

# Mormor's Piano

By Amy S. Brown

## Chapter One

I prayed I wouldn't have a funny finger day. Not today. I stretched my hands, flexed them back and forth. Dancing fingers—that's what I needed, tiny ballerinas. In four hours I would be back at school, performing my first piano solo at the middle school spring concert. I clicked my fingernails against the window as the bus pulled away. Mozart's Sonata in C Major filled my head, drowning out everything else.

"Will you stop doing that?" My best friend Allison gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're driving me crazy!"

"Doing what?" I asked, turning away from the window.

She looked at me, rolled her eyes. "You know. That thing you do. That weird noise you make, sort of humming but not. Tapping

your nails on the window. I mean, where in the universe is Ellen?  
Which planet?"

"Planet Nowhere," I almost said, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn't want Allison to accuse me of being cranky. The truth was, I wasn't cranky. I was nervous. I had never played in front of an audience before. I hated doing anything in front of a group. The very idea of it made my hands sweat and my heart pound. I had stage fright even when I wasn't on a stage. So how on earth would I manage to get through tonight? I tucked my hands into my sweatshirt pockets, clamped my lips shut. "Just thinking," I told her.

"Well, if you're not going to talk to me, can you think more quietly? I'm trying to read." She had *Vogue* spread across her lap, the perfume from the sample cards making my nose itch. I felt a sneeze coming on. Allison spent hours reading those magazines, committing celebrity fashion trends to memory, underlining makeup advice. She even rubbed those disgusting perfumes on her wrists. I didn't get it. I could care less about those things. Allison and I were so different it was amazing we were friends at all, let alone best friends. I shook my

head, tried to wake myself up. No use. Daydreaming was the sort of thing I always did on the bus ride home.

I turned back to the window. The high-rise office buildings, the shopping malls and the pizzerias and small convenience stores passed by in a blur; I barely saw them anymore, they were so familiar. The bus turned into the first neighborhood of small two-story ranch houses, Marsh Meadow, where Allison lived. (This was one of our private jokes, because there was no marsh or meadow for miles). Like most afternoons after school, I was going to her house to practice the piano.

We didn't have a piano at home. Not anymore. Not since Mom died. My mother was a great pianist—that's what her older sister, my Aunt Celia, told me once. She said Mom played with a small chamber orchestra, but she always wanted to travel to places like Salzburg and Vienna and play at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Now that I was getting older, almost thirteen, I looked even harder for traces of my mother. But instead I saw thin, brown hair falling flat like a curtain to my shoulders and my father's pea-green eyes, not the thick, black

wavy hair, full lips and brown saucer eyes of my Italian mother. The only part of me where I could see my mother was in my fingers.

“C’mon, we’re here.” Allison nudged me. I grabbed my backpack from the floor and followed her up the street to the faded blue-shingled house she shared with her father and older brother. Her parents had divorced when she was seven and now her mother lived in California with what Allison’s brother Michael called, in his typical sarcastic way, “her replacement family.” As soon as we walked in the door, I dropped my bag and went straight to the piano.

“Hey, how about a snack?” Allison asked. “I’m starving.”

“No time,” I said. In a half hour I had to head home and start making dinner for me and Dad. I spread out my music sheets, adjusted myself on the bench, and closed my eyes. The room filled with colors. When I played Mozart, it was that deep blue of twilight. Brahms was smoky gray and Chopin was pearly white, like falling snow.

Today, I almost felt my mother sitting beside me—her hand guiding mine, her nails like tiny seashells as she turned the sheets of music, the soft rise of her breath, the rich, deep sounds swirling

around us, shards of sunlight dancing off the walls. I am seven years old, my feet dangling off the piano bench, and I hear her say, “*Brava, Ellen! Bravissima!*”

When I came to the tricky part, I took a quick breath and for once, my fingers didn’t stumble over the keys in their hurry to reach the *allegro*. I heard those Italian words in my mother’s soft voice and her deep, throaty laugh. *Adagio* was meant to be played slowly, gracefully, and *andante* was somewhere in between—slow, but not too slow. *Allegro* was my favorite, even though my fingers had to move faster than my brain.

More than anything, I wanted my mother in the first row tonight. Instead, there would be no one there for me. Especially not my father. He didn’t know I played the piano. He couldn’t know. Not now. Maybe not ever.

And that was the biggest and hardest secret of all.

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I smelled it the minute I walked in the door. Tomato sauce.

Garlic bread. I couldn't remember the last time Dad was home this early from work—and the real shocker—that he'd decided to cook. He never made anything that didn't come out of a box that you stuck in the oven or the microwave. By the time I was nine, I had learned to make basic stuff like macaroni and cheese or spaghetti for the times when Dad worked late, which was most nights.

I walked into the kitchen and threw my backpack on a chair.  
“Yum...smells good. Are you actually *cooking*?”

Dad turned and grinned. “Thought I'd be chef tonight. This is spaghetti a la spur of the moment—in other words, whatever I found in the fridge.” He waved a wooden spoon in the air with a flourish. Tomato sauce dripped onto his white shirt. “Whoops,” he said, making more of a mess as he smeared the stains with a napkin.

I handed him an apron. The kitchen counter was covered with empty sauce jars and lids, the cutting board was practically falling off the edge, and bits of chopped onion were all over the floor. When Dad cooked, the mess never stayed in one place, and most of it ended up on him. He cooked the same way he did everything—with his mind on

a million other things. Sometimes I thought his brain was wired like the computer programs he designed, zigzagging in every possible direction.

Dad took the apron and turned around so I could tie it for him.

“Thanks. Better late than never.” He re-adjusted his glasses, which had a habit of sliding down his nose. “Hey, I thought I’d throw these in the pot. What do you think?” He held up a jar of sun-dried tomatoes—which I hate, and a can of black olives, the kind with a pit that are super sour—but he looked so pleased with himself I decided not to make a face.

“I know you’re the pasta queen around here.” He stirred the sauce a bit too vigorously, splattering red on the tile behind the stove. “But since I’m home early, I thought I’d give you a break.”

“Is Marie coming for dinner? Is this all for her?” I asked.

Marie was the Swedish woman Dad had been dating for the past six months. Her company owned the software firm where he worked and she was assigned to a project at Dad’s company, so she came to

New York on business every few weeks. This was the longest he had dated anyone in the five years since Mom died. The way he whistled around the house, took ages to choose a tie for their dates, made it obvious that he liked her a lot. But I figured it wouldn't last. One day soon the project would end and Marie would go back to Sweden. It would be Dad and me again, and that was okay. I was used to it. I was a specialist at getting used to things.

Dad looked at me and smiled. His hair was thinning on top, a little gray on the sides. He needed a haircut, a trim. I went over to the fridge and wrote "Dad. Haircut. Pronto" on the kitchen calendar to remind him.

"No, it's just the two of us tonight," he said. "I thought we could talk."

"About what?" I looked at him, curious. It wasn't like Dad to announce a "talk." I couldn't think of a single reason why I'd be in trouble. My last report card was five As and two Bs. No one else I knew helped out around the house as much as I did. And as far as my lying, I was very, very good at it. Dad didn't have a clue about what I



did at Allison's house every afternoon.

"You'll see," he said, and turned back to the stove.

It all sounded very mysterious but his weird sauce did smell good, and I was starving. I reached into the cupboard for two plates, glasses and silverware and laid them on the table. Dad brought out the steaming pot of sauce and a bowl of spaghetti. He took a huge portion, heaping the pasta onto his plate.

"Watch that belly, Dad," I said. "You don't want a beer belly."

"I don't drink beer," he said. "You know that."

"It doesn't matter. Everyone will think you do," I said, and moved the pasta bowl away from him. "You have to think of your health, Dad."

Allison said I was the worst worrier in the world. But you learn to play it safe when you have only one parent and he wasn't that good at taking care of himself. I kept a Worry List. I read once that if you write stuff down, you get more control over it and it doesn't haunt you as much. So far, it hadn't worked for me. I added about one worry a

day to the list. Allison warned me that I would get gray hair if I kept worrying like I did. But I couldn't help it. Someone had to do the worrying.

I reached for the serving spoon. "Wait," Dad said. "Let's have a toast." He held up his glass of wine. "To what?" I asked. We clicked our glasses together, three times for good luck, our own invention.

We'd started the tradition when I was eight, and I begged to have my juice in one of our ivy-trimmed glass wine goblets. We only used them for birthdays and special occasions. I sipped my milk, not sure why we were using the glasses tonight.

"Here's to you and me...and maybe some good surprises along the way," he answered.

Dad had a huge smile on his face, like the time he got promoted to manager, and we celebrated by going to Disney World in Florida. That was two years ago, the best summer vacation ever. We hadn't taken many trips; we couldn't afford it, Dad said, and anyway, there were plenty of great places in New York State. Camping was our

thing. I liked sleeping in a tent, telling ghost stories when the stars came out. But maybe we were finally going out West to California, or even Hawaii, which was at the top of my Dream Destination List.

“Tell me! Is it a trip? An extra special vacation?” “Sort of,” he said. “It does involve a trip somewhere.” “Where?” “Well...,” He cleared his throat, something he only did when he had a cold or he was nervous.

And he didn't have a cold. I picked up my napkin, folded it into tiny triangles. “There's a reason Marie didn't come for dinner tonight. I wanted to talk to you myself.” He held my gaze. “I know you like Marie. And she likes you, too.” he paused. “And I ...well, I love her and she loves me. So....” He stopped for a second.

*In love? My father?* He didn't use the “love” word—at least he didn't say it aloud. He wrote “Love, Dad” on my birthday cards, but that was about it. What did he mean, he was “in love?” But before I could begin to process this bit of information, he dropped the next bomb.

“I asked Marie to marry me. And she said yes.”

I put down my fork, my stomach twisting. Dad’s smile was strained. He wanted my approval, my blessing.

*Marie.* Last time she was at our house, I secretly peeked at her when she was in the bathroom, putting on her makeup. She sprayed perfume on the inside of her arms and behind her ears. She outlined her lips with a pencil and made a big O with her mouth as she applied mascara in perfect, even strokes. There were so many things I didn’t know about being a woman, stuff I needed to learn. Lately, I had wondered if something was wrong with me, because I didn’t have my period yet. And how did you know if a boy really liked you?

Before Marie, Dad had dated exactly two women. The first one, when I was nine, was with a woman from his office. She murmured, “You poor, poor thing,” when she met me and patted me on the head. That only lasted one date. The second one, a year ago, was a disaster. At least that’s how Dad described it when he got home.

“Maybe I should give up,” he had told me. He didn’t say it, but he didn’t have to. I know he was comparing those women to Mom and

that they would never measure up.

With Marie, it was different. Not only did Dad go out with her for a second, then a third time, but on the fourth date he brought her home for dinner to meet me. Still, I hadn't let myself think about Marie as a potential stepmother because I didn't expect her to stick around. And now...now I had to think about her in a whole new way.

“That’s....great, Dad. I’m happy for you,” I said, swallowing. “I’m glad to hear that,” he said. “Because there’s more to tell you.”

“More?” It came out like a croak.

“What do you think about moving to Sweden? After school is out.” His smile was a little crooked this time.

“Sweden! But why...why can’t Marie live here?” It was the middle of May. School ended in less than three weeks. I pushed my plate away. I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“Marie has been working for her company for years. She was

recently promoted to vice president, something she's worked really hard for. I didn't feel I could ask her to move. Computer programmers can find work anywhere." He smiled. "And I thought it could be a real adventure for us."

Marrying Marie was one thing. But to move to Sweden!

I thought about Allison, about this house I'd always lived in, the school I'd gone to since the first grade, where I knew everyone and everyone knew me. I thought about the tree in the backyard with the swing Dad put up for me, where I did my best thinking.

And I thought about my mother's grave at Brooklawn Cemetery, two miles away, close enough to bike to. The place I visited alone, some Saturdays, when Dad was working.

I didn't want to leave any of it. This was home.

"Do I get a vote or is it already decided?" I asked, my voice shaking. Thoughts tumbled around in my head. *How could he decide all this without even talking to me? Don't I count?*

"I'm sorry. We had to make a decision quickly. Marie's

company is expecting her back at work, and she wanted us to be with her, and settled, before then.” Dad smiled uncertainly. “I know this is a lot to take in. But think how exciting it will be! We always wanted to take a really big trip, didn’t we? Travel somewhere far away?”

This wasn’t just a trip. We might not come back. Ever. I swallowed. I needed time to think. There was a limit to what a person could get used to, even someone as adaptable as me.

But Dad seemed to think the discussion was over. He got up and started clearing the plates. “Get your jacket. We’re going out to celebrate at Bennigans, any dessert you want. Marie is going to meet us there. She can’t wait to see you.”

He turned to me and smiled. “She actually wanted to be here when I told you, but I wanted to tell you myself first.”

“Tonight?” I asked. I suddenly remembered the concert at school, my solo. “Tonight is the spring concert at school. Allison is playing in the band. I told her I’d be there.” But even as I said it, I knew—just knew—it wasn’t going to happen.

“Couldn’t you skip it? Allison will understand. This is important. Marie is expecting us,” he said.

I looked at Dad, his smile about to split his face. He was happy. And I could ruin it. I could ruin everything.

I took a deep breath. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll go get my sweater.”

“Great. I’ll call Marie to say we’re on our way.” He gave my arm a squeeze. “Ellen, I’m so relieved you’re okay with this. I was little afraid about telling you. But you know you’ll always be my best girl, right?”

As we got into the car, I saw the empty seat at the piano, Mrs. Gilbert, the music teacher, calling my name. No one would be there to answer. No one at all.