

The Scarred Pianist

by Maria Ernestam

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Chapter One 2014

Veronica,

Today I thought I saw James again.

I'm beginning this way to make you carry on reading. You never answered when I tried to contact you, and in the end I realised it was pointless. It's been a very long time since we were in touch, and I find it difficult to know how to express myself. Even these few lines have taken me half an hour.

What I can tell you is how I got hold of your email address. I phoned your son Jonte, who was extremely surprised to hear from me, naturally. Mum's old best friend, as he put it.

He was pleasant, as always, so I gather you haven't told him. I kept as close to the truth as possible and said that you and I had drifted apart, and that I'd also managed to lose some old addresses. He helped me out by revealing that you are actually in Sweden at the moment. What a remarkable coincidence. But I assume you do come home sometimes, even if you don't tell me.

There is so much I want to say and so much I want to know. How you are and what your life is like. After all, I know so little - nothing, really. I want everything to be the same as usual, which is stupid because things can never be the same as they were. And today definitely isn't the same as usual, because today I really did think I saw James again.

That's why I'm sitting here writing to you.

The man I saw was leaning against a building, and he called out to me. He was wearing work overalls with a hi-vis yellow waistcoat on top. Heavy boots on his feet. Pointed nose, thin lips. Drooping eyelids. My first thought was that it was James sitting there, and for an instant it seemed almost natural.

I stopped walking and must have looked utterly bewildered because he repeated what he had said. *Is this the Old Town?* I answered in English, telling him yes, this was Gamla Stan, the Old Town, and then I started babbling on about the buildings

around us. At the same time I tried to get a better look at him, to see if he really could be James. The eyes were right, the posture, the straight, dark hair. I couldn't quite see his hands.

When I asked where he came from he said Ireland. Immediately I knew he wasn't James, but probably just a lonely construction worker.

And everything hit me again, with terrifying force.

It's ten years since we last saw each other, you and I. Eight years, perhaps, since I stopped writing to you. Various things have happened in the meantime, things I'm not sure would interest you. But, to be brief, I'm the owner of a little bookshop in Gamla Stan where I sell new and second hand books. I bought it shortly after Carl and I got divorced. The contact with my customers, and the chance to spend my time doing something that feels meaningful make it worth the effort, and Carl and I have managed to remain good friends.

Apart from that I am still an author, but I no longer write my crime novels. And that's working out quite well, too. I've met a man and we've been together for a few years. He's a vicar with a taste for horror films. That's probably enough for you to understand that he isn't like other people.

Above all he's my best friend. But he knows nothing about it, either. No-one knows, except you and I. Today I realised that I am never going to be free of it. Unless I can contact you, I will be forever walking around with the feeling that something is missing, even though my life is fine as it is, basically. But the gnawing feeling inside won't go away. In fact it gets worse.

Ever since our trip I've thought about the things that make us who we are. There are so many different kinds of people, aren't there? Those who give and those who take. Those who talk and those who keep silent. Those who lie to themselves and to others, and those who try to be honest, even when it's next to impossible. Those who believe that people are either good or evil, and those who don't understand that everyone can be a bit of both, and that most of them are doing the best they can.

I've thought about what I'm like. Probably a mixture of all those things.

Now I know I've got to write about us and our journey, to stop it being lost. Because if I don't, Veronica, then perhaps there was no meaning to what happened. No meaning to me, either. None at all, in fact. And that feeling scares

me. That's why I really must get in touch with you again, to clear up everything that happened, assuming that's even possible.

I would be so happy if you could reply at long last. And I hope you know in your heart of hearts that I never meant to cause you any harm.

Marieke.

Chapter Two 2014

I stare at the email I have just finished writing, until the letters begin to dance on the screen. Finally I walk away, not deleting it but not sending it either, and go into the shop. The afternoon has slipped into evening and outside the window it is getting dark. Slate-grey clouds swollen with arctic cold chase each other across the sky. The last customer has left, and I have locked up and switched off the lights. But I haven't gone home, haven't taken those few steps between the bookshop and my apartment. I already know I'm not going to get a wink of sleep until I find out if Robin is safe. Robin, my son, who is training to be a Norrland Ranger with the Army Battalion up in Arvidsjaur.

Tonight he's out searching for two tourists who have lost their way in the fells. He hardly had time to tell me he had been called out before the TV and radio were reporting that a major snow storm was pounding the area, and one rescue helicopter had already crash-landed during the search. There is no information yet about any injured or dead, but I can't get through to Robin by phone, and I don't know exactly where he is.

Here, a few crumpled autumn leaves are dancing about in the twilight, in a small-scale imitation of what is happening up in the fells. In the alleyways of Gamla Stan the storm is reduced to silent gusts of air. There is no roaring from the uncontrollable heart of nature. Even so, these wind-tossed leaves remind me of what my son is in the middle of right now, and the anxiety pulsates inside me, making me shudder. Snow whipped into barbs of ice, snow drifts blocking the way. I only hope they keep together and search in a group, so no-one else goes missing.

At that moment my thoughts return to that unknown man who I thought was a person I had always hoped to see again. After I realised it wasn't James I fled, reached the bookshop, unlocked the door with trembling hands and slammed it

shut behind me. Made some tea and tried to pretend it hadn't happened. I sat down with the manuscript I was currently working on, but the sentences I produced were distorted and abrupt. In the end I left it. When the first customer came in it was a relief, a reminder that the world was turning as usual. For others, at least.

But as I stood at the till to take the money, the memories attacked me like howling wolves. Any attempt to breathe calmly, look at my customers and say something pleasant, was useless. James was blocking the way to everything. So was Veronica. The Veronica I have worked so hard to shut up in a cavity deep inside me, behind a door that is kept firmly shut so that she can't glide in and out over everything that is me and mine. Veronica at the piano, Veronica and me singing together, our conversations over a glass of wine. Veronica on the beach, at a restaurant in San Francisco, in a hotel bar.

For the rest of that day my eyes are drawn to the gilded pendulum clock I brought from my home to the bookshop a few years ago. I did it because although there's something comforting about the ticking during daylight hours, on sleepless nights at home the sound filled me with such melancholy that ultimately it became unbearable.

Ten years. Ten years with the memories sealed away in that cavity. A failed attempt to write about what happened, about that story in particular. What does a wing-clipped author do when the words run out? You back away from the wild beast with its bloodthirsty jaws, you back warily until the path forks and you can set off down a different track. You take a rest among butterflies and trivialities, until your courage returns and you dare to wander into the unknown again, perhaps with a rifle under your arm, if you have been clever enough to learn anything.

Quite simply, you write about something else.

I walk into the cubby hole beside my writing corner, the one I call my storeroom, and there in rows are the boxes. Newspaper cuttings, old manuscripts, photos, odd sentences jotted down in note books, ideas and snatches of dialogue scribbled down on receipts and paper napkins. I get the ladder and reach for the box right at the back. Find the stack of paper.

It is the incomplete beginning of a novel in which I had intended to change the name Veronica to something else. Angelica, for example, or Monica, just as James could have been Harry, and Langkawi relocated to the islands of Thailand. The

Andrews Sisters could just as easily have been the Harmony Sisters, or Trio Lescano. Essentially, it was an attempt to atone for what happened by being almost, but not quite, truthful.

But it never was a book. My plan to give the events some kind of higher meaning by putting them into words dwindled to miserable writing shifts where dry and lifeless sentences only made what had happened even more tragic. The only sensible part of the process was when I threw the whole lot into the bin. Not a single letter survived the purge. Apart from the first few pages.

And I hope you know in your heart of hearts that I never meant to cause you any harm. That is what I have just written to my former best friend. But I don't know if it's true. It seems more like wishful thinking. Sometimes I wonder what they are good for, those longings that are too far removed from reality to do any good. The only thing I know is that as the years pass I can't reinterpret my way out of grief, blame or anger. And also that acceptance is all I have been able to hope for.

So far.

Chapter Three 2004

The day it all started I was grappling with a manuscript when my phone rang. I had forgotten to switch it off and shouldn't have allowed it to intrude on my writing, but the display showed the intruder was Veronica. Any excuse for a laugh, I thought, and fell for the temptation.

But there was no cheerful 'hi' or 'hello' or 'guess what's happened'. Instead I heard Veronica's weirdly strangled voice saying the inconceivable: that she had found her aunt Klara dead in bed. That she had travelled to Uppsala to meet her for lunch and no-one had answered when she rang the bell.

Eventually she let herself in with the spare key Klara had given her only a few weeks before. She went in and found Klara in the bedroom. Peaceful, almost smiling. But cold.

At that point Veronica's voice cracked and she began crying hysterically. I managed to stay calm enough to find out that she had phoned for an ambulance,

and whoever else you have to phone in such circumstances. Between sobs she said she was on her way back to Stockholm.

Klara. Veronica's rock. The person she could depend on most in life, because her father vanished from the scene when Veronica was born, or maybe even before that, while her mother had a full-time job obsessing over her own life and mental state.

When Veronica was young, she and her mother had moved from one unsuitable place to the next, but after she started school such an itinerant lifestyle became unsustainable. Instead, Klara had looked after her niece for long periods of time, and she always gave the impression of being willing to do so. She lived alone, after all, with no family of her own, and my mother used to say how fortunate Klara was to have a child in the house, even if it wasn't her own.

Veronica must have missed her mother occasionally, I'm sure, but as the years went by it seemed their relationship worked better the further apart they lived. Mum, you're incorrigible, I once heard Veronica say almost affectionately on the phone, after her mother had disappeared to Paris for the weekend with a married man.

Klara, on the other hand, didn't seem to bother with romances. She taught French, German and English, had shelves filled with books, was good at knitting and painting water colours, and went abroad to exactly the same places for exactly the same five weeks every year. The rest of the time she lived a fairly routine and quiet life in Uppsala with Veronica, who grew up with someone who was only too happy to take on the role of single mother.

Klara. She was a rock and a safe haven for me, too, during my sometimes stormy childhood and teenage years.

I dropped everything and met Veronica at the station. Made sure she got home, tried to get some food into her and stayed the night. Held her every time she woke up and howled, which was practically every hour. Stroked her hair and made comforting warm milk with honey, instinctively aware that she must eat and sleep to get through the coming days.

As the hands of the alarm clock glowed phosphorescently, I remembered the nights when I was young and stayed over with Veronica and Klara, and would wake up in the night with a sore throat or feeling nervous about a test. Klara either got

out of bed the minute I woke up, or I would push open her door a crack and whisper her name.

Curtains fluttering in the draught from the open door, the cool night air filling the room. Klara's gentle breathing, the way she quickly pulled back the duvet, slipped her dressing gown over her nightdress, and went with me to the kitchen.

There we would sit, draining our cups and chatting, feeling a sense of trust that was hard to describe, but very tangible. Often laughing about something that wasn't especially funny. Then she would tuck me into bed again and I would go straight back to sleep almost every time.

In our house Dad needed his night's sleep, and was furious if he was woken up unnecessarily. If only I could give you a shot of something, he said once, when I dared to tiptoe into my parents' bedroom after a nightmare. Quite funny, I suppose, but not at that precise moment.

Through that endlessly long night I listened to Veronica's anxious breathing and thought about all the times we had eaten dinner together, the three of us, after Klara had phoned my parents and convinced them it was all right for me to stay. She never appeared to worry about what or how I ate, but instead used to ask me about my day, about school or about the fickleness of life in general.

The feeling that what I had to say was important and worth a response gave me the courage to open up and talk about my doubts and fears. She never stood up in the middle of a sentence or flicked through a newspaper while I was speaking, neither did she get angry when I spilled my drink on the tablecloth. She was quite simply available. Willing to be a fellow human being with no hidden agenda about feeling good, or even better, than other people.

She would offer words of wisdom I didn't really understand but gave me comfort anyway. Such as when she said theatrically: 'You have to do something while you're waiting to die', or how 'it was time to spend time alone with your soul.' Another favourite was that 'you learn from your mistakes, as the hedgehog said when he climbed off the scrubbing brush'. Veronica and I used to say that to each other and Klara would shout: 'Precisely!' She was a good story-teller, animated and funny, and I have often made use of her family stories or dramatic expressions in my books, to flesh out a character.

Oh, how I adored her irreverent sense of humour.

Around 4 a.m. Veronica woke up again. Eventually her tears turned into piercing wails, and in between she managed to say that she hadn't even been able to say goodbye, hadn't been able to have a last conversation to tell Klara how much she loved her.

'She knew that, I promise you.'

'At school ... and Jonte, a new baby in the house...'

'You'll manage. I'll help you.'

'Her apartment without her...oh, Marieke...'

Yes, Klara's apartment. Where I always wanted to go to and stay for as long as I could, because in that place was peace and love and a solution to everything, and a spare toothbrush just for me.

'...that day we went to the zoo at Skansen and were so annoyed because not one single *bloody* animal wanted to crawl out of its hole? But I guess...'

The shadow and echo of our childhood, our shared memories. I wanted to say that Klara was almost, no, *as* important for me as she had been for Veronica. But that night, or indeed during the time that followed, there was scarcely any space to even think that thought.

It was Veronica's grief that both she and I had to deal with; Veronica's life that had to be shored up, quite apart from the fact that it was Veronica's responsibility to sort out everything after Klara's death. I was on the phone for hours, took over conversations with various officials and institutions, and I continued to make sure Veronica didn't go under, that she ate and slept and washed her hair.

One afternoon, when I was sitting in a café, I saw a woman who looked like Klara standing at the counter buying bread. The realisation that I would never again see her toss a scarf round her shoulders, or run her hand across the back of her neck to pull her hair free, made my stomach lurch. That stab of grief that comes when you least expect it. Why can nothing ever stay the same? I know we humans are born to struggle, but couldn't we at least have a few safe stepping stones along the way, to stop us slipping on our treacherous belief in permanence?

Then came the funeral.