

CYNTHIA SALAYSAY

Private Lessons



It's not just playing
when your heart
is on the line.

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LESSONS

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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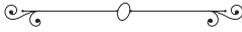
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To my mother



It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful.

— *Benjamin Britten*

C H A P T E R

— *One* —

I've done everything I could to make Paul Avon like me. I listened to every sonata and concerto and prelude and fugue and fantasy I could for a whole week before my audition. I packed a change of clothes and my toothbrush so I could freshen up right after school before I left for the train. Resprayed down my primary cowlick with hair spray. Checked my shoes for gunk. There isn't anything left to do but be myself, which honestly doesn't seem like enough.

"Paul's very good. One of the best in the area," my piano teacher said at our last and, I hope, final lesson. "But he's definitely not the teacher for everyone. He's picky. Hard to please."

I'm on the BART train to San Francisco, where he lives, Liszt and friends leaning against my thigh in my backpack. I didn't know what to bring, so I'm bringing what seems like the whole canon. The houses slide past the window, fading in color as the light fails. Then down, down underground, where the train starts a high-pitched scream as it descends

under the bay. We're underwater. I know this is supposed to be normal—everyone in here looks calm—but I white-knuckle it. All I can think about is the tunnel collapsing and filling with water.

If it weren't for college applications, I would never have gotten up the nerve to come. My guidance counselor was the one who suggested I try piano competitions. It was at my first one—I went alone, in case I had a breakdown—that I heard Paul's name.

Everyone—guidance counselors and science teachers and basically every auntie who comes to the house—expects me to have a bright future.

"You need to shine," Tita Alta said at dinner after one of mom's prayer groups. "Grades aren't enough for the Ivies or good scholarships."

My mother said something in Tagalog, and Tita Alta nodded. Another family friend touched Tita Alta's shoulder to get her attention. "Didn't your daughter was homecoming queen?" she asks. Her English is very Filipino.

Tita Alta nodded. "Nag-aaral siya sa Princeton. Third year."

Awed looks, all around the table.

Princeton. The only thing I knew about Princeton is that F. Scott Fitzgerald went there. But I looked into it and it doesn't seem to be an artsy place. Not for me.

By the time I get off at Civic Center, it's four thirty. Rush

hour. It smells different here, of mildew and ice. Preppies on bicycles act suicidal, weaving themselves into the car lanes. Women in heeled booties and skinny jeans stare hard in front of them, talking into the air, phones in hand. I check my own phone, read a map, and find my way uphill, toward Alamo Square. Homeless people on park benches. People wearing camping gear like it's high fashion. Even though San Francisco is considered diverse, there are still many more white people here than at home. But there are so many kinds of people here — glamorous and poor, tailored and casual — that I feel anonymous. No one seems to pay any attention to me.

Past the museums, past city hall. The store signs are smaller compared to at home, and not so garishly lit. Cakes, anointed with whipped-cream pompadours, fill a shop window. Another store sells seashells, coral. The houses become flouncy. The air is so wet, it feels like a cloud is seeping through my clothes, like it's going to rain, even though it's May already. San Francisco has its own weird seasons. I haven't been here much, but it's always colder than at home.

I turn a corner onto a postcardish street, with cheerful candy-colored houses of pastel and lace. I know which one is his before I read the address because I hear Chopin doing his bright best, gushing out the first-floor window of a cherry-ice-cream-pink house. Prelude no. 1. It instantly puts me at ease.

I should knock, but instead I look at my feet, listening.

My shell of a heart has creaked open. He plays like it's burbling out of him, all gushy and sudsy, like he has to restrain the notes from coming out all at once. It almost makes me forget how nervous I am. That I'm not supposed to be here. My mother, who has no idea where I've gone, feels miles away.

I feel a little bad I didn't tell her, but I know she just would've made me even more nervous if she'd come with me.

The prelude ebbs away, over before I wish it to be, and I knock.

"Hello!" Paul says through the open window, his face hidden. I'm surprised how normal he sounds. "Can you wait outside? Just finishing up here."

"Okay," I call, probably too loud.

I sit on the steps, listening, pulling my socks back up—the elastic has blown, and they've been sliding into my shoes the whole way over. The music starts again like a blaze. It sounds so ridiculously good, I want to laugh. He makes it seem easy. Not for the first time, I wonder if I should even have come.

I get absorbed in my phone, and soon the door opens. A girl with blond hair in a loose bun and a navy peacoat with the collar turned up waves at me, then takes the handful of steps in a jump. I'm stunned. That was *her* playing. She looks like a J.Crew model. And she looks my age.

"You must be Claire," says Paul, the words flowing out glycerin-smooth. He has an earnest, curious expression. Shots of gray in his thick sandy hair. Even though he has

glasses on, I can see how startlingly blue his eyes are. They're curved like apostrophes, downward over sharp cheeks. I shake his offered hand. It's soft and warm, without calluses. "You need tea, I think. You look cold," he says.

I hide my hands in the pockets of my hoodie and follow him into the house. He isn't wearing any shoes, just black argyle socks. "It's warmer at home."

"Where did you come from?"

"Fremont."

"All the way out there?" He walks deeper into the house, leaving me standing in the hallway.

Bookshelves stretch all the way to the ceiling, filled with sheet music, their tall, recognizable spines—ivory Peters editions, goldenrod Schirmers, and evening-blue Henles—lining most of the three walls, casting the room in a greenish, underwater glow. The fourth has a large picture window, curtained to protect the pianos—Steinways, both of them baby grands, their curved bellies facing each other, wings folded. The brown one is weathered and scratched. The other gleams a black ebony. On the shelf behind it is a bruised violin case, and in the corner sits a small glass writing desk. Two low-slung chairs face each other in the middle of the room with a table between them.

I sit down in one of them and it puts me in a slouch, my feet dangling like a child's, so I sit back up again, balancing on its edge and touching the floor with my toes.

"I hope you like cream and sugar. I took the liberty." He hands me a mug, sets a plate of cookies on the table, and

settles into his chair, looking at me like I'm a strange bird. He cradles his mug close to his chest, his fingers looking impossibly long, stretched over the curve of the cup. Paul is rangy, wearing loose pants, his shirttail out. "So, Fremont. What's that like?"

"Pretty boring." Fried chicken places next to drugstores next to Indian *chaat* houses next to *pho* spots next to grocery stores. And behind it, bland hills.

"Really? That's too bad."

"I guess so." The first sip of tea burns, but I try not to let it show, swallowing quickly. If he knows I've scalded my tongue, I can't tell, but his eyes are sharp and dead on me, so I'm guessing he does.

"You must be Filipino, then."

I shrug a yes. I don't see why that matters.

"And you'd like to play more seriously?"

"Well, I'm no prodigy. This is just, you know, for school. Scholarships and stuff." An answer grown-ups would understand.

"You know it isn't easy, teaching people if they aren't serious about it. It's not just about playing fast or the right notes—you have to really want it in order to truly play well. To be an artist. And if you're just doing everything you can to get into college—chess, horseback riding, volunteering with veterans—all that, then maybe this isn't for you." His eyes wrinkle behind his glasses as if to soften the criticism.

"I don't do any of those things."

“Sorry about that last bit. I didn’t mean to be harsh.”

“I do want this.”

“Why?”

I feel my burnt tongue. “Because playing feels beautiful.” The last word is hard to say. No one says that word at school, and I don’t say it to anyone. I can’t remember the last time I’ve said it, and here I am, saying it, all cheesy.

It’s true though. Songs don’t feel like they really die. They feel like they just go back where they came from. And when I play, it’s like I’m a part of that.

His eyes don’t leave mine. I get the sense he’s drinking me in, along with his tea. He must be thinking about walking me right out the door.

“How long have you been playing?”

“Since I was seven.”

“That’s a bit late. Have you been to competitions?”

“Mm-hm. I did one. The California Piano Teachers’ Association, South Bay.”

“How was it?”

“Okay, actually! I got third.” I look down. I personally think third is pretty good. But maybe he doesn’t think so.

“Nice!” His tone is warming again. “And what did you play?”

“Bach, Ravel, Beethoven.”

He gives a swift smile. “Let’s start with Bach, then. But first you should wash your hands.”

I look at them. They don’t look dirty. He raises an eyebrow.

“Everyone has to wash their hands before they play,” he says.

He gives me a clean hand towel to use. The soap is white, imprinted with flowers. Like out of *Little House on the Prairie*.

I scrub beneath my fingernails and paste my hair down with a wet hand. From the mirror, a grayed-out face peers back. I always look sick when it’s cold out. Squishy lips, big eyes behind big glasses. There’s nothing I can do about any of that right now though.

In the practice room, the bench gives an acquiescent creak beneath me as I move it back to the usual distance from the piano and run a few notes. Every piano has its eccentricities: some are like old, grave men; others are flashy. This one is warm and golden. Supple. I can sink my fingers deep into the bed of the keyboard, like I’m feeling for the underside of the note. The action is a little loose compared to the one at home, but it feels really well kept.

Here we go. The C-sharp Major, from Book II of *The Well-Tempered*.

Already my muscles are seizing up, and Paul looks like he wants me to get on with it, so before I lose all courage I take off at a speed I immediately know I can’t manage. The piece has a processional quality, a thrumming in the left hand. It should not be like a hummingbird. My hands are skittering over the chords, and it’s worse if I try to force myself to stop shaking. The fugue is rushed and it sounds like chattering chickens. I just keep speeding up and up and up.

“Hmm,” says Paul as the last note fades. I flinch.

“It wasn’t like that at competition.”

He moves to the other piano and plays a fragment of the top melody—no sheet music! His piano is slightly brighter than mine. “You aren’t opening it up, really. This,” he says, playing a note, “links to this. *Pah-taah* . . . You see? But make it rise.”

I risk a glance at him. No derision. Just focus.

He’s being kind.

I try again. “More . . . tenderness in the right hand. Let the touch be like it’s the only thing worth doing. . . .” He talks me through it, and the notes begin to flash like a cut jewel turning, the theme shifting, folding onto itself, like a choir of voices from the natural world, asking questions and answering them. We rip into the fugue and it starts to rock, every voice of the prelude in a frenzied weave. I get so excited, my fingers start to shake again.

“Better,” he says. “Though I don’t know if this is the right piece for you.”

We run through a bit of Beethoven, but not for long. He waves me off of it in a few measures.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“I know it’s difficult to play well in this kind of situation, at least the first time.” A bit of a smile appears, though his eyes stay cool. “We could . . . work together for a month. Maybe do a competition, a small one. See how you do. There are some technical things I think that you can work on, but that’s quite improvable. You sight-read well?”

“Yup! I mean yes,” I say as quietly as possible, tamping

down my excitement—as if being too happy might make him change his mind.

“And you know my fees?”

I nod. One ten an hour, Andrew, his assistant, told me over the phone. Three times what we pay now. I have no idea how I’m going to ask my mom for the money.

“Okay. Well, then.”

I pack up. “Send me some recordings,” he says. “And I’d like you to get an exercise book. Czerny’s *The School of Velocity*. Practice it an hour a day, after your scales for speed and control.” He pokes the book of Mozart sonatas peeking out of my bag, back down where it belongs. “You’ll have to work for it,” Paul says. “Everybody has to, of course, but . . . we’ll see. I think it will be evident very quickly if this is worth your while.” He puts his hand tightly on my shoulder and studies me, tilting his face in one direction. Nothing seems certain, and I’m sure it shows on my face. “Take heart. You have nice hands. That’s a good sign.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re articulate.”

Outside the house, I do a little victory dance, complete with whoops and screeches, and it scares the pigeons and I catch a bit of side-eye from a fellow pedestrian, but who cares? Who cares! I skip downhill. The houses, pastel bonbons each one, line my way. I pull my phone out of my backpack, slip my earbuds in, look for a song to match the hour, choose one with a bright tambourine. The blue sky swims in

oops and *bop-bops*. The drums smack and shove, and all the falsetto words are sighed all daydreamy.

He likes me. Well, okay, he liked me enough, and enough is a lot in my book. And if he likes me enough now, he could like me even more later. I can't stop smiling at everything: the BLACK LIVES MATTER signs posted in windows and bicycles chained to parking meters, even the sidewalk cracks flowing by and a hipster girl, with a nose ring and her Afro-hawk dyed green and rolled-up jeans, who smiles back at me.

The song harmonizes and whispers that everything I did was right. I could be the girl in the song. The kind of girl a boy sings about. Who is vindicated. Who is right. With perfectly dirty hair. Who could say or do whatever she wanted, and people would still love her.

C H A P T E R

— *Two* —

I get on the train and do the thing I'd been trying not to do before today: I look him up on my phone.

I find an old YouTube video. Vladimir Horowitz sits beside him, his hands together, as if in church. A master class with Horowitz. That's like having the pope watching to make sure you pray right. Horowitz's eyes glimmer over his papal nose. Even then he must already have been very old.

Paul's jacket doesn't fit well, hiking up at the shoulders when he brings his hands far apart on the keys. Sandy hair, longer and more ruffled up back then. The same straight nose and sharp blue eyes hovering over the keyboard, as if it's a map and he's plotting a course over sea. It's the third movement of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata. *Adagio sostenuto*. The one that sounds like a milky flood from some gushing star. The one Evelyn, my old teacher, said you shouldn't attempt to play before you've reached thirty, or

unless someone you love has died—which means maybe I could play it, though it didn't sound as if she wanted me to.

I wonder how my mom will take this news about Paul. I didn't think he'd agree to work with me, so hadn't spent too much time thinking about her reaction before now.

The sky has become serious. Closer to home, every fourth house is a mirror image, colored like sand and dun. There are lawns like wall-to-wall carpet; windows alight with television screens, or dark with curtains drawn; and the sameness of every house, and every day.

By the time I kick the front door closed, all sense of elation has gone. The salty smell of fish sauce and softened onions floods the air, and the washing machine drones in the background. Mom's home. I guess she didn't go to prayer group tonight.

It's dim in the hallway, tinged orange from the dusty chandelier high above. Must be a bulb out. There's just enough light to see the statues standing at attention on the altar in the next room, greeting me with their carved holy smiles. My pencil-gray shadow lists on the wall while I shimmy out of my shoes and fling them toward the others that are piled like kindling against the wall.

The thud of my backpack on the floor echoes down the hall, and she calls at the sound. "Anak"—which means child, or daughter in my case—"come eat."

It's half a question, half a command. She sounds like she's in a decent mood. I pad sock-footed over the double

thickness of Oriental rug laid over carpet into the kitchen. She's already in her light-purple house robe, scooping rice into a bowl for herself from our ancient rice cooker. "Did you eat yet?" With a flick of the spoon, a ball of rice drops into the bowl.

"No, I—"

"You should eat. And feed the dog. He's hungry. Did you do your homework?"

She doesn't actually require a response to questions. Sometimes she'll even ask me about school on Saturdays. But you can easily divert her with a newspaper article about someone getting *E. coli* at the grocery store, or predatory ants, or other topics that suggest conspiracy or impending doom. She's inclined to worry even when there's nothing to worry about. She'll cast about—*How is school? How is Tash?*—until she lands on something—*Oh, she has a crush? Does he like her back?* Once that's settled, she relaxes, as if she now has a handle on the situation, which she doesn't. *Well, I hope she doesn't get hurt. She's such a nice girl.*

I know it's just her terse Asian style of parenting and has nothing to do with how much she loves me, but sometimes I wish she were a little bit more like the moms in television sitcoms—baking cookies and dressing up on Halloween. My mother would never dress up for Halloween.

"It's Friday. I can do it tomorrow," I finally answer.

The kitchen has the kind of light that hurts my eyes, hyper and worn, especially after the pillow-soft light in Paul's

practice room, and I feel like I shrivel down a size in the scalding light of our kitchen. Everything shrivels here.

Our dog, Dean, scratches at the sliding-glass door to the back yard—he always knows when I’m home—and I go to let him in, but she says, “After. We’re about to eat.” She shuts the lid of the rice cooker with a metallic clang and starts drawing up long, clear noodles out of a steaming pot on the stove. I study her profile, the intensity of her worry indicated by the depth of the lines in the corners of her eyes. She’s almost my height, and we have the same face, though her cheeks are flatter, her lips a little less full. Eyes like pancake syrup when they’re not tired, but she’s tired now.

I pull a bowl from the cupboard and stand beside her. “Mom. Guess what?” There’s nothing to do but just tell her, but I’m already tensing up for her predictable flip-out.

“What’s wrong?” The slippery noodles have formed a bridge between the lip of the pot and her bowl. She coaxes them toward her with her fork until they splash into the bowl, the drops darkening flecks on her house robe.

“Nothing, actually. Nothing’s wrong. It’s just, do you remember when I did that piano competition?”

“The one you didn’t tell me about until afterward?” A flat note of blame.

“I didn’t want you to worry.”

She sighs her frustration in response.

I smile, hoping to sway her mood to a more positive one. “I decided that maybe I could take it more seriously, so

I looked around and found a new piano teacher. An important one. He's like the best in the Bay Area?" My uncertainty turns the fact into a question. Her face snaps to me, her eyebrows raised. When she doesn't say anything, I start to babble. "Really, really, absolutely the best. I got his name at the other competition in fact. From one of the judges? His name is Paul. He's interesting. My audition was amazing. . . . My Bach was . . . it was like magic by the time he got through with it. I swear, I couldn't believe it was me."

I can't help smiling for real now, and she smiles, finally, tentatively. She puts her hand on my arm. "Wow, Claire. That's so . . . wow." Then, her hand begins tightening on my arm. "I hope he doesn't cost too much." And before I have time to answer, she asks, "Where are the lessons? How often? Did he seem confident about you? How successful you could be?"

I pull away. "No," I say, grabbing a fork from a drawer and slamming it shut with a hip. "He didn't say."

"Oh."

I prod the pale mess inside the stew pot, fork in hand. This is why I hate telling her things. She wants everything to be safe and secure. For every story to be over. If it isn't, it can't be good.

I stab a drumstick, pull it out of the pot, stick it on top of the noodles, and douse it with black pepper. "Do you know how hard it is to be accepted? You have to audition for him." I sidestep the trial period issue.

We sit down at the table, and she whispers a prayer. Hope for blessings, hope to be heard. “Where does he teach?” she finally asks, her tone dropping half an octave as she picks up her fork and spoon. Conversational. That’s good.

“At his house.”

“Where is that?”

“In the city.”

“What city?”

“San Francisco?”

“You went there by yourself?” Her accent gets stronger when she gets louder—the careful flat *e*’s, the sharp *t*’s.

I feel a stab of guilt. “I’m home safe.” I wiggle my fingers. “See, all ten fingers and toes. Virginity still intact.” Her eyes widen, and immediately I regret the joke. Another stab of guilt. “It’s a nice neighborhood,” I say feebly.

“How did you get there? That’s an hour and a half away.”

“I took the BART.”

“The BART?” She’s repeating this as if she’s having trouble understanding the words.

I chew, growing impatient. “It was easy.”

“You can’t just run off like that by yourself. You don’t know what will happen.”

“Well, I have to go if I’m going to go to a good college.”

“But you’re four-point-oh.” A gleam of pride wiggles out beneath her knitted brows.

“That’s not enough.” We both knew that. Grades aren’t enough. Math Bowl seems pretty average. But a thing like

winning piano competitions, actual competitions, that will make you special.

We eat without speaking for a while, the slippery noodles laced with ginger and onion slowly filling my belly with comfort. She's probably thinking about all the things that could have happened, running through every scenario—bombs at the BART station, masturbators in alleyways, Armageddon. I wish she'd stop watching Fox News.

She delicately, methodically, tears her meat apart with a spoon and fork. I give up and just eat my drumstick with my hand.

"I was careful. It was fine. It's during the day," I say, reminding her with my voice that I'm still here. Nothing bad has happened to me.

"How much does it cost?" she asks.

"A hundred ten."

"An *hour*?"

"He's one of the best teachers in the area. Of course he costs that."

She shakes her head. Her face mirrors my own shock when I was first told his rates. Only, I adjusted. She makes no effort to. "Ay yi yi, Claire."

"Well, it's not like we're paying for Vassar," I say, standing up with my bowl. I dump the chicken bones and the noodles in the trash and get the water running.

Last fall, the inside of our mailbox shone with glossy college brochures. Sarah Lawrence. Wesleyan. Vassar. The University of Chicago. Reed. Oberlin. Each one looked like

a different world of soft-cheeked, serious, pure-faced kids in hoodies and sneakers, perched on the stairwells of brick buildings. The Vassar brochure had particularly cute boys, but Oberlin seemed more like my place. It had a real conservatory, and snow. For weeks, I fell asleep looking at them, until one night my mother woke me up as she turned out my bedroom light. None of these, she said, were affordable, or possible. I cried, but I didn't throw away the brochures. I shoved them under the bed, and every once in a while I'd sift through them again. Maybe, at one of these schools, I'd be happy. I wouldn't be so out of place for liking books more than video games, and classical music more than hip-hop, and J. D. Salinger more than Buzz Feed.

With piano lessons, and time, and work, maybe I could win a competition or two, or even a scholarship. A school like Oberlin wouldn't have to be a fantasy.

I feed the dog. The food's barely in the bowl before he digs in, his sun-faded pink plastic dish grating rhythmically against the concrete every time he licks it. He smells so real and funky, you can't pretend he isn't there, but his fur is nice and soft. My father's dog.

If Dad were still alive, these lessons wouldn't be a problem. He's the one who loved music, who insisted I take lessons.

When I was really little, the piano was just a toy, but I felt the notes in my body, rippling down my arms, pulling a twitch out of the skin between my first and second toe.

The waves of sound shimmered through my flesh into my bones.

Then it filled the quiet when my mother, who used to have more time for me, who took me to dance lessons and the park, who read me stories at bedtime, was consumed with caring for my dad. But the piano was there, alert, and it always responded to me. At that time in our house, it was nice to have a response, even if it only reflected what I was doing, no more. It was neutral. Made me know who I was, like a fish that needs the motion of water to know what the world is.

I was barely aware of what was happening to my dad at first, and then, around the time I was seven, the world finally became clear. He started staying in the guest bedroom on the first floor because it had gotten too hard to climb the stairs. Around this time I started to really play, and my dad took notice.

It was summer, before he was too sick to stand and was still himself, before he had to quit his job but would often stay home and sleep.

I was picking out the tune to the song from *Sleeping Beauty*—“Both hands!” he used to say when he told the story—and singing to myself.

“Do you know who wrote that? Tchaikovsky,” he said. And he moved me over on the bench and played it from memory, and I sang the tune from the Disney cartoon. He showed me the left hand, and I picked it up. And that very

evening, when Mom got home, he told her I should take lessons, and Mom, by then, couldn't say no to him.

We talked about music a lot—more and more as he got sicker. He made my mother take me to lessons. He played Bach, Schubert, Liszt, Scarlatti, Haydn on the stereo, looking at me meaningfully. Like he was filling me up with them.

By the time he died, I was twelve. I could play the *Sleeping Beauty* waltz—with pedal, both hands. I played Mozart fantasies, Bach cantatas, and the “Aria” from the *Goldberg Variations*, which he asked me to play more often the sicker he got. It had been so hard to learn. The timing, the way it sometimes seemed only just barely to hang together, and threatened at times to fall apart.

After he died, playing started to feel like an entire world. A gentler world. It soothed me.

I don't have a lot of clear memories of him from before he was sick—not as many as I wish I had. He would let me swing from his arm. He used to rest his hand on the top of my head, which he did, I think, more to calm him than me. He had moody eyes that scared me if they stayed on me too long. He was quiet, but both my parents were, and now my mother and I are. Comfortably quiet together. Like we know each other so well, we don't always have to talk.

I never took myself seriously enough to think I could be an artist. Be the thing I deep down want to be. And now that there is that possibility, I really want to see if I can do it.

I launch the second wave of attack on my mom in front of the television. “If you weren’t so afraid, you’d see how good for me this could be.”

We’re watching television, sitting right next to each other, so close that half of me has sunk between the cushions like a tire in mud. Old issues of *Vanity Fair* gleam on the coffee table. Her robe is velvety and smells of powder, and it’s almost too warm, the way it was when I was a kid, burrowed under her blankets in the morning.

“And how much is the train?”

I cringe. “Around nine dollars a trip.”

She clicks her tongue.

“If you meet him, you’ll see that it’s worth it.”

Her thumb is on the remote, skipping over the news, commercials for vacuum cleaners, pauses on a legal drama we sometimes watch. “Next week,” she says, nodding.

I punch the air in silent triumph. She smiles, makes the sign of the cross, whispers a word.

On the television, a private eye spies on a woman taking off her clothes, and an older man grabs her breasts from behind. When the private eye takes a phone call, you can hear the couple mewling and grunting.

My mother and I don’t say a word. We don’t talk about sex. Thank God.

Later, I run upstairs, get into bed, and send Tash a text. *Guess what!* If there’s one person who would be utterly gob-smackingly happy for me, it would be Tash.

Colonel Mustard. In the library. Lead pipe.

No.

Definitely lead pipe.

I'm being serious here. I tell her with a text, receive emojis on emojis back. Hearts and unicorns and fish and balloons and cake and stars. I rub the bottom of my feet on my fuzzy blanket and text her a smile and a star back.

C H A P T E R
— *Three* —

Mom keeps the heater on full blast on the way into the city. I'm glad we drove. This way we pass by all the cute little Italian and Japanese places to eat, places that look like whoever built them cared about beauty. If she saw the homeless people sitting against the wall at the BART station, and some of the dingy streets on the way, no amount of pleading would have gotten her onto Paul's porch.

"Not too bad," she says, looking approvingly at the stained-glass pieces set into the front door. "Not too bad," in Filipino mom-speak, means it's good.

She raises her hand to knock.

"No, don't." I seize her hand and point at the window. "That's someone else having a lesson."

The girl sounds formidable, just like before, but my mother doesn't seem to notice. She rubs her hands—"It's cold here!"—and wraps her cardigan tighter around her dress. Even when it's cold, she wears dresses. She's never gotten used to the feeling of pants on her legs.

“She’s really good,” I whisper. I feel edgy, listening to the girl, about to see Paul again. What if he realizes he’s made a mistake?

We look at our phones in companionable silence until eventually the girl pops out the door. I watch my mother from the corner of my eye as we go in. I can tell she’s awe-struck by the girl’s face, and then struck again when she sees Paul, bending down a little to come to eye level and shake her hand. His fingers seem somehow even longer today, the way they wrap around her palm. His bulky tweed sweater emphasizes the sharpness of his shoulders, his flat torso. I’m so excited to see him, some of my nervousness is forgotten. He doesn’t seem surprised to see her, though I hadn’t mentioned she’d be coming.

“Hello! You must be Claire’s mother. It’s so nice to meet you.”

My mother’s face instantly melts into a smile. “Elizabeth,” she says in her best manner, her voice softer than it normally is. She looks dubiously at the carpet. “Should I take my shoes off?”

“No need,” Paul says. Inwardly I cringe. She’s embarrassing, in her big floral-printed dress, which doesn’t look quite right here. Like she’s been costumed for a different play.

But Paul seems oblivious to her awkwardness. He asks if we got here okay, and if the parking was bad. “It was horrible! How do you drive here?” My eyes widen. Already she’s complaining.

He just laughs. “It’s like an extreme sport.” He moves to

the back of the apartment. Cupboards close. A blast of the sink. My mother shoots me a meaningful look I can't read.

"What?"

"I can see why you like it here." And she flicks her eyes to the kitchen. "Ang guwapo niya." He's handsome.

"You think he's cute?"

Paul strides back in. Mom turns red, flashes a stiff look at me as he lays down a tray of cookies and her tea. Mortified, I dig into my bag, grab my phone, and check that it's on silent just so I can hide my face. I suppose he would be handsome to her.

"It's lovely to watch people dip their cookies," he says, his smile generous. He must have heard.

"That's how you should do it," she says. "Don't you think?"

"I do, actually. They both taste better."

I head toward the bathroom, lingering over the pencil drawings framed along the hallway, partly so that I can overhear them. I'm curious to hear what Paul might say about me to her.

"I hope you didn't take time off of work to be here," he says, his tone as soft as hers.

"No. My shift ended at three."

"Ah! Well, I'm so glad she's here. Does her talent come from you?"

My talent. That's nice. I turn the water on, just a teeny bit, so I can still hear her. "Well, her father played the piano for our church, and his mother was a music teacher. So it

was like that, you know.” I can picture her brushing something imaginary away, as if the talent in our family is no big deal.

“Lovely. And so he still plays?”

“He passed away.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

When I come back, she looks as uncomfortable as I was, slumped in her chair. Her look softens when she sees me. Paul winks a greeting and we settle in—me at the beautiful Steinway again, he to sit in a wooden chair, slightly behind me. He asks if I’d seen his e-mail—he’d sent me a few pieces to try and a few competitions to consider. I chart the movement of her eyes—from him, to me, to the shelves and the drawing of a woman’s profile on the wall.

“I do think the Chopin Étude opus ten, number—yes, number two—in A Minor would be good for you.”

He reaches over to play a few measures. The highest voice—the highest line of melody—sounds like a bell that rings with more depth the more it sings. His hands spring like angsty bugs touching down on random flowers, but his face is placid. This is effortless. I sense victory when the worried wrinkles around my mother’s lips soften, and her head moves in time to the music.

She puts her tea down on the table and turns slightly in her chair to watch us.

“What do you think?” he asks me.

“You make it look easy.”

“Well, it’s a good reach for you,” he says, looking upward

and scratching his chin, “but not impossible. It’s got just enough going on to keep you from being bored.”

We move on to the Bach from last week. How to make two or three or four voices sing at once, to sing with the mood of the day with only two hands? I touch the keys carefully, trying to make each one sound clear. Definitive. Every note placed where it should be.

“Better,” he says, nodding. “I can see how hard you’ve worked on it.”

Paul is light with me, but I don’t relax. I keep waiting for a criticism that doesn’t come, partly, maybe, because my mom is sitting in the corner. I nod at his questions as if everything is fine, but it feels like everything is moving faster than I can. The rest of the lesson goes by in a blur. Besides the unborring Chopin, we settle on a Beethoven sonata for me to work on.

Paul turns to my mother. “She’s going to do fine, Mrs. Alalay.”

Words that relieve me as much as her. “Do you really think so?” she asks.

“Well, she can hear herself,” he says, looking at me studiously. “Which is rare. She’ll have to work for it, of course.”

“You’re going to work hard, right?” she asks, turning to me.

I flush. It’s not like she didn’t hear me practicing all week.

“I’m sure she will,” he says. I keep my annoyance off my face as I pack up my books. He rubs the back of his neck slowly, as if it hurts. “You can always call me if you have any questions. If you’re uncertain of anything.”

“Why did you say that?” I ask her after the front door has closed after us.

“What did I say?”

We walk fast. I take a deep breath. The first one in an hour. “That you hope I work hard enough! Now he’ll think I’m lazy.” I’m sure that we’ve made a bad impression: the shoes, her tea.

“No, he won’t. I’m sure he won’t.”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“Because I’m just—”

“You just insulted me.”

“I didn’t!”

“Everything has to be negative with you.”

“You’re so sensitive,” she says. “Whenever it’s someone you want to impress, you get so . . . it’s like I don’t even know you.”

“Of course, I’m acting funny. There’s so much pressure. . . .”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“You act weird, too!”

She sighs. “Claire. Let’s just . . . not fight. Okay? I don’t even see what there is to fight about. You are getting to take the lessons, aren’t you?”

We’re silent until we get into the car. She grips the steering wheel with both hands. I watch her nervously check the traffic, looking three times before taking her turn, tapping the brakes when a bicyclist dashes past on our right. Eventually the air blasting out of the vents heats up. I smell

lilac in the air and realize she probably put on perfume to come here.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“It’s okay.”

“He’s great, isn’t he?”

“You know, he seems a little . . .”

Here it comes. There’s always something. “A little what?”

“A little too easy-breezy. Like he’s used to getting what he wants.”

“I thought he was nice to you.” He seemed extremely polite to me.

“He was,” she concedes. “At least on the surface. But you never know.”

“You’re so suspicious.”

“Well, he is a man! When you’re as fortunate as he is, and that handsome, it’s easy to be nice.” Her laugh is dark. “Of course I’m suspicious. I should be suspicious.”

“He’s an amazing teacher!” Surely she isn’t going to veto this because he’s a man.

“Mom! See, this is what I mean. Please stop second-guessing everything.”

I glue my eyes to my phone, so upset that I start going through my e-mails, pausing on the clothing sales and deleting all the junk. She isn’t happy unless the sky is falling.

“I’m just being careful, that’s all. If anything happened to you . . .”

“I know.”

I look away, at the view of warehouses and fast-food

chains flowing past. It is only us two. She wasn't close to my dad's family, and aside from a few visits from one of her sisters every few years, we don't see her family. They live in the Philippines, and it's too expensive to go there.

She touches the Saint Christopher medal hanging from the rearview mirror, crosses herself, and whispers a prayer. "What is his full name again?"

"Paul. Paul Avon."

She whispers his name, her accent hard on the *v*, and crosses herself again. "Will you at least text me when you get there?" I watch slices of light cross her glasses.

"Yes."

"And you have to come right home afterward."

"Of course."

"I really am proud of you. Dad would be, too." Her tone makes my stomach do a flip-flop. I feel more pressure when she's nice to me.

C H A P T E R

— *Four* —

Changing my schedule is a breeze. I ask the photography teacher, Mr. Mullen, if I can leave class to play the piano in the auditorium. “My new teacher wants me to practice more.” I say it loudly to make sure that when people see me in there, they won’t think I’m a loner freak—though they probably already do. I’ve been at this school so long, there’s no changing my label.

Mr. Mullen must hate school as much as I do, because he just lifts a faintly bitter eyebrow at me and waves me away. I lift my chin a little as I sail out of the room. Freedom. It’s like I don’t even have to ask. I guess when you’re an honors kid, don’t do drugs or anything criminal, and basically act like a mini-adult, you can do what you want. There really isn’t much time to waste, though. The first competition, a small one in a Burlingame hotel, takes place in a month.

“Gangway, major ego coming through. Double wide, double wide.” My head snaps to Ben Haden. Blond, his hair sticking up like an exclamation point. Blue eyes gleefully

on fire. I don't know what he has against me, except my grades, but he's never stopped saying mean, hateful things. I've avoided him for years. I stick my tongue out to hide my shame, then scurry off.

The piano sits at the back of the stage, a dried-out shell that's well hidden in curtains of the same color. Sickly yellow lights hang from the theater ceiling. The empty seats scallop around me, extending outward to the walls like ripples. Behind the walls of the theater, I can hear the lunch ladies bang pots. It's so empty that my ears cling to anything happening outside the open door. Sneakers scuffing the concrete. Ryan DeGuzman's distinctive, relaxed laugh, like he's comfortable with himself. Ryan, who is gorgeous and a senior and who I've never had the guts to say hello to, even though sometimes, he says hello to me. And then I do the dumbest thing—I pretend that I'm confident and give him my best cooler-than-thou toss of the head. It's a total act, but I mean, what am I supposed to do, stop and talk to him? No way. I feel like everything I am naturally isn't good enough. There's no 4.0 on my body for him to admire, and he probably doesn't like classical music, and then there are my glasses.

I wish I felt I was more like the other students, but maybe deep down, they're lonely, too. Even people with tons of friends, like Jasmine Granger, quiet and feminine and beautiful, are probably lonely sometimes. But it just doesn't seem like I have much else in common with those kids, sitting in

class, head in the clouds. Their heads are just not in the same clouds as mine.

Sometimes, playing so far from everyone else, the loneliness gets like an itch between my ribs, somewhere deep, where I can't scratch. The piano sounds terrible then, with its edgy ring, its grumbly low notes. And then there's the middle F, which sometimes sounds and sometimes sticks. It's not good for much but scales and these new exercises Paul wants me to do, so it feels like watching the same television program over and over.

What does Paul want me to sound like? I don't really know. I think of the lightness of the girl who plays before me—her quickness, her speed—and sing over my notes, covering up the sound of my playing.

My honors biology lab partner, Duncan, and I pour methylene blue into a test tube, and he mentions some shock jock on a radio station.

"I don't listen to the radio much."

I can see he's insulted. "I thought you were into music and all."

"I am. Just not Top 40, I guess."

"What, you think it's beneath you?"

Here we go. "A lot of it is catchy, but it's not very complex. It's all about wanting to get down, wanting to get some, wanting to be rich, wanting to get back with someone."

"What about Radiohead? They're complex. And emotional."

“And white,” says Angela Diaz, smirking.

You can’t be too white at my school. And you can’t be too brown, either. It’s so paradoxical. Your parents come to America so you can be successful. They don’t even teach you their language so that you can completely assimilate, be successful, go to college, be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer. So you assimilate as well as you can, and if you get anywhere, anywhere close to being smart enough, or successful enough at it, you get told you’re too white.

But there’s no point in getting into it with him. “I respect Radiohead, but it’s not my thing. So whiny and depressing.”

“They’re being ironic,” Duncan says.

“I guess I prefer a more natural sound.”

“That’s kind of the point. The music expressed the zeitgeist of the time. The fakeness of what people wanted. The artificial flavoring.”

“Then why have more?”

“You’d rather listen to Beethoven,” Duncan says. This is an accusation.

“Yeah, so?”

“My dad listens to Beethoven.”

“Your dad has good taste.”

“My dad is a dork.”

Angela Diaz smirks again.

Well, at least he’s alive. That’s my comeback. But I don’t want to say that. It’s the pity line.

I sputter instead. “Do you even know what *zeitgeist* means?”

Maybe there's something wrong with me for not liking Radiohead. Or Duncan. He has all these friends, and I don't, but he's obnoxious. I don't get it.

At lunchtime, I find Tash near the new tech center, where we always hang out. They never cleaned up after they built it, so the dirt's white with concrete dust and whatever they make walls out of, and the plants look stuck into the ground, spindly and uncomfortable.

She's sitting with her eyes closed, earbuds in.

"Earth to Tash."

I wave my hands in front of her face until she blinks at the sun. She looks surprised. But then she tends to, because of the dots of glitter she wears at the corners of her eyes. With her white miniskirt, her orange All-Star sneakers, and tiny pigtails high on her head, she looks like a space fairy. And a freak, by our school's standards. Which is why we hang out. We're not preps who like hip-hop. We're nerdy. We're artsy. We're a clique of two. It's easier to pretend I'm not lonely when I'm with her.

"You have to listen to this," she says, handing me her phone. "Tom showed it to me." Tom her recent crush, is a boy from another school.

I look at the screen. Spiritualized. *Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating in Space*.

I've never heard of it. Apparently Tom knows all kinds of music—seventies Afrobeat, sixties French pop, nineties

post-punk. Hence Tash's crush. I plug my earbuds into her phone—no one touches Tash's headphones—and listen.

It's a baroque round. A clear, bell-like keyboard drifts in, and a spiral galaxy of sound, debris aglow, revolves in my head. Heavenly. Tash looks skinny, her shoulder blades poking up a little on the back of her shirt. Where wings would be.

At the end of the song, she looks at me solemnly. "Right?"

I'm happy and sad at the same time. "Definitely."

"I think Tom likes me," Tash says. "Do you think he likes me? He wouldn't have me listen to songs like this if he didn't like me."

Atomic debris continues to drift around us. See, that's the thing about Tash. We dream similar things. If I were to tell her the sun changes color when I listen to Debussy, she'd get it.

C H A P T E R

— *Five* —

Paul knows my weak spots before he even hears me play.

“Okay. Measure thirty-one. Let’s go.”

It’s been a month. The ACTs have come and gone, and while other people are tanning in the late-spring sun, I’m paling. Soon I’ll be as pale as the Korean rom-com TV stars my mother loves like a teenage girl. But the torture—Paul’s grueling exercise assignments, the long trips to San Francisco, and seeing Tash less and less—is working. My scales feel like they’ve readjusted, as if Paul’s taken small wrenches to them, touching them this way or that, the way he might adjust slightly tilted picture frames on the way to his bedroom.

“Don’t bite your lips, hmm? You’re performing. It’s a generous sharing of yourself with the world. You want other people to want to be you or be with you. No one wants to be with an awkward girl.”

He sits beside me and a little behind, one hand conducting the air, sometimes twitching like a puppeteer, or cutting

the air like an air-traffic controller. Or both hands hover like gulls over a bridge. It is reassuring, though, that someone's there to tell me where I'm going wrong—pointing out errors as small as pedal marks and bar rests. For all his little boyish ways—his bare feet, with their triangular toe pads, his choirboy politeness, and his undone shirt cuffs that hide part of his hands—sometimes, he's unnervingly serious.

“Posture.” He touches my shoulder, loosens my arms. “Relax.”

The strap of my tank top slides down my arm, and he brings it back into place.

The feeling of his fingers on my shoulder lingers. I suddenly feel very, very awake. I press the weight of the melody onto the piano, the keys rippling. Dust motes shine and float. I don't know if it's the song or if it's him that is making me feel this way, but when I look at his face when the song is over, he looks unflapped. “Not bad,” he says. “Decent. You'll want to work on this measure when you get home. . . .”

And I do. I spend half an hour on two seconds of music. There's no way I'm only going to be decent.

Parked in front of the community center in Burlingame, where the competition is about to start, my mom holds out a Tupperware and asks if I want something to eat. Cold pancit noodles or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. This isn't her brightest moment.

I twitch my head no.

“It might settle your stomach.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Have you eaten anything at all?”

I don’t answer. She tsks sharply. She takes out the sandwich she made this morning. “Here.”

“Later, Mom.”

“How can you compete if you don’t eat?”

I don’t answer. I look out the window at the green manicured islands dotting the parking lot, the palms brushing the cloudy sky. It’s so early that the lights of the hotel sign are still lit.

Everything seemed fine at Paul’s yesterday. We went over the pieces I’m going to play—the Bach I first played for Paul during my audition and Beethoven’s sonata *The Hunt*. They felt solid—accomplished even. Paul was encouraging. He liked the way certain parts of the melody were being sung—softer when they were typically louder—as if there was something hard about reaching those notes. “I just want to make sure you slow down a little—don’t rush. Be in the piece, you know?”

“Do you think it’s finished?” I asked, feeling a twinge of anxiety that these pieces wouldn’t be perfect. There was always something that needed work.

“It’s all a process,” he said, shrugging. “You’ll go on to play them. Even better than you play them tomorrow.”

“You don’t think I’m ready?”

“You know them by heart?”

“Yes.”

“And you understand something of the piece.” A thing