

LITTLE STRANGER

Chapter 2: Olivia

'And when you press the keys together, you get this." The piano sounds as my tutor shows me how to play "Happy Birthday." She's been teaching me for the last two weeks, and I asked if she could show me how to do that song, so I can play it for Malachi.

He's twelve today, but he doesn't want a party or to go for a family day out. If anything, he seems sad. My hugs usually make him feel better, or when I lie next to him in bed and we watch movies, but he said no when I asked earlier.

Well, he signed "no" because he still doesn't talk. Mom said it's selective -he chooses not to speak, and hasn't since he was five years old. I'm not sure why; my dad said he'd explain when I'm older.

Sometimes, when we lie in bed or the tent we pitch in the living room, I'll try to coax him or trick him into talking, which only makes him mad-he'll ignore me for days when I do that. My friends think he's weird for not talking and laugh when he signs to me, but I tell them to shut up.

We still share a room. Mom wanted to move him into his own one, but he begged her to let him stay. He's scared of the dark and sometimes sleeps beside me. And I don't think he likes Dad very much. Malachi ran out of his office with a black eye the other day.

I look up from the piano as Malachi walks in. He's wearing a black hoodie, the hood up, nearly covering his curly black hair. He sits on the sofa in front of the piano and watches me while I finish my lesson.

My tutor goes to speak to Mom, something about having to reschedule my next lesson, and they get into a discussion. I hear them talk about Malachi's birthday, that my dad won't be here since he's intentionally working late. Malachi comes to sit on the stool beside me. He signs, Teach me? He watches my fingers as I play to him what I just learned, and his eyes light up when he realizes what it is. I grin and shrug. "Happy birthday," I say quietly. "It was supposed to be a surprise."

He signs, Thank you, then gestures to the piano again. Play.

This time, I mess up, and he silently laughs at me when I huff and cross my arms then he starts to press the keys in front of him, higher-pitched, and I try not to giggle at his terrible piano skills.

"Did you like the present I got you? Mom helped me pick it."

He nods then kisses my cheek, signing, Thank you.

I turn my cheek and point at the other one. He kisses that, then I point at my forehead, and he kisses that too. When I point to my nose, he kisses my lips, and I freeze.

Pulling back, I stare at him, wide-eyed. "Mom told me not to let boys kiss me! You're a boy!"

I'm your brother, so I'm allowed.

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"Really?"

He nods, his eyes flashing. He watches me for a long second then turns his body, pressing the piano keys again.

I glance over my shoulder and notice my mom standing in the doorway, looking concerned as she holds Malachi's birthday cake the candles already melting.

Later that night, Dad comes home and drags Malachi out of bed, and when I try to ask what's wrong, he yells at me to go back to sleep.

When Malachi comes back to our bedroom hours later, he's visibly shaking and apologizes to me using his hands, and I hug him until he falls asleep.