

I placed the back of my hand against my forehead dramatically, "I'm sorry that my dying Victorian child-like complexion is hard to look at."

"You should go outside more often, hun," Mama chimed in as if she wasn't dead asleep moments ago.

"Oh, you've got jokes. Like either of you are Miss California Sunshine," I said, marveling at the big audacity in the tiny room. It was good to hear Mama laugh, though. Especially because it was rare anymore.

"My turn!" she said, trying to push herself up from the bed.

I hurried to her side. "Here, let me help, Mama." She squeezed my hands, holding on with all the strength she had to steady herself. "How are you feeling?"

The wrinkles of time crept at the corners of worn eyes that hid behind a tired smile. "Less pain today," she said. "It's almost Phantom time! I'm so excited. Sing to me, my Angel!"

Choking back the lingering guilt behind a smile, I settled her in at the table with Sarah.

"So, anyway, men suck. Gotcha," Sarah said. "But like there's someone out there just waiting for you to trip into them and then tell them to fuck off."

"Can we please talk about anything else?" I asked.

Just as I pulled away, the grip on my forearm tightened.

"We should be here to see one of your movies. It's not fair," Mama said so affectionately I wanted to vomit. *Great. This again.*

"Let's go back to talking about the disaster that is my love life..." I started, when the faintest brush of—something, like an echo from a memory, stopped me.

I turned back to the mirror, looking for the source that I had only felt in my dreams. But just my reflection stared back.

"You know the playwright you're named after was French," Mama said, ignoring my plea for redirection and pulling my attention to a story I've heard a million times before. There's nothing worse than a famous namesake you couldn't live up to. Especially one you don't even remember listening to.

"Yes, Mama," I grumbled.

"Melody Rena...Rena..." she stumbled, trying to say the name she used to say with ease, one of the side effects of her condition being memory loss.

"Renaître," I answered.

"Oui Oui! Yes," she said, proud of herself. "Her and her husband wrote musicals, like operas and stuff. When I was pregnant with you—"

"Yes Mama, I know." Well, that's two things I'll never have. Thank you for the reminder. My eyes saw the back of my skull. "The only channel we had was PBS and they played their work over and over, and it was the only thing that soothed me."

I stepped away to fish out my super discounted pair of beautiful, black, rhinestone-covered strappy heels by Michael Kors from beneath the table.

"Mom, stop moving please," Sarah begged.

"Remember, hun, her career didn't even take off until she was almost forty," Mama said, ignoring Sarah's plea.

As I fastened my straps, I bit the inside of my cheek, determined not to let the brewing bitterness fuck up the rest of the night.

In an attempt to derail the previous subjects, I returned to the masks on the table, fiddling with each one. "Hey! You guys know the original story, right?" I asked.

"Uh uh," Mama said.

"Not really, actually," Sarah answered. "Is it much different?"

My mind lit up like the fourth of July, and I beamed with glee. "Yes! So, the author of the original 1909 story, Gaston Leroux, took elements from real life. Places, people, etc. Some things were a little inaccurate, like the year the *Palais Garnier* opera house actually opened, but you know, for drama."

"That's cool..." Sarah replied, to humor me. Only one of us was into history or reading. It wasn't her.

"Right? Anyway, there's nothing sexy about the original Phantom at all. He was off his rocker, basically. Like, Christine tries to kill herself when he kidnaps her, mostly because he's so ugly and won't stop crying and begging for her love. Then he basically plans a murder suicide. But then he doesn't go through with it and tells his 'friend', the Daroga, that he let Christine and Raoul go. But no one ever hears from them again. Then he dies of a 'broken heart'."

Sarah's mouth hung open in utter horror. "What the actual fuck?"

"Yeah! It's a better depiction of obsession than at least most adaptations, which is cool. I personally think he killed them and then overdosed. It's gothic horror, so that makes sense."

"Well. I didn't know that," Mama said, wincing.

"That sounds terrifying," Sarah added.

"I'm still hot under the collar for the version we're seeing tonight, though," I said.

Sarah giggled. "Oh yeah? Same."

As my sister continued working on Mom, I grabbed the black and silver mask and put it on for my final outfit check. It had been a long time since I felt beautiful. It had to be perfect tonight. And it was.

I couldn't be happier with the black off the shoulder, long sleeve dress with slits in the skirt that stopped just below the crease of my belly, accentuating the tattoo on my leg. A beautiful piece done of roses and the overture from Phantom, wrapped around an ornate pipe organ. My favorite tattoo. Well, tied with the one on my forearm, dedicated to

Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

However, my favorite part was the way the dress fell off my belly and didn't cling to it for dear life, screaming, "Here I am!".

"I could definitely take home a phantom in this," I joked.

"You wouldn't know what to do with him," Sarah said, followed by a very throaty laugh.

"Yeah, well...," I said, half-heartedly.

"Jesus, Mel. God himself could literally hand you the person specifically made for you and tell you 'this is the one' and you would still be like... 'Eh. No. I don't believe you.' And then you boo hoo that you're single." Her mocking tone cut like an old razor.

"I don't boo hoo." Not really, anyway.

"Leave her alone, hun," Mama scolded.

As I opened my mouth for a fight, I stopped mid-breath as goose pimples rose along my neck and arms. The sensation from earlier was stronger this time. Like someone had walked through my body and grabbed onto my soul.

The voices trying to repair a broken bridge dissipated, and the room slipped away when I peered into the mirror, and saw nothing. It was empty yet calling as my heart beat faster in anticipation for a presence that dwelled somewhere within. *Am I awake?*

A flash of white behind the woman in the mirror yanked my focus. Beneath the fabric of a dress shirt, a chest heaved as though the man it belonged to had been running like his life depended on it.

Fidgeting hands danced at his side, and bewildered, piercing eyes, one emerald green, the other, stone gray, stared through the eyeholes of a white mask that spanned his face.

The craving within my very being held me in place. Like it knew something I didn't.

A little odd, even for my fantasy.

Cautiously, as if approaching a wild animal, he stepped closer with a hypnotic gaze locked on mine. Without warning, the warmth from his body forced a silent gasp from me as it hit my back.

I shouldn't be able to feel my imaginary boyfriend.

With a glint of wonder in his eyes, he glanced from the mirror to me as if he wasn't alone like I was. His pale hand raised with intent, but hesitated, hovering over the round of my bare shoulder. His jaw rocked as he stared, contemplating something.

Heat radiated from his flesh as he moved towards my cheek, hesitating again. Without touching, I melted, and my eyelids grew heavy. A tingling flowed down my arm when his fingertips finally made contact and traveled towards my wrist. With sweet desperation in a voice I had never heard before, he strained, "Are you real?"

Unable to concentrate, my lips parted to answer. But the murmur of another voice stifled my thoughts. His head snapped in the direction from which it came, like he had heard it too.

Sarah's voice called again. Clearer this time. "Hello...?"

As though he could feel the connection fading as well, his gentle grip around my wrist tightened. "No..." he shouted, yet his voice somehow was lower than a whisper.

I turned like I would actually find him there. But I was standing in the hotel room with my family staring at me like I was a lunatic.

"Earth to Melody!" Sarah called out, waving her hands again.

"Huh?" I said, scanning the room. The sensations were gone, but the heat on my wrist still lingered.

Maybe I'd finally let my imagination run a bit too wild. I should probably get therapy. Lord knows I needed it.

"I was just saying, you look hot tonight," Sarah said with sincerity. "Meanwhile, I'm over here looking like the penguin from Batman Returns..." In her black Spanx, she turned to the side and slumped over, really adding to the bit. "You're coming with me!"

"Oh my God, shut up!" I cracked, forcing my mind from the delusional break from reality, or ignoring it all together.

"No. Hun," Mama said as we continued to laugh.

It was a real Hallmark moment. But...

"As great as this is, time's a slippin'. And I swear to God, if I miss my crazy pants basement dwelling boyfriend, I'll hang you both from the catwalk myself!" I threatened, "Okay? Okay!"

It was mostly a joke.

"I got Mom's hair. Get dressed, Penguin," I said and tossed Sarah her blue velvet dress.

The hotel was only a ten-minute walk to the Majestic Theater. *Best planning ever*. Unfortunately, cutting through the busy night life of Times Square—which smells like assholes by the way and is riddled with them—was the quickest way to get there.

I pushed through the crowd with the weird sense of power and strength my amazing outfit and matching black and silver mask gave me. Especially as peddlers weaved in and out of our little group, giving "compliments" as they tried to sell their shitty CDs.

As we finally turned onto 6th Avenue, the bright lights and unmistakable blue marquee, donning the iconic white mask and long stem rose, washed away the stress and stench of tourism. A shiver of thrill mixed with the memory of my strange mirror fantasy trickled in, and kick started my adrenaline. I reached into my pocket for my phone and froze. "Oh shit."

"What?" Sarah asked. "Don't tell me you forgot your phone?"

"Aren't the tickets on the phone?" Mama asked.

The little Smith & Wesson pocket knife I always carried was still in my pocket. It wouldn't normally be an issue, but concealed weapons scanners stood outside the doorway, and I didn't want to have to go back to the hotel. I'd die if I missed this.

"Uh. Nothing. Everything's good." I took a deep breath and exhaled before turning back to the line. My heart palpitated, threatening to burst from my chest as I tried not to shit myself.

Please. Please. Don't see me. . .

"Have a good time," the security guard said as he ushered me towards the door.

Ignoring that part of me that was suspicious as to how I made it through the scanner, relief rolled off my shoulders and the urge to shit subsided. "Come on!" I said, waving down my companions.

With five minutes to spare, we stepped into the soft glow of the lobby. Unfortunately, there wasn't any time to appreciate the beautiful details throughout the place as we hurried up to our overpriced balcony seats.

However, the red curtains trimmed in gold, the bronze angels that framed the stage, and the setup for the opening scene were worth the rush.

Was this the magic that I was looking for? The magic of the stage? Something to help me find the courage to try again?

"This is the most beautiful place," Mama said and squeezed my hand just in time to watch the lights dim.

"Yeah. It is." I wish I didn't have to go back home.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will take a twenty-minute intermission and will return to the music of the night, shortly," the intercom announcement said as the curtain fell.

Every detail was exactly as I hoped it'd be. I wanted to be there. Be the girl with the voice of an angel that the unhinged Phantom desired and the whiny Vicomte swooned over. It was too bad my bladder had other ideas. "Oh God, I have to pee so bad," I said, getting to my feet.

"The Phantom is so sexy and so manly! His voice!" Mama sang.

Apparently, she was just as entranced as I was. Made sense. Toxic men followed us everywhere.

Honestly, he'd still probably be a better partner than any I've had.

"The singing is phenomenal!" Sarah said.

"Totally!" I said, as I slid by. "Be right back. Make sure mom doesn't slide off her seat."

"Ew," they said, simultaneously.

Oh, the delight I derived from their discomfort.

After navigating through another crowd of people, eventually I found the back of the line to the restroom. Why was there always a line the length of a football field for the women's restroom?

As I waited with the several other unrelieved ladies, many commented on my outfit. I twisted my fingers in the hem of my skirt as I uncomfortably took their compliments. It wasn't until then, I realized that Mom, Sarah and I were the only ones that had dressed up.

I mean, I was the queen of comfort, but it's Broadway. Even more so, it's Phantom. To dress up was in the name. Why was everyone wearing jeans and t-shirts?

"Finally!" I shrieked, when it was my turn.

My shorts had just hit my knees when the overture blared from the speaker above, nearly knocking me off the seat with its five-minute warning. I was suddenly a horse in the final stretch of the Kentucky Derby. I'd never cleaned up so fast in my life. "Excuse me," I said, weaving through the still very long line of women at the doorway.

Whoa...

Like ocean waves against a boulder, dizziness crashed into me the second I stepped through the threshold into the hallway.

"Holy fuck." *Please don't vomit,* I begged myself. My brain spun on a tilt-a-whirl at full speed while the rest of me turned into marble.

The lights dimmed, and with no relief in sight, I forced myself onward, determined not to miss anything. Groans and comments from the owners of the feet I tripped over in the aisle fell on uncaring ears before I finally crashed into my seat.

"Do you have anything for a headache?" I asked, leaning into Mom.

The applause was on the highest setting as the music started up. There might as well have been a drum line of kindergartners in my head. My vision blurred and my head pounded worse the more I concentrated on the stage and the odd music playing. "Mama, please? Anything?" I asked, grabbing her arm. I recoiled when I found a confused man staring back at me. "Oh. I'm sorry."

The dizzy wave hit me again, and I squeezed my face, taking a few deep breaths before turning to my sister. In her place was a woman surrounded by a sea of similarly disgusted faces in nice suits and gowns. A huge change from all the jeans and t-shirts.

I snapped back to the stage, which was clearer now. The air in the room was gone and my chest caved into my stomach when I noticed the bronze angels were gone, and the theater was much larger. I staggered to my feet, and made my way back down the aisle, tripping over dress hems and polished shoes once again.

"Madame, restez à votre place," the usher said as I pushed past him.

I clung onto the railings in the hallway, trying not to fall as blurred faces stepped away, probably thinking I had gone rabid.

The hallway finally opened up into an enormous foyer, where I stared down a grand staircase lined with tall statues and candles as far as the eye could see. At the bottom were large wooden doors to what I hoped was the outside.

Screams and the sounds of a million glasses shattering erupted in the

distance behind me urging me onward, but with every step my reprieve seemed further away.

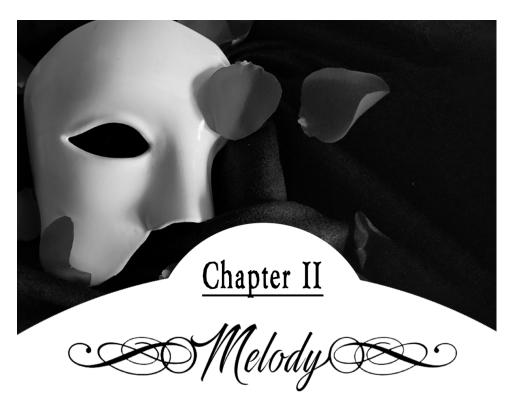
The thick night air slapped me as I burst through the heavy wooden door, and everything I had ingested within the last year tore my throat as it came back up. My head pulsed and tensed as people bumped into me trying to get past as they exited the building, taking me farther away from it.

I looked up into the sky, trying to catch my breath, and to my surprise, no more swirling or blurred vision. The stars twinkled and stayed put as they should.

"Hors du chemin!" a man's voice called out.

Wide eyed, I jumped back just as a horse-drawn buggy raced past, barely missing me.

"What the shit is this?"



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 pulsated 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.