'There is much naive charm to be found in this story of a young girl who finds both a new friend and the hope for a new life through her growing interest in jazz... this is a loving, quietly charming... portrayal of jazz as a music which salves the soul of a misfit, brings her friendship and a sense of camaraderie and connects the future with the past.'

Glasgow Sunday Herald

'*Wonderful Feels Like This* is a gifted and moving novel, elegantly translated from the Swedish... Lövestam can make difficult narrative feats look easy and the sharply observed central relationship draws you into its poignancy and quiet heroism.'

Sydney Morning Herald

'Sensitive and deeply moving: outstanding.'

Kirkus Reviews

'Empathy, identity, and the transformative power of music bind this tale of an atypical friendship between a teenage outcast and a jazz musician.'

Publishers Weekly

'Lövestam is a musical writer, with such an eye on language and storytelling that she can do almost anything she wants... She writes with the perfect pitch.'

Malin Persson Giolito, *Amelia*

'A well written, warm and cosy story about how unexpectedly you can find a friend when you most need one.'

Stefan Holm, *Värmland Folkblad*

'I know of no writer who can make me so genuinely happy as Sara Lövestam does... And if I'm ever asked what is the best book I've ever read, I will definitely answer: *Wonderful Feels Like This*.'

Annika Koldenius

Wonderful Feels Like This

Sara Lövestam

ALLEN&UNWIN

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Out of the blue, someone you meet
will be the friend you need.

—Povel Ramel,
"Underbart är kort" (What Wonderful Feels Like)

– CHAPTER 1 –

Steffi is becoming happy jazz. She lies on her striped bedspread, eyes shut, while deep down inside, she's turning into an upbeat happy blues, a going-crazy-with-happiness blues. All the stupid people vanish into a fog far beyond her window; they're nothing now as she walks the bass line with her guitar. She rubs away a few tears, which have mingled with the hair at her temples. Povel Ramel sings: *Just slap them away like a mosquito! Who cares what they say? Get on with your own show!* She's singing along with his hit "A Happy Blues." She takes a deep breath and no longer gives a damn about any of the other kids in class 9B. The bass player works the blues line like a madman. It's one of the most difficult walking bass lines on the whole record. As if there were no rules, as if you could play exactly what you wanted, but she hasn't yet figured out how.

When she finally leaves her room, nobody can tell that she's been crying. Mamma puts a dish of fish in white sauce on the table, Pappa is throwing out the box the fish came in, and Edvin is getting out the tableware.

"Can you get Julia?"

The door to Julia's room is closed. Steffi walks right in.

"Hey, would it hurt to knock?" Julia yells and then into the phone: "It's just my nerdy little sister." She turns her head to Steffi again. "One day you'll walk in here and see something you really don't want to see." A laugh comes from the phone.

"Time to eat," Steffi says.

"I need to finish this."

"She needs to finish her call," Steffi reports back to the kitchen, and her father gets up from the table with a sigh.

Edvin does not want to eat the fish or the potatoes. He swirls the sauce around with his fork and eats a little of it with a bit of lettuce and a tomato. The struggle to get Julia to the table transforms into a fight to get Edvin to eat at least one bite of fish.

"You're eight years old." Mamma sighs. "Eat it now and you won't have to eat it later. You can't live on gravy alone; you'll get dizzy."

Edvin laughs at the image. "Like thiiiiis?" he asks and flops his head from side to side again and again.

"Just eat."

Edvin clamps his mouth shut. Julia has started to text under the table. Steffi swallows a bite of fish with potatoes.

"Think of it like this," she says to Edvin. "Potatoes are precious like gold."

Edvin looks at her skeptically. "No, they're not."

"More like gold than tomatoes. Look at your plate. What looks the most like gold?"

Edvin cuts a tiny piece of potato and stuffs it in his mouth, swallowing it with exaggerated effort. "It doesn't taste like gold."

"That's because you're eating it all alone. If you eat some fish with it, it'll have more gold flavor."

Pappa gives her a grateful look. Mamma is asking Julia where she bought her mascara, and when Julia doesn't reply, Mamma asks Steffi about her day at school.

"Fine," Steffi mumbles. She's concentrating on her potatoes and fish. When the thought of the girls in class 9B forces its way into her mind, she slaps it away just like she'd slap away a mosquito. She is a happy blues, as cool as cool can be.

"I can tell our last semester is coming," she says. "We're getting a project."

"Sounds fun," Pappa says. "How exciting."

"Don't act so surprised," Julia says. "When I was in ninth grade, we had a project, too, remember?"

"Yes, well . . . ," Mamma says. "What fun that you get to do one, too. Have you picked out a topic? Or does the teacher assign one?"

"I don't know yet," Steffi says. "I'll have to see."

Edvin plumps both elbows down on the table. "This. Does. Not. Taste. Like. Gold."

Steffi has stopped logging in to The Place, although sometimes she'll go back just to see what's happening. But then she'll delete the guest book comments, trying not to read them, but she always does. She tries not to feel hurt by the words *whore, dyke,* and *disgusting,* but she is. She's never been a prostitute, she's never been in love with another girl, and she takes a shower every day, but the feeling of being dirty seems to come with the words. She's definitely stopped going to The Place. She's done that many times. Today she's not even going to start.

Instead she takes out her bass. Last week she'd taken "A Happy Blues" to her bass teacher, who hemmed and hawed at it doubtfully. He'd explained that a walking bass line goes from

one note to another through three notes you choose yourself. Then they practiced it together for a while, but it never sounded right. She has seen through him already. All he really wants to do is teach classical guitar and sing Bellman songs. It's easier when she's alone. She goes from A to D a few times, testing different notes, grimacing when it sounds off, repeats. Nods her head to the rhythm when she gets going, ups the volume.

Finally, she puts on "A Happy Blues" again. She ignores the bass player on the record and does her own thing between the downbeats. It sounds passable, but nowhere near Povel's bassist. After eight measures, she gives up, stops playing, and falls backward onto her bed, her bass on her stomach. Listens to the rest of the song. Slaps away The Place's nasty comments just like a mosquito, gets on with her own show. Becomes happy jazz.

– CHAPTER 2 –

Their project is supposed to explore some aspect of social or natural sciences in depth.

"They did a *fashion* show last year!" Karro protests. She rolls her eyes and looks around for affirmation. She's wearing well-applied eye makeup.

"That's why this year, we decided to change the guidelines," Bengt explains. "This is practice for *gymnasium,* when you'll have to study on your own. Take advantage of it!"

Karro rolls her eyes. Steffi can't stand Karro, but on this point she has to agree. She'd hoped to record some of her music.

"You can choose to do a project on your own or in pairs," Bengt continues. "Those who decide to work in pairs must give me a plan of who will be responsible for each part of the project."

The girls immediately reach out their hands to pair off like invisible magnets—Steffi is left out, as if she has as much magnetism as a block of wood.

"Project outlines will be due next week. More detailed information is on our class page, and part of your work is to understand the instructions and follow them. Any questions?"

Victor raises his hand. "Is there going to be a test?"

Some giggles break out.

Bengt remains calm. "Everything is on our class page. You will be required to prepare a written report with a summary, a table of contents, and a bibliography, as well as do an oral presentation during class."

As they all file through the classroom door, Steffi finds herself next to Sanja. Karro gasps theatrically as she grabs Sanja and pulls her away. "Watch out for Steffi!"

Sanja snickers and then sighs hugely in relief. "I didn't see her!"

"You'll have to wash your clothes in bleach, you know, if you get too close."

Sanja giggles at the laundry advice as Steffi rushes off, breathing hard and trying to distract herself by thinking of what subject to choose for her project. But the lump in her throat gets in her way. She knows her face has turned bright red and her eyes have filled with tears that will brim over if somebody talks to her. She slinks into the bathroom.

Surprisingly, her reflection in the mirror is not quite as ugly as she'd imagined. She meets her own eyes, pushes her hair behind her ears, and tries to smile. She will never show them that they'd made her cry, never. She can picture their snickering and their pointing fingers: *the slut's crying!* Never!

She flushes the toilet before she leaves.

She walks home with Povel Ramel on her mp3 player. The familiar notes open up that other world, where Karro is nothing more than Povel Ramel's wilted kangaroo vine—useless in every way.

The headphones are warm on her ears and she walks in time with the music. "Wow, How Lively the Band Swings!" gives her feet a beat that swings as the bass slides into the closest Povel ever came to reggae. Next comes "Look, It's Snowing," and she hears the intro even before it starts. Her footsteps are lighter, strutting. She moves her lips in Povel's lightning fast patter: *"Look, it's snowing, fireside glowing, flakes are whirling, everybody's stirring. . . ."*

It had taken her an eternity just to figure out the lyrics. Like most of Povel Ramel's songs, they aren't online, and all the many words flashed by in an instant. Once, in the fifth grade, she'd performed "I'm Digging You" in music class and was met with forty-four rolling eyes. Her music teacher tried to make them more receptive by explaining that this was actually the first rap song out of Sweden, written by the hardworking and mischievous Povel Ramel. It didn't help that her teacher pronounced "rap" as "repp."

The batteries run out halfway home. Steffi stops and shakes her player; sometimes this squeezes out ten more minutes. Sometimes it doesn't. For a second, she thinks she hears it start up again, but when she puts on her headphones, she doesn't hear anything. She shakes the player again but realizes as she's shaking it that she's already hearing the music. It's "Where's the Soap?" And it's not coming from her headphones. She furrows her brow.

Nobody is around. Other than the weak sound of music, it's completely quiet. The streetlights shine on no one but herself. Still, she can hear the words clearly: *The wind's stopped howling, the old aunt stopped growling. . . .* She stands stock-still and brings her player to her ear to make sure that the music's not coming from it. Then quiet falls again. A handful of snow slips from a tree branch. She is just about to start walking again when the next song starts: "Jazz Is Calling."

Steffi turns around. Then she turns slightly to the left and finally to the right to zero in on the sound. It seems to come from the short row of town houses a few meters back from the road.

Her feet leave silent marks in the snow. The notes of a string bass and a clarinet bubble out like champagne, slightly muffled, but coming closer. When she comes to the fourth window along the row of town houses, she sees it's slightly open. The music is coming from there, right next to her. Povel Ramel's high-pitched voice finds its way out into the empty February air around her. It's like being in a dream. She stands there until the clarinet has wailed up into a falsetto and then dies out. The wind is ruffling through a spruce tree somewhere, the dark sky seems to touch her head, and the yellow bricks in front of her are harsh with black shadows. Then there's a noise from the window above her head, and she jumps as if she's been slapped.

A voice, nothing like Povel Ramel's, rasps at her as the shape of a head forms inside the window frame. Steffi wants to run away, but her body won't move.

"So, answer me!" the voice barks from the window.

Steffi is breathless, even though she's been standing absolutely still. She has to swallow before she can say a word. "What . . . I didn't hear what you asked," she calls up to the window.

"Well, then, let me repeat myself! Why are you standing around down there?"

Steffi has to think for a moment. Why does *anyone* stand around outside someone's window?

"I heard someone playing Povel Ramel."

More noise comes from the window and then it's opened so wide that she can now clearly see the man's whole head. He's almost completely bald; his face has cheeks that are long and narrow, and his bushy white eyebrows are as white as the hair

sprouting out of his ears. His lips turn up in an amused smile. "I'm sure you did, since I *was* playing Povel Ramel."

Steffi stares openmouthed at the man in the window. He's really old. Not like Grandma and Grandpa, who have just retired, but with wrinkly skin like parchment paper, like the old folks in the care center. He sucks on his lip and then lets it go.

"Do you know when he recorded this song I just played?"

Her heart starts to beat again, like when her teacher asks her a question she knows. Even more so, since she's standing in the snow and being questioned about Povel Ramel. She feels that her answer will change everything.

"Nineteen forty . . . the forties."

"Of course it was recorded in the forties. In 1946 exactly. Casper Hjukström on the clarinet. But that I don't really care about."

"You don't?"

Silence from above. She looks up, expecting his head to disappear back into the room, gone as if he'd been a ghost. But the man stretches his neck farther out so she can now see his chin and cheekbones outlined against the wall. He lifts his wild eyebrows.

"Well, are you going to give me pneumonia in this cold air or are you going to come up and introduce yourself like a normal person?"

The hallway reeks of soap residue and plastic mats. Steffi stands still just inside the entrance after she's been buzzed in. A picture showing a house in the forest hangs on the right-hand wall and on the left is a needlepoint with a phrase about God. She pulls

up the shoulder strap of her school bag, which always slides down. A door opens down the hallway. The face from the window appears, followed by the rest of a body.

He's not much taller than she is, but once, maybe, he'd been taller. She takes his knotty hand and they shake. His hand is cool and dry, his handshake stronger than she'd thought it would be.

"Alvar Svensson's the name."

She wonders if she should introduce herself as Stephanie or perhaps give an imaginary name. But she is who she is. "Steffi Herrera."

Alvar Svensson leads her to his room. It is square and contains one bed, one plaid armchair, two chairs, one table, and one enormous bookcase. He folds into his armchair like a collapsing measuring rod, while nodding at Steffi to take a chair, which she does. It's already dark, judging from the lack of light through the window. She pictures the ground outside where she'd just been standing and listening to the music.

"Well, as I was saying," Alvar says and leans back so that his armchair squeaks. "I really don't care if it was Hjukström on the clarinet. I was more impressed by the wonderful vision that went by the name Anita Bergner. I don't suppose you've heard the song 'Letter from Frej'?"

Steffi wants to laugh. He's underestimating her, this old guy who enjoys Povel Ramel. She wants to imitate the bit where the woman begins to quiver in ecstasy from reading Frej's letter, but she doesn't know the words. Instead, she quotes from another part of the song:

> *"Your mere nearness devastates*
> *A fire flames in me that incapacitates."*

She's starting to sing as she reaches the end, but falters on the last note.

"Yes, that's just how I felt when it came to Anita," Alvar says, pleased. "Perhaps you've felt it, too." He states this as a possibility, but not a question.

"She was outside the studio when Hjukström showed up with his clarinet."

Steffi repeats his words in her head. *Was he there?*

"What do you mean?" she asks, feeling stupid.

"Oh, didn't I say that? I was hired for a recording . . . oh, I probably forgot to mention it. I was in Stockholm back then."

Steffi stares at the man in the armchair, the one who had been to Stockholm and had met Povel Ramel's clarinet player. Did he come from Stockholm? But what about his Värmland accent, then? She decided it would not be polite to ask.

"You had to go to Stockholm," Alvar reminisces without prodding. "Just look at the labels on the gramophone records."

He grabs the arms of his chair and heaves himself up. He walks to his bookcase and pulls out something very flat. Since Steffi did not immediately jump up, he pulls out another and waves them around.

"Look! Konserthuset in Stockholm! Odeons Studio, Stockholm!"

Steffi looks closely at the records. They are as large as plates, and their paper sleeves have nothing printed on them. Circling the center holes, she can make out Povel Ramel's name written in cursive. A gramophone record from Alvar's time. It is so very real it makes her seem unreal.

"You couldn't keep me away," Alvar goes on. He holds out a record in its sleeve to her and she takes it. The paper is rough. She feels a connection with the past—just then a cell phone rings

into the swing music still coming through Alvar's large gramophone horn. Her cell phone plays a line from "A Happy Blues."

Alvar startles and looks around, then laughs as he sees her pull out her phone. "Jazz is calling," he says.

Steffi smiles. "Or the blues. The family is calling, my pappa, he's wondering where I am."

Alvar nods. The ears on his head seem so large they could have been bought at a costume shop.

"I'll tell you my whole story someday, if you want to hear it."

Steffi thinks there must be a pleasant polite phrase she should say, but she can't remember what it could be. "OK."

When she walks through the door at home, she wishes she could have stayed longer at Alvar's place.

"ADMIRAL!" Edvin is shouting, holding up his stick with a yellow flag, his imitation of a military gesture. When she doesn't respond, he marches into the kitchen, flag held high, turns, and then marches back to her.

She takes off her shoes. She should have thought to tell her father she was in the music room at school. Then she could have stayed longer.

"Hi, Steffita," her father greets her. He claps her on the shoulder.

Mamma asks her to help in the kitchen.

"Julia can," Steffi answers, but then she sees the extra pair of shoes in the hallway and knows she can't get out of it.

"Fanny's come over," Mamma says.

Fanny coming over is like having two Julias in the house. It's also like having a song on repeat, because they say the same things over and over even if someone eavesdrops on them. What idiots some other girls are; how to get rid of unwanted hair; how

cute the senior boys are. Fanny would complain, "I can't stand the boys in our class. I want a real man!" And Julia would agree. "We girls just mature faster." And wonders if she should get Botox for the wrinkle beneath one of her eyes. "It's because you smoke!" Fanny would exclaim, and then the two of them would giggle so stupidly that Steffi couldn't stand it. She had to be really bored to even bother eavesdropping on them. Most of it was scribbled in Julia's diary anyway.

"How was school today?" Pappa asks.

An image of Karro and Sonja—*Watch out for Steffi!*—the bathroom, the song that came from nowhere, the bald old man in the window, the original gramophone records behind a plaid armchair.

"We were told how to go about choosing our projects," she replied.

Edvin leaps into the kitchen. He's exchanged his yellow flag for a golden sword. "*En garde!* A duel! What's for supper?"

– CHAPTER 3 –

Kevin, Leo, Hannes . . .”

Sanja is ranking the boys, and Steffi is not there. She’s not there because she’s sitting on the farthest bench away, with her back to them, and she’s concentrating on putting on her sweater. She’s not there and that gives her a bit of breathing room.

“No, Kevin, Hannes, Leo,” Karro objects. “Hannes is really hot, now that he’s cut his hair, and Leo stinks.”

“That’s because he’s always exercising.”

“He still stinks.”

“But he’s so cute.”

“That’s why he’s third. Or do *you* want him?”

Sanja pretends to hit Karro with her towel.

Steffi can see them reflected in the mirror on the wall. She has the song “Letter to Frej” running through her head.

Povel’s bossa nova from the seventies gets entwined with Sanja’s attraction to Leo and his aroma. Steffi smiles at the thought. They could start a song, she thinks. Sanja would begin:

Your nose to me is so enchanting

And Karro would reply:

But your mouth spews only bantering.

They'd giggle like the singer Wenche Myhre and trill the lyrics that Steffi hasn't yet figured out. Something about the gods.

"Excuse *me,*" a voice says too close to her ear and Steffi transforms back from air into flesh and blood. "Excuse *me,* but I think this slut has been laughing at us."

Steffi immediately checks her clothes and finds herself still half-dressed. At least she had gotten her pants on and her cell phone is safely in her pocket. But her tights and woolen socks are on the bench next to her.

Her shoes squish all through the last class, even though she'd wrung her socks out as well as she could and held them under the hand dryer for at least two minutes. When she's about halfway home, her feet have gotten so cold they hurt. She unties her shoelaces and pulls off her wet socks to walk the rest of the way home in just her shoes.

As she walks by the long, flat building that is the local retirement home, she sees that Alvar's room is dark. Even though she hits pause on her mp3 player, she doesn't hear any music from his window. Just as well, since her feet feel like tender blocks of ice. She walks a few more steps and looks back to see if he's turned on a light, but she couldn't turn back anyway.

Of course, according to Sanja and Karro, Kevin is the hottest of all the boys in their class. There's no room for discussion there. Everyone agrees. It's a fact, not an opinion. That Steffi

disagrees with everyone else makes her a little worried. She knows she's old enough to understand why cute boys are cute, but she thinks that Kevin's eyes are too narrow and she doesn't like the way the ends of his mouth turn down. She can't see what makes him the cutest guy in class. This must mean that the others are right: there's something wrong with her.

Just before she reaches her block, her shoes really start rubbing on her bare ankles and she forces herself not to tear up by holding her breath. She's been through worse—and she is definitely going to learn how Wenche Myhre sings that trill.

At home, when she pulls off her shoes, her feet are bright red in the middle and white around her toes. They tingle as she pulls on some woolen socks from the dresser in the hall while she yells, "Hello? Anybody home?"

She gets no answer. But there's a sound from Julia's room.

A wheezing, a sigh, a human sound. Julia's door is slightly open. Steffi tiptoes up to it. She sees Julia on her stomach on her bed, completely still. Then a snivel followed by a long, halting exhalation. Steffi stands there, mouth wide open. Julia is crying. Steffi feels frozen in place as she watches Julia's shaking back and catches the sound Julia is trying to muffle. She feels tears welling up in her own eyes. She wants to ask what's going on, but this is Julia.

She leaps back when, without warning, Julia flips over and stares at her.

"What the *hell* are you doing here?"

Steffi backs away. "I'm just . . . I'm just . . ."

"You're so damn nosy! Go away and shut the door behind you!"

"What . . . what's wrong?"

Julia sits up in bed. Her eyes are red from crying and her anger makes them ugly. "GO AWAY!"

———

By dinnertime, Julia seems back to normal. She rolls her eyes at Pappa. He's been trying to understand the Swedish word *påbrå*.

"I thought it meant something else! I mixed up *brå* with *bra* and it wasn't until I realized that *å* and *a* were totally different letters in Swedish that I figured out why Swedes didn't understand me! But it was a logical mistake!"

"What does *påbra* mean?" Edvin asks.

Pappa starts a long explanation involving Pippi Longstocking, a Siw Malmkvist song from ages ago, as well as his own Caribbean Indian grandmother.

Steffi is chewing her fish balls, trying not to look at Julia. Julia is not a person who cries. She's the one who flips back her hair and tries on lip gloss. Julia rolls her eyes at last year's shoes and gossips with Fanny about twenty-year-old guys. There are never tears in Julia's eyes, only mascara on their lashes.

Edvin is eating for a change and Mamma asks Steffi, "How was school?"

Steffi stuffs two fish balls into her mouth and nods instead of answering. Outside, the winter night is black as coal.

After dinner, Steffi decides to get right to work. She tries to laugh like Wenche Myhre and attempts the hoarse sound of a laugh making its way all the way up through her throat. Wenche Myhre is Norwegian, and her Swedish has a Norwegian accent.

Your mere nearness devastates

A fire flames in me that incapacitates

Steffi sings along as well as she can. "Oh, oh, oh!" She trills together with Wenche Myhre, and Povel Ramel's lyrics become a dramatic duet between them. The trill is not so hard; it just

doesn't rhyme. Once she's figured out the entire song, she pulls out her bass guitar.

"Dum de dum, the song's in fifths. Dum de dum, she just can't quit, I'm dancing with the dame who got a letter from Frej."

Her socks on the radiator are slowly steaming off the water from the changing room toilet. Her CD keeps spinning; Povel's voice takes over from Wenche. It is a good voice, a voice that sings only funny words with happy music.