

# THE SCROLL OF CHAOS

ELSIE CHAPMAN



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# ONE

The entire class goes wild on their instruments at the sound of the school bell. It's become a regular thing at the end of Friday's last class, and for about ten seconds, you've never heard a school band sound so off-key.

Mrs. Battiste finally claps her hands for quiet.

"All right," she calls out over the still-noisy classroom. "Only one week until Spring Revival! Let's try really hard to fit in some extra practice time this weekend. If you've already sold all your raffle tickets for the concert, make sure to turn in your stubs to the office. See everyone on Monday!"

As Libby Pearson (my best friend) puts away her violin beside me, she clumsily bangs the instrument against the leg of her chair. Her parents would freak if they knew, since Libby's violin isn't a rental.

I'm way more careful putting away my clarinet. One, because it *is* a rental, and my parents are always worried about the damage fees. Two, because it's a wind instrument, making it easy for mold to start growing inside. If that happens, you're inhaling that mold right into your lungs each time you play. And three, because not only is

that bad for any player, it's especially bad if you've got asthma. Like me.

My asthma is also why I started playing clarinet. "To help build up your lung power," Dr. Park said when she suggested the idea to my parents. "Let's get you some super lungs, Astrid!"

That's me. Twelve-year-old seventh grader Astrid Xu. Star clarinet player at Quincy Elementary School.

So, okay, the last part isn't actually true. If I'm the best clarinet player at school, it's because I'm the *only* clarinet in this year's band class. There *would* have been three of us, but Beatrice Myers moved away during the summer and Owen Chabra decided to switch over to trumpet last minute. And since I'm still working on those super lungs, it also means I'm just an okay player, which doesn't bother me at all. Most of the time.

Jasper Choi (my other best friend) walks over, backpack on and saxophone case in hand. "Bear ate my whole booklet of tickets before I could sell any," he tells Libby and me glumly. "I guess my folks are buying the entire two dozen."

For every ticket a student sells, they get their name entered in a school raffle for a brand-new iPad. Every kid at Quincy Elementary—including me—is hoping to win. And Bear is Jasper's golden retriever. He once ate all the

buttons off my jacket, and he farts a lot whenever we take him for walks, but otherwise he's a pretty great dog. Jasper's parents are always asking Libby and me if we want to adopt him, but we know they're just kidding. They spoil Bear nearly as much as Jasper does.

"I left my tickets at the restaurant's front counter," Libby says, snapping her violin case shut. "Our regulars bought them all up!"

The Pearsons own and run Butter, one of Vancouver's fanciest and most famous restaurants. Not everything on the menu is made with butter, but everything still somehow tastes rich, which I guess is why eating there is so expensive.

I check my clarinet reed for cracks (there aren't any) and store it away in my reed container (there aren't any spares left inside; I'll have to remember to refill it before next class). I close the flap and grin at Libby and Jasper. "*Three* booklets sold for me."

My parents might not be rich like the Pearsons, and we don't own a house like the Chois. But it turns out living in an apartment complex isn't just great for when I'm in the middle of baking my family-famous apple dumplings and I'm an apple short. It's also a gold mine for customers.

Libby's mouth forms an O of shock. "No way! That's

awesome! Maybe you can sell some more this weekend.”

Jasper looks even glummer than before. “At least my folks might have a real chance at a door prize, right? C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

Libby grabs her backpack from beneath her seat. “Astrid, you ready?”

Ever since the end of winter break, I’ve been walking partway home with them. We split up at Forty-Ninth Avenue, with Libby and Jasper off toward their places in one direction and me to our apartment in the other. But back in the fall, Mom would drive Marilla and me to school and then pick us up again nearly every day. Libby and Jasper asked me once why she doesn’t anymore, and I just told them she got too busy with work.

Which is a lie.

I wipe out my clarinet with a drying cloth. “Sorry, my dad’s picking Marilla and me up today.”

Dad decided this morning to work from home, which is a sign of how he thinks the weekend’s going to go (hint: not great). He’s actually been working from home a lot lately, especially these past few weeks. Sometimes I wonder if he’s told anyone at his office why he’s not there. What would he have said? How do you explain a sickness you can’t really see—one that lives deep in your head?



“Okay, text us later,” Libby says to me.

“Hey, if you two want to come over tomorrow, I bet we can order in pizza for lunch,” Jasper adds.

“Sure,” Libby says. “We can bring Bear to the dog park, too.”

“Um, let me check, okay?” I say. It depends if Mom’s still in bed or not.

My friends wave goodbye and take off.

I finish putting away my clarinet, tucking each piece into its place in its velvet-lined case: bell, lower and upper joints, barrel, and mouthpiece. The case is the mini type, and after I zip it up, I slide it right inside my backpack. I’m not rushing or anything, but I also kind of am. Dad’s probably already waiting outside, and Marilla, too, impatient in the back seat.

Also . . . what if today’s the day everything actually goes back to normal? Since it’s Friday, we’ll bring home Chinese or Thai and eat while we all watch a movie on Netflix. The way we always do when things are right and Mom is fine.

“You sounded *great* today, Astrid,” Mrs. Battiste says at the doorway as we leave the classroom at the same time. “How are you feeling about your solo next week?”

She’s holding her teacher’s copy of *Studio Ghibli for Kid Musicians*. We’re doing a Studio Ghibli beginner’s medley

for Spring Revival! (the exclamation point is part of its name, by the way). It's a Quincy tradition that the students get to vote on a concert's music theme, so songs like "Hot Cross Buns" and "Frère Jacques" never stand a chance (no offense to them). One concert, the school band did *Star Wars* songs, and for another, it was Top 2000s Hits.

"Pretty good," I tell my band teacher, when my real answer is something closer to *terrified*. My solo for Spring Revival! is during "Path of the Wind" from *My Neighbor Totoro*. I'm pretty sure I'm looking forward to it as much as I look forward to getting a cavity filled.

Dr. Park *did* warn me that playing wasn't actually going to fix my asthma, but that it would help me learn how to control my breathing, which would then make my asthma easier to deal with. She also said it would take time to show improvement. "Baby steps, Astrid! And lots of playing time, okay?"

I thought I could prove Dr. Park wrong about how long it would take. So back during Winter Fest (Quincy's winter holiday concert), I strolled up onstage, sure my solo would be a breeze. The high notes were my kryptonite, but I'd been hitting them nearly every class.

The concert started out great. But the closer it got to my solo, the more I started imagining messing up in front of everyone. And the more I tried not to imagine it, the



more I couldn't help it. Panic crept into my chest like little pinching fingers stealing all my air. When I finally played the high notes, nothing came out of my clarinet but a thin and embarrassing wheeze.

Even now I can shut my eyes and remember the feeling of everyone's eyes on me, so heavy that I could barely play another note the rest of the concert. Marilla never makes fun of me for it, either, which is how I know it's bad.

I've been skating along in band class ever since, hiding my playing behind the sound of everyone else's. I skip high notes whenever I can get away with it. It's only when I'm practicing by myself in my room that playing feels nearly fun again.

When Mrs. Battiste said we'd all get solos for Spring Revival!, I planned on faking a stomachache that night. But then Mom started to get sick again. She started to sleep way too much, the house would become oddly quiet, and Marilla and I never knew what to do, so we just argued to try to fill up that strange silence. That's when I decided I would go to the concert, because if I have the chance to be great onstage, how could Mom *not* want to get better enough to come watch?

But now it's nearly Spring Revival! and I still can't play in front of anyone the way I could before the disaster. I guess I'm too scared to try if it means facing just how

badly I'm going to blow my solo. Sure, some days go well enough that I can practically picture Mom in the audience, happy again as she hears me play with super lungs. But panic always ends up creeping close once more, making my air race away, so that I'm back at square one. Those days make the stage feel more for magicians than barely-able-to-play kid-clarinetists.

How am I going to figure out in a week how to get better so that I can make Mom better, too?

"Remember," Mrs. Battiste says to me as she steps into the hall, "practice, practice, practice! I'm sure you'll do wonderfully at the concert."

Deciding she must have the shortest memory in the world for a teacher, I make myself smile back. "I'm sure, too."