

Phantom

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

1.

He pushed open the auditorium door _ (the whisper of old pine echoed in the silence as, up onstage, silver glistened)_ and stood with his hands on the cushioned metal seat at the end of Aisle Z. Someone had carpeted the great room and added false wooden arches. The hall's perfect acoustics _ (a single, startled grunt resounded in the stillness)_ had been sacrificed to an ignorant remodeler's whim.

Martin stepped over the seat and then sat down. The other rows were well spaced and curved down toward the stage. From this spot he would be able to see everything clearly. Not that he wanted to. Being in the Dixon left him with a vague feeling of unease. He could see Terry standing next to the piano, his hair combed back in a greasy ducktail that Elvis Presley would have been proud of. Terry haunted the Dixon for Martin, and so did a knife, a long, slender knife streaked with blood.

Martin ran his hand along the soft woven gray and pink seat cover. The hall was quiet. He would have thought that people would be working frantically, finishing last-minute projects before the performer arrived. But Martin hadn't seen anyone since he let himself in the back door. He still found it amazing that, with all the recent concerns about murders at the Dixon, Wellman hadn't bothered to have the locks changed. That would have been the first thing -- that had been the first thing -- Martin had done.

He sighed and closed his eyes. If he strained hard enough, he could almost hear the feathers of former performances still floating in the air: Rubinstein caressing the _Moonlight_ like a lover, Andre attacking the _Trumpet Voluntary_ with a brightness Clarke never imagined, and Rampal teasing the puckishness out of Mozart. Tonight, though, tonight would be the best. Tonight was Stern.

Isaac Stern, perhaps the world's greatest violinist. But he was more than a great musician. With his gnomelike body and dancing eyebrows, Stern embodied passion, passion that he poured back into the auditorium through his violin. Martin had seen only one other performer give so much emotion to the music. Arthur Rubinstein, thirty years ago to the very day.

Arthur Rubinstein. Isaac Stern. Martin patted the seat and then relinquished it. He would have to sit near an exit closer to the stage.

2.

WILL THE PHANTOM OF DIXON THEATER STRIKE AGAIN?

(Rockridge) -- Security guards patrol the Dixon Theater as classical music buffs buy last-minute tickets to this Oregon town's first concert in nearly a decade. Henry Longfellow Wellman, the theater's owner, hired the guards to prevent another murder.

Thirty years ago, after a performance by pianist Arthur Rubinstein, stagehand Terrance G. Hodgeson was stabbed to death on Dixon's stage. Ten years later a worker found an unconscious Rowena Klingdest the day after trumpeter Maurice Andre appeared on the Dixon stage. In the late seventies, following a concert by flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal, the Phantom stabbed his final victim, Lorili Lee Anders.

No one knows who has committed the killings. Some have nicknamed the killer the Dixon Phantom because of his ability to appear and disappear so....

* * * *

Rowena crumpled the newspaper and threw it back at Jon. She hated it when the newspapers dredged up that old story. "Piece of garbage," she said. "You'd think I don't have enough to worry about." She flicked up the switch that illuminated the lights around the stage. "'Central lighting,' he says. 'Makes for more intimacy,' he says. 'No spots,' he says. Christ, would you look at that, Jon?" She swept her hand toward the big glass window of the booth overlooking the stage. "Looks like a goddamn cavern out there."

"I've been wondering why Wellman hired all those security guards."

Rowena yanked the cover off the Neotek and then looked at her assistant. He was sitting on a stool, staring at the newspaper, one foot resting on a bar and the other barely touching the floor. His thick black bangs hung over his eyes, and she could see the frown of concentration reflected in the narrowness of his mouth.

"I don't know anything about running sound on a solo violinist," she said. This Phantom of the Opera stuff had her annoyed. If the past two stabbings had been done by a copycat killer like the police believed, then the newspapers were just making things worse by publishing articles on the incidents before Stern's performance. "We never had to do it in Seattle. But this hall dumps sound so bad that I'm afraid people in the back won't be able to -- "

Jon wasn't looking at her. He was still studying the newspaper. Rowena yanked it from him and shoved it in the trash.

"What did Stern say to you when he was here?" she asked.

"They mention you in that article, you know."

Rowena could feel her lips tighten, and wondered if she would get age lines that turned the corners of her mouth downward. "I know," she said.

"I would think you wouldn't be here tonight."

"And who would run the boards? You? You haven't paid attention all day."

"I just thought that -- "

"You thought wrong." She winced at her own tone. She sounded shrewish, like she had those last few months in Seattle, just before her divorce. She took a deep breath and decided to be conciliatory. "Let's put this Phantom shit away and get busy, all right? Tell me what Stern said."

"He said the piano was out of tune."

Rowena punched the on button for the Neotek. Feedback squealed into the little booth. Shivers ran up her back, and she stifled an urge to clasp her hands over her ears as she pulled down all of the sound buttons. The VU meters slowly eased back into black as the feedback quit, but the effects remained. Her ears rang, and she felt as if she were cringing inside herself. Sometimes she thought that if feedback continued long enough, something inside -- the part that appreciated harmony and beautiful music -- would explode.

"Danny tuned the damn thing this morning," she said. Her voice sounded hollow after the violence of the feedback.

"Wellman turned on the air-conditioning at noon. Change in temperature made the thing off enough that the old man got angry about it."

Rowena bit back a reply. A violinist of Stern's reputation was not, despite his age, an old man. She tried to make her words as soft as possible. "Isaac Stern is a great violinist. Since we're going to be working with him, we have to show him some respect."

"Yeah." Jon looked out the window at the empty stage. "It's just that he comes on like everything has to be exactly perfect. This isn't Carnegie Hall. We do our best."

She nodded. "But we can get the piano retuned for him. Why don't you call Danny back? We'll see if we can get this settled before curtain."

And, she thought, bending over the Neotek, _we'll see if we can get this settled, too_. They rarely used the expensive sound board, and the instant feedback had surprised her. Someone had been monkeying with the controls, and that added to her annoyance. She was the only one authorized to touch the machine.

The door clicked shut behind her as Jon let himself out of the booth. She punched the speakers back on, knowing that, with the touch of a button, the sound of the entire theater could come alive for her in that little room.

3.

Danny Stevens clutched the red curtain dividing the wings from the stage and glared at the piano as if it were an enemy. It had taken him nearly an hour to tune the damn thing that morning. He would work, feel as if he had tuned it, and then hit middle C. The sound would slide away from the perfect pitch as if the piano were deliberately untuning itself.

And now they were asking him to do it again.

He ran his gnarled hands along his faded pants. The problem wasn't the air-conditioning, he thought as he walked across the wooden floorboards that separated him from the piano. The problem was that the damn piano didn't want to play that night.

Not that Danny could blame it. The piano had seen some awful sights over the years. A murder and two stabbings, and who knows what else that happened backstage, night after night.

He pulled back the bench and sat down. The piano was a strange instrument, but a good one. It had a richness of tone he had never heard before, and would probably never hear again. He believed the piano was a hybrid or an experimental model made by a company that had never survived. No name marred the black finish; no trademark hid inside the frame. The piano had qualities of all the best pianos and the identifying marks of none.

Without depressing any keys, he ran his fingers across the board. The piano hated classical concerts. Fortunately, none of the big orchestras or quartets had asked to use it. Only the soloists. And for them the piano never stayed tuned. But it loved the local performers. Its tone was pure for the annual children's musical and the high school productions. It faded into nearly nothing for the glee club performances, and it was the star of the local jazz band. But try to tune it for a recital where the entire program had nothing more modern than Tchaikovsky, and the piano would refuse, every time.

It had had no trouble playing for the first soloist. Danny had been just a boy then, barely twenty, when Rubinstein had played the Dixon. As a condition of his performance, he demanded that they provide him with a "decent" piano. And so Martin, who had owned the place at the time, ran out and bought the piano, even though the theater really couldn't afford it. Two nights later, Rubinstein played the hell out of the instrument. Danny remembered thinking, as he sat in the audience with tears streaking his face, that

the piano would never sound as good again. And, in his own way, he had been right.

He played octave C's and winced at the dissonance. No arguing with Stern. The piano had slid out of tune again.

Danny tilted his head, played octaves, and began to tune the piano. He couldn't remember if he had had to fight with the piano before Rubinstein's performance. He remembered tuning it, thinking that he hadn't touched a piano that fine since Old Lady Steinglass had passed away two years before. The piano had felt like a supple woman in his hands, and Danny thought he had fallen in love.

He wouldn't have fallen in love with a recalcitrant piano.

That meant the problem had started after the murder, after Martin had found Terry sprawled on the stage, knife pinning him to the floorboards. Blood had splattered everything, and Martin had called Danny to clean it off of the keyboard. Danny remembered how tenderly he had cleaned, making sure that each drop disappeared.

But the piano hadn't been the same since.

"Hey, you!"

Danny jumped. His hands slipped and fell onto the keyboard, sending jangled, out-of-tune notes into the rows of empty seats. He turned around and saw one of the security guards glowering at him. The man was big, so big that he strained the seams of his shiny blue uniform. A pair of handcuffs dangled at his waist like a gun.

"What are you doing here, old man?"

"I -- " Danny cleared his throat. "I'm tuning the piano."

"Let's see your clearance."

"I -- um, Rowena called me, and Jon let me in the back." Danny took a deep breath to calm himself. The man frightened him. "I was here this morning."

"I wasn't." The guard walked over to the piano. "I need to see your clearance."

"I don't know what clearance is," Danny said truthfully. He was beginning to shake.

"Then I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Danny shot a frightened glance up at the booth. Rowena was bent over a piece of equipment, her entire body in profile. Danny _ (flashed on a memory: Rowena -- a young Rowena, barely seventeen -- lying beside the piano, her hand leaving a trail of blood down the polished wood. Her clothes hung in tatters around her body, and her left breast rose like a small island of flesh out of her mutilated chest. He had screamed, and the sound of his voice had reverberated through the hall, making her eyelids flutter)_ stood up. He couldn't attract her attention without walking on the catwalks and messing with the lights.

"Can't we talk to Rowena?" he asked.

The guard shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. You need clearance to be in the building. I can't let you be here without it. I can take you outside, and you would have to wait there while I talk to the lady myself."

"I'm tuning the piano!" Danny could hear a note of hysterical anger in his voice and wondered where it came from. It would probably have been easier to go outside and wait while the giant talked to Rowena.

But Danny didn't want to.

He turned and slammed his fingers onto the keyboard, playing the opening notes of Grieg's Piano Concerto in A Minor. The heavy chords filled the auditorium, and he tried not to flinch at the horrible off-pitch sounds. The guard grabbed his shoulder -- tightly -- and Danny stopped, feeling frustrated.

"Danny?" Rowena's voice through the booth intercom, sounding hollow and almost inhuman.

It had worked. Danny let out the air he had been holding in his lungs. "Rowena, this guy wants to throw me out. Says I need clearance."

"Oh, is it that time already? I forgot. He's clear, Mike. Send him up, and I'll give him the slip."

The guard let go of Danny's shoulder. "Sorry," the man said.

"Yeah." Danny shrugged his shoulders as if to get the feeling of the man's hand off his skin. Danny walked to the edge of the stage and climbed down into the pit, then made his way up the aisle toward the booth. He had a strange feeling, as if he could see multiple time layers all at once. So many times he had walked up that aisle, past wooden chairs, past metal chairs, and now, past these padded things that were ever so comfortable and had somehow destroyed the Dixon's sound. In his memory, his footsteps resounded along the aisle floor. But only in his memory.

He went out into the lobby, then opened the little, unobtrusive door that hid the stairway to the booth. He loved the old theater. He had been in some of the new ones, with their space-age technology, booths located in the center back where the good, cheap seats used to be, and had been thankful that Rockridge still had the Dixon. Somehow those new theaters, pretty as they were, lacked the heart of an older theater, lacked the feeling of time stretching and contracting as if the building itself were a sort of time machine.

He stepped into the booth. Rowena was leaning against a stool, staring at the stage below. When he shut the door, she turned and handed him a slip of paper.

"Sorry I forgot, Danny," she said. She kept her eyes averted, as she always had after the stabbing, as if she couldn't forget that he had been the one who found her nearly dead on the stage below them. "They added the clearance shit at noon. Thought it would be safer or something. I think it's a pain in the butt."

Danny took his paper and shoved it in his pocket. "I was afraid you wouldn't hear me."

"I was playing with the Neotek or I wouldn't have."

He wanted to reach over and touch her, to reassure himself that she was real. He had never done that, never touched Rowena, never really proven to himself that she had survived the attack. Not that he had touched her before, either. She had been too exuberant, filled with too much life. He used to love to come to the Dixon, just to watch Rowena prance around as if she had been born to the stage. But after they let her out of the hospital, she had given up acting, given up everything except the hidden part of theater, the lights and the sound, performed by a magician behind a cloak of darkness.

"Thanks," Danny said again, feeling awkward. "I better get back down again and finish."

"Will you be around tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Good. That piano's so damn fussy, and who knows if Wellman will monkey with the air-conditioning

again. You can watch from here if you want."

Danny stared at her. She was built slender and tough, with long, glistening black hair that hung to the center of her back. He would have loved to be in the booth with her, watching her fingers play the board as if it were a baby grand. But she would have to look at him, to actually see him as a living, breathing human being.

"I got tickets," he said. "But thanks."

Tickets. He let himself out of the booth and allowed himself a moment of self-pity. He was taking Nancy again, because there was no one else. Nancy, the prude, who had never let him sleep with her, not in two years of irregular dates and halfhearted efforts on his part. He supposed it was his fault. He had never made an effort with women that really attracted him -- women like Rowena. She was nearly fifteen years younger than he was, and battle-scarred. Ever since Len had left, she looked as if she didn't care, as if no one could get in.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and leaned against the railing. He was alone. She was alone. And he embarrassed her. Those three facts were all that mattered.

4.

Chrissy swished her satin skirt about her knees. She clutched the plastic cup filled with wine and leaned against one of the pillars as she waited for Robert. Such a beautiful evening, a magical evening, like a prom, only better. She took a sip of the wine and savored its alcoholic taste as it slid down the back of her throat.

Robert came out of the bathroom and tugged the edges of his sleeves as he walked. He looked so elegant with his silver-black hair and deep tan accented by his suit. A number of women stopped talking and stared as he walked past. Robert ignored them as he strode purposefully toward Chrissy. She smiled to herself as she watched him walk, the swing of his broad shoulders, the curve of his body as it tapered down into a pair of long, supple legs. Perhaps tonight she would see the entire thing naked, not just glimpses in the back seat of a car.

"You look delicious," he said as he stopped beside her.

She made a purring noise in the back of her throat and put her head on his shoulder. Robert was special. She didn't care that he was so much older. He seemed to like treating her as if she were an adult. He ordered wine for her although she wasn't legally supposed to drink it, and took her to see a famous violinist that no one had ever heard of. She loved the excuse to wear her satin. She knew that the wide, knee-length black skirt with the full waist, the soft white blouse with black trim and the flowery white stockings made her look like a model. Her sister's black heels had been a nice touch, but almost unnecessary.

Robert ran a finger down the side of her blouse. "You ever been to a concert before?"

"U2 up in Portland," she said.

He chuckled. "No, I mean a real concert."

"One like this?" She surveyed the lobby. The principal was talking to the mayor. Both wore dark suits, although not as nicely tailored as Robert's. Three of her dad's bowling buddies stood off in one corner, watching their overdressed wives gossip about the stabbings. The orchestra teacher had a crowd of kids around her. Some even wore jeans. One boy caught Chrissy staring at him, and he toasted her with an

imaginary glass. She snuggled even closer to Robert. "No, I never have."

"Then there are a couple of things you should know." He put his hand flat on her back. She could feel his palm burning through layers of satin. "God," he whispered suddenly. "You're not wearing a bra."

"I'm not wearing panties, either." She smiled up at him. His eyes had that smoky look they usually got before he turned the car off down a side street and tugged at her jeans.

"Chrissy -- " he breathed, and she willed him to say it, this time, to make the evening perfect. _I love you Chrissy. I love you._

She stood on her toes and pressed her face even closer to his. "Yes, Robert?"

"Jesus, girl." He twined his fingers around the back of her neck, and she thought he was going to kiss her right there, in front of the principal, the mayor, and everybody -- but then a bell sounded, and Robert pulled back. "Time to go in."

"Oh, is that what that means?" She tried to will his gaze to remain on her, but he had looked away. He took her hand and pulled her toward the center doors where people were lining up.

They got in line behind an overweight couple that Chrissy didn't recognize. Real pearls hung around the woman's fleshy neck. Robert gripped Chrissy's elbow. "Now," he said, "there's etiquette to a classical music performance."

She watched him talk, letting the sentences about when to clap and when not to clap flow through her as if she were hollow. She made sure that her expression was wide-eyed and innocent. He liked that look, although she didn't practice it often.

"What do I have to do?" Chrissy asked.

Robert watched her for a moment, then a smile that didn't reach his eyes crossed his face. "Nothing, honey. Just clap when I do."

"O.K." Chrissy rocked back on her heels, then looked at the line behind them. Rows and rows of people wearing their very best clothes. She wondered, as the line started moving forward, why no one had come alone. Apparently, the etiquette Robert had talked about included a date.

Robert handed their tickets to Tammi Markston, who stood at the door. Tammi handed the stubs back, along with two programs. She leaned around Robert and giggled. "Hi, Chrissy."

Chrissy made herself smile. She hated it when Tammi acted so dumb. "How're you, Tam?"

"Not as good as you, looks like."

Robert put his hand against the small of her back and pushed her forward. Chrissy had to walk quickly to keep from tumbling off the shoes. "Sometimes I forget just how young you are," he said with an edge of irritation in his voice.

Chrissy wanted to grab at his sleeve and tell him that she wasn't young, not really, but she knew that was the wrong thing to do. She stepped down the first stair in the aisle, pretending that she was ten years older, but just as beautiful.

Robert stopped them five rows away from the stage.

"Great seats," Chrissy said.

"I would have liked them a few rows farther back," Robert said as he sat down, "but this hall dumps sound so badly now that I didn't dare."

Chrissy gazed up at the crystal chandelier, reflecting prisms of light around the auditorium. Then she turned, tucked one foot underneath her thighs, and watched the people trail down the rows.

"Don't gawk, Chrissy."

"I'm not gawking," she said. "I'm memorizing."

Robert sighed and leaned a little away from her. Chrissy watched him out of the corner of her eye and frowned. Sometimes he seemed so happy to be with her, and sometimes he acted as if he couldn't stand her at all. She settled back in her seat and tried not to move while she waited for the concert to begin.

5.

The house lights dimmed, leaving the full stage lights illuminating the piano. Martin glanced up at the booth, but he could see nothing. Rowena knew what she was doing, yet it seemed odd to him to give a soloist full lighting instead of spots. Spots were more intimate.

He shrugged and leaned back in his chair. There was nothing he could do. He turned slightly and stuck his feet into the aisle. He had chosen a seat closer to the exit, for what reason he really did not want to examine. Seat I, Row D. He had told himself that the sound would be better from there, but he really wasn't certain. What seemed more likely was that he offered himself a quick escape if something awful happened.

A wave of applause rippled through the auditorium, and he felt a band of excitement tighten around his stomach. A small rotund man with the face of a leprechaun; a taller, thin man; and a woman walked in stage right. The leprechaun carried a violin. Martin smiled. He had never seen Isaac Stern in person before.

The woman sat in a chair beside the piano. The taller man folded himself onto the piano bench and hit middle C. Stern played the note on his violin. Martin winced. The piano was nearly a quarter-step off. He certainly wouldn't have let it get so out of tune before a concert.

Stern tried to tune his violin to the piano. Just when Martin thought Stern was going to give up, the violinist moved the music stand over, and played the opening notes of a Beethoven sonata. Martin resisted the urge to consult his program. It had to be Beethoven. No other composer had such fullness of sound. And Stern. Stern himself became the music. The man's entire body flowed to the music. His eyebrows rose with joy and then fell again as the piece ebbed into a sadness. Martin felt himself move with the music, ebbing and flowing just as Stern did. Music was better than _ (a single, startled grunt resounding in the stillness) _ sex and money rolled together. For a brief moment, he wished he still owned the Dixon, but then he remembered seeing Terry pinned to the stage, the knife sticking up from his chest, blood dripping from the piano. Martin had run up onto the stage, but Terry was dead. And Martin's love for the Dixon had died, too. That was the difference. He could visit her and remember how he felt. But he could never, ever love her again.

6.

Danny hated Beethoven. He sat stiffly through the piece, feeling as if he were being crushed, and trying not to let anger at the piano overwhelm him. He knew where he would be during intermission. Onstage with the damn piano, trying to make the thing sound good. It was embarrassing to have to tune a piano three times in one day. People would think that he wasn't doing his job, when it really was the piano's

fault.

Nancy started applauding and Danny applauded with her, happy that the Beethoven had ended. Stern bowed, then looked at his accompanist. Danny stiffened. Would they call him now? Before intermission even started? He could imagine himself climbing onstage, with Stern, the accompanist, and the page turner standing back as he hurriedly tried to tune the piano. The audience would rustle in their seats, the piano would slide out of tune, and Danny would get angrier and angrier --

The high, clear sound of a violin brought him out of his reverie. Stern had eased into a Schubert sonata. Danny relaxed. The piano seemed to like Schubert. It was warming up to the romance, the richness in the music.

Stern caressed his violin like a lover. Danny watched and envied the other man as he poured himself into his music. Once Danny had wanted to pour himself into music like that. He had played the piano once, and still did, but lacked the very thing that made Stern so great: the ability to make music live.

Shivers ran up Danny's back. Good shivers of the kind he heard too rarely over the years. The last time had been Rampal, making love to his flute onstage.

The music continued, crescendoed into an almost dancelike ferocity. Danny felt the magic of Stern's violin descend from the stage, reaching out to caress them all.

7.

Rowena brought up the house lights. She wiped the sweat off her forehead and watched as, row by row, the audience stood. Intermission. Danny got up and headed backstage. She swung her chair around and shut down the Neotek so that the remaining audience members, the ones who were listening to the sound system instead of pure Stern, wouldn't hear him tune the piano yet again.

Then she took a deep breath and stretched. Her entire body ached. She was too tense. All evening she had been telling herself the tenseness came from carrying sound on a soloist, that it was a delicate task, difficult to balance, but she knew she was lying. She hadn't been in the Dixon for a classical concert since Maurice Andre, twenty years ago. The night she had been stabbed.

The booth door swung open, and Rowena gasped. Jon stepped in.

"Jonny, you're supposed to be downstairs."

"I know," he said, "but I think we have a problem with the piano."

She glanced on the stage. Danny was leaned over the piano, the accompanist and the page turner both beside him. Danny was gesticulating wildly. "What?"

"It won't tune."

"Obviously."

"No, I mean, it won't tune at all."

He stood behind her as if waiting for her to solve the problem. "Well," she said. "Let Danny work on it. I can't do anything about the piano."

Jon nodded. He started out the door, when Rowena added, "Next time use the headset."

He tapped the one he wore around his neck, the cord clutched tightly in his hand. "I tried. You weren't

answering."

Rowena started guiltily. She had pulled hers off a second before she upped the houselights. Headsets made her feel isolated, even though they gave lovely renditions of her performance with Stern. She wanted the connection to the rest of the world quickly.

"Sorry," she said.

He didn't reply, but turned and disappeared down the stairs. Rowena had to get up to close the door behind him. Then she turned back and looked out the glass. Danny was there alone again, working with the piano. Something about that piano bothered her, something about the way it sounded. It had been out of tune since the night she saw Andre. Danny had been up on the stage, monkeying with it, and Martin, the old owner, had also been there trying to help. She had sat near the exit and listened, hoping that someday someone would go to the same trouble to make sure her performances sounded as brilliant.

She made a whispery laughing sound in the back of her throat. Great joke on herself. She had come out of that night a techie herself, no longer whole enough to stand onstage alone.

She checked her watch, then reached over and sounded the return bell. With both hands, she picked up the headset and slid it over her ears.

"...do much about that piano," Jon was saying. "Rowena?"

She adjusted the tiny mike and said, "I'm here, Jon. What now?"

"Danny can't do much with that piano. What should I do?"

She thought for a moment. Delaying the concert was the worst thing she could do. Stern was on a tight schedule. He was taking a commuter flight not an hour after the concert ended. "Tell Stern he'll have to live with it -- and apologize."

"I get all the great jobs," Jon muttered. She heard his side go dead. She pulled the headset back, turned the Neotek back on, and slowly began to dim the lights.

8.

Chrissy tried not to sigh. She had sighed too many times already. Robert was getting annoyed. She ran a hand down the satin sleeve of her blouse and tried to imagine what it would be like after the concert, just her and Robert in his apartment. Maybe he would give her a little more wine, and as he went into the kitchen to get it, she would take off all of her clothes, stack them neatly in a chair across the room, and then arrange herself for him on the couch. The smoky look would come back to his eyes, and everything would be all right.

Applause started around her, but Chrissy dutifully waited until Robert started clapping before she did. The old man was coming back out onstage, clutching his violin, and he looked upset, too. These concerts definitely weren't fun. They were boring.

The old man walked to the edge of the stage and raised his hand. The applause slowly died.

"The Weber -- " He sounded like he was talking to a group of children. " -- is bits of light dancing through darkness. It is a very delicate piece. I beg your indulgence during it. The slightest noise could ruin the music. So please, no coughing, no whispering. Just music."

The applause started again. This time, Chrissy clapped without waiting for Robert. Slapping her hands

together seemed to be the only thing to alleviate the boredom. The old man poised his bow over the violin, and everyone stopped clapping. Robert leaned forward. He had an intense expression on his face, one Chrissy had never seen before. She took the opportunity to sigh, knowing that Robert would glare at her if she sighed during the music itself.

Suddenly the old man started to play. He hit the bow across the strings in short, choppy movements. The sounds reminded Chrissy of the time her brother had tried the violin. The family had finally made him quit to stop the squealing.

Someone coughed behind her. She cheered silently. Robert was staring so intently that he didn't even seem to notice. Chrissy sighed again, and then settled back, wishing that the concert would end.

9.

Danny unclenched his fists when the Weber ended. He hated that atonal stuff. It didn't matter if the piano was in tune or not. No one could tell. And that light-in-the-darkness business was there just so that people would think that they understood it. Give him Schubert or Tchaikovsky or Schumann any time, and he would be perfectly happy.

As people clapped around him, Danny checked the program. Mozart. Good. Maybe that would calm him. He had been angry since intermission. The piano wouldn't tune. She had a personality all her own. He knew it, and the piano knew it. And during classical concerts, they were at war.

10.

Martin waited until Stern had finished his second encore before slipping backstage. The security guards weren't worth their money; Martin could tell that much. He had entered the building in the afternoon, using one of the side doors, and they hadn't caught him. Now he was backstage, the scene of the crimes, near a world-famous violinist, and they still hadn't checked his ID.

Martin leaned against the wall near the ladder up the catwalk. The stagehand passed him without even giving him a second glance. Martin watched as Stern began the Kreisler. In just a few minutes, the concert would be over and the trouble would begin.

He had been out in the house during the first murder, picking up programs, adjusting seats, when he saw that flash of silver on the stage. He turned in time to see Terry fall, to hear the grunt that would be the last sound that Terry ever made. Martin had chased over the entire theater that night, as had the cops, and they never found anything. Not even footprints in the mud outside. Nothing to show that person or persons unknown had even entered the theater. Martin himself had been under suspicion for a while, until the cops found someone who had seen Martin drop his programs and run up to the stage to see if he could save his stagehand.

The frustration from that night rolled back at him. He hadn't been able to save Terry or that other little girl or Rowena. He had been to all three concerts and, at all three, had failed to catch -- to even see -- anything out of the ordinary.

He had started studying the Dixon to see if there were old legends that someone was trying to revive. None. None at all. At least, not until the night Arthur Rubinstein played onstage. Not until Martin had experienced a true success.

The applause startled him. It sounded louder in the back for some reason. He hadn't even heard the piece end. During the noise, Martin reached over and grabbed the railing on the ladder. He climbed quickly, efficiently, remembering the steps as if he had climbed them the day before. By the time the

applause ended, he was in the very center of the catwalk, lying in a prone position, where he had a perfect view of the stage. And there he saw it, easing out of the piano in wisps, the shape of a man clutching a knife.

11.

In the seconds between the end of the applause and the rise of the houselights, Danny shoved his way past the three people at the end of his row. He had to get backstage, had to apologize to Stern for that awful piano. Then he would go to the piano itself and see what was causing the problem. If the instrument was in tune, he would _(bash it)_ do something to it -- maybe even get Wellman to sell the damn thing.

He took the side stairs onto the stage and then opened the door leading to the back, sending a well of light into the audience. A security guard stopped him, but Danny fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the clearance Rowena had given him earlier. The guard waved him on.

Danny got to the edge of the wings just as Stern was entering them. "Mr. Stern," Danny said. "I'm the piano tuner. I just wanted to apologize for the -- "

The look Stern shot him was so full of anger that Danny had to take a step back. The accompanist smiled half-apologetically and waited until Stern disappeared into his dressing room. "He wants everything to be perfect or he doesn't enjoy the music," the accompanist said.

"It wasn't my fault," Danny said. "The piano -- "

"Yes, I know. I watched you try to tune it during intermission. The piano does seem to have a mind of its own. Perhaps a new instrument is in order?"

Danny nodded. A new piano would help the Dixon more than anything else. He watched the accompanist head back to the dressing rooms, and felt both relieved and embarrassed. Damn piano. He turned and stared at the gleaming black instrument, sitting alone onstage. The love affair was finally over. Danny didn't think he could hate anything as much as he did that piano.

12.

Rowena slowly brought up the houselights. Her hands were shaking. The concert was over; the waiting had begun. She watched as the audience stood up, turned back, and grabbed programs. The swell of conversation buzzed into her headset, and she leaned back to shut off the Neotek, but thought the better of it. The security guards would be handling the exits, guarding the doors to the stage, keeping an eye on Stern himself. No one would be watching the stage.

She punched the buttons turning on the speakers, then adjusted the headset so that it covered only one ear. She would be able to hear Jon if he called, but she could also hear the theater, hear strange noises that no one else picked up.

The auditorium was emptying out. Her shivering increased. She turned her back on the stage, then picked up the logs and a pen, filling everything out before she had to go downstairs and help Jon.

13.

Robert grabbed Chrissy's hand and tugged her into the aisle. But instead of going up the stairs toward the back of the theater, he went toward the stage itself. Chrissy stumbled twice trying to keep up with him, and she crashed into a middle-aged couple who glared at her furiously.

"Sorry," she said. "Honest." But by the time the words had left her mouth, she was already well past the

couple. She tried to pull on Robert's hand. "Where are we going?" she asked, but he didn't answer.

He went up the side stairs where that little man had gone just before they brought the lights up, and stepped backstage. A security guard stopped them.

"Clearance?"

Robert frowned. He had clearly never encountered anything like this before. "I'm Robert Ashly. I used to own the Dixon."

The guard shrugged. "I still need clearance."

A good-looking guy wearing headphones with a little microphone trailing toward his mouth stopped and watched. Finally he walked over to them. Chrissy smoothed her skirt and smiled at him, but the guy didn't notice.

"I'll vouch for him, Tom," the guy said. "Mr. Ashly gave me my first job here. Sweeping, remember, sir?"

Robert nodded, although Chrissy could tell that he didn't remember. "Thank you," he said.

"And I take it this is your date?" the guy asked. He smiled at Chrissy. "You haven't changed, Mr. Ashly."

A slight flush rose in Robert's cheeks. He tucked Chrissy's hand under his arm and led her forward, past cord and wires and drapes into an area lined with doors. He stopped at the one with a guard posted out front and knocked.

The old man opened the door. He looked tired, and sweat streaked his face. "Yes?" The question was clipped, almost a dismissal all by itself.

"Mr. Stern," Robert said in his most authoritative voice. "My name is Robert Ashly, Jr. My father used to play with the New York Philharmonic -- "

"Bob! Yes. You're little Bobby."

"Yessir."

The old man stood back and held the door open. "Come in, come in. I have only a moment, but...."

Robert turned to Chrissy. "Wait for me here."

She frowned as the door slammed in her face. The guard looked at her with bemusement and then smiled. "Fathers," he said.

It took a minute before she realized that he thought Robert was her father. She threw back her shoulders and made herself look taller. "He's my fiance," she lied, although she hoped that would be true by the end of the evening. The expression on the guard's face seemed almost like pity. She turned her back on him and walked past the doors, behind some more curtains, and onto the corner of the stage. She sat there, dangling her feet over the edge, and stared into the empty rows of seats.

14.

The stage was quiet, empty. So was the hall. Martin lay across the catwalk, clutching the metal platform with his hands, feeling the cool slats against his chest. So far, nothing. Nothing since he had seen that shadow rise out of the piano.

If he slitted his eyes, he could still see it, hovering there, but he was beginning to realize that it was his imagination. He blamed himself for Terry's death. But as the killings continued, after each major solo performance in Rockridge, Martin felt the blame grow heavier within himself. He had set up the first concert with Rubinstein. He had laid the groundwork for the other appearances. He had given the Dixon its start.

And, as he had watched over the years, he noted that it was only when the piano was used for classical music that the killings happened. The local jazz performances brought no demons to the Dixon's stage. Neither did the high school's end-of-the-year musical. Even the orchestras, the famous, well-known orchestras, left the Dixon unscathed. Only the soloists provoked the Phantom -- and only the famous soloists at that.

Martin watched Danny cross the stage. Danny was good at his profession, good enough to be working in Portland instead of Rockridge, but the man himself was strange. If Martin hadn't been with Danny the night Rowena was stabbed, he would have blamed the piano tuner. After all, Danny had been at all three concerts, fiddling with the piano. Danny never attended any of the other events. And for some reason, after all three performances, he had been angry, so angry that Martin was almost afraid of him.

Danny was angry now; Martin could see it in the way the tuner moved, the short, choppy bursts of motion followed by long steps. He approached the piano, played octave C's, and when the dissonance echoed throughout the theater, he slapped the open frame with the palm of his hand. A slight reverberation of wires, almost a humming, drifted up to Martin. Then, as he watched, the ghost creature, the shade beside the piano, touched Danny's neck with its knife.

Danny yelped and whirled. The creature filtered into Danny's open mouth, and suddenly his posture altered. He stood straighter, seemed more powerful. His right hand was arched as if it held an imaginary knife. He played several clear notes on the piano, striking each with his left hand, and as the succession of out-of-tune notes grew, so did the object Danny was holding. By the time he was done, the knife was solid and silver, gleaming against the darkness of the stage.

Martin got up and hurried along the catwalk. He had to do something -- before Danny did.

15.

Chrissy drummed her heels against the edge of the stage. What the hell was taking him so long? And why didn't he take her along? She would have liked to meet a famous violinist, even if his music had been boring.

Someone yelped. She turned quickly, her heart pounding. The piano tuner was standing beside the instrument, playing notes at random. She took a deep breath. All that talk at school about the Phantom made her more nervous than she cared to admit.

A hand touched her shoulder. She jumped, trying not to scream. The good-looking guy, the one who had let them in the back, had crouched down beside her. "This is not a safe place to be," he said. "Where's Mr. Ashly?"

"Talking to that violinist." She couldn't quite keep the resentment out of her voice.

"And he didn't let you go along?"

She shook her head. Suddenly she felt tears in the back of her eyes. Robert treated her so mean sometimes.

"Let me tell you something," the guy said. His blue eyes were fringed with long black lashes, the kind girls would kill for. "You may not like this, but maybe you'll remember it -- "

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Jon."

"I'll remember, Jon."

He took a deep breath and drew his lips back so that they almost made a straight line. "Mr. Ashly was forced to sell the theater several years back. Do you know why?"

She shook her head. She hadn't even realized, until Robert had told the security guard, that he had owned the theater the first time he had lived in Rockridge.

"They kicked him out of town. Said he raped some girl. _Statutory_ rape -- she was too young."

"I'm eighteen," Chrissy whispered.

"I know, or he wouldn't have even brought you here. But you know what you are, don't you? You're his way of spitting at the community."

"I am not!" she slid away from him, as if putting more physical distance between them would make his words go away.

"Honey, I'm sorry -- "

"No, you're not. You just said that to upset me. Well, you upset me. Why don't you leave me alone?"

"I -- "

"Go away."

He stood up. "I am sorry. Honest I am. Just be careful."

She turned her back on him and brought her knees up to her chest, not caring if some pervert was hiding in those empty seats out there and saw that she wore nothing under her black skirt. Robert wasn't using her. Robert loved her. She could tell. Robert --

The scream made her turn. It was long, frightened, and male -- and it ended abruptly, even as Chrissy saw what was happening. The piano tuner had grabbed Jon and shoved a knife in his back. Jon had fallen forward across the piano, and he wasn't moving.

Chrissy scrambled to her feet. The sound of her heels scuffing against the wood made the piano tuner turn. His eyes looked wrong, glittery. He grabbed the hilt of the knife and pulled it out of Jon's back. The knife glittered, too, although something told Chrissy that the knife should have seemed dull; it should have been dripping blood.

She looked for an opening on the stage, a way to return to Robert or that security guard, to go anywhere away from that man with the knife. And then, suddenly, in two steps, he was across the stage and grabbing her, raising the knife. She kicked back at him, hard, with her sister's heels, and her leg shuddered as the heel connected. He squealed, and the knife swung past her. She could hear the sound of a woman screaming, long, hollow, almost inhuman screams that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere in the theater. Someone had seen; someone would save her. Chrissy bit her lower lip and tried to wrench free of the man's grip. But he was strong, and it seemed like everywhere she turned, there was

a knife, silver, glistening in the light that graced the stage. She tried kicking again, and missed. He brought the knife down, and in the last second, she moved. The blade grazed her arm, ripped her satin (her satin!), and chunked heavily into the skin along her stomach. She let out an _oof_ of pain, and clutched at the knife, but he had already pulled it free.

Suddenly the man released her. Another man had grabbed him from the back, a man she hadn't seen before, and the two were struggling like men in a movie, only this was real. Chrissy drew in air to scream, and then decided that screaming was dumb. Someone else was screaming still, that long, hollow sound, and she looked up and saw that it was the woman in the booth, the glass booth toward the back of the theater. Her hands were splayed against the glass, and her mouth was open, and she was screaming.

Jon still lay across the piano, his blood dripping down his back and falling in a puddle beside his feet.

Chrissy had to find Robert or a security guard. She had to leave. She turned and fled into the darkness that was backstage, not realizing that the stickiness she felt was blood flowing from her side onto her black satin skirt.

16.

He felt like he was drowning, trapped inside all of that anger, violence, and fear. Danny had lost control of his own body. He had been invaded, violated, and held hostage inside of himself. He remembered holding the girl, feeling the sharpness of her heel against his shin, smelling the sharp scent of her fear -- and yet, he knew that he wasn't doing anything to her at all. He had been reduced to a tiny being inside of himself, cringing against a much stronger force.

His body was fighting Martin now, holding him, stabbing at him with the knife. Danny's arm shook as the knife connected with Martin's shoulder, making a squishing sound as it pounded deep into his flesh. Martin moaned but did not scream, and Danny reached for him, tried to break through the wall that was keeping him prisoner, to warn Martin to get away.

Danny could do nothing. He tried to yell, but his mouth wouldn't open. The wall seemed to shudder with laughter, seemed to crave _(blood, more blood -- the music had drained it)_ something that it needed Danny's body to get.

He began exploring the wall, trying to find any chinks that would let him through, help him back into his own body, set himself free.

17.

The girl ran. Rowena stopped screaming, let air out of her throat, and sighed. Thank God. The girl was safe. Suddenly the scene before her became clear. The girl was safe, but Martin was fighting for his life against Danny.

(Danny? But he was the one who found her. He had been out drinking the night before, depressed because the piano wouldn't tune.)

She had to do something. The security guards would have heard the noise, but they might not make it in time to do anything. Danny seemed to have more strength than she thought him capable of. He was whipping that other man around, in a stabbing frenzy, bringing the knife down again and again. They whirled closer to the piano, to _(Jon. Holy Mother of God, that was Jon!)_ the pool of blood on the floor. They knocked the music stand aside, and its clatter filled the tiny booth. And suddenly Rowena knew what she had to do.

She flipped around to the Neotek and began pushing up buttons. And then she punched it on, amplifying the sound in the auditorium. Feedback squealed from all the speakers. She kept bringing the sound up, making the feedback worse, until her ears felt as if they would burst. Shivers ran down her back, and her skin almost cringed, like it did when someone ran fingernails down a blackboard. The feedback might not stop the men, but it might help.

Rowena turned back to the glass, saw them down there. They had separated. Danny was on his knees, his hands covering his ears. The knife dangled beside his face like an obscene earring, although from her distance, it seemed to be losing definition. A security guard ran toward him, and then another, and another, all three wincing as the feedback attacked their ears. Two grabbed Danny and yanked him to his feet. And then, suddenly, the knife disappeared. Danny opened his mouth -- to scream, perhaps -- and something gray and not quite solid floated from him to the piano. He slumped forward, and the guards had to hold him to keep him from falling over.

She slammed her fist on the Neotek, stopping the feedback. Her ears rang, but she felt strangely and amazingly elated, as if she had just run a three-mile race and won.

18.

Martin saw it before the guards did. Danny was dead. Flat-ass, stone-cold dead. Martin got up slowly, clutching his shoulder. Blood oozed between his fingers, but he felt all right. He supposed he wouldn't when the shock wore off. He was starting to breathe a little more clearly, his mind turning over the events. Rowena had nearly killed the thing. The feedback ate at it, nearly swallowed it whole, the strange, almost antimusic sound had nearly destroyed it. And leaving when it did had killed Danny.

Outside, sirens echoed. Someone had had the presence of mind to call the cops. Martin supposed he would have to make a statement. He surveyed the scene, looking with sadness upon the techie who died before he could get down there. He would use that man's blood as an excuse to destroy the piano, no matter what Wellman said. The piano had to go, be burned, something. It was the connection between it and the music, the well-played classical music, that had caused all the trouble at the Dixon.

The teenage girl that Danny had attacked stood in the wings. Her boyfriend (Robert Ashly. Dear God. Robert Ashly after little girls again) had put his suit coat around her shoulder and was clutching her tightly.

Martin watched as the police streamed in. They would start asking questions. He wanted to think, not about what he would tell them, but about the horrible suspicion that was growing in his mind.

If the piano possessed people and caused them to kill, who had killed Terry? Martin hadn't. He knew that. He remembered picking up programs, hearing Terry's grunt of pain.

And who had stabbed Rowena? Danny hadn't. He and Martin had gone out drinking that night. They left the theater together, Danny because he wanted to get away from that goddamn piano, and Martin because, because he hated the Dixon sometimes, on nights of successful concerts when he remembered that he no longer owned her.

And what had happened during the last concert, the Rampal concert, the night that other girl got killed? Martin didn't know, or if he did, he couldn't remember. He had been in the theater, but he couldn't remember anything except waking up the next morning with blood beneath his fingernails.

He sat on the edge of the stage and waited for the cops, wondering if he had the guts to tell them the truth, and knowing that he did not.