“SHARP SHARP SHARP SHARP!” she screamed while banging all of the stupid keys on the stupid piano. She threw Mozart’s Sonata 17 across the room and watched as the pages slowly fluttered to the ground. She looked up at the clock. 10:30 p.m. She had been there for two hours and still couldn’t get the D sharp. As she crossed off today’s date on the calendar above the piano, it dawned on her that there was only thirteen more days. She should have picked something easier, but it was too late to change now. Her audition for The Curtis Institute of Music was coming much faster than she expected. This was going to be a disaster. She started to absent-mindedly run through her scales until she was interrupted by the screaming of her parents.

“She’s eighteen now. It’s her decision! There is nothing we can do about it,” her father screamed at her mother.

“She’s my baby. I can’t just watch her throw her life away, and I can’t believe you would support her terrible decision. I don’t even know who you are anymore,” her mother yelled between the sobs.

There was no possible way that she could get anymore practice in tonight over the ridiculous arguing of her parents. Exhausted and tired, she gave up and went to bed.

“Breakfast is ready,” her mother yelled up the stairs.

She could smell the pancakes and bacon that her mother had made. “No thanks. I’m not hungry.” She put on her coat and backpack.

“Are you sure? I made chocolate chip; your favorite,” her mother said as she was walking out of the door.

When she got to school, she walked down the familiar hallway feeling like an alien.
She could feel the stares she received when her back was turned as she walked down the hall. Everyone’s eyes full of pity and relief that it was she and not them. She could hear the whispers surround her until she thought she was going to drown in them. She just walked with her head down straight to home room. She had no need to go to her locker anymore since she had no more need for the books. Grades, which were once the most important thing in her life, were now meaningless.

When she finally got to class, she went to her seat in the back corner, away from the rest of the class. The room slowly filled up, but her corner always stayed empty. She pulled out the worn sheet music for the sonata. That was how she spent every class, sitting in the back corner studying the music. Picturing the keys and her fingers running over them perfectly. Picturing Carnegie Hall sold out. Hearing every note slowly come back to her after snaking its way around the auditorium. Finally hitting that D Sharp and the whole crowd erupting in applause. If only it were that easy on a real piano.

The week passed in a blur, every day repeating itself. Thursday was no different from Wednesday, which was no different from Tuesday, which was no different from Monday. She studied the music during class, practiced for hours at home, then went to bed once the screaming became too much to bear. On Friday everything changed.

The bell rang for lunch. Her favorite part of the school day. It was the only time when she could practice. She didn’t know if she was actually allowed to use the piano in the choir room, but no one ever tried to stop her. Not that she would have cared much if they had. She needed this time. It was the only time during school when she could escape. She sat down and took out the sonata. She started to play, and even though the piano was extremely out of tune, it was possibly the most beautiful noise that she had heard all day. Losing herself in the music, she felt every note ringing through her whole body. It was the best that she had ever played the piece until that last stupid run.

She slammed the lid down on the piano after hitting D natural. This was ridiculous. It was just one little note. Why could she not remember to sharp it? She had played much more complex pieces than this before, and none of them ever gave her nearly this much trouble. She had to get this right.
The door opened, but she didn’t care enough to see who else was in the room.

“You know I missed you at lunch this week.”

“I can’t get this last run and the audition is in a week.”

“Don’t second guess yourself. Just go with it.”

“That is your response to everything,” she said as the bell rang signaling the end of lunch.

“Because it is great advice. So do you want to tell me why you locked yourself in the choir room or why you are crying?” he sat down next to her on the bench and reopened the piano.

She reached up to check if there actually were tears on her face and was surprised when she found them there. “It’s official. I ruined my parents’ marriage. My mom hired a lawyer yesterday,” she said. “Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“Nah, it’s just art. Anyways, Ms. Johnson won’t mind. Besides, there are more important things than school. You will be ready in time for the audition.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you always pull through in the end.”

“Are you still talking about the audition?” She started to run through her scales. “Because we both know that I am not going to pull through this time.”

“Just because I know that, I don’t have to accept it,” he said. “I get it if you don’t want to go through everything again, but I still wish you would at least try.”

“No. You don’t get it. You can’t possibly get it. You don’t know what it’s like to beat it, just to have it come back a year later. You don’t know what it’s like to be stuck in that hospital or in ICU. You don’t know what it’s like to go through chemo, or to lose all of your hair, that for the first time since I was five, finally reaches my shoulders. You don’t know what it is like to know that you are going to die from this. You don’t know. Unless you have had cancer, you can’t possibly know.”

“I’m sorry. I have no idea what you’re going through, but still...”

“I know. It’s just that if I am going to die no matter what, I would rather not spend the last months of my life locked up in that terrible hospital,” she said. “I am starting to
think that auditioning is pointless. I'll never actually be able to go there,” she whispered, barely audible.

“Don’t say that. Your dream was never to go to the school. It was just to get accepted. So who cares if you can’t attend?”

She decided to try the sonata one last time before choir started. She closed her eyes as she began, trusting her fingers to go where they were supposed to. She pictured the music in her head, blocking out everything but the current note she was playing. She started with the allegro section; the notes raced through her mind, fighting for that first spot. Then came the adagio, and everything moved as if it was underwater. The notes slowly emerged from the haze that covered them. Then slowly they got faster and louder. The end of the song was approaching. She just kept playing the notes as they appeared in her head not worrying about the next one. Finally the D sharp appeared. She had done it. She had gotten the run. She slowly opened her eyes not believing what had just happened. She looked over at him, and he had a huge smile on his face, confirming that it was not a dream. She actually did it. She played the sonata perfectly. For the first time, she believed that she actually was going to be ready for the audition.

“I told you that you could do it,” he said.

“Thank you, for everything.”

The bell rang. The choir members started to slowly fill the room and take their places in their appointed chairs. She remained in her seat at the piano as he got up to move to his seat in the back row. The choir instructor entered the room, and they started singing Jingle Bells like they had been doing for the past month.

Life continues to move on as if she had never been a part of it. Anyone who met either of her parents would never know that they had lost their daughter a couple of months ago. He is the only one who seemed to be affected by it. He now runs through the cemetery every morning and pauses at the stone that has her name engraved on it. He no longer cries himself to sleep like he did the first month after she left. Eventually even he will move on.

Her acceptance letter came two months later. She was not there to receive it, but her mom got it since she got to keep the house. Her mom wouldn’t open the letter. She had
been given specific directions not to do so. She didn’t deserve to be the first to know. She
didn’t even go to the audition, because she was too busy with the divorce. He was the only
one to attend her audition so she had asked him, before she left, to be the one to open the
letter. He threw a party a for her even though she wasn’t there to celebrate. Not many
people turn down the Curtis Institute of Music, but she had no other choice.