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Penguin Random House UK

First published in the USA by Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House
Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC,
and in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2026

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Cover and lettering by Lisa Quine
Interior cover art by Fernanda Maya

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STRANGER THAN YOU DREAMT IT EST 1986

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–79698–6

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

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Paper
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For Tara—

You went along with every one of my crazy childhood ideas, even when I cast you as Raoul. I'm so sorry for that. I love you and your adventurous heart more than you will ever know.

The Phantom of the Opera is about love. It's as simple as that.

—Andrew Lloyd Webber



PROLOGUE



Paris, March 1896

The Opera Ghost was gone.

The absurd thought was with me from the moment morning's pale light spilled in through hastily drawn curtains, prodding me away from dreams both fearful and divine.

He's gone.

The sudden certainty was so startling I sat up with a gasp and pushed aside the twisted tangle of linens, even as my bedfellow groaned.

Ignoring his protestations—already he'd rolled over and fallen back asleep with an ease I envied—I quickly dressed and abandoned the chamber, the town house, and the man they contained before ordering a hansom cab to take me back to the place I'd sworn so many times I'd never return: the Opéra Populaire.

He's not there.

My inner voice was an almost-convincing shield, keeping me safe from harm and heartache, but I had to know. I had to see everything with my own eyes.

I couldn't imagine the opera without him haunting it, couldn't fathom a world without his careful watch.

But if it was . . . If he had . . .

I had the carriage stop along the Rue Scribe so that I might take the back entrance and slip in unnoticed. Half a dozen gendarmes loitered out front, chatting and sharing cigarettes with exhausted members of the fire brigade. My visit was to be brief and without interruption. I would confirm that my suspicions were right and then go, secure in the knowledge that this nightmare—this beautiful, terrible horror—was well and truly over.

One step into his world at the edge of the underground lake, five whole basements beneath the bustling streets of the 9th arrondissement, was enough for me to know.

The Angel of Music, my tutor and tormentor, was not here.

The silence gave it away instantly.

The air—usually so full of music and life, so saturated with song that the notes lingered long after being played—was still. The mechanical clicks and rustles of his automatons, his models and tinkerings, were no more.

Stripped of his unearthly genius, his dark kingdom was now dominated by other sounds: dripping water and scratches of rodent claws on wet brickwork, things I'd never once noticed when everything was filled with him. Even the building itself could be heard, settling with ominous groans that made me terribly aware of the hundred thousand tons of granite, marble, and gilded statuary that were suspended above me by nothing more than the magic of arches and angles.

He was not there.

But the monkey music box, that curious figure of tufted hair and clapping cymbals, was.

I made my way over to the novelty, keeping my lantern brandished to hold back the most eager shadows.

"Where did he go?" I asked. I was almost certain that the monkey could come to life and tell me all he'd borne witness to, if only he wanted.

But he remained still and kept his secrets.

Impulsively, I wound the handle and let the sweet, wistful refrain trigger an ache in my chest so painful I feared I would crack.

It had been wondrous here once.

Beautiful, even.

But now . . .

Toppled, broken furniture and smashed machinery littered the space. Cogs and springs and metallic detritus crackled underfoot. Wooden carvings, lovingly rendered, were reduced to splinters. Drapes had been ripped to shreds and candles knocked over, covering surfaces with angry sprays of hardened wax. It was a wonder the entire opera had not burned down.

Seeing the magnitude of his work, pilfered and broken, wholly destroyed by senseless rage, made me want to cry.

Most concerning was the music.

Thousands of sheets of paper—arias and concertos, requiems and sonatas—were cast across the room with such disregard it made me physically ill. Whole scores had been ripped from their covers, torn in two, and pitched. A lifetime's worth of art ruined in a fit of fury.

But whose rage had brought this on?

That of the encroaching mob?

Or . . .

"Erik," I whispered, picking up the nearest sheet and tracing a finger along its stanzas.

The notes had been hastily jotted in his signature burgundy ink. I recognized the melody immediately. His fervored urgency rippled through every line.

A duet, written for soprano and baritone.

How I'd smiled when he'd first told me. Tenors were always meant to win the heroine's heart.

But not this time.

Not exactly.

I closed my eyes, remembering our last moments in this space, remembering how his lips had moved over mine, remembering the abject sorrow which had choked his voice as he screamed for me to leave him.

With a shaky breath, I glanced around the room, looking for the rest of the song. I wanted to take it with me. I couldn't bear the thought of such beauty stranded in this darkness, forever entombed like a pharaoh forgotten to time and history.

The sheer quantity of it all was overwhelming. I wandered through the mess, spotting tunes both familiar and strange. His spirit, his talent, remained in this place, even if my Angel was no more.

I picked up every page I could find, taking the scattered song and piecing it back together the way it was meant to be. At the far side of the room, just at the edge of my vision, came unexpected movement, and I startled.

An undignified cry caught in my throat, and I squinted, picturing him as he'd step from the darkness, his suit only a shade lighter than the void itself.

I willed for other bits of him to appear—first his hands, long and pale and lovely, then the crisp press of his shirt, the fastidious knot of his cravat. And his mask.

I stood frozen, breathless, my chest heavy with anticipation.

My instinct had been wrong.

The Opera Ghost was not gone. He was here. He had outwitted his would-be captors and come back. He'd returned.

For me.

All thoughts of Raoul—dear, wonderful Raoul, slumbering in his bed, wholly unaware of the treachery lodged within my heart—vanished.

Erik had come for me, and I could not forsake my Angel a second time.

But when he did not step out of the shadows, I crossed the room and pushed aside a gauzy bit of tattered tulle—the remnant of a bridal

veil from *Lohengrin*—and I saw that the movement I'd caught had been nothing but my own self, reflected in the jagged shards of a mirror.

It was an enormous behemoth, taking up an entire section of the room and towering over me like a giant. The reflective surface had been smashed, shattered into hundreds of pieces. Some still hung in the frame like silvery teeth, and I had the irrational thought that it was a great beast on the verge of devouring me whole.

A cold draft caused the lantern's flame to dance, setting the gilded nymphs carved along the frame into false motion. Highlights slid over exposed limbs and bared breasts. Metallic faces watched me with seething interest, and I looked away, feeling their judgment.

Resting on the steps just before the mirror was the last page of the duet. I knelt to retrieve it and discovered that hidden beneath was a colored illustration ripped from the pages of a book.

It was a rose.

A very red rose.

"The Rosa Joséphine," I whispered, instantly recognizing its unique shade.

I scooped it up, noticing all the notes he'd scrawled in its margins—dates and locations, facts and anecdotes—and smiled. He'd been so uniquely curious, driven by a compulsion to know more. No detail was too small; no object was beneath his notice. Once his attention was caught, he would not rest until he knew and understood everything. His intensity could not be stopped.

How well I knew.

I tucked the rose within the sheets of music and stood. A sudden flush of déjà vu swept over me, seizing hold of my mind and taking me back to another time, in front of another mirror.

There had been roses then too.

And him.

And the music.

So, so much music . . .