

AUTHOR OF *BROKEN*

'A truly
great writer and
explorer of the
human mind.'

JO NESBO

Karin
FOSSUM
the caller

AN INSPECTOR SEJER MYSTERY

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Also by Karin Fossum

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Don't Look Back
He Who Fears the Wolf
When the Devil Holds the Candle
Calling Out For You
Black Seconds
Broken
The Water's Edge
Bad Intentions

The Caller

KARIN FOSSUM

Translated from the Norwegian by K.E. Semmel



Harvill Secker
LONDON

It's a good thing there are lies
Lord help us
if everything that was said
were true

— Old adage

Chapter 1

The child slept in a pram behind the house.

The pram was from Brio, and the child was an eight-month-old girl. She lay under a crocheted blanket, wearing a matching bonnet with a string fastened under her chin. The pram sat under the shade of a maple tree; behind the tree the forest stood like a black wall. The mother was in the kitchen. She couldn't see the pram through the window, but she wasn't concerned about her sleeping baby, not for an instant.

Pottering about thoroughly content, she was light as a ballerina on her feet, not a single worry in her heart. She had everything a woman could dream of: beauty, health and love. A husband, a child, and a home and garden with rhododendrons and lush flowers. She held life in the palm of her hand.

She looked at the three photographs hanging on the kitchen wall. In one photograph, taken under the maple, she wore a flowery dress. In another her husband, Karsten, was on the front porch. The last was a photograph of her and Karsten together on the sofa, the child between them. The girl's name was Margrete. The arrangement of the three photos made her smile. One plus one is surely three, she thought - it is truly a miracle. Now she saw that miracle everywhere. In the sunlight cascading through the windows, in the thin white curtains fluttering in the breeze.

At the worktop she energetically kneaded a smooth, lukewarm dough between her fingers. She was making a chicken and chanterelle quiche, while Margrete slept beneath the maple in her little bonnet, she, too, smooth and warm under the blanket. Her little heart pumped a modest amount of blood, and it coloured her cheeks pink. Her scent was a mixture of sour milk and soap. The blanket and bonnet had been crocheted by her French grandmother.

She slept heavily, and with open hands, as only a baby can.

Lily rolled the dough on a marble slate. As she swung the rolling pin, her body swayed and her skirt billowed around her legs – like a dance by the worktop.

It was summer and warm, and she was bare-legged. She set the pastry in a pie dish, poked it with a fork and trimmed the edges. Then she put a roast chicken on the chopping board. Poor little thing, she thought, and tore its thighs off. She liked the cracking sound the cartilage made when tearing from the bone. Light and tender, the meat let go easily, and she succumbed to the temptation to stick a piece in her mouth. It's good, she thought, it has just enough seasoning, and it's lean too. She filled the pie dish and sprinkled on Cheddar cheese. Then she checked the time. She didn't worry about Margrete. If the child sneezed she would know it immediately. If she coughed or hiccuped, or began to cry, she would know. Because there was a bond between them, a bond as thick as a mooring line. Even the slightest tug would reach her like a vibration.

Margrete's in my head, she thought, in my blood and in my fingers.

Margrete's in my heart.

If anyone were to harm her, I would know. Or so she thought. She went about her business calmly. But at the back of the house, someone crept out of the dense forest and in one bound reached the pram. He pushed the

crocheted blanket to the side, and Lily didn't feel anything at all.

The quiche began to turn golden.

The cheese had melted, and bubbled like lava. She glanced out the window and saw Karsten as he pulled into the driveway in his red Honda SUV. The table was set, the china old and dignified; in each glass a white napkin opened like a fan. She switched on the lights, stepped back and tilted her head, evaluating the result. She hoped her husband would see that she'd gone out of her way, that she always went out of her way. She smoothed her skirt and ran her hands through her hair. Other couples fight, she thought, other couples divorce. But that won't happen to us; we know better. We understand that love is a plant that requires tender care. Some people spread all this rubbish about being blinded by love. But she'd never understood as much as she did now, had never had this insight. Had never had such clarity of vision, or such uncompromising values. She went into the bathroom and brushed her hair. The excitement of her husband's return, the oven's heat and the low July sunlight spilling into the room made her cheeks flush and her eyes sparkle. When he stepped into the kitchen, she was ready with a bottle of Farris mineral water and a slight, elegant tilt to her hips. He carried a stack of post, she noticed, newspapers and a few window envelopes. He set them on the worktop, then went to the oven and squatted down, peering through the glass.

'It looks delicious,' he said. 'Is it ready?'

'Probably,' she replied. 'Margrete is sleeping in the pram. She's slept quite a while. Maybe we should wake her - otherwise it'll be hard getting her to sleep tonight.' She reconsidered. Cocked her head and looked at her husband through full black eyelashes. 'Or maybe we can wait until after dinner, so we can have a little peace while we eat. Chicken and chanterelle,' she said, nodding at the oven.

She slipped on a pair of oven gloves, removed the quiche and set it down on a cooling rack.

It was burning hot.

‘She’ll certainly forgive us,’ her husband said.

His voice was deep and gravelly. He stood at his full height, put his arms around her waist and escorted her across the room. They both laughed because she was wearing the oven gloves; he had that look she loved so much, that teasing look she could never resist. Now he led her into the lounge, past the dining table to the sofa.

‘Karsten,’ she whispered. But it was a weak protest. She felt like dough between his hands; she felt kneaded and rolled and poked with a fork.

‘Lily,’ he whispered, mimicking her voice.

They fell together on to the sofa.

They didn’t hear a peep out of the child beneath the tree.

Afterwards they ate in silence.

He said nothing about the meal, or about the table that had been so beautifully set, but he continued to look at her with approval. Lily, the eyes said, the things you do. He had green eyes, large and clear. Because she wanted to stay thin, she tried not to eat too much, even though the quiche was delicious. Karsten was also thin. His thighs were rock hard. A thick mane of dark hair, always a little too long in the back, made him look cheeky and attractive. She couldn’t imagine him gaining weight and losing his shape, or his hair, as many men did when they approached forty. She saw it happening to others, but it didn’t apply to them. Nothing could sever what they had together, neither gravity nor the test of time.

‘Will you clear the table?’ she asked when they had finished eating. ‘I’ll get Margrete.’

Immediately he began to collect the plates and glasses.

He was quick and a tad abrupt in his movements, clacking the porcelain between his fingers, and she held her breath; she'd inherited it from her grandmother. She went into the hallway to put on her shoes. She opened the door to the warmth of the sun, the mild, gentle breeze, and the smells from the grass and forest. Then she rounded the corner of the house and walked towards the maple.

A terrible foreboding came over her.

She had shut Margrete out of her mind.

She moved faster now, to make up for what she'd done. Something about the pram was strange, she thought. It was right where she'd put it, near the trunk of the maple, but the blanket was crumpled. There's so much activity in these little ones, she thought, as she fought her terror. Because now she saw the blood. When she pulled the blanket off, she froze. Margrete was covered in blood. Lily fell to the ground. Lay there, writhing, unable to get up. She wanted to throw up. Felt something sour force its way up her throat, and she emitted a terrifying scream.

Karsten ran round the corner. He saw her contorted on the ground, and noticed the blood, slick and nearly black. He reached the pram in four steps, grabbed Margrete and held her against his chest. Shouted at Lily to get the car.

'Go, Lily!' he shouted. 'Go!'

She moaned in response. He shouted louder. He roared like a wild animal, and the roar forced her, finally, to act. She rose and ran to the garage. Realised she needed the keys. Continued into the house and found them on a hook in the hallway. Then she was behind the wheel, backing out. With Margrete in his arms, Karsten yanked open the door and got in. He examined her body, looked under the clothes.

'I think she's bleeding from the mouth,' he gasped. 'I can't tell. I don't know how to make it stop! Can't you drive any faster? Drive faster, Lily!'

Later, neither would remember the drive to the Central Hospital. Karsten had some vague memories of running past the reception desk and pushing open the glass doors. A wild sprint through the corridors with his daughter bleeding in his arms, searching for help. Lily remembered nothing. The world spun so fast it made her dizzy. She ran after Karsten, dashing like a hunted hare that knows the end is near.

They were stopped by two nurses. One of them took Margrete and disappeared through a door. 'Stay here!' she shouted.

It was an order.

Then she was gone.

The doors were made of mottled glass, the kind you can't see through. Here, at the end of the corridor, was a small waiting area, and they sat on separate chairs. There was nothing to say. After a few minutes, Karsten walked to the water cooler by the window. He pulled a paper cup from the machine, filled it and held it out to Lily. She knocked it out of his hand with a scream.

'She was making sounds,' he said. 'You heard it. She was breathing, Lily. I'm absolutely sure of that.' He paced the room. 'They have to stop it! She'll get a blood transfusion. We made it here quickly.'

Lily didn't respond. A teenager with his arm in a sling walked up and down the corridor. Clearly curious about the drama unfolding just a few metres away, he stared openly at them.

'Why is it taking so long?' Lily whispered. 'What are they doing?'

It was as though she were inside a wire drum rotating at high speed. It wasn't life, and it wasn't death. Later they would both refer to these minutes as pure hell, a hell that ended when a nurse came through the glass doors with Margrete in her arms. She was wrapped in a white blanket.

To his amazement, Karsten saw that she jabbed at the air with her hands.

‘She’s completely unharmed,’ the nurse said.

Karsten took her from the nurse. Felt her little body in his arms. It was warm all over.

With nervous hands he began unfolding the blanket. Margrete, wearing a disposable nappy, was otherwise naked in the blanket.

‘She’s completely unharmed,’ the nurse repeated. ‘It wasn’t her blood. We’ve called the police.’

Chapter 2

Karsten and Lily Sundelin were led to another room where they could wait undisturbed. Lily wanted to go home. She had no desire to talk to anyone. She wanted to go back to her house and her bedroom; she wanted to retreat into a corner. She wanted to lie in her queen-sized bed with her husband and child, and remain there. Never again would she let the child sleep in the pram under the maple tree, never again let her sleep without supervision. Never again shut her out of her mind.

But they had to wait.

‘What are we going to say?’ she asked anxiously. ‘I get so nervous.’

Karsten Sundelin looked incomprehendingly at his wife. Unlike Lily, who was filled with fear, he felt, first and foremost, a boiling rage. Any charity and understanding he’d felt for others had evaporated, and left him out of breath and hot-tempered. Though he’d never had anything to do with the police, he’d never been particularly fond of them. To him, they were coarse and simple-minded people who trampled about in black boots and silly hats. They reminded him of stocky handymen with a cluster of tools clattering on their belts; they were young and uneducated and knew nothing about the nuances of life – the details, Karsten Sundelin thought: what makes this crime against Margrete and against us particularly heinous. They won’t

appreciate it; they'll think it's an act of vandalism. If they find it's a teenage punk pulling a stunt, he'll get off with a warning - because the poor kid probably hasn't had an easy life. But I'll give them a piece of my mind, he thought, and sipped the bitter coffee the nurse had brought.

Lily clutched the child with an urgency that made her tremble. She studied the pictures on the wall: one of some pastel water lilies floating in a pond, another of the Norwegian mountains and endless blue skies. On a table she saw health magazines with information about what you should avoid, what you should eat and drink - or not eat and drink - and how you should live.

If you wanted to live a long life.

Karsten paced the room, extremely impatient, like an angry bull. The police station was a couple of minutes away, but because of the bureaucracy it took a while.

'Maybe they have to write a report first,' he said, with tired sarcasm in his voice. He stood in front of Lily with his feet apart, his hands on his hips.

'I'm sure they write it afterwards,' Lily said, stroking the child's cheeks. After all the commotion, Margrete slept soundly.

At last two men strolled down the corridor. Neither wore a uniform. One man was tall and grey-haired, perhaps sixty years old; the other man was young and curly-haired. They introduced themselves as Sejer and Skarre. Sejer looked down at the sleeping child. Then he smiled at Lily. 'How are you doing?'

'We won't let her sleep in the garden any more,' Lily said.

Sejer nodded. 'I understand,' he said. 'You know what's best.'

Skarre pulled a notebook from his pocket and found a chair. He seemed bright and eager, Lily thought, like a runner at the starting block.

'We have to ask you a few questions,' he said.

'I should hope so,' Karsten Sundelin said. 'Whoever's behind this should pay for it, even if I have to take matters into my own hands.'

At this, Skarre looked up, while the older inspector raised an eyebrow. Tall and muscular, with powerful fists, Karsten's temperament was evident in his eyes, and in his outraged voice. The young mother sat scrunched up in the chair, closed off to the world. In an instant, Skarre had mapped out the couple's power balance: raw power versus feminine vulnerability.

'Have you been married before?' he asked Lily affably.

She looked at him, surprised. Then she shook her head.

'Boyfriends? Live-in partners?'

Now she grew slightly embarrassed.

'I've had boyfriends,' she admitted, 'but I also have good sense.'

Of course you do, Skarre thought, but sometimes life shocks you.

'And you,' he said, turning to her husband. 'Anything from a previous relationship? I'm thinking of jealousy. Or revenge.'

'I've been married,' Karsten said in a measured tone.

'I see.'

Skarre made a note, then turned his blue-eyed gaze once more on Karsten. 'Was it an amicable divorce?'

'She died. Cancer.'

Without losing his composure, Skarre absorbed the information. He ran his fingers through his hair, tousled it. 'Have either of you had disagreements with anyone? Recently or in the past?'

Karsten leaned against the wall. As if he maintained the upper hand. Like Inspector Sejer, he was impressively tall and broad-shouldered. He glanced down at the two people for whom he was responsible, Lily and Margrete, and something rose in him, something he'd never felt before.

He liked the taste of it, the rush. It's no doubt some kid, he thought. I can't wait to get my hands on him.

'We never cross anyone,' he said, raising his voice.

Someone has a short fuse, Skarre thought.

Sejer grabbed a chair and sat beside Lily. He seemed friendly, and Lily liked him. He was strong and confident – not in a cocky way, but in a reassuring way that said *I'll take care of it.*

'Where do you live?' he asked.

'In Bjerketun,' she said. 'At the housing estate there.'

'How well do you know your neighbours?'

'Pretty well,' she said. 'We talk to them every day. We know their children too. They play in the street. The big kids push Margrete in her pram. Back and forth along the pavement in front of the house. So I can see them from the window.'

Sejer nodded. He leaned over Margrete and stroked her cheek with a finger.

'I used to have one of these,' he said, looking at Lily. 'Many years ago. They grow up, after all. But don't think for a second that I've forgotten what it was like.'

Tears formed in Lily's eyes. She liked his deep voice, his seriousness and understanding. She was reminded that policemen were like everyone else; they lived with grief and despair. When they faced tragedy, they were forced to get involved when others could just turn away in horror.

'When you get home,' Sejer said, 'I want you to write down everything you remember. When the little one is asleep and you've got some peace, sit down and record everything you can think of about today. From the time you got up: what did you think about? What did you do? Did anyone drive past? Did anyone call? Did someone hang up when you answered? Did you get anything in the post? Did anyone walk slowly past the house? Did you, in one way or another, feel watched? Do you remember anything from a long time ago, a quarrel or row? Write it all down. We'll be

stopping by to investigate your garden. The perpetrator may have left something behind, and if so, we'll have to find it at once.'

He stood, and so did Skarre. 'What's your child's name?' he asked.

'Margrete,' Lily said. 'Margrete Sundelin.'

Sejer looked at them. Lily beneath the water lilies, Karsten beneath the blue skies. The little bundle in the nappy.

'We're taking this very seriously,' he said. 'This incident was very cruel. But let me remind you of one thing: Margrete doesn't know anything about it.'

Chapter 3

When Sejer and Skarre were back at the station, they began reconstructing the crime – because it was obviously a crime, something much worse than a cruel joke. It was brazen, calculated and mean, like nothing they had ever seen. News of the small baby found drenched in blood had spread like wildfire through the corridors of the station, finally reaching Chief Holthemann's desk. Cane in hand, he tramped into Sejer's office and hammered on the floor to express his disgust. Why he'd begun to use a cane was a mystery to everyone at the station. One friendly person had asked him how long he would need it. I'll be dragging this cane as long as necessary, he had mumbled, and if I need support for the rest of my life, so be it.

'What's all this about a child?' Holthemann said. 'Can't people just steal a car or rob a bank? One can understand that kind of thing. What about the parents? Are they strong, or are they going to be on our case all the time?'

'The husband is strong, also indignant and angry,' Sejer said. 'His wife is jumpy as a doe.'

'It's probably someone they know,' Holthemann said, rapping his cane against the floor. 'People argue. They bully and terrorise and lob insults at each other. Maybe it has something to do with their past. Something they've forgotten, or didn't understand the significance of.'

He scraped a chair across the floor, and then sat heavily. The chief did have a sense of drama, after all, and he was definitely in his element. Originality was always interesting, and the blood-drenched baby was certainly something to talk about.

‘Do you have anything to drink in that fridge?’ he asked, pointing with his cane.

Sejer took out a bottle of mineral water. Skarre unrolled a map which he hung up on a whiteboard. He made some notes with a marker. They had been to the Sundelins’ and had jotted down a number of details. Bjerketun was a housing estate from the early nineties, with nice, well-maintained homes, most of which had gardens, double garages and large verandas round the back. The housing estate lay four kilometres from the centre of Bjerkås, and was made up of sixty homes. Those closest to the woods had built extensions, but Lily and Karsten Sundelin hadn’t; they wanted to keep the garden. There, they thought, Margrete could play when she was old enough. Maybe splash in a small pool or bounce on a trampoline. Lie on a blanket and read. Behind the Sundelins’ house was a dense grove of trees; on the other side of this grove was a second, larger estate called Askeland with its seventy-four homes. An older estate, the homes at Askeland had been built in the sixties, and resembled square, faded brooding boxes. The local authority assigned a third of them to welfare recipients, and this had led to an inevitable and increasing sense of decay.

Sejer studied the map. With his index finger he followed the main road from Bjerkås, where around five thousand people lived. From there he traced to Bjerketun, and from Bjerketun to Askeland. ‘Obviously he must have come from here,’ he said, and put his finger on Askeland. ‘He could have followed a path through the trees, carrying a container of blood under his jacket. A bottle, or a bag. I don’t know what kind or where he got it. Perhaps he stood

behind a tree and kept an eye on the pram, and afterwards, ran back through the grove. The lab will determine the type of blood. Perhaps it's something you can buy at an abattoir. If so, we're probably dealing with an adult. Let's hope he didn't sacrifice anything to carry out his plan, a dog or cat. What do you think?'

Deep in thought, Skarre examined the map. Those who knew him were aware that his father had been a vicar, and that he'd been raised in keeping with that. Fair, trustworthy and demanding. Yet he had maintained a boyish playfulness which drew people to him - especially women. Skarre wasn't married, and had no children - at least none that he knew of. But he had seen Margrete Sundelin and her chubby cheeks, and he'd observed how she lay in her mother's embrace.

He had recognised the smell of milk and soap.

'This was carefully planned. The perpetrator must have surveyed the house, possibly for quite some time, and taken note of the family's routines. He knew what time of day Margrete slept, and perhaps even how long she slept. He could have ducked behind a tree when Lily came out of the house, and maybe enjoyed seeing her reaction. Do you know what?' Skarre said to the inspector. 'This is pure evil. I'm almost speechless.'

Sejer, who had a child and grandchild himself, was in complete agreement. 'Holthemann, you may be right,' he said. 'The Sundelins may have stepped on people's toes without knowing it. They're nice, decent people, but everyone makes mistakes. Karsten Sundelin is bull-headed and uncompromising - I could see that at once. But it's just as likely we're dealing with a mentally unstable person. A woman who lost her child in a terrible way, or something along those lines. Who saw Lily walking with Margrete. You know that mother-child joy I mean. It could be someone who's been abused out for revenge, and they're striking at random. An individual who has been tormented throughout

his life will happily torment others. It's an awful but easily recognisable characteristic.'

'Revenge,' Skarre said. 'Or jealousy. The need to mark his territory.'

'In any case, he's methodical,' Sejer said. 'He doesn't act on impulse, he stages dramas. And Lord, what a drama!'

The department chief had been listening silently. 'Well, I need you to solve this!' He thanked Sejer and disappeared out into the corridor. They heard his cane thumping into the distance, a melancholic sound which, along with Holthemann, would soon go into retirement.

Skarre pulled himself away from the map. He unscrewed the lid of a Thermos, poured himself a full cup of coffee and drank greedily. Then he stood by the window and gazed down on the square where a group of journalists had gathered, like swarming wasps.

'The press are waiting,' he said. 'This is juicy stuff for them. What are you going to say?'

Sejer considered. 'That we're keeping all possibilities open. And just like the perpetrator, we're going to be methodical. I hope to get away with three or four sentences, bow politely and return. It's OK to be a little stingy with my words today. Otherwise the story will be blown all out of proportion.'

'No doubt they'll ask whether we're expecting more attacks like this,' Skarre said. 'How will you answer?'

'No comment.'

'What would you say, just between you and me? I mean, who do you think did this?'

'I should probably keep my mouth shut,' Sejer said. 'It's too early to speculate.'

'I won't hold you to what you say,' Skarre said. 'You can draw on your experience and intuition and your knowledge of people, which - as everyone says - you have in spades. If I know you, you've already got the perpetrator in your sights now. I'm just curious. I have my own suspicions

about who the perpetrator is. What this is.' He raised his hands. 'I'm not writing anything down,' he smiled.

'It's a man,' Sejer said and sank into a chair.

'Why do you think it's a man?'

'Probability.' He rolled up his sleeve and scratched at his right elbow. His psoriasis flared up whenever he became agitated, or when it was really hot. The summer was hot. 'Every probability suggests the following facts,' Sejer went on. 'He's a man between the age of seventeen and sixty, neglected and invisible. He's shy and introverted, but his awkwardness stands out. He wants respect, but doesn't have much luck. He's creative, bitter and hateful. He has a low-level job with a meagre income, or he's unemployed, maybe on the dole or getting some kind of benefits. He has no close friends. He's intelligent and intuitive, but emotionally very immature. He doesn't drink, doesn't use drugs and isn't especially interested in girls. He lives simply, in a room or a small flat, or he lives with his mother. And it's possible he keeps an animal in a cage.'

'What?' Skarre said incredulously. 'An animal in a cage?'

'That last was a joke.' Sejer smiled. 'I figured you'd get it. But I thought about a rat or something similar. You asked me to paint a picture using every detail,' he said. 'So I used my imagination.'

Sejer looked down at the crowd of reporters clustered in the square. 'They look ravenous,' he said. 'Should we toss them some scraps?'

Skarre stood at his side. He too sized up the journalists shuffling around with their thick woolly microphones - like a group of children who had each received a giant lollipop.

'Not surprising they're here,' he said. 'This case has everything, drama, originality. It's a shocker.'

'Maybe we've done everything wrong,' Sejer said. 'Maybe society relates to crime in a completely foolish way. The newspapers blow it out of proportion, and the criminal

gets all the attention he wants. Maybe we ought to kill the story with silence. Force all criminals into silence.'

'But what will he do if we ignore him?' Skarre asked. 'We always have to take that into consideration. Will he become more dangerous, even angrier, if he doesn't get any reaction? There's something explosive about it all. We're talking about a little baby, a soap- and milk-smelling little sugar cube weighing seven or eight kilos.'

'You're right,' Sejer said. 'He needs an audience. But it's important that we try to be balanced. I will introduce him as a person with emotions, so he feels understood. We shouldn't step on his toes.'

The inspector turned his back to the window and sat for a moment at his desk. A shy man, he didn't like the prospect of going out into the square, to the sunshine and the heat and the ravenous, sensation-hungry journalists and their curiosity. But, as inspector, it was his job to be the department's public face. To inform and report, in his calm way.

'What are you thinking about?' Skarre asked, in a low, intimate voice.

'About my grandson, actually,' Sejer admitted. 'You know Matteus. He's at the Opera ballet school. They've just learned that one of the pupils will get the chance to make a guest appearance on the main stage. In April.'

'So he's going to audition?'

'Yes,' Sejer said. 'On the tenth of October. For the role of Siegfried in *Swan Lake*.'

'The prince.'

'Yes,' Sejer said. 'A lot's at stake. He really wants to get that role. But there are so many good dancers.'

He looked at the desk pad, a map of the world. His daughter's eighteen-year-old son had been adopted from Somalia, and now he put his finger on this country, shown in yellow. Matteus was four when he came to Norway. Now he was a promising dancer at the ballet school, with an

impressive physique and rock-hard, coffee-coloured muscles.

'But do you think they'll pick a black prince?' Sejer said suddenly, a little concerned. 'Certain roles never seem to come in black.'

'Give me an example,' Skarre said.

'Robin Hood, Peter Pan.'

'You're worried about people's prejudice, but you're the one who's prejudiced.'

Sejer glanced apologetically at his younger colleague. 'I've been thinking about it for years, I can't shake it. It's never been easy for Matteus. At school he was a loner, and had a hard time. Now this: the prince in *Swan Lake* and plenty of stiff competition. Well, we'll see how it turns out, I guess. I won't harp on about it now.'

He got ready to meet the press. Straightened his back and adjusted the knot in his tie, until it was smooth and tight.

'You're thinking about the white swan girls,' Skarre teased. 'In feathers and tulle. And you're afraid Matteus will stand out. But even swans come in black.'

'Really?' the inspector said.

'There's a pond with black swans at the cathedral in Palma,' Skarre said. 'They're obviously much more attractive than the white swans, and they're rarer.'

Sejer headed out to the journalists. Skarre's words made him feel a little more optimistic.

That evening Sejer sat in front of his television, in a comfortable chair by the window, with a pillow supporting his back.

Sejer's dog, a Chinese Shar Pei called Frank, lay at his feet, and was, like most Chinese, dignified, unapproachable and patient. Frank had tiny, closed ears - and thus bad hearing - and a mass of grey, wrinkled skin that made him look like a chamois cloth. His eyes, black and intelligent but with limited vision, were set deep within the wrinkles.