

The Wounded Pianist

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 mate, as he put it.

He was as 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 that you do come home sometimes, even if you don't tell me.

There is so much I would like to say and there is so much I would like to know. How you are and what your life is like. After all, I know so little - nothing, really. I want things to be the same as usual. I miss that, which is stupid because things can never be the same as they were once. 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 sitting down, leaning against a building, and he called out to me. He was wearing work overalls with a yellow waistcoat on top. Heavy boots on his feet. Pointed nose, thin lips. Drooping eyelids.

I stopped walking and I must have looked completely bewildered because he repeated what he had said. *Is this the Old Town?* I answered in English, telling him yes, this was the Old Town, and then I started gabbling on about the buildings around us. At the same time I was trying to get a better look at him to see if he

could indeed 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. Instantly I knew he wasn't James but just a lonely construction worker.

Then it came over me again. Suddenly. Terrifyingly.

It's been ten years since we last saw each other. Eight years, maybe, 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 Brända Tomten Square in the Old Town, where I sell new and second hand books. I bought it shortly after Kalle and I got divorced. The contact with my customers and the chance to spend my time doing something that feels meaningful makes it worth the effort, and Kalle and I have managed to remain good friends.

Apart from that I am still an author but I no longer write my crime novels. It works out pretty well, considering. I've met a man and we've been together for a few years. He's a vicar who likes 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 doesn't know anything, either. No-one knows except you and me. Today I realised that I was never going to get away from 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 the people 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 others, and those who try to be honest even when it's almost impossible. Those who believe that people are either good or evil, and who don't understand that everyone can be a bit of both and that most people are doing the best they can.

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

I know now that I have to write about everything to stop it from being lost. Because if I don't do that, Veronica, then it might mean there was no point in what happened. No point to me either. Absolutely none at all. That feeling scares

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

I'd be so glad if you could reply. It's been such a long time. And I hope in your heart of hearts you know that I never meant you any harm.

Marieke

Chapter Two

2014

I stare at the email I've 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's getting dark. Slate-grey clouds with bellies full of cold chase each other across the sky. The last customer has left. I have locked up and switched off the lights.

But I haven't gone home, haven't walked those few steps between my bookshop and my apartment. I know already that I'm not going to get a wink of sleep until I find out that Robin is unhurt. Robin, my son, who is training to be a Norrland ranger with the Army Battalion 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 both radio and TV were saying that a snow storm was battering 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 old autumn leaves are fluttering about in the twilight like some poor imitation of what is happening up in the fells. In the alleyways of the Old Town the storm is reduced to silent eddies 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 involved in right now, and the anxiety beats inside me and turns me cold. Snow whipped by the wind into barbs of ice, drifts that block the way. Please just let them keep together and search in a group so that no-one else goes missing.

I ran from that unknown man who I thought was someone I had always hoped to see again. I got to the bookshop and slammed the door shut behind me. Made some tea. Briefly I tried to pretend that it hadn't happened and I sat down with the

manuscript I am currently working on, but the sentences I came up with were distorted and erratic. I couldn't decide which were best, the normal ones from yesterday or these untamed ones - and where they had come from? I hardly knew. Eventually I just 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 pounced like howling wolves. Any attempt to breathe calmly, look at my customer and say something pleasant was useless. James was blocking the way to everything. So was Veronica. The Veronica I have worked so hard to lock up in a little cavity inside me, behind a door that stays 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 cup of tea or a glass of wine. Veronica on the beach or at a restaurant in San Francisco. In a hotel bar.

All that day my eyes were drawn to the gilded pendulum clock which I brought from my flat to the book shop a few years ago, because although there's something comforting about the ticking during daylight, on sleepless nights at home the sound filled me with such melancholy that it finally became unbearable.

Ten years. Ten years with the memories shut up in that sealed cavity. A failed attempt to write about what happened, about that particular story. 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 divides and you can set out on another track. You rest among butterflies and frivolous things 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.

You write about something else. It's that simple.

I walk into the cubby hole beside my writing corner, the one I call my storeroom, and there are the boxes, lined up. Newspaper cuttings, old manuscripts, photos, single sentences 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. And find the document.

It is the unfinished 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 have easily been the Harmony Sisters, or Trio Lescano. Essentially it was an attempt to come to terms with what had happened by being almost but not quite truthful.

But there never was a book. My plan to give the events some kind of higher meaning by putting them into words withered into miserable hours spent in front of the computer, where dry and lifeless sentences only served to make what 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 in your heart of hearts you know that I never meant you any harm.

That is what I have just written to my former best friend. But I don't know if that's right. It seems more like wishful thinking. Sometimes I wonder what they are good for, those desires that are so far from reality. The only thing I know is that as the years pass I can't interpret my way out of grief, blame or anger. Acceptance is all I have been able to hope for.

So far.

Chapter Three

2004

The day it all started I was wrestling with a manuscript when the phone rang. I had forgotten to switch it off and shouldn't have allowed it to distract me, but the display showed that 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 weird, strangled voice saying the unimaginable: that she had found her aunt Klara dead in bed. That she had travelled to Uppsala to meet her for lunch and that 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 earlier. She went in and found Klara in the bedroom. Peaceful, almost smiling. But cold.

At that point the voice cracked and Veronica began to sob hysterically. I managed to keep calm enough to find out that she had managed to phone a doctor and the

other necessary authorities. Between sobs she said she was on her way back to Stockholm.

Klara. Veronica's rock. The person who had been her greatest, many times her only, security in life, because her father vanished from the scene when Veronica was born, or maybe even before that. While her mother had spent her entire life wrapped up in her own problems and psyche.

When Veronica was young she had to live with her mum in one peculiar place after another, but once she started school such an itinerant lifestyle became unsustainable. Instead, Klara had to look after her niece for long periods of time, and she always gave the impression of being willing to do that. 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.

Naturally Veronica missed her mother occasionally, but as the years went by it seemed the time they spent together 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 place for five weeks every year. The rest of the time she lived a fairly routine and quiet life in Uppsala together with Veronica, who grew up with someone who was only too happy to take on the role of single mother.

Klara, who was a rock and a safe harbour for me too during my sometimes stormy upbringing.

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 screamed, 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 used to stay 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 her door open 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 speed with which she pulled back the duvet, slipped her dressing gown over her nightdress and went with me to the kitchen.

There we would sit for ages, emptying 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 almost every time I would go straight back to sleep.

In our house Dad needed his night's sleep and was furious if he was woken up unnecessarily. Pity I can't give you a shot of something, he said once when I dared to tiptoe into my parents' bedroom after a nightmare. Quite funny as well, 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 that I could stay. She never seemed 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 responding to 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, and she never got angry when I spilled my drink, either.

She would offer words of wisdom that I didn't really understand but were comforting anyway. Such as when she said melodramatically: 'You have to do something while you're waiting to die', or now it was time to be 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 while Klara shouted: 'Precisely!' She was animated and funny when she told us about things that had happened, and I have often made use of her family stories or dramatic expressions in my books to flesh out a character.

And how I adored her crazy sense of humour.

Around 4 a.m. Veronica woke up again. Eventually her tears turned into piercing little 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 with her to tell her how much she, Veronica, had loved Klara.

'I never said ... how much she meant to me...'

'She knew that, I promise you.'

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

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

'The flat without her...oh, Marieke...'

Yes, Klara's flat. 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 an extra toothbrush only for me.

'...when 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 understand ...'

The smell and shadow 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 she and I had to cope with; Veronica's life that had to be shored up, quite apart from the fact that it was Veronica's responsibility to sort everything out after Klara's death. I was on the phone for hours, taking over conversations with various authorities, 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 throw a scarf round her shoulders or run her hand across the back of her neck to pull her hair free made my stomach knot. 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 have a few calm stepping stones along the way? Then came the funeral.