

## Chapter Three: Past the Point of No Return

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“Why on Earth would someone need this many coats?” I exclaimed, coughing into my elbow from all the dust swirling around the small closet.

With all of the many coats surrounding us, there was barely enough room for both Clay and I to stand among them. I could spot various colors and materials around me, most of which I didn't recognize. Some were detailed enough to look like they were costumes from shows. It made sense considering what a theatre fanatic Mr. Mason had been.

“That is a very good question.” Clay replied, continuing to rifle through the hangers.

I coughed again and went back to helping them search through the closet. It had been difficult to get to the coat closet, seeing that it was upstairs, and we had to avoid all of the others. The other guests were swarming Mr. Mason's mansion in search of his will. We had barely avoided Claude, and if it wasn't for Clay dragging us down another hallway, he might've spotted us. We had been trying to avoid the guests since they had split off to search for the will. Clay and I were the only ones who were trying to find out the truth, which meant we had to get to the clues, and the mystery, before anyone else.

It wasn't easy going up the stairs after what had happened. There was no way to move Mr. Mason's body without tampering with a crime scene. If Mr. Mason's position was moved or if any evidence was compromised, it would make things more difficult for when we finally were able to get the police involved. Oliver had neatly folded a sheet over the body, but chills still flooded my spine as we walked by.

“I'm sorry about Mr. Mason,” I said quietly after a few minutes of searching had passed. “I know you looked up to him.”

“I'm sorry too. He was a good man. He didn't deserve an end like that.”

I stopped. “Why do you think he planned everything out with the will? If he knew someone was going to murder him, why didn't he call the police, or at least do more to stop it?”

“I wish I knew,” Clay exhaled slowly. “He must've known whoever it was wasn't going to stop until he was gone.”

“Someone here?”

They nodded. “It has to be. Mr. Mason wouldn't have lied, and he might've been old, but he could still move around alright. There is no way he fell.”

Clay had stopped looking. Their hand was resting over one of the fur coats. I hesitantly put my hand over theirs.

“We’re going to find whoever did it. We’ll get justice for him.”

“I know, but then what?” Clay looked up. “Mr. Mason spent his whole life with that theatre, and now he’s gone and it’s just going to go to someone who doesn’t really care. Everyone else here just wants the money. They’ll sell the theatre for profit as soon as they get the chance.”

“What would you do with the inheritance?”

Clay paused for a moment. “I’d do what Mr. Mason always wanted. I’d work to make the theatre something he could be proud of.”

“We’ll keep looking. We have until morning.” I put a hand on their shoulder reassuringly.

They nodded and finally pulled out the coat that they had stopped at. It reached to the floor and was made of a cinnamon colored fur. The cut looked like a trenchcoat, but the collar was thick and puffed up around the neck. A long row of golden buttons stretched over the front and gleamed in the dim lighting. I didn’t have to ask to know that it was the mink coat we were looking for. Clay reached into the front pocket and pulled out a single red rose. A thin velvet black ribbon was tied around the stem. Their face scrunched up in confusion as they twisted it in their hand.

“It’s a rose? I don’t get it.”

I was about to agree when a sudden flash of recognition hit me. “Wait! I know what it is. It’s Phantom of the Opera! Remember? The Phantom left it for Christine. In the movie at least.”

“Oh my gosh, you’re right,” Clay chuckled, looking at the rose. “How’d you know that? I thought you hated musicals.”

“Do you not remember forcing me to watch the movie version?”

“Well I do, but I didn’t think you were paying attention.” Clay said with amusement, but I could sense an unrecognizable emotion in their expression.

“Look, I don’t like musicals. I still think the Phantom’s obsession with Christine was creepy at best, however, the music was great.”

Clay grinned for the first time since the loss of Mr. Mason. “I knew it. You are a secret musical lover.”

“I am not,” I crossed my arms. “Now, where are we supposed to look next?”

“My best guess would be either the balcony or the basement. Seeing that the balcony could be hinting at the song with Christine and Raul on the roof, but the basement could be the Phantom’s lair. Where do you want to look first?”

“Balcony. Definitely. I’m not going in a creepy basement unless we have to.”

They offered sarcastically. “Well, then you can hang onto this, angel of music.”

I rolled my eyes as I took the flower. The Angel of Music was the Phantom’s nickname for Christine, and Clay knew that I hated it with a dying passion. I had very clearly told them of my distaste when we had watched it together.

“You suck.”

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Clay and I managed to make it out of the closet, down the staircase, and through a hallway, before we heard the shouting. The memory of the last time we heard shouting flashed in my mind and my blood went cold, as the fear that something else had happened took hold of me. I gripped the rose in my hand tighter as we both raced down the hall toward the noise. As we got closer, I realized that it wasn’t fearful shouting like earlier, but merely arguing. I stopped abruptly to turn back, but it was too late. Clay and I both stopped in our tracks to see that Flora and Emilia were both standing by themselves in the hallway.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about!” Flora screamed angrily.

“Oh really, Flora?” Emilia taunted. “Is that what you think? You really can’t own up to your own wrong-doing. How pathetic.”

I stepped forward ahead of Clay. “What’s going on here?”

“Get out of here. This doesn’t involve you.” Emilia snapped back.

Flora’s eyes were watering as she glanced at both of us. “She’s right. Just go.”

“We’re not leaving,” Clay replied with authority. “You’re fighting in a hallway when a murder has happened. Now what’s going on?”

“It’s none of your business!” Emilia countered. “Graduated or not, you’re still just a kid. Why can’t you just go back to your pointless little clue solving, and leave the adults alone?”

Flora wiped her eyes. “Just go, both of you. It’s fine, really. I’m fine.”

“Not until I know what’s going on. Clearly something is wrong.”

“Are you bothering my girlfriend, Clay?” A voice came from behind us.

I turned to see that Grant had entered the hall. His arms were crossed threateningly as he glared at us. His long blonde hair was pulled back, he had taken off his suit coat, and the sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up.

“No. We heard arguing and came to help.”

Grant looked from Flora to Emilia, and back to us. “You should stop digging around, kid. It’s only going to get you in trouble.”

“Everyone keeps saying that,” Clay took a step toward him. “Doesn’t deter me any less.”

“Says the one who’s convinced that there’s a murder running around.”

“There is, whether you acknowledge it or not. And right now, you’re looking rather suspicious yourself, Grant.”

Grant’s mouth twitched. “Are you accusing me of something?”

“No,” Clay answered coldly, glancing back at Emilia. “Just making a suggestion.”

“Well, then I suggest you get out of here before it’s you who takes a tumble down the stairwell.”

“Step off. Grant.”

Clay’s voice was stone cold, and I could sense the anger in their eyes, but it was no match for the severity in Grant’s furious expression. I could sense a fight and grabbed Clay’s arm to pull them away.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

Clay didn’t move at first, but I tightened my grip on their arm and began to walk us both down the hallway. Behind us, Grant took a few steps toward Flora and Emilia.

“You okay, darling?” He questioned Flora.

“Yeah... Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Good,” Grant said from behind us. “I’ll make sure they don’t bother you again.”

“T-Thanks.”

Clay clenched their hand into a fist, and I continued firmly walking us down the hallway as to avoid Grant getting punched in the face.

“There is some good news...” I started as we got out of earshot.

They huffed. “Like what?”

“We now have our prime suspect. Grant.”