

# Chapter

## One

Erik Carrière-Destler was dreaming. He had to have been. For fourteen years, he had longed to leave Palais Garnier and experience the outside world. All he ever wanted was to be like anybody else. His face, however, disagreed with his wishes. Thanks to it, he feared his fate was to be shunned and locked away, as was the case for so many disfigured people that had come before him. (Including him as a kid!)

But when Erik opened his eyes, he was delighted to discover that it wasn't a dream at all. The rocking of the carriage, the fresh air surrounding him, the trees waving outside the window... *it was real.*

It was all thanks to the girl sitting on his left. With unwavering kindness and determination, Christine Daaé had shown him true love. Her friendship had saved Erik from going down a path of destruction. She was his summer, the warm light that guided him through the wintry shadows.

To his right was Raoul de Chagny, the viscount whose life had nearly been ended due to Erik's insanity. Erik shivered as he recalled seeing the Punjab lasso tied around Raoul's neck. He still couldn't believe that he would commit such a horrible act!

*That's all in the past now*, Erik reminded himself. *You'll never hurt someone in that way again. ...Unless something else causes me to snap.*

He shivered and scooted away from Raoul, who was peacefully snoozing away. Erik rested his head on Christine's, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair. It instantly filled him with content.

Christine gave a soft chuckle and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Just resting on this pillow here," Erik responded softly, making her chuckle. "What scent is that?"

"Rosemary tea."

Erik raised his head. "You wash your hair with tea?"

"*Shh!*" Christine pointed to Raoul. "I wash it with Castile soap, but the tea makes it stronger. And it smells nicer."

Erik inhaled with a smile. "I can tell. I should get some."

"It's only for light hair. You'd have to use black tea."

"...Oh."

"It smells like pine trees, though."

"Sounds like it should be called *pine* tea."

As Christine giggled, there was a knock on the carriage's roof. Erik was so startled that he accidentally nudged Raoul with his elbow! The abrupt action woke the viscount up.

"Wha- huh?" Raoul asked sleepily. "What time is it?"

"You're the one with the watch." Christine reminded him.

"Oh, right."

Raoul took a watch out of his pants pocket and pressed a little button on the top. Erik was amazed at how the lid gradually fell down, revealing the time.

"Looks like it's eight o' eight." Raoul reported.

"Oh my!" Christine exclaimed. "The sun sets so late in the summer."

Erik looked out the window. Twilight time had arrived a few minutes ago, ushering in darkness that was slowly but surely falling over the city.

Upon hearing another knock, Raoul rolled down his window and asked, "Yeah, Castelot?"

"We're getting awfully close to your home, Vicomte de Chagny." the driver reported.

"Awful is right. I'm not looking forward to seeing my sisters."

Christine gave him a smile. "I'm sure they'd love hearing all about our trip."

That was another thing that didn't seem real to Erik- he had traveled all the way to Giverny! He loved visiting Christine's home village. It reminded him of Saint-Martin-de-Boscherville, where he spent his winters as a kid.

Raoul smiled as he said, "They'll be so jealous when they hear about me seeing Monet's house! Then they'll probably ask, 'Wait, who's Monet?'"

Erik tried not to feel jealous at how Christine giggled harder at that than at 'pine tea'. But it was hard to ignore the burning in his heart when the carriage pulled up to Raoul's mansion.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Christine." Raoul said to her.

"Oui," Christine replied. "I'll see you tomorrow, too!"

Erik slinked down into his seat as Raoul tried to lean over to give Christine a nose kiss.

"Wait, I'll get out." she said.

She gave Erik a fleeting smile before leaving the carriage. Erik watched her and Raoul walk through the foliage-covered courtyard of the mansion. He dug his bony fingers into the gray leather seat beneath him.

*Don't get too jealous. You don't want to snap, he told himself. Besides, Christine loves you just as much as she loves him. She might giggle more when he cracks a joke, but she cares about us equally. ...At least, that's what she says.*

Erik distracted himself by grabbing his clipboard. It secured some sketches he had made during the trip. The most recent one was of the sun peeking out from behind the Daaé cottage. He smiled as he recalled walking inside, which brought him back to his house in Boscherville. (Although that had less rooms than the Daaé one!)

The sketch of Christine's house morphed into his own. His nine year old self hopped out of the stagecoach that had brought him and his parents from Rouen, where the last show of the circus season had taken place.

"Home sweet home!" his father, Gerard, exclaimed cheerily.

"Finally, a few months of peace and quiet." his mother, Madeleine, said.

Erik ran up to the house. "The flowers are blooming so nicely. Aren't they, Prettina?"

He held up his paper doll, who brushed up against the lavender flowers on the windowsill.

Madeleine set a hand on Erik's bony shoulder. "Indeed they are," she agreed. "Phlox is one of the most beautiful flowers."

"But they're not as beautiful as you, my dear." Gerard told his wife, making her chuckle.

Erik looked up to see his parents kiss. But to his surprise, their faces were fuzzy.

In the present, Erik squinted, trying to conjure up their image...

"I'm back!"

Erik gasped, breaking his absent-minded gaze at the wall in front of him. His legs jerked up for a moment, sending the clipboard to the floor.

"Oh!" he exclaimed upon seeing Christine. "It's just you."

"Did I scare you?" she asked.

Erik shrugged. "A bit."

Christine said to Castelot, "Take us to the gate at Palais Garnier, please."

"The area we departed from?" the driver asked.

"Oui!" Christine replied with a nod.

"Will do, Miss Daaé."

Castelot motioned for Caesar the horse to ride as soon as Christine closed the carriage door.

*We're in someone else's carriage, Erik thought, suddenly feeling awkward. I guess I could pretend it's a cab. A really*

*fancy Hansom cab! ...No, wait, that's when the driver sits in the back. A really fancy Brougham cab, then. That doesn't help much, though. If it was my carriage, then maybe-*

He felt something nudging his arm and looked to his right. Christine was holding his clipboard.

"Oh! I, uh, I forgot I dropped that," Erik took the clipboard. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. What were you thinking about?" Christine asked him.

Erik sighed while saying, "Just that it's a little strange to be in a carriage that's not ours."

"I mean when I opened the door. I don't think the wall is that interesting. No offense if you do."

Erik flushed. "O- Oh, I was just thinking about..." He looked down at the house sketch. "My parents. I- I could see myself at our house in Boscherville. But when I looked up at them..." He felt tears prick at his eyes. "They were fuzzy. They get harder to see every year."

"...Oh. I'm sorry," Christine gently touched the edge of the sketch. "At least you have that drawing you made of them."

"Those are just pencil lines that aren't that accurate to real life. I can't see them as they were. You know, like that photograph of you and your father."

"That's true. They were in the circus, right?"

Erik nodded. "My mother was an acrobat and my father was a juggler."

"Then maybe there's a photo out there of them performing!"

"Do you really think someone would drag a big daguerreotype camera into the big top and try to get a photograph of a probably blurry looking performance?"

An awkward silence pierced the carriage.

"...Probably not. But you never know. There could be a photo of them waiting to be discovered." Christine said, giving a sly little smile.

Even though Erik seriously doubted the existence of a parental photograph, he smiled back. Then she covered her mouth to conceal a yawn.

"I sure could use a nap!" she remarked. "Maybe I should lay in the seat across from us."

"But there's no seat there."

Christine pointed to the seat in front of them. "Yes, there is!"

"That's not a seat." Erik stretched his legs out. "It's a *footstool*."

Christine rolled her eyes as he gave her a cunning grin. She slid down so her feet and ankles could rest on the 'footstool'. It wasn't very comfortable.

"The only benefit to having long legs," Erik said. "That, and flawless curtsying."

The carriage soon drove past a long line of trees. Beyond the tall foliage was a sprawling park. Erik took in a breath. It reminded him of the Roumare Forest in Boscherville. He had gone there twice a year with his parents- once in November when winter break began and right before it ended in April. He cherished that peaceful time so much that he had built the dreamery (a false forest) in the water cellar years later!

*I wonder what it would be like to walk through a real forest again...* Erik wondered before whispering, "It looks magical over there."

Christine smiled. "The Bois is such an exciting place! We should definitely go sometime."

Erik was about to agree when he saw a couple walk out of the park. He put on his fedora and lowered himself in his seat.

"You'll have to remove the entire human population before we can do that."

"Or we could just go at night," Christine suggested.

"Although there aren't many street lamps inside the park, so it's sort of spooky."

"That would be nice. The dark comforts me."

Erik and Christine looked out the window at the setting sun for the next few minutes, but it soon became hard to see past the towering Haussmann buildings. He soon grew bored of trying to count dozens of windows and opened up the book he had brought, George Sand's *Valentine*. He had read half of chapter seven out loud before Raoul fell asleep.

In the last scene, Benedict had lovingly helped Valentine cross a ditch. Now he was yelling at his dog, Partridge. After kicking the poor pup aside, Benedict led Valentine through a garden full of brambly and bushy foliage. She felt embarrassed at being alone with all those plants surrounding her... and Erik felt a stab of jealousy upon remembering Christine and Raoul walking through the courtyard! He quickly read past the awkward scene, which ended with Benedict jumping over the garden fence because he forgot the key.

Erik was about to ask Christine something when she said, "The Arc de Triomphe looks so impressive."

The huge arched monument stood in the middle of a round plaza. Twelve avenues led to the square.

"We're riding down a star beam," Erik remarked softly. "A fascinating thing on maps."

Christine smiled. "A star beam... I've never thought of it like that."

"Really? But the Arc is on Place de l'Étoile."

"Oh! You're right, it is! One of the roads- or, *star beams* goes to a smaller plaza. The top beam leads to Madame Valerius' mansion."

"It's like the Big Dipper and Little Dipper. Y- You know, the constellations."

"Aww!" Christine exclaimed, placing her hands on her heart. "Paris has the sweetest streets!"

The carriage drove down Avenue de Friedland and Boulevard Haussmann. The long boulevard took them right to Palais Garnier. When the coach stopped at the last intersection, Erik saw a fascinating sight. The rounded

corner of a Haussmann building fanned out into rows upon rows of walls and windows.

*What interesting architecture!* Erik thought in amazement.

He started to take his pencil out of the clipboard's little nook, but decided against it. He couldn't possibly draw it in such a short amount of time!

Besides, there was something far grander right next door.

Palais Garnier towered over the Haussmann building. It was an elaborate structure with many rectangular windows. An archway led to the administration side of the building while the rooftop showcased ornate carvings and two statues.

"Can you believe we've been up there?" Erik asked.

"Up where?" Christine asked back, causing him to point at the rooftop. "Oh, yes. How exciting that was! And a little frightening now that I can see how high up the roof is."

"Will we go back tonight?"

Christine looked away. "I don't know. I-"

"It's okay to be afraid. We'll be hundreds of meters up, probably! But you're perfectly safe with me."

"No, it's not that. I was thinking I'd stay home tonight."

Erik blinked sadly. "...Oh."

"It's not because of you," Christine gave a small smile.

"You just know Meg will want to hear about *everything*."

Erik smiled back. "She definitely will. What about tomorrow night?"

"That will work! And we can go up there every Saturday after. Make it a tradition!"

"We'll have the opera house all to ourselves the next morning. A fine tradition!"

It wasn't long before the carriage pulled up to a familiar black gate on the side of the opera house. Erik put on his cloak and hat before gathering his paper materials. He held onto them tightly as he scooted through the carriage.

Christine, who was already out, offered a hand. He took it, his heart aching at her warm, soft touch.



*I wish we could stay together for the rest of the night, he thought while he got out. But there's always tomorrow. How wonderful it is to say that! I'm so lucky to have her.*

As Erik set his feet on solid ground, he heard someone say, "Have a fine night, monsieur."

Startled, Erik jerked his head up. Castelot had spoken from his perch on the driver's seat. It took Erik a few moments to get any words out. He started to speak, but had to swallow and try again. Such was the life of an anti-social stutterer who didn't quite know what to say...

"Yeah," he managed to get out. "Thanks."

He gave an awkward smile and quickly headed to the gate. After sitting in the carriage for hours, his legs wobbled slightly and his back ached. Resting at home would be such a relief! The question he had earlier came back upon realizing that the gate's door was locked.

"Oh, I was going to ask you..." Erik gave Christine a sideways glance.

"Yes, I have the key," Christine said before taking one out of a basket and unlocking the gate. "Looks like you'll need one, too."

*That's true....* Erik realized. *I never left the opera house until last week, so there was no need for a key. But now...*

A strange feeling suddenly came over Erik as he gazed at the key in Christine's hand. Was he excited at being able to explore the outside world or terrified of what lied within?

"Erik?"

"Wha- huh?" Erik asked, snapping out of his thoughts.

Christine fiddled with the key as she inquired, "Are you alright? You seemed a little dazed just now."

"Yes, I'm fine. Just..." Erik pried his eyes away from the silver key. "This is all so new to me! It's a little overwhelming."

"I can see how it would be," Christine smiled. "But I'll help you through it. Tomorrow, we can get a key made," She gave Erik's fingers a kiss. "I'll see you then."

Erik gave a shy smile. "See you then."

Christine giggled before getting into the carriage. She waved with a cheery, "Au revoir!"

Erik gave a little wave as the coach drove down Rue Scribe. Then he stood at the gate for a few long moments. Before today, it was rare to get a glimpse at the outside world. Now, the Rousseau's chocolate shop across the street was in clear view. The big hand of a golden clock above the doorway moved just past an upside down 'VI'. Beyond that, he could see a tinge of pink and pale orange in the slowly darkening sky.

*Outside is so beautiful...* Erik thought before hearing the hooves of a horse. *Or maybe not!*

He threw open the gate and darted inside, closing the door mere seconds before a Hansom cab drove by. His heart thudded as he pressed himself against the gate's warm iron. Through the tiny holes of the door, he saw the carriage pass by.

*That was close,* Erik thought in relief. *I might have to get a new key, but I'm definitely not getting a new attitude on people.*

If there was one thing that would remain a constant, it was that strangers would always be wary of him. His suspicious looking mask and the frightening face it concealed certainly didn't help. Because of this, Erik's home was a safe place. No one treated him differently in the water cellar.

...They just bossed him around!

"Meyah, meyah, meyah!" a voice echoed down the hall as Erik came to the end of several stone steps.

It was none other than Ayesha, Erik's companion. A bell on the little black cat's collar jingled as she trotted up to her owner.

"Why, hello there, princess." Erik greeted her with a smile.

Ayesha rubbed against his legs before looking up at him with an impatient, "Meh-eh!"

"Oh, it's dinner time, isn't it?"

Ayesha almost seemed to nod. "*Mrreh.*"

Erik walked down the short hallway while saying, "I'm sorry for not coming home sooner. I was in Giverny with Christine. That's her home village. You would've loved the fields. They were like the dreamery but bigger! You'd have all the space in the world to run around and play."

Ayesha made a soft sound. She much preferred the false forest that Erik had built deep in the water cellar.

Before long, the two reached the end of the hallway, which opened up into the vast cistern of water. A bridge connected the hall to Erik's house. Ayesha ran across the bronze overpass. Erik's fingers brushed against the smooth metal as he followed her, trying to match her speed. His legs were long, but they were no match for the fast cat!

"You win!" he said once Ayesha reached the wooden platform that the house rested upon. "Let's reward you with some dinner, shall we?"

Ayesha gave a happy meow. She dashed into the house as soon as Erik opened the door. They went to the kitchen, where he grabbed a little bowl and opened up a packet of Spratt's Cat Food. After pouring the crumbly beef-flavored bits into her bowl, he poured a dash of milk on top to soften it.

"Meyah, meyah, meyah!" Ayesha complained.

"I know, I know!" Erik shot back. "You try following the instructions on the packet."

All the kitty did was grumble. She sat right next to Erik's feet, her eyes on his hands. She watched him stir the food and milk together with his finger.

"Mrrow!" she exclaimed as he set the bowl by the kitchen door.

"There!" Erik said before licking his finger. "Mmm, I can see why you're so eager to get this."

After taking off his cloak and fedora, he decided to make a quick dinner for himself. Before long, he was biting into a ham and salami sandwich. He read some more of *Valentine's* seventh chapter while eating. Louise gazed at a

flowered curtain as she recalled her past, bringing up a vision of her grandmother.

*If only I could do that with my parents.* Erik thought sadly.

After letting Louise indulge in remembering Valentine as a little girl, he finished his sandwich and opened up his book drawer. He found a sketch of his parents in a red leather folder containing other drawings and gave a sad sigh. Their eyes looked too big and there was something off... It didn't quite capture how they were in life.

In the very back of the folder was a paper doll. Sporting white underclothes, a low bun and a necklace, Prettina demurely looked off into the distance. Erik had gotten her for Christmas in 1866. She was one of the three childhood possessions he still had (along with a shawl and an ace of hearts card).

"Don't you wish we could see Mother and Father again?" Erik asked Prettina. "*Accurately*, I mean. My sketch resembles them, but there's something missing. I- It hurts to not be able to capture them like a photograph can."

Prettina gave a meow. Erik was confused for a moment. The paper doll was usually so silent! Then Ayesha rubbed against him.

"Hello, princess," he said before Ayesha gave a meow. "No, I'm not crazy, I'm just talking to Prettina, my old paper doll. ...Okay, maybe I *am* crazy."

Ayesha sniffed Prettina. Then she started rubbing against her thin shoulders.

"Be careful! She's quite delicate. That's why she stays in the drawings folder," Erik sighed at Ayesha's paws. "...The folder that you're standing on."

"Meh-eer!" was Ayesha's reply as she looked down at the sketches.

"I'd advise you to step away. Prettina is quite embarrassed at being in her underclothes for so long."

"*Mmm...*" Ayesha grumbled while backing away.

She lay down next to Erik and watched him take out Prettina's outfit- a red jacket over a white dress. On the bottom of her skirt were white circles connected by red fabric.

Erik smiled. "I think she should stay out for a bit, don't you?"

"Reh!" Ayesha agreed.

Erik set Prettina in his lap, giving Ayesha a look before setting his Giverny drawings on top of the sketch and putting the folder away.

Then he grabbed his journal and returned to his table with Prettina in tow. After settling into his velvet chair, he continued an entry he had started earlier in the day.

*I'm back from Giverny! Oh, how magical it was! I loved seeing Christine's home. The fields were like something out of a dream. I drew a few sketches during the trip so I'll never forget it.*

*The best part was feeling the sun on my face (or would it be mask face?) and the rain storm that occurred not long after we arrived. It felt so warm and refreshing! I forgot how wonderful the outdoors is.*

*We stayed in Christine's cottage for a while. The wide living room reminded me of Boscherville. So did Giverny as a whole.*

*Earlier, I found myself remembering the last time my parents and I came home at the end of the circus season. I couldn't conjure up their faces, which frustrates me. Not even my sketch of them looks quite right. I know it's been twenty years since I saw them last, but I wish I had a*

clear, accurate depiction. It gets harder to see them every year. If only I had a photograph...

But they never said anything about one. One would think they would since photos were a big deal back then! Although they were prone to keeping things from me...

They didn't tell me about my face, so a photograph isn't out of the question. Maybe Christine is right. Maybe a true to life picture is out there. I suppose I'll keep a mostly open mind about it.

I can't dwell on it too much, though. I have a future to think about! Christine and I are getting an extra gate key made tomorrow. And the day after...

Thinking about that is making me feel nervous. Opening the biggest door of my life thus far... For now, I'd rather think about the literal door that needs to be opened