

Chapter 1

The first time I saw the ghost, I wasn't dreaming. I wasn't even asleep. I'd had no premonition that my life was about to change forever, and no wonder; I'm not prone to having premonitions. It happened the evening my husband Christian and I attended a piano concert. Such a normal thing to do. We arrived at the auditorium in time to socialize with acquaintances and friends. Usually I enjoyed seeing the familiar faces, but tonight my stubborn awareness of Christian's discontent and my own anxiety marred any pleasure I might have felt.

I took my seat and loosened my pale-blue wrap while Christian played at being the socialite. My head felt tired. I closed my eyes and tried to relax while I listened to the patter of voices around me, the dull scrape of shoes on carpet, the creak of a seat, the muted mumble of an auditorium filling with well-dressed people. Our seats were slightly to the left so Christian could watch the pianist's hands move upon the keys of the enormous black concert grand in the center of the stage. At home we had a smaller parlor grand with a mahogany finish, which Christian played every day after work and on weekends. The music helped him unwind from the drudge of his engineering job, the job he kept to provide for us. He'd told me, once, that he only needed a house to shelter me and his parlor grand. Now he wanted that shelter to include a child.

The lights dimmed, and Christian slid into the seat beside me. As was his habit, he took my hand and laid it over his forearm, which was strong and well shaped. Just like the rest of him. In the near-darkness of the hushed auditorium, the stage lights illumined the pianist, Vladimir Feltsman, as he crossed the stage, stood beside the piano bench, and gave a slight bow. He was a striking man with carefully groomed, graying hair and a short, elegant beard. Applause leaped into the air as he seated himself neatly before the piano. Hands poised over the keyboard, he waited for the applause to diminish into silence. His back arched for an instant before his hands

met the keys.

The music, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, normally would have left no room for thought. It should have been easy to lose myself in its splendor, but I couldn't stop thinking about the previous night. Sharp, even brutal words had passed between Christian and me, and the memory tolerated no competition. Our words rang with a resounding clarity in my head. My emotions still burned on the surface of my mind like lit gas on water. Christian had never pushed so far before, and my yelling at him hadn't helped.

"Babies! Children! You talk of nothing else now."

"And why not, Evie? We've been married three years—"

"I want time to finish this book, Christian."

"You said the same thing during the last one—"

"I'm not ready yet!"

"When will you be ready, Evangeline? When?"

I still winced when I thought of the look on his face, of hurt more than anger. When I'd fallen in love with him, and known nothing more about him than his warm, earthy eyes, children had been the least of my worries. I wanted nothing more than to please him now as I had pleased him then, but having a child would be disastrous. No matter how I tried to change my own mind, the idea of being a mother more than terrified me.

I closed my eyes and attempted to clear my thoughts, to concentrate only on the pianist, one of Christian's favorites, and the music he now created.

The effort wasn't in vain. I began to lose myself in the melody's serene beauty. Mr. Feltsman's fingers danced upon the ivory and jet, and the piano's joyful sound caressed, flowed into my ears. Longer and louder, quieter and slower, his fingers met and parted with each key as

lovingly and longingly as if each instant of touch was the promise of a kiss. His body relaxed into the music, and soon it became difficult to tell who played whom. Did the man play the piano, or did the piano play the man? For they had become as one.

I opened my eyes, wanting not only to hear but to see this splendid performance. As I watched Mr. Feltsman, a shimmering vision of a woman appeared upon the stage. I gasped. Who would dare interrupt a piano concert with a visual distraction like this? I glanced at Christian. His attention to the pianist was complete. He paid no heed to the woman who stood just to one side and a little behind Mr. Feltsman. Her golden dress reminded me of another time, perhaps the time of the music, which was of the late eighteen hundreds or even earlier. How could she be part of the concert? Her appearance made no sense.

The woman did nothing but stand behind the pianist, her eyes downcast, her hands folded together in front of her voluminous iridescent gown, her face sad yet serene, as if she too were lost in the music and its magic. I watched her unwavering form throughout the entire piece until the soft stage lighting caught and sparkled upon a single tear slipping down her cheek.

Tears pricked my own eyes, and I blinked against the unaccustomed sharpness. Pity welled within me. This woman was a wonderful actress, for that's what she had to be. She portrayed someone bereft of hope, yet hoping still. Her sad countenance held all the misery of love unrequited, the ravages of demanding the impossible of oneself, and the triumph of never giving up, no matter that all was lost.

Such quiet yet fierce passion I had never seen, much less experienced. By the time Mr. Feltsman played the last note before intermission, I couldn't breathe. With a jolt, I saw the woman disappear as Mr. Feltsman's fingers left the keyboard. Gone. She did not walk off the stage. She did not leave with the pianist. She had quite literally disappeared before he rose to his

feet. The stage manager must have used mirrors to give her that ghostlike appearance.

Whoever had conceived this idea had done a brilliant job. No regular piano concert, this one. I was impressed and disturbed at the same time. The vision had pulled such emotion from me, more than I felt was appropriate for such a performance. I wasn't sure I liked its unsettling impact. I turned to Christian and said, "I've never seen anything like this." He who was so pure in his love of the piano, would he think her more a distraction than an enhancement?

"Seen? What do you mean, Evie? Mr. Feltsman looks the same as always. This time his playing was faultless. Much better than the last concert I saw him play. I think he's improving with age."

"But the woman, what did you think of the woman?"

"What woman?"

Shocked, I stared at him. He had no idea what I meant. Had anyone else seen her?

"I think I'd like a drink." I stood before he could offer to get it for me and followed him out to one of the beverage counters. Christian, my lovely Frenchman, and love of my life, placed his hand gently under my elbow.

"Are you well, *mon aimée*? You look a bit pale."

He always called me his beloved, and I tried to smile, to reassure him, if not myself. "I'm fine. A little thirsty, that's all."

"What would you like? A glass of wine? Water?"

"Water would be perfect, but first I'll go to the restroom. Be right back."

I could see his concern. He always had the same look when he worried about me; a little line appeared between his thick black brows and his jaw tightened. He didn't like it when there were secrets between us, or when I was bothered about something he didn't know how to put

right, but I think he liked the mystery of not knowing everything about me. Maybe that's what had first fascinated him, attracted him to me when we'd met four years ago. Now, more than ever, I wished his fascination were enough.

I took the stairs, eager to get to the restroom and ask in as careful a manner as possible if anyone else had seen the woman. However, none of the ladies waiting in line had seen the apparition. All that anyone had seen or heard was the pianist. No shimmering, beautiful lady dressed in grief. Although I didn't need to "go," I went into one of the stalls and leaned against the wall. I started shaking. I closed my eyes.

I wasn't sure if I could watch the second half of the concert. The apparition had more than unsettled me, and I felt like a fool. Why had no one else seen her? When I left the stall and passed the women waiting in line, my eye caught my reflection in the mirror. I stared at myself. I looked completely normal. True, I was a little pale, but that could be the lighting. My makeup wasn't smudged. It still lay pristine around my disbelieving eyes. Certainly no strange vision, no matter how haunted, could change the fact that I hadn't cried in years. I'd heard that the eyes are the windows to the soul. Where was my soul, then? I saw nothing but unease looking back at me.

When I rejoined Christian, who had been talking with a friend, he searched my face, handed me a glass of water, and welcomed me with his usual grace into the conversation. I felt as if I were watching myself from a video camera high up in a corner somewhere. I smiled, spoke pleasant nothings, drank my water, and told myself over and over to breathe. I shivered as the lights dimmed, announcing the second half of the program. I set my empty glass on a white-napkin-covered tray and told myself to pull it together. When Christian guided me back into the auditorium, his large, warm hand on the small of my back made me feel better.

As we sat down, my head swam in dizzy patterns; my palms felt damp. I didn't want to

see the ghostly lady again or feel her desperate anguish. Her emotion—so silent, so intense—had depleted me. I couldn't endure facing her again. I feared I would have no resistance to such suffering a second time, and that if she reappeared, she would drain me and leave behind nothing but a corpse. "Christian, can we go?" I couldn't believe I'd said the words out loud.

"Now, Evangeline? In the middle?" Christian looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. He was right, of course. My reaction to the woman was beyond silly.

"No, of course not."

The bright lights dimmed, and the stage was again softly illuminated. Vladimir Feltsman returned and repeated the bow, took his seat, and waited again for silence with fingers poised. I closed my eyes, determined to only listen this time, not watch. The music enthralled me, and I drank it in as though it could slake my unease. The notes clung to my ears and dripped slowly onto my chest as if magic portals to another world. My apprehension faded, and I smiled for the first time since I'd seen the stricken lady. She was nothing but a fanciful hallucination caused by the rich tones and passion of the piano. I would have had to be heartless not to fall under the spell of the music winding its way into the depths of me. I breathed again.

I dared not open my eyes; but against my will, I did. She was there. Spellbound now, caught in the trap of her quiet pain, I couldn't drag my eyes away. I was no longer afraid—couldn't be, in front of her sorrow. A deep pity welled within me. What was her story? Who was she? Where did she come from, and why could no one else see her?

I had no answers, and knew I probably never would. She was a figment of my imagination brought on by the enchanting music, which had been written in a distant age when passion fought propriety, and was, therefore, all the more stirring. Her figure remained stoic and silent. She never moved but only listened, as did the rest of us, to the music, which for a while

might help us escape unwanted thoughts.

When the last note had sounded through the auditorium, I waited for the pianist to stand and the woman to disappear. I stared at her, knowing it would happen in an instant. I held my breath as Vladimir Feltsman rose from his seat. The ghostly woman abruptly opened her eyes, stared into mine, and revealed the hell of the damned as she whispered in my head, demanding, “Come to me, Evangeline. Come to me!”