



The Enchanted Bookshop

By Barbara Hinske, copyright 2014

Once Upon a Time...

Sven turned the envelope over in his hands and examined the penmanship—jagged and labored by age and infirmity—but still familiar. The last thing he’d expected was a letter from his grandfather, now dead for more than six months. It had taken that long for the letter to catch up with him in Moldova, and for him to come home.

He studied the gravestone and the dates that bracketed his grandfather’s long life. It seemed fitting to open the letter here.

Sven withdrew a sheet of lined paper, covered in his grandfather’s sloping cursive. A long silver key and a map fell onto the grave as he unfolded the letter. He left them where they lay as his eyes swept the page. A lump rose in his throat as he read:

“My dearest grandson,

The happiest days of my life were when you were a little boy and visited me at my bookshop, making forts out of the books and playing shopkeeper. Your college years separated us, as you traveled the world, trying to find your place in it. I don’t think you succeeded.

I always wanted to help you, and I believe that I can still do that—even though this cruel disease has robbed me of the chance to do it in person. Perhaps it’s better this way. That’s why I’ve left you this key. You remember the magic books, don’t you?”



Sven raked his fingers through his hair and stooped to pick up the key and map. A shaky hand had drawn a circle around an intersection in the older part of the city. He turned his attention back to the letter.

“This key opens a storage locker that houses all of the inventory that was too precious to part with when I closed my shop. I always thought that these big-box bookstores wouldn’t last and I’d re-open my store. I was right; most of them have gone out of business—but it soon became apparent that I wouldn’t be well enough to do so.

The address of the storage locker is on the back of the map. Inside are my collection of rare books, my personal library, and the remaining magic books.”

Sven coughed and cleared his throat. He remembered that his grandfather believed in magic books. And that Sven’s parents made fun of him for his belief. Now that he was an adult and had spent time in a world where he found no trace of magic, he had to agree with them.

He turned the letter over and continued reading:

“I feel certain that one of these books is your magic book. If you take the time to look for it, you’ll find it will hold the key to your happy future. Set aside any cynicism and doubt, and open your mind to possibility.

Love,

Gramps”

He carefully folded the letter and replaced it, the key, and the map in the envelope. He’d be able to sell the rare books online and raise some much-needed cash. His grandfather’s personal collection might be interesting to thumb through; he’d like to know where his grandfather’s unshakeable optimism came from. But believe in magic books that



attracted the people who needed to read them? He couldn't buy into that.

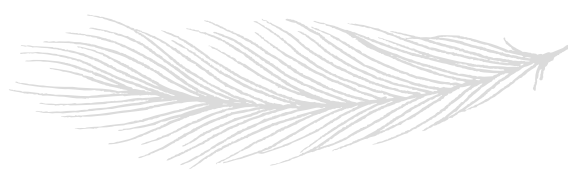
Sven was waiting the next morning when the clerk arrived to open the gates at the storage facility. He wanted to get his hands on the rare books, turn them into cash, dispose of the rest, and get out of there. He didn't know where he would go. Not back to Europe. She was forever gone to him; he had to give up.

He jiggled the key in the lock and, just as he was about to give up and summon the clerk for assistance, the door gave way, opening into a dimly-lit room stacked, floor-to-ceiling, with boxes numbered in his grandfather's neat hand. *Before the disease robbed him of the ability to hold a pen*, Sven thought.

A clipboard hung on a nail inside the door, holding an inventory of the boxes. Sven paged through the sheets, trying to determine which boxes contained the rare books. He was scanning the entries labeled "Magic Books" when his eyes stopped at a long list of names scribbled in the margin. His name was on the list.

Sven slowly lowered the clipboard and leaned back against a stack of boxes. As a child, he'd believed in the magic books. He'd been in the bookstore a few times when someone had found their book. Or, as his grandfather liked to say, the book found them.

The process was always the same—whether the person was old or young, male or female, rich or poor. Their common denominator was a palpable sense of despair. They wandered into the store—sometimes just to get out of the rain or cold—and browsed the shelves. His grandfather greeted them and offered suggestions. When he sensed that a patron was one of "the ones," he'd kindly tell them that one of the books was searching for them, and that it would bring them great joy. When asked how they'd know which was their special book, his



grandfather's answer was always the same: *It has your name, written in the front.*

Now that he was grown up, Sven assumed that his grandfather had somehow managed to slip the person's name into the book in the same fashion as he'd been able to pull a quarter from behind Sven's ear. His grandfather had been a talented amateur magician.

His grandfather never accepted payment for one of the magic books, but always gave them away. Sven surmised this had been a ruse—a marketing ploy—designed to play up the name; The Enchanted Bookshop.

He turned and began sorting through the stacks of boxes, searching for the magic books. He needed to find out if they already had names in them and if one bore his name.

Sven checked the clipboard. The notation indicated that the box he was holding contained magic books. He pulled the small Swiss army knife from his pocket and cut through the layers of tape. He hesitated as he looked at the books stacked in the box. He wasn't sure what he hoped to find.

Sven sighed and picked the first book off the top—a hardcover copy of *Anne of Green Gables*. The book underneath was *The Shell Seekers*, and beneath that was *Winds of War*. He began unloading the box, removing fiction and nonfiction; well-known classics and books he'd never heard of. Why had his grandfather selected these as "magic"?

When the box was empty, he knew it was time. Sven picked up a copy of *A Long Way from Chicago* and opened the front cover. He was greeted with the imprint of the title and the publisher, and nothing more. No name was written in the book.



Sven opened the cover on the next book in the stack. Again, no name had been written inside. He quickly worked through the rest of the stack, with the same result.

Maybe he'd been wrong about this box; maybe it wasn't one that was supposed to contain magic books. There was certainly nothing remarkable—to his eye—about the books he'd uncovered.

Sven consulted the clipboard and examined another box noted as containing magic books. No names were written in any of the books. *What game had his grandfather been playing?*

Sven roughly shoved the boxes of magic books aside. *He didn't have time for this nonsense.* He needed to get his hands on the rare books, get them sold, and get out of town. He'd donate the rest.

Sven whistled as he loaded ten boxes of rare books into the trunk of his rental car. One was a beautiful leather volume, bearing a date of 1734, written in Latin. Others were signed first editions of classics from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He had his hands on a small fortune.

Sven pulled out of the driveway to the storage locker but found his route back to the highway and the economy hotel where he was staying blocked by a multiple-car accident. The police officer waved the traffic onto a residential street.

Sven inched along with the other detoured cars. The street was canopied with enormous old trees, now bare, whose roots caused the sidewalks to undulate. The homes were small but well-maintained. Now-empty window boxes gave the promise of a charming spring.

Sven noticed a small "Room for Rent" sign in the window of a neat bungalow. He hesitated, then pulled to the curb two doors down. It would take time to properly investigate the value of the books in the trunk; he really should stay here a while. He was already tired of his



hotel, and he couldn't afford to stay there for an extended period, anyway.

Sven got out of the car and approached the house.

Mrs. Harrison peered over her half-moon spectacles at the anxious young man sitting across from her at her kitchen table. She didn't normally rent to men—especially young ones. They were often messy and noisy, and frequently had questionable friends. Her daughter constantly harped at her about the danger of taking in boarders. But there was something compelling about this one.

“Do you take cream or sugar?” she asked.

“No, thank you. This is perfect. And the room is exactly what I'm looking for. I only plan to stay for a month; two at the most.”

“What brings you here?”

“My grandfather passed away and left a storage locker full of books. I need to dispose of them.”

She arched a brow as she stirred her tea. “Surely that wouldn't take a month.”

“My grandfather owned a bookstore. These books are his remaining inventory when he was forced out of business by a chain store. There's a large collection of rare books that I need to sell.”

She looked at him intently. “Where was his store?”

“Not far from here, actually. The Enchanted Bookshop. Did you know it?”

“Indeed I did,” she said. “Your grandfather once gave me a magic book.”



Sven stopped, his cup halfway to his mouth, and returned the cup to its saucer. “So you know the story about the magic books?”

“It’s not a story, my dear,” she said, rising and going to a bookshelf in the next room. She returned and handed him a well-worn copy of *The Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency*. He flipped the cover open and stared at the name in the top right-hand corner: Sheila Harrison. She waited until he brought his eyes to meet hers.

“Will you tell me what happened?”

Mrs. Harrison sat down. “My husband was in the hospital after open heart surgery. His spirits were low and he wasn’t cooperating with the nurses; wasn’t going to physical therapy. I was constantly trying to encourage him, but it only made him angry. We did nothing but fight whenever we were together. I was at my wits end. I felt like I’d lost him and our marriage. The day I walked into The Enchanted Bookshop, I was frightened and miserable; desperate to find something that would take both of us away from our harsh reality and let us enjoy each other again.”

Sven nodded, “go on.”

“I picked up a couple of crossword puzzle books and headed to the register. They kept me busy while I sat for hours in doctors’ waiting rooms. Your grandfather rang them up and as he handed my bag to me our hands touched and the most peculiar look came over his face. I’ll never forget it. He paused, then told me that one of the books in the store would bring my husband back to me. I hadn’t said a word about my husband. He told me the book would have my name written inside the front cover.”

“And you looked for this book? You didn’t think he was odd?”



Mrs. Harrison laughed. “I almost turned and ran out of the shop. But I wanted to believe that he was right. So I decided to wander around the store for a few minutes to see what I could find. I’d never been a fiction reader, but I wandered over to the mystery section and picked up this book,” she said, pointing to the volume Sven was holding. “It was lying on its side, perilously close to falling off the shelf. I intended to put it securely back into its place, but the cover fell open. And there was my name.”

“What did you do with it?” Sven asked.

“I took it up to the register, but your grandfather wouldn’t let me pay. He said he’d never seen anyone find their book so fast. He figured my husband and I must have needed it very badly.”

Mrs. Harrison hugged the book to her chest. “I took it to the hospital with me and read it to my husband. He loved it, and it gave us both something to lift our spirits, if only for a little while.” She sighed as she laid the book on the table. “I read the whole series aloud, and my husband began to refer to them as our ‘book dates.’ We carried on like that until he died. He even got one of the nurses to buy a bouquet of flowers that he gave me before one of our ‘dates.’ He said it was like when we were courting.” Her voice caught.

Sven leaned toward her. “Thank you for telling me this and showing me your book. I was in the shop a couple of times when it happened, but recently I’ve been thinking I must have imagined it.”

Mrs. Harrison brought her head up sharply. “You’ve inherited a collection of magic books, too, haven’t you?”

Sven held her gaze and nodded slowly. “His inventory contains fourteen boxes marked ‘magic books’. But I’m not so sure.”



“The only way to find out is to reopen the shop and give people the chance to find them. You can’t just chuck them into the donation bin,” she said indignantly.

Sven began to shake his head. “I don’t know...”

Mrs. Harrison interrupted him. “That book changed my life and restored my loving husband to me for the remaining months of his life. I wouldn’t have missed that for the world.” She now assumed a businesslike demeanor, “You also need somewhere to sell the rare books.”

“I can offer them online. My grandfather said that one of the magic books is for me, but I opened every book in all fourteen boxes and none of them contained my name.”

“I know there are magic books—your hand is resting on mine. It’s your destiny to reopen The Enchanted Bookshop.”

Sven settled into the modest room in Mrs. Harrison’s home that was now his. The light from the north-facing window was good and the hand-stitched quilt on the bed was inviting and comforting. The other pieces of furniture in the room were a small chest of drawers that doubled as a nightstand, a student desk, and a straight-backed chair.

Sven set his laptop on the desk and reached into his suitcase for the final item—the slim packet of emails from *her*. He’d met Kiara through his studies at the University of Stockholm. She worked in the library of Uppsala University and he’d corresponded with her about materials in Uppsala’s collection. They’d struck up a professional relationship that deepened over the months into respect, affection, and—for him—love. He opened her final email where she’d accepted his invitation to meet face-to-face, for the first time. She would be waiting for him at the library entrance the following Tuesday at noon.



Sven travelled to Uppsala and waited at the entrance for over an hour, his excitement turning to sour disappointment as the minutes ticked by. He'd gone inside to inquire about her, only to be told she'd left for lunch shortly before noon. As far as he knew, she'd never returned to the University.

Sven slung the emails into the wastebasket by his bed. Whatever had happened to her, he would never find out. He didn't even know her last name. Searching for a girl named "Kiara" in Sweden would be an impossible task. He'd finished his thesis, packed up his few possessions, and set out to explore lesser-known haunts in Europe with a group of friends. They were in Moldova when the letter from his grandfather's attorney caught up with him.

His plan was to sell the rare books to raise some much-needed cash and get out of town. He certainly didn't want to start over here. He opened his laptop and searched "rare book values." He was reaching for one of the boxes of rare books when his eyes fell on the container of his grandfather's personal books; the ones his grandfather always kept by his side.

Sven hesitated, then pulled the box onto his bed and carefully slit the tape holding it shut. Inside were a dozen books, tabbed and underlined and held together by rubber bands where the bindings were falling apart. He sat on the bed and carefully began a journey that would last all night—a journey to his grandfather's surprising past.

Sven knew his grandfather had served in the European theater in WWII. What he didn't know—and what an aging parcel of letters proved—was that his grandfather had fallen deeply in love with a beautiful Swedish woman living in Paris. The letters told of a brief but passionate affair and a commitment to meet on a certain date and time. From there, the story stopped. Sven's eyes burned and his throat felt tight. His

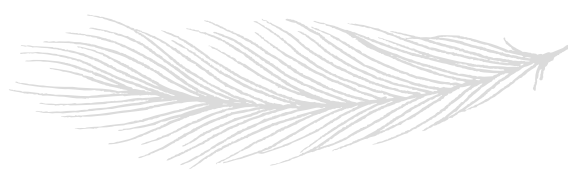


grandfather had never told anyone about this, he was sure of it. And now he was living the same experience.

Sven continued to explore the contents of the box, pausing to read highlighted passages and marginal notes his grandfather had made in *The Power of Positive Thinking* and *The Power of Now*. His grandfather's philosophy of life was clear: help others and you'll help yourself. He rubbed his hand over his eyes and looked at the bedside clock: it was three o'clock in the morning. He was replacing the last item into the box—a copy of a phone book for Uppsala, Sweden, from 1938—when the front cover fell open and there, in the upper right-hand corner, was his name.

Sven's hands shook as he sank back against the headboard and placed the Uppsala phone book on the bed in front of him. He double-checked—his name was definitely written inside the front cover. He turned the first page and began working his way slowly through the book, seeking clues as to why this book should be *his* magic book. He had loved a woman in Uppsala, but how could a seventy-five-year-old phone book help him now?

Sven stopped just past the halfway point in the book. Circled in ink was the name “Ivarsson, Alban,” with an address and phone number. Inside an envelope taped to the center of the page were a lock of blond hair and a gold locket. He brought the locket to the light of his bedside lamp and carefully released the latch. It opened and he found himself looking at a photo of his grandfather as a jaunty young Army captain on one side of the locket and a beautiful young woman with blond hair on the other side.



Sven groaned and turned toward the door to his room. “Are you all right, dear?” he heard Mrs. Harrison ask. “It’s past noon.”

“Yes. Thank you. I stayed up all night, sorting these boxes,” he stated, stepping into his jeans and opening his door.

“Sorry to wake you. It’s just that I was getting worried.”

“I’m glad you did. I have a letter I need to mail.”

“I can put it out for the mailman, if you’d like.”

“No. It’s going to Sweden. I need to take it to the post office.”

Mrs. Harrison regarded him intently. “You’ve found your magic book, haven’t you?”

Sven grinned. “As a matter of fact, I have. And I have no idea what it means.” Mrs. Harrison nodded. “But I slept well for the first time in months. And I’m going to lease a space for a bookshop as soon as I mail my letter.”

Sven re-opened The Enchanted Bookshop in a corner location just three blocks from the original store and directly across from the site of the now-defunct big box store that put his grandfather out of business. When he signed the lease, Sven was sure his grandfather would have approved.

He’d resisted Mrs. Harrison’s suggestions for a splashy grand opening, but he appreciated that she sent him to the store with freshly baked cookies every day. Business was picking up, and some days the only thing he had to eat was one of her cookies, snatched between customers.

The rare book collection turned out to be extremely valuable and a few early sales produced enough revenue to pay his rent for a year. At the



end of his third week in business, a young girl entered his shop and he knew she would find a magic book.

Anna Morris was a slight, shy ten-year-old girl with crooked teeth and thick glasses. She ducked into the shop one day after school. Sven was surprised that she was alone—it was unusual to find children this age unaccompanied by an adult.

“How may I help you?” Sven asked and the girl jumped, startled by his voice.

She turned in his direction. “I’m just waiting for the bus to come and pick up the others,” she said, pointing out the window to the passel of children jostling and joking at the bus stop.

“Aren’t you supposed to get on that bus?” he asked.

“I’d rather walk home,” she said, and they both knew she was lying.

Sven shook his head in understanding; he’d been small for his age and had been a favorite target of the school bullies. “You’re welcome here anytime. There’s homemade cookies on the counter, if you’re hungry,” he said. “Why don’t you poke around in our books? I think you might find something that will help you.”

“I don’t have any money,” the girl replied softly.

“I’ll tell you what—pick out a book and it’s on the house. We give away a book every week to one lucky customer. You’re the lucky customer this week.”

The girl smiled and set off on her search.

“Just let me look at your book before you leave the store,” Sven called.

Fifteen minutes later, the girl approached the register, book in hand. “*Anne of Green Gables*,” he said. “Good choice. She had a rough start in



life, but used her wit and her will to survive and triumph.” He opened the front cover. “Anna Morris?” he asked, and the girl nodded.

A chill traveled along Sven’s spine. He ushered Anna Morris to the door and almost missed the letter, bearing a Swedish postmark, that had fallen out of the mail slot onto the floor.

Sven brought the letter to the register and ripped it open. He was extracting the contents when the door to his shop opened and a woman herded two middle-school-aged boys into the shop. He clamped down on his growing impatience as he helped the boys select books from the school’s reading list.

He’d just handed the woman her receipt when another patron entered the shop. He knew he should be grateful for the business, but he was itching to get back to the letter from Sweden. He was finally able to turn the “Open” sign to “Closed” twenty minutes past his usual quitting time and hurry back to the drawer where he’d hastily stashed the letter.

He withdrew an unadorned piece of linen stationery and read the note in the neat, feminine hand.

“Dear Sven,

Thank you for your kind letter. The photo of the locket that you sent looks like a locket that my maternal grandmother received on her twenty-first birthday from her mother. We have a portrait of her wearing the locket. She was a blond and looks very much like the woman in the locket. We know that she was in love with an American soldier. Sadly, she was killed in an air raid at the end of the war.

It meant a lot to my mother and me to know that your grandfather kept these keepsakes all of these years. He must have loved her very much. Our condolences on your recent loss.



Yours sincerely,

Kiara Ivarsson

Sven's heart leapt to his throat. Could it be *his Kiara*? Not likely, he told himself; Kiara was a common name in Sweden. But the magic book—his magic book—led him to this Kiara. It had to be her.

Sven wrote an immediate reply, asking if she once worked at the library at Uppsala University, and if she had, did she remember a lengthy email correspondence with a man from the University of Stockholm? He was that man, and he always wondered why she didn't show up to meet him as they'd planned. He reread what he'd written, scribbled his email address in the corner, sealed the envelope, and took it to the post office before he lost his nerve.

He spent the next two weeks in protracted negotiations with a rare book collector, but the distraction provided scant relief from his anxiety to receive a reply. Whatever the outcome, Sven needed an answer. On the night of the fifteenth day, his patience was rewarded. He checked his email one last time before turning out the light and found her message waiting.

"My dearest Sven,

When I got your letter about the locket, I'd hoped it was from 'my' Sven. My mother told me I was being silly, but I prayed it was you. I thought you had abandoned me! My mother was grievously injured in an auto accident on the day we were to meet. The hospital called me at eleven o'clock. I wrote a note to tell you why I couldn't meet you and where you could contact me, and gave it to my co-worker. She promised she would find you and hand you the note. I was away from my job for weeks, caring for my mother. I asked the woman and she said she delivered the note to you. When I never heard from you, I didn't know



what to think. I emailed you when I went back to work, but by that time, you had left the University and my emails came back undelivered. I was so brokenhearted, thinking I'd lost you forever.

I still care for you, Sven, and would like to begin again. If you feel the same, please contact me. Email is fine, and here is my phone number, too...."

Sven dialed the number and held his breath. She answered on the first ring, and all was right with his world.

THE END