

## Concerto in B Major

Hands clasp, unclasp. Twist and untwist. Clammy fingers interlock then separate, and interlock again. The hands are viciously clean, mottled pink from too much scrubbing, every hangnail picked, every knuckle soft and sore. Only a few stubborn flakes of gold glitter cling to her cuticles, remnants of a long ago nail painting session. She waits.

One shaky hand flutters up to her mouth. She nibbles on the already raw red skin where the white of her nail once was. Spider-like fingers crawl across her lip, pick at the scraps of dry skin at the corner of her mouth. No rings adorn those nimble fingers, only the bracelet weighing her wrist down like a shackle. It was once pretty, the silvery chain with the tiny charms winking at her, but now it seems tarnished and grey. She rubs the pad of her thumb over the words engraving the inside of the bracelet. *"To My Beautiful Daughter"*. She pauses on the final word, pushing her fingerprint into the letters, as if searing them onto her skin. She wonders if he'll bother to show up this time. She always wonders. She waits.

Blue-green veins twist up her wrist, tangled like vines, rising to the surface for air and sinking deeper into skin again as they approach the creases in her palm. She feels her pulse thumping under her fingers, sure and steady, if not a little fast. She listens to it, is caught in the rhythm, and for a moment loses her fear, apprehension, nerves. It all leaves her. Her thumb beats out the rhythm against her wrist. Da dum, da dum, da dum.

His hands aren't like hers. Thick, curling hair inhabits the backs of hands, right down to the heavy gold watch clasped to his wrist. Newspaper ink crusts under his nails, stains his knuckles. He never came. Every time she asked, head dizzy with hope, he'd mutter something that sounded close to a no, grip the steering wheel tighter with a meaty hand and the conversation was over.

Her thumb stills. She picks at the final flakes of gold embellishing her nails. Would he come this time? She always wondered. And he never did. She twists her hands, untwists. Clasps and unclasps. She feels the moisture beading on her palms again and sighs. She waits.

"Alissa? Alissa Brown?"

She looks towards the voice, and sees another pair of hands. Knobbled knuckles, leathery brown. A heavy opal ring hugs her middle finger. She taps her carefully manicured nails against her clipboard. Alissa's own fingers twitch in response.

"Alissa Brown, Grade 8 Performance, Concerto in B Major. Correct?"

Her pulse beats out a tempo ten times faster than before. Sweat-slick hands fumble under her seat for the sheets of music. She feels the reassuring chafe of the paper under her fingers and crushes the corners as she stands up.

"Yes, that's me."

It's the noises that always make her the most nervous. The murmur of voices, the scrape of hands at the bottom of a purse, the muffled hush from someone at the front, who can see the lights begin to rise as Alissa shuffles onto stage.

And then there's the light, beaming, brilliant, illuminating every inch of her hands as she plants herself on the stool, shuffles her pages with shaking hands. She twists her wrists, sees her veins glow aquamarine in the radiance.

She feels her pulse throb in her fingers, thrumming against the keys of the piano. She takes a shuddering breath, eases it out. He won't have come. He never comes. She's not going to bother looking for him. Don't look.

Alissa looks.

And in the gloom, amongst the hundreds of expectant eyes, the hands grasping programmes, digging into bags of lollies and raising to whisper in ears, she sees a gleam of a watch clasped to hairy wrist. Ink crusted nails tap softly against the seat in front. Her eyes travel to the face, meets her father's smiling gaze. Alissa stares at the music. The feel of his eyes on her soothes the flutter in her fingers, cools the sweat on her palms.

She begins to play.