

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Piano Player's Son

Written by Lindsay Stanberry-Flynn

Published by Cinnamon Press

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Published by Cinnamon Press,
Meirion House,
Tanygrisiau,
Blaenau Ffestiniog,
Gwynedd LL41 3SU
www.cinnamonpress.com

The right of Lindsay Stanberry-Flynn to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act, 1988. © 2013 Lindsay Stanberry-Flynn.

ISBN 978-1-907090-93-6

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data. A CIP record for this book can be obtained from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publishers. This book may not be lent, hired out, resold or otherwise disposed of by way of trade in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published, without the prior consent of the publishers.

Designed and typeset in Garamond by Cinnamon Press.

Cover design by Cottia Fortune-Wood & Jacob Hull from original artwork 'meditation of piano' by Jozef Sedmak © Jozef Sedmak, agency dreamtime.

Cinnamon Press is represented by Inpress and by the Welsh Books Council in Wales.

Printed in Poland

The publisher acknowledges the support of the Welsh Books Council

The Piano Player's Son is a work of fiction, Any resemblance to any person is entirely co-incidental.

One

By four in the morning, the vigil was over. Isabel's lips touched his forehead. He already felt cold. 'I love you, Dad,' she whispered.

The others had said their goodbyes and would be waiting in the car park. Their impatience tugged at her, but she couldn't bring herself to go. It didn't seem right to leave him on his own. She gazed at the bristles spiking his chin. How long does a beard keep on growing, she wondered.

There was a noise behind her and she glanced round.

A nurse was standing in the doorway. 'I thought you'd all gone.' She indicated the trolley in front of her. 'There are one or two things I need to do.'

Isabel clamped her fists to her sides as the nurse's hand, reddened and capable-looking, touched her father's pale arm. 'What will happen to him now?'

'I'll make him comfortable, and then he'll be taken to the mortuary.'

Isabel frowned at the nurse. *Comfortable?* What on earth was that supposed to mean? *He looked so peaceful*, you heard people say. *He could have been asleep* – platitudes designed to ease the pain. But never, ever would she have thought her dad was asleep. Sleeping people wake up, they come back to you: *I had a bad dream*, they'll say. *I love you*, they'll murmur. But this was different. This awful quality of absence slashed a gulf between you and them, between sound and silence.

The glass doors slid open and Isabel stepped out. The early morning air stung her cheeks after the fug of the hospital. She hesitated at the top of the steps, looking down at her mother and brother waiting at the bottom, their faces blobs in the shadow cast by the sodium light. Her mother clung to Rick's arm.

Isabel started down the steps and joined them. Close to, Rick's eyes were bloodshot. Before he arrived at the hospital last night, she hadn't seen him for several months and his hair was streaked with grey. Her mother's mouth was pinched and lifeless without its red lipstick.

The three of them formed an awkward little circle. No one spoke. Isabel's fingers searched for the ring on her left hand. She couldn't get used to its absence.

She settled her mother into her old Volvo and followed Rick out of the car park. As they passed St Joseph's, Isabel's gaze slid over the statue of Mary, baby Jesus cradled in her arms, which stood in the church forecourt. Her mother made the sign of the cross and lowered her head. When Isabel was young, she would sprinkle holy water on them all, or offer up Hail Marys as they left for school when they had exams or something big happening. But the Blessed Virgin hadn't come up trumps this time, had she?

Rick was already in the kitchen when they arrived at the house. He was tapping numbers into his mobile.

'Sit down, Mum,' Isabel said. 'What can I get you?'

Her mother, usually so talkative, so loud, just shook her head.

'Brandy's good for shock. Dad's got a bottle somewhere.'

Rick looked up from the phone. 'I've sent Georgie boy a text.'

'Saying what?'

'No point driving like a maniac. Dad's gone.'

Isabel glared at Rick. 'You told him that in a text?'

'Credit me with some sense. I said *no rush now*.'

Isabel turned away. She glanced at the wall where her father's old station clock hung. Over the years, the long black hands had announced when it was time for school, piano lessons, her driving test, and the moment when she and her father should leave for church on her wedding day. 'The clock,' she said. 'Look. It says five to four. That means it stopped when Dad –'

'I'll sort it out.' Rick pulled open the glass front.

'No!' Isabel caught his wrist as his fingers reached towards the clock. Only her father was allowed to wind it. It had been one of his rules.

Rick shook off her hand. He searched around on top of the case and Isabel heard the staccato clicking of the mechanism as the key turned. She stared at her brother's back, his outstretched arm as he closed the front again and returned the key to its home. He was taller, slimmer, but it could almost have been her father standing there.

She crouched beside her mother's chair. 'What about some tea?' Her voice sounded bright and artificial.

Rick turned from studying the clock, which now showed twenty past five. 'Not for me. I'm shattered.'

'Yes, go to bed, *caro*,' her mother said.

'And you, Mum. Isabel can bring tea up to you.'

Their mother stood up, catching hold of the back of the chair. She suddenly looked much older than sixty-eight. 'You won't forget about Grace?' she asked, from the doorway.

'I'll ring her now.'

While she waited for the kettle to boil, Isabel dialled Grace's mobile. When they'd realised their father's condition was serious, she'd phoned her sister in Italy. She would leave immediately, Grace had said. She wanted to be there. But a few moments before he died, the nurse had come in with a message. There were technical problems: Grace was stuck in Naples.

Grace took an age to answer. Isabel pictured the airport: lights dimmed; row upon row of travellers trying to sleep, whiling away the hours that held them suspended between one moment in their lives and another. It was the worst of settings to receive such news.

The bedside light was on in her mother's room and she was sitting up, tiny against the plumped up pillows. Isabel tried not to look at the empty space beside her.

'When I first came to England,' her mother said, sipping the tea, 'I hated this dreadful stuff.' She pulled down her mouth at the memory. 'I was nearly sick more than once.'

'I phoned Grace,' Isabel said.

'Poor baby. All on her own.'

'Flights resume in the morning. I'll pick her up from Heathrow.'

'And *mi tesoro*?'

Isabel took the cup from her mother's hand and put it on the bedside table. 'George will be here soon.'

Her mother closed her eyes. Isabel watched the rise and fall of her chest. When she was sure she was asleep, she leant forward and kissed her cheek.

Her mother's eyes shot open. 'Isabel! Why are you here? Where's your father?'

'Mamma ...' Isabel rarely called her mother that these days. She'd left the name behind with toys and dressing-up clothes. It was her father who would say *Ask Mamma; you'd better tell Mamma*.

Her mother reached up and stroked her cheek. 'You're a good girl, Isabel. A good daughter.' She smiled. 'Tell Henry I want him.'

'Mamma. Dad's gone.'

'But he hasn't said goodbye. Henry always kisses me goodbye.'

Isabel put an arm round her shoulders. A pad of flesh covered the bone. 'Mum, you remember. You went in the ambulance with Dad.'

Her mother's fingers clutched at the bedcover, her long nails red against the cream material. 'Gone. He's gone,' she repeated as if she was learning a new language. 'Mamma ...'

Her mother dropped back on to the pillow. 'I'll be all right on my own.' She pushed Isabel's hand away. 'You get home. Brian will be wondering where you are.'

'I doubt he will.'

'Why? Has Brian gone too?'

'We split up, didn't we?' Isabel said.

'Did you?'

'I'm in that flat now. Dad helped me sort it out.'

Her mother slapped her palm against her forehead. 'I'm all confused.'

'It's shock.'

'I can't manage on my own.'

'I'll help you.' Isabel hoped she sounded confident. Her father had been a saint when it came to dealing with her mother.

'Henry did everything for me.'

'I know,' Isabel said. Too much, people used to say. 'You and Dad were perfect together.'

'*Perfetto.*'

'I wish I'd been half as lucky with Brian.'

'He'll come back. They always do. Make him pay a little and then forgive him.'

Isabel stared at a brown stain on the wallpaper above the bed. It looked like tea, or blood. She'd never noticed it before. 'It's not so easy.'

'Forgiveness. Isn't that what marriage is all about?'

'You should know, Mum.'

'What makes you say that?' Her mother's voice was sharp.

'You and Dad were married a long time, that's all.' Isabel felt for the words as if she was negotiating a route on a rocky path. 'You must have had to forgive a few things over the years.'

Her mother's face wrinkled into a smile. 'You were his favourite.'

'Dad didn't have favourites.'

But you have. Isabel watched her mother. *And it's no secret who.*

On the landing, a strip of light shone from underneath Rick's old bedroom door. She tapped and waited. No answer – he'd probably fallen asleep with the light on. She pushed the door open.

Rick was sitting on the narrow bed, his laptop open on his knees. He looked up. His face was grey in the computer's bluey glow. He kept his fingers poised over the keyboard.

'What?'

'I thought –'

'What do you want?' His voice rasped as if he'd just smoked a pack of twenty.

Isabel smoothed down the edge of the carpet with her foot. It always caught on the door. 'Someone will have an accident on that one day,' her mother used to say. Dad had never got round to sorting it out. 'I thought you might want to talk.'

Rick's heavy eyebrows dived towards each other and a furrow appeared between them. 'What's to talk about?'

For a second, Isabel was a little girl hovering at her big brother's door: *Do you want to play? Shove off! I'm busy.*

She shrugged, the urge to communicate shrivelling away like melting snow. 'What are you doing?'

'Making a list.' Rick's gaze had returned to the screen.

'A list of what?'

'What is this? A catechism?'

Isabel edged the door shut with her heel. 'Ssh. You'll wake Mum up.'

Rick sighed and laid the laptop on the bed next to him. 'Right. You've got my attention. What do you want?'

A prickling sensation started in Isabel's nose, and she bit her lip hard. 'Why do you have to be so vile? Dad's just died. I thought there might be things to talk about.'

'Isabel.' Her mother's voice called from across the landing.

'Mum's awake.' Rick lifted the laptop back on to his knees.

'Isabel.'

'You'd better see what she wants.' His fingers raced across the keyboard.

A lamp burned on the bedside table, and her mother was sitting at the dressing table, plaiting her hair.

'I thought you were asleep, Mum. What are you doing up again?'

'You know I can't go to bed without doing my hair. You shouldn't have made me.'

Isabel sat down on the bed and looked at her mother's reflection as she wound the long, thick hair round her fingers. At one time it had been the colour of burgundy, but now there was more white than anything else. She looked different in the mirror. There was something about her eyes, the shape of her mouth with that slight droop in the corner that made her seem a stranger.

'He used to love watching me do this.' Her mother smoothed a stray strand of hair.

'Morning and night, he'd sit on the bed and hand the clips to me. Except yesterday. He didn't want to get up.' She gripped Isabel's hand. 'If I'd called someone then, he might still be with us.'

'It was a major heart attack. Nothing could have been done.'

'I should have known. He was always up first.'

Her mother's eyes had a distant look as she contemplated some private world Isabel couldn't begin to imagine. Isabel followed her gaze across the room. Her father's dark suit, the one he wore for best, was hanging on the wardrobe door.

'We were going out for his birthday next week. He'd got his suit out to be cleaned.' Her mother turned back to the mirror. 'I didn't deserve him.'

'He adored you.'

'Sometimes I think he loved me too much.'

Her mother's voice was a whisper, so at first Isabel thought she must have misheard. Surely, her mother could never have too much adoration?

'He'd have done anything to make you happy.'

'That was the trouble.'

'How do you mean?'

Her mother shook her head and the newly wound plait twisted snake-like on her shoulder. 'It doesn't matter.' She sat on the edge of the bed and swung her legs round. 'I'm tired, Isabel. I think I could sleep now.'

'You can't say something like that, Mum, and then shut up.'

'Your father made me promise not to tell anyone.'

'If there's something I should know about ... '

Her mother lay back against the pillow and closed her eyes. 'Perhaps it would be better.'

'It's no good bottling things up. Isn't that what Dad always said?'

'My eyes hurt. It's too bright.'

Isabel switched off the bedside light. For a few moments darkness and silence coalesced, and then her mother began to talk.

Isabel hung her key on the hook in the kitchen. The flat was cold and silent. She went back into the hall and hesitated outside Rose's room. The door was ajar and she could hear the soft sound of her daughter's breathing. She hadn't expected Rose to wait up, but still she felt disappointed, like a child coming home from school to an empty house.

In the kitchen, she fished around in the back of a cupboard and found the bottle of gin. She poured a large measure. There was a time after Brian left when she drank every night. It got especially bad when Josh went to live with his dad. After the first couple of glasses she hardly felt the pain. She used to fall asleep at the kitchen table, waking up cold and stiff in the early hours, to climb into Josh's bed and cuddle his pillow.

One night when Rose was staying with a friend, she'd phoned to say there'd been a row, and she wanted to come home. Isabel tried to persuade her to get a taxi but she wouldn't hear of it, sobbed down the phone. Isabel went. It still made her shudder to think what might have happened.

She hardly drank after that. But tonight was different. She rested her forehead against the cold wet glass of the back door. The blackness of the night was creeping away. A soft grey had edged in. The hedge bordering the garden stood hunched against the darkness of the sports field beyond. A shape streaked across the lawn. Samson. Isabel opened the door and he shot in, arching his back and rubbing against her legs.

She picked him up, burying her face in his warm fur. His weight made her arms ache and she slumped on to the rocking chair. Her father had given it to her when she moved into the flat. 'Very comforting, rocking chairs,' he'd said.

Samson tolerated her embrace at first, but then began to struggle. He stood over her, paws kneading her chest. She smelt the sardines Rose had given him for supper. His purr vibrated against her ear and her breathing slowed in response. She pushed her toes against the floor and rocked back. Forwards. Back. Forwards. Back.

Two

Isabel spotted Grace as soon as she came through arrivals. With her silver jacket, her long legs in tight jeans, and her sunglasses, her sister might have been a celebrity arriving at the airport. The other passengers streaming through the barrier looked insignificant in comparison.

Isabel waved and Grace turned and strode towards her. The knot lodged in Isabel's stomach eased its grip – she'd always been close to Grace, wedged as they were between two warring brothers.

Close up the celebrity persona was frayed. When Grace pushed her dark glasses up on her head, Isabel noticed her eyes were puffy and shadowed. She hugged her. Despite the jacket, Grace felt thin and fragile.

'Let's go somewhere we can talk,' Grace said.

'Don't you want to get out of here?'

Grace shook her head. 'I want to hear what happened.'

'Okay.' Isabel steered her towards a café area away from the crowds.

Grace sipped her cappuccino. She made a face: 'Dreadful stuff.'

'I forgot you've become more Italian than Mum.' Isabel slid the plate of pastries across the table. 'What about something to eat?'

Grace took a croissant and began to cut it into slices. 'Tell me. Was it terrible?' Her dark eyes were glassy with tears.

'More unreal. It hasn't sunk in.'

'What was it like?'

'Mum phoned about four o'clock in the afternoon –'

'I mean at the end. What was it like at the actual moment ... you know ... when he died?'

Isabel stirred her coffee. 'It's hard to describe.'

'Try – I need to know.'

'It was ...' She shook her head: that hospital room ... sickly mustard walls ... the smell, something bad, something rotten, disinfectant failing to mask it ... the machines ... their incessant bleeping ... the next beat of her father's heart the only thing that mattered –

'Isabel.'

Isabel forced herself to talk: 'At first we expected him to come round. Then his breathing changed: it was shallower and there were gaps between each breath ...' Those gaps ... longer and longer ... waiting ... wondering ... the next breath ... when would it –

'Isabel!'

'Can we talk about it later? I can't now.'

'He's my dad too – I've got a right to know.' Grace pushed crumbs around the plate. 'It's horrible being the only one who wasn't there.'

'George hasn't arrived yet.'

'Really?' The sharp lines of Grace's face relaxed. 'I'm glad I wasn't the only one.' She tried another sip of the cappuccino.

Isabel gazed at the line of froth on her lip. She had longed for Grace to get here. She'd imagined them comforting each other. But this? She didn't recognise this less-than-perfect sister.

Grace rubbed her hand across her mouth. 'It's always me that's left out.' 'How?'

'Middle child and all that.'

'Grace, there are four of us – you can't be the middle one.'

'Rick's the eldest, you're the first girl, and George is the baby ... Mamma's darling.'

'But you're the beautiful one. You're so much like Mum when she was younger – Dad adored you.'

'Because I look like her?'

'Dad was proud of you, all that you've achieved.'

'Achieved!' Grace shoved her cup to one side. Liquid slopped over the edge and made a brown pool on the table. 'But he loved you for you.'

Isabel closed her eyes. The blackness inside her lids was like a balm. If only she could shut out the past forty-eight hours as easily. She forced her eyes open again and found Grace watching her. 'Let's not argue. Just at the moment I don't care who loved who more and why.'

Grace caught hold of Isabel's hand. 'Sorry.'

Isabel looked down at her sister's long pale fingers entwined with her plump ones, already bulging at the knuckle. 'I seem to be everyone's whipping boy at the moment. I've had Mum telling me all sorts of stuff –'

'What stuff?' Grace's hand tightened on Isabel's.

'You know what she's like.' Isabel felt her cheeks growing hot. 'Always rambling on about the past and her beloved Italy.'

'At least you had the chance to say goodbye to Dad.'

Isabel's hand itched to fly up in the direction of Grace's cheek. She imagined the sting in her palm as she slapped her sister's smooth skin. The red weal erupting over its serene beauty. What was this harping on about not being there when he died? He was dead. Gone forever. Never again would she feel his hug; never again hear his voice: *Don't upset yourself, love*; never again sit beside him on the piano stool and – she tried to pull her hand from Grace's, but Grace clung on.

'If I'd been there, I'd have known one way or the other.'

Grace's voice, usually so light and musical, grated on Isabel like chalk on a blackboard. *Known one way or the other*. What was she talking about? Known what? Did she want to hold the mirror up to see if he was still breathing? Wait while the nurse made him *comfortable*? Words screamed up through Isabel's chest into her mouth, like exploding fireworks: *It's okay for you on your beautiful island, with your beautiful husband and your beautiful idyllic life*.

Oh God. What was happening to her? This was Grace she was about to heap abuse on. Grace, the baby sister she'd adored from the moment she'd first seen the black curls, the dark eyes peeping out of the crocheted shawl. She'd helped change her nappy, pushed her pram, rattled her toys, lifted her out of the cot each morning. Until that day. The day when the big black taxi arrived and Mamma climbed into it carrying little Grace in her arms. 'Italia,' Mamma had said in response to Isabel's anguished cry. 'We're going to Italia.' And she waved as the taxi pulled away. The shops. Playschool. The park. Even Yorkshire, where her granny and granddad lived. Isabel knew where they all were. But where was *Italia*?

She clutched her waist with her arms and clenched her hands into fists.

'Don't go all silent on me.' Grace's accusation sliced across her thoughts. *Going silent*. It was what people said she did. When things were difficult, when she was angry or unhappy, she tried to explain how she was feeling, formulated, rehearsed, reorganised the words she would say, but before she could open her mouth, the gibe always came: *You've gone all silent again*. Moody, Brian called it.

Okay, she wouldn't be silent. 'Why haven't you been over for so long?'

'You know it's difficult to get away. The restaurant ...' Grace sounded different, her voice smaller, more diffident.

'It's not easy looking out for Mum and Dad either.' Tears pressed at the back of Isabel's eyes 'And all the stuff with Brian as well.'

She felt Grace's fingers stroking her wrist. 'I'm sorry.'

She wanted to answer, say she understood, to mend the breach in her love for her sister, but the sides of her throat felt glued together.

'I am sorry about Brian, Bel.'

Bel: her family's pet name for her. Only her father and Brian had ever used it recently.

'Are you okay?' Grace asked.

'Josh has gone with him.'

Grace's eyes opened wider. 'What? You mean Josh is living with Brian?'

'And *her*.'

'Oh, Bel. Talk to me.'

So Grace wanted her to talk: she'd tell her all right. Tell her what it felt like when your husband fucked someone else, gave away what was precious between you to someone else, had a baby with someone else, and worse, took away your child and gave him to someone else to look after. Isabel searched in her handbag for the photo. At first she'd looked at it constantly and it was dog-eared. Now she rationed herself. She held it out to Grace. 'That was in Majorca. Our last holiday,' she said. 'We'd been fooling about in the pool and Brian asked the man from the next-door sun lounger to take a photo. Look how happy Rose and Josh are. You can't believe Brian was sleeping with that bitch even back then, can you?'

Grace frowned. 'Perhaps it would help if you let go of the anger, Bel.'

Isabel shoved the photo back in her bag. Josh was Grace's godson and she'd always had a soft spot for him, but she didn't have any children. How could she know what it felt like? Only her father understood. 'It's tough, lass,' he used to say. 'When you put the pieces of a broken heart together, it never goes back quite as it should. But these things happen, and we get through them. Somehow.'

'Play the piano for me, Dad,' she'd pleaded, when she couldn't cry any more.

His fingers were poised over the keys. 'What would you like?'

'Do you need to ask?'

'Debussy's Nocturne, it is then.'

The Nocturne had been her favourite since she was a little girl and she used to sit at his feet and watch his big shiny shoes as they pressed the pedals. She'd thought his feet had magic in them.

'Boys like to be with their dads, don't they?' she said now and made an effort to sound reasonable. It wasn't fair to take it out on Grace. 'And since they've had ...' When Brian's girlfriend had produced a son three months earlier, Isabel thought she would die with the pain. 'They're a family now. How can I compete?'

'It's not a competition,' Grace said. 'You'll always be Josh's mum.'

'That doesn't count for much at the moment.'

'It will. You'll see.'

'You bet it will.' Isabel stood up. 'I'm going to get my husband and son back, Grace. Whatever it takes. I'm going to get them back.'

When they arrived at the house, grief bit into Isabel. For minutes at a time, she'd been able to forget he was dead, but here, his mark was everywhere. The mosaic floor tiles in the hall that he thought would remind Mum of Italy. The old 78 records that he refused to throw away stacked in the corner of the dining room. His slippers by the front door pulled her gaze towards them. He always wore the backs down and she used to buy him new ones every Christmas. He'd almost been due a pair.

Their mother was having a rest when they arrived and Grace went up to see her. Isabel pushed open the door to the dining room.

'Hi, Sis.'

'George! You made me jump.' Her brother was sitting at the table, their father's sheet music spread out in front of him. 'When did you get here?' Isabel stood in the doorway, unsure what to do. She felt she should put her arms round George. But it was years since she'd had that sort of relationship with him, and, anyway, his mouth had its usual smile and his dark eyes studied her with their familiar quizzical gleam. If he was distressed by their father's death, he was putting a brave face on it.

'About an hour ago,' he said now. 'Just in time to exchange the odd word with my dear brother.'

'Where is Rick?'

'Gone to the funeral directors.'

'Why didn't he wait so we could all go?'

George shrugged. 'Eldest son and all that.'

'But there's so much to decide.' Isabel tidied the sheets of music into a pile.

'Steady on, Sis. I'm looking at those.' George scattered the pages across the table again.

Isabel tried not to look at them. Her father always kept his music in chronological order – it was one of the things she'd enjoyed helping him with. *He played the piano with me as well, don't forget* – The words she wasn't able to speak bounced around her head. 'Rick can't decide it all himself,' she said. 'We'll have to choose hymns. And what about readings?'

'You know our Ricky. Got to be in control.'

'But he hasn't even been to see Mum and Dad since Easter.'

'Too busy with his dot com company, I guess. Anyway, as soon as I was here to keep an eye on Eva, he pushed off.'

Isabel couldn't remember when George had started calling their mother by her first name, but he was the only one who could get away with it. She looked at the glass of wine in his hand. It was typical of him to sit here drinking and let Rick take over. He might be charming – their mother thought the sun shone out of his backside – but he was so irresponsible.

'Do you want a drink?' George asked. 'You look as if you could do with one.'

'It's the middle of the afternoon.'

'Your point is?'

'It's too early to start drinking.' Isabel wasn't going to tell George that if she had a drink now, she might never stop.

'I thought you might need one when you hear the news.'

'What's happened? Is it Mum?' Isabel turned to the door, ready to rush upstairs.

George laughed. 'Nothing like that. But Eduardo's on his way. He phoned just after I got here.'

'Oh God! He's all we need.'

Isabel went into the kitchen. As always the fridge was full and she decided to make a meal for later. It would give her something to do. She took an onion from the vegetable rack and with one of her mother's beautifully sharp knives began to peel and slice it. Tears pricked her eyes.

From the room next door, came the sound of the piano, as George picked out the notes of the Moonlight Sonata. It was one of their father's favourites and the music filled her head. She held a tea cloth to her face, forcing the thick towelling material against her lips. Why couldn't her fingers tempt sounds of such exquisite melancholy as George's?

She went back to the dining room and stood at his side as he played. By rights neither he nor their father should have been a pianist. He was the only one of the children to have inherited their father's short stubby fingers and they were always comparing hands, matching palm to palm, arguing whose fingers were longer.

George stopped playing and swung round. He looked surprised to find her beside him.

'Dad loved this piano,' he said, his fingers lingering on the lid. She put her hand on his shoulder and he reached up and grasped it.

Isabel thought he might talk, drop the usual banter, but at that moment Grace appeared in the doorway.

'That was lovely. Mum said it was as if Dad was down here.'

'Grace!' George stood up and kissed Grace on each cheek. 'How's my sister?' He leant back and studied her face. 'Beautiful as ever.'

Grace pulled away. 'Not now,' she said. 'Play for us again.'

George sat down at the piano and flexed his fingers. 'You shall have your wish.'