

Chapter

One

Christine Daaé pulled her red scarf close with a shiver. A chilly autumn breeze played with its fringes as she stood against a lamppost near the corner of Rue Halévy. Multiple people passed by, crossing the street in different directions. Ladies wearing bustled dresses hurried to the tailor on Rue Halévy while suited men strode across Place de l'Opéra to who knows where. On the far, far right was Rue Auber, a street with so many shops and people that Christine couldn't see what was going on!

Behind Christine was Palais Garnier. She gazed up at the elegantly carved statues dancing in front of the grand opera house's façade. Above the seven pairs of Corinthian columns were busts of various composers. They looked like little gold mannequin heads to her nearsighted eyes, completely devoid of detail. Yet she knew they looked just like the men they were supposed to represent. That was the great thing about Palais Garnier- it was filled to the brim with intricacies!

Christine squinted, seeing golden letters above the busts. She could barely make out 'National Academie de Musique'. Just seven months ago, she had looked up at this façade feeling so hopeless and alone... Now here she was, employed at the most famous opera house in the world with so many wonderful friends! It made her heart swell.

Then it sunk at the sound of a horse's hooves behind her. She spun around, seeing a Hansom cab drive down Place de l'Opéra.

"Wait!" Christine called before clutching her skirts and charging across the street.

She squeaked as a carriage stopped in front of her, but kept on running. The fright had caused her skirts to fall from her grasp, which in turn made them start to play with her ankles when she ran across the street's other half. She took more fabric than necessary to allow her stride to lengthen. People stepped back in surprise as she barreled down the wide sidewalk.

"Excuse me, pardon me." Christine apologized quietly while weaving through the crowd.

Her hand slapped a lamppost on the corner. The ringing of the metal made the horse's ears wiggle back and forth. (And it made Christine's hand sting!)

The driver, who was perched on a seat above the back of the carriage told his horse, "Woah there!" before asking Christine, "Do you need a ride, mademoiselle?"

"Oui!" Christine replied with a nod.

Not even a second after getting in the carriage, it took off!

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"A flower shop on the way to Passy Cemetery." Christine replied before sitting back with a huff.

The cab carried her through the streets of Paris, driving past sprawling Haussmann buildings with dozens upon dozens of windows. It circled around The Madeleine, a church that looked more like a Greek temple. Yellow leaves fluttered on the trees surrounding the streets. Christine admired them through the window.

The carriage soon turned onto a narrow road called Rue de Laborde. A couple bicyclists squeezed in between the cab and pedestrians on the sidewalk. It almost made her claustrophobic! She was thankful when the carriage started to emerge into the wide intersection where Rue de Laborde met Rue d'Argenson, Rue de Miromesnil and Boulevard Haussmann. In between the former and latter's slender roads was a half-circle sidewalk.

"Oh!" Christine exclaimed before knocking on the roof.

The driver opened a trap door behind Christine. "Yes?"

"Stop here for a moment, please."

"Will do, mademoiselle."

Since the intersection was so vast, the cab could comfortably stop without being in another carriage's way. Christine jumped out to quickly browse a flower stand. The cart was bursting with a colorful array of flowers. She took in a breath, smelling the wonderful scents... and suppressing her shyness. She briefly bit her lip before stepping up to the seller.

"Excuse me, do you have any ranunculus bulbs?" she asked.

"No, those are out of season. You'll have to wait until January to buy those again," the seller replied. "Might I interest you in some carnations or pansies?" His eyes twinkled. "A rose for your true love, perhaps?"

Christine's face warmed. "Oh, no, I'm not interested in romance! This is for..."

She felt a tiny lump rise in her throat. "Well... someone very special. I'll take some carnations."

"A fine choice!" the seller approved with a nod. "That'll be twenty centimes."

While he wrapped five carnations in paper and tied it off with a pink ribbon, Christine took a tiny silver coin out of her pocket. She traded it with the seller, who gave her the bouquet.

"Thank you for your business, dear!" he said, his smile bright and his eyes twinkling.

"You're welcome!" Christine replied.

She took a sniff of the carnations, smiling at their cinnamon and nutmeg-like scent. Then she returned to the carriage, ready for the next step of her journey.

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Fifteen minutes later, the Hansom cab arrived at Passy Cemetery. Christine handed seventy-five centimes to the driver, who unlocked the cab doors for her.

"Have a good day, mademoiselle!" he said with a wave.

"You too!" Christine called back, chuckling when the horse neighed in response. Her demeanor grew somber as she walked through Passy Cemetery. Hundreds of upright gravestones surrounded her. It was always a little bit unsettling, but in October... Christine hugged her scarf with a shiver, apprehension stirring in her heart.

The unfinished Eiffel Tower loomed not too far from the cemetery. Big wires were sticking out from the top of the second floor. It looked eerie even in the bright afternoon light. It certainly wasn't helping the spooks go away!

Christine paused for just a moment to see the grave of Pierre Valerius, her father's dear friend. As usual, there were a few flowers there. Madame Valerius never missed her weekly visits! Christine wished she could pick up that habit, but she made sure to visit Passy at least once a month.

Before going to her destination, she went to the back of the cemetery. Gerard Carrière and Madeleine Destler- the parents of Christine's best friend, Erik- were buried there. Their grave had been neglected for twenty years before Erik and Christine found it! Last month, they had given Madeleine and Gerard a new gravestone. The roses Christine had left there had long since dried out. She plucked a couple carnation petals, setting them on either side of the couple's shared death date. After admiring the beautiful granite slab for a few moments, she turned around, walking on a carpet of orange and yellow leaves created by the surrounding chestnut trees.

Another grave just as nice stood in front of a tree. A deep sorrow stirred within Christine's heart. This had made her world so awfully bleak all those months ago...

Gustave Daaé

13th June 1829

28th December 1887

"Bonjour, Papa. It's been a while, hasn't it?" Christine said, smiling as she added, "I found these flowers at a stand! They didn't have ranunculus bulbs, but carnations are just as nice. I hope you don't mind."

After taking the flowers out of their paper, she used the stems to dig a little hole in the ground right against his stone. The carnations stood tall beside Daddy Daaé's grave.

"The cemetery is so eerie at this time of year. You're physically not here to comfort me..." Christine lowered her head with a sigh. "Only I am."

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She touched her red scarf, feeling its soft wool beneath her fingers. Then she softly sang,

Tant que cette eau coulera doucement (As long as water runs smoothly)

Vers ce ruisseau qui borde la prairie (Towards this stream which borders the meadow)

Je t'aimerai, te répétait Sylvie (I will love you, Sylvie kept telling you)

L'eau coule encore, elle a changé pourtant (The water is still flowing, yet it has changed)

Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un moment (Pleasure of love only lasts a moment)

Chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie... (Pain of love lasts a lifetime...)

The uneasiness in Christine's body slowly faded with each word that fell from her lips. Although *Plasir d'amour* was a bittersweet song, it was a source of comfort for her. She had sung it thousands of times with her father.

Papa always knows how to make things better. she thought with a teary smile.

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When Christine returned to the opera house, seamstresses were filing into the costume room.

"Christine!" Julianne Vernier exclaimed, rushing up to her friend. "I found some fabric for Berthe's headscarf."

Le Prophète was currently running at Palais Garnier. It had been shown quite a few times over the years, so the costumes needed some touching up. The bride's new headscarf was a sunny shade of yellow with white flowers.

"How lovely!" Christine replied, touching the light linen. "It'll go with so many other costumes."

Julianne nodded. "That's precisely why I chose it. I'll let you cut it if you want."

Christine followed her friend to the tailoring room, where she set her scarf on a table by the door. There was so much to see! Around a dozen tables with sewing machines, bolts of cut up fabric, tape measurers dangling from nails on the wall, shelves with pincushions and fabric scrap baskets, little boxes labeled with 'thimbles', 'seam rippers' 'measuring tape' and 'needles' in all sorts of sizes...

How overwhelming! Christine thought. (Even though she had been coming to this room often since July!)

Luckily, Julianne had plenty of experience under her belt. She strode over to a drawer with scissors and went to a cutting table. After making some marks on the fabric, she handed the scissors to Christine.

"Remember, it's triangular." she told Christine, who nodded.

Christine carefully cut the rectangle-shaped fabric into a triangle, following the pencil marks. She had one more snip to make when...

"*Oh!*" she exclaimed, looking up to see something swipe her scarf.

"That looked like the work of a ghost." Julianne remarked with a wink.

Christine shivered slightly. For nearly fifteen years, Palais Garnier had been haunted by a specter known as The Opera Ghost. It caused all sorts of mischief, especially behind the scenes!

"I'd better stitch up the hem. You can head to the embroidery room for a ribbon,"

Julianne said as Christine made the final snip. "Watch out for You Know Who!"

"I always do." Christine replied with a wink before setting the remaining yellow fabric in one of the baskets.

Moments after entering the embroidery room, she felt an eerie presence in the air. She turned around, seeing a looming figure peeked past the doorway. The Opera Ghost struck fear in all who heard of it. But Christine wasn't scared (*that* much, at least), for she knew its true identity...

"Erik!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here? And how did you get in the costume room? It's busy out there!"

Erik Carrière-Destler stepped into the room, closing the door behind him while saying, "Hiding in the knitting room always helps. There's nothing to knit for *Le Prophète*! U- Unless one of the characters wants a new scarf."

He took Christine's scarf out from behind his caped back. She took it gratefully, draping it over her shoulders. As she wandered over to the ribbons, a loud clacking could be heard past the wall.

"What is that prattle?" Erik asked, briefly touching his ears.

"Just one of the sewing machines," Christine replied. "Julianne's making the hem for our headscarf."

"'Our' headscarf? So you're both going to be in *Le Prophète* wearing some pretty yet giant handkerchief?"

Christine giggled. "No! I cut the fabric, she's hemming and I'll sew a ribbon on. Once I find it, at least," She scrutinized a pale blue ribbon. "Sewing machines are more about feet than hands. You have to pump a pedal underneath the table and move the fabric along instead of working with a needle and thread. I *much* prefer hemming by hand! It takes a good chunk of time, though," She shrugged while adding, "So I guess it's good to have a faster option."

As Christine pictured the headscarf in her head and moved onto a white ribbon, Erik inquired, "What were you up to during the break? I- I haven't seen you since lunch!"

"I should ask the same of you."

Erik sighed while leaning against the door. "*Oh*, I was tuning my piano. That takes so long to do... Luckily, it wasn't *that* bad. Those sour notes sneak up fast!"

Christine chuckled. She stroked the silk ribbon while saying softly, "I was visiting Papa's grave. I figured it was time to give him new flowers..." She looked over at Erik. "Especially after seeing how dried out your parents' roses were."

"How are they? I wish I could visit, but... you know how the outside world is."

Erik had a facial disfigurement that was often subject to cruelty. It forced him to hide within the opera house, not letting him experience the world until this summer. Being so sheltered was something his parents had implemented from the moment he was born.

"They're fine, I suppose," Christine reached for the edge of a green ribbon.

"Resting peacefully," She hugged herself with a small shiver. "It's good that they didn't have to walk around the cemetery. It's spooky."

"Even though it's the same old graves you see every month?"

"No, it's not that. There's just... *something different* in the air. A sort of chilly uneasiness. October and all that." Christine responded with a little shrug.

"O- October?"

"Oui!" Christine gave a playful smile. "I hope you haven't lost track of dates down here."

"My journal keeps me on my toes," Erik set a skinny finger on his mouth. "There's something about October, though..."

I know just what it is. Christine thought, not daring to give him the answer.

Instead, she watched as his finger tapped downwards, touching his chin. It was quite cute to see him searching for the answer!

"*Oh*, I remember! H- Ha... H... *Halloween* is coming up!" Erik pushed through his stutter to exclaim.

Christine's face paled. By the grin on his masked face, she could've sworn he was smiling about Christmas!

"That's a great holiday," he said, his icy blue eyes lighting up in delight. "All the costumes and treats and games and carving turnips and reading horror stories... Louise celebrated it in Scotland. She puts together a party every year for the seamstresses. *Oh*, I love it!"

"And I *don't*."

The sparkle in Erik's eyes went out.

"...*Oh*. You... You don't?"

Christine shook her head. "All those ghosts and witches and skeletons and vampires..."

Erik grinned. "*Ooh*, ghosts and skeletons! How could I forget those? Especially since that's what I am!"

"It's all so scary!" Christine said, her face frightened and serious. "And you know how I feel about those sorts of things."

"You saw The Opera Ghost's hand touch Box Five's curtain and screamed like you were being murdered." Erik remembered their unofficial first meeting in March.

"*Exactly*. That's why I'm not too fond of this time of year. I like the leaves changing and being able to wear my scarf often..." Christine bit her lip. "But I draw the line at ghosts!"

"Really? You draw the line at me?" Erik asked, giving her a playful look.

"*No*, I mean *real* ghosts!" Christine's chuckle turned into a frown. "Ghosts aren't real, right?"

"No... At least, I don't *think* so. I'm the only other ghost I've seen. But who knows? They could be out there." Erik said with a wink.

I sincerely hope they aren't! Christine thought.

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"Erik!" Christine called.

Unlike a few hours before, she was alone in her dressing room. She lowered herself in front of the mirror, looking at her reflection as she sat down. At any moment, Erik would fade into view. He conducted mirror chats from his house in Palais Garnier's sixth and deepest cellar... one filled with water! It seemed like an impossible place to live in, but Erik had managed to do so for fourteen years.

I wonder if he's swept up in some piano song, Christine thought. *Or maybe he's getting dinner started. It is six after a-*

"Happy birthday to me!" a voice sang out (horribly off-pitch!).

Christine's heart jumped. Her head jerked around, seeing Meg Giry. The ballerina ran into the room with a skip in her step.

"Meg, you scared me! Your birthday was yesterday, remember?" Christine reminded her best friend through a chuckle.

"Sorry!" Meg apologized. "It still counts if Emilie gives you a present, though! She wasn't here yesterday."

"What did you get?"

Meg sat on the floor, showing Christine her wrist. *"Ta da!"*

She was wearing a bracelet made of yellow and white beads.

"How cute!" Christine exclaimed, feeling the cool ceramic. "It's perfect for you."

"What's perfect?" someone asked.

Christine smiled at the sight of Erik fading into view. "Meg's bracelet."

"See it, Mr. E?" Meg asked, jumping up and slamming her hand against the mirror.

Erik flinched at the loud smack it made, but he smiled upon seeing the bracelet.

"Those colors suit you very well, Little Miss."

Meg giggled and admired the trinket for a few moments.

"Are you looking forward to Louise throwing another Halloween party?" Erik asked, taking her focus away from the gift.

Christine's first instinct was to say no, but it wasn't her question to answer. Her stomach fluttered nervously as Meg replied, "Of course! Those soul cakes are *yum-my!*" She licked her lips in an exaggerated fashion. "*Mmm...*" Her eyes flashed open. "*Ooh*, and dooking would be fun!"

"What?" Christine asked, utterly baffled by the word.

"She means bobbing for apples." Erik spoke up.

"Yeah, it's what Scottish people do on Halloween," Meg explained to Christine. "I got four apples last year."

"And I almost got wet because you splashed so much," Erik added. "You just *had* to choose the bucket closest to my hiding place..."

Meg giggled. "It was worth it!"

"I'm not sure about bobbing, but I'll definitely watch," Christine told her, feeling her fears ease up. "Halloween doesn't sound as scary now!"

Erik smirked as he added, "I don't know about you, but *I'd* like to hear more horror stories."

Christine's heart sunk.

I guess it's still as scary as I thought.

"Christine, you helped me come up with one."

Christine gave an apprehensive frown. "...I did?"

Erik nodded. "Indeed! Once upon a time- a *spooky* time, mind you- there lived a man with a horrible deformity. Half of his face was disfigured in ways I dare not say, and his nose was missing."

"Like how *your* nose is missing, Mr. E!" Meg remarked.

"Not exactly, Little Miss. While some people are blessed with one hole for a nose, he had *none*. He was lamenting about this when he smelled the sweet scent of roses. A perfumed girl walked by, the prettiest person he had ever seen. He wanted to say hello, but he knew she'd reject him because of how he looked. So he created a mask."

"Just like you!" Christine exclaimed.

"Even more so. It blended in perfectly with his skin. And it wasn't made of leather like mine... it was crafted from *human flesh!*"

Christine squeaked in terror while Meg exclaimed. "Woah, gross!"

"He did this to look as normal as possible... and it worked! He and the girl got along splendidly. But as the night drew to a close, he knew his true self couldn't hide forever. He tried to take off the mask... *but it was stuck to his face!*"

Meg gasped loudly. "No!"

Erik clawed his fingers, tugging at his leather mask as he frantically exclaimed, "He pulled and he tugged and he tried *desperately* to get it off, but it was no use! His skin was melded with the rotting mask of *rotting flesh!* He'd be forced to live as a corpse for the rest of his-"

Christine screamed, burying her face into the divan to muffle the sound before raising her head to tell Erik, "Please end the story!"

"...And then he died of heartbreak. The end! *Tragically.*"

"And spookily!" Meg added before looking at Christine. "Are you alright? Your face is white!" She giggled. "And that rhymed!"

"I... I'm fine," Christine stuttered out timidly. "That was just terrifying, that's all."

Erik blinked, his eyes filled with great concern. "I didn't mean to frighten you *that* bad. I'm *terribly* sorry, Christine. I just... I got caught up in the story."

"*Too* caught up," Christine gave a thin smile. "But at least it's just a story."

Erik raised a finger to say, "Here's something just as spooky... and real."

Meg looked at Christine excitedly. Meanwhile, Christine wasn't eager to hear it in the least! Her stomach flip-flopped as she braced herself for more horror.

"Do you remember the Salle Le Peletier fire?" Erik asked them.

"That was the old opera house!" Meg remembered. "The *boy* opera house."

"Oui, and it burned down in 1873," Christine added. "You saw it."

"Exactly!" Erik confirmed with a proud smile. "There were many casualties in the fire- music scores, stage e- equipment... and people. A firefighter lost his life, as did a ballerina."

Christine gasped while Meg gave a soft, "Ooh..."

"Some say a pianist named Ernest worked at Salle Le Peletier. He was engaged to the ballerina, and they were excited to start their lives together... but it wasn't to be. At first, people thought they died while trying to flee. But the truth was far sadder."

Meg leaned forward, her brown eyes wide. Christine's heart thudded against her chest as Erik continued telling the tale.

"He somehow managed to escape the blaze, but his face was permanently marred with severe burns. *And as we all know*, disfigured people a- aren't treated kindly, even if they play spectacular music. The widowed Ernest was forced to seek shelter in the opera house.... as in this very one!" Erik lowered his voice to add, "Legend has it that he haunts the lower corridors with an eerie cry..."

Christine shivered. "Have you ever heard him?"

"Legend has it that it's just that- a legend. The only eerie cry I've heard was when I found Ayesha. The rest of the time, the passageways are silent. Which I guess is eerie in itself. Sometimes I wonder if he's not really alive at all."

"But he escaped!" Meg pointed out.

"Yes, but losing a loved one *and* becoming horribly burned in one night? That's sure to cause some immense heartbreak. That's why I think..." Erik paused for a few long moments. "*He became a ghost.*"

"A ghost?" Christine asked in a squeak.

"Ooh, that makes sense! 'Cause he died and you've never seen him!" Meg exclaimed. "And there's that eerie cry... *Woowooooo...*"

"A- And that *would* explain the unusual chill I sometimes feel and the u- u- unexplained things not even The Opera Ghost can explain..." Erik added, wiggling his fingers while adding, "*Woo...*"

Christine hugged herself, feeling goosebumps underneath the long sleeves of her bodice.

Erik chuckled. "Wouldn't it be funny if he was real? One rumored ghost meets another!"

"It would be!" Meg said with a smile. "You'd have a ghostie friend!"

"You're certainly *not* a rumor," Christine added. "You're just as real as the Peletier opera house was."

Erik winked while adding, "And just as legendary."

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That night, a carriage took Christine, Meg and Madame Giry, to their apartment at 42 Rue Notre Dame des Victoires. The moon shone high above the Haussmann buildings that went by. Christine had the leather curtain cracked open so she could see the silver crescent, feel the cool breeze...

"Wooooo..."

"EEK!" Christine screamed

Something was tickling her neck... and it wasn't the wind! She slapped her neck, half expecting to feel a ghost.

"Meg!" Madame Giry exclaimed. "Don't scare Christine like that."

Christine relaxed slightly upon realizing that she was touching human fingers and her bodice collar.

"Sorry, Mama," Meg apologized with a giggle. "I was just saying hello to a ghost."

"*Sure you were.*" Christine said, casting a glare at her friend.

"Mr. E told us about a *real* ghost," Meg told her mother. "He was named Ern-"

"Tell the story when it's not dark, please!"

"Yes, wait until we're home, mon amour," Madame Giry agreed with Christine. "It won't be long now."

Meg slouched in her seat. "*Fine.*"

The carriage turned onto Rue Notre Dame des Victoires. Alongside the moon's light were electric streetlamps. The golden glow of the lanterns eased Christine's ghostly worries.

Before long, she was leaving the carriage with the Girys. She was the first to walk inside the Haussmann building, which greeted her with a warm light. Leading the way, she went up four flights of stairs. The last door on the fourth floor lead to the Giry flat. Christine held her hands together while (secretly impatiently) waiting for Madame Giry to unlock the door before rushing in. The scent of plum jam made that morning still lingered in the kitchen. Christine's stomach growled while walking by.

"Who wants sandwiches?" she asked.

"That would be lovely." Madame Giry replied.

"I'll have two! No, three!" Meg chuckled at Madame Giry's look. "Or just two and a half."

Christine whipped up four sandwiches, humming *Auprès de ma Blonde* while spreading golden Mirabelle plum jam over halves of bread. This type of plum wouldn't be in season again until August, so she savored every moment of crafting the sandwiches.

All the while, Christine overheard Meg talking to her mother in the living room. Her voice echoed down the hallway just outside the kitchen, causing fear to creep up Christine's spine.

"The ghost's name was Ernest, and he died in the fire that the old opera house had. Salle Le... *Peleteen* or something like that."

"Peletee, dear."

"*Anyways*, he lost his fiancé and ran to Palais Garnier *and then* died and became a ghost! Mr. E says he still-"

"*Sandwiches are ready!*" Christine hollered, slamming the knife down on the kitchen counter.

"Mmm, *I'm* ready!" Meg called.

Christine let out a relieved breath as her friend rushed into the kitchen. She snatched up a sandwich and took a big bite. Ghostly tales couldn't get in the way of bread and jam!

Everyone ate in the living room. Christine wandered away from the dining table to look out the window. Palais Brongniart loomed in the distance. Made up of over a dozen Corinthian columns, it looked more like an Athenian temple! While tasting the sweet, apricot-like flavor of her plum sandwich, Christine squinted to see past the veil of night. Bankers in dark suits filed down the many steps, probably talking about all the stocks they had invested in or how successful their business meeting was.

They must have so many numbers in their heads! Christine thought.

She didn't know if it was the sandwich or the banker gazing, but she quickly grew sleepy.

"I'm going to bed." Christine reported with a yawn.

"It's only nine-thirty!" Meg said.

"Sewing and singing can get exhausting! And-" Christine stopped to pop the last bit of her sandwich in her mouth. "I want to get plenty of rest."

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“That’s a very good idea,” Madame Giry said with an approving smile. “Perhaps you should do it too, mon amour.”

Meg frowned. “But I’m not tired! I’ll whip up some more sandwiches...” She gave a big yawn. “Maybe some strawberry ones...”

Christine chuckled. “You can do that in your dreams.”

While undressing in the bedroom she shared with Meg, a flutter persisted in her stomach. To her dismay, the sandwich hadn’t eased it, nor did taking off the hug that was her corset. She hoped laying beside her sleeping friend would comfort her, but the feeling remained. The clock ticked towards ten as she rolled over with a disappointed sigh.

It’ll take me the whole night to feel- Christine gasped, her grip tight on her sheets as she sat up. *What was that?*

She waited for a few moments, her eyes on the window. Her heart hammered in fear as she waited for the curtains to open again...

There it is! she thought with a fearful squeak. *Someone’s here! They’re...*

She suddenly realized that the air around her seemed cooler than before. It wasn’t a spectral occurrence at all!

Oh, it was only the wind! There’s nothing to be scared of. Christine told herself, her body relaxing.

She fell back onto her pillow, letting the autumn breeze gently send her to sleep... and send her ghostly worries far away from the window.