Before the Frost

Henning Mankell

CHAPTER 1

The wind picked up shortly after 9.00 on the evening of August 21, 2001. In a valley to the south of the Rommele Hills, small waves were rippling across the surface of Marebo Lake. The man waiting in the shadows beside the water stretched out his hand to discover the direction of the wind. Virtually due south, he found to his satisfaction. He had chosen the right spot to put out food to attract the creatures he would soon be sacrificing.

He sat on the rock where he had spread out a sweater against the chill. It was a new moon and no light penetrated the thick layer of clouds. Dark enough for catching eels. That's what my Swedish playmate used to say when I was growing up. The eels start their migration in August. That's when they bump into the fishermen's traps and wander the length of the trap. And then the trap slams shut.

His ears, always alert, picked up the sound of a car passing some distance away. Apart from that there was nothing. He took out his torch and directed the beam over the shoreline and water. He could tell that they were approaching. He spotted at least two white patches against the dark water. Soon there would be more.

He switched off the light and tested his mind – exactingly trained – by thinking of the time. Three minutes past nine, he thought. Then he raised his wrist and checked the display. Three minutes past nine – he was right, of course. In another 30 minutes it would all be over. He had learned that humans were not alone in their need for regularity. Wild creatures could even be taught to respect time. It had taken him three months of patience and deliberation to prepare for tonight's sacrifice. He had made himself their friend.

He switched on the torch again. There were more white patches, and they were coming nearer to the shore. Briefly he lit up the tempting meal of broken bread crusts that he had set out on the ground, as well as the two petrol containers. He switched off the light and waited.

When the time came, he did exactly as he had planned. The swans had reached the shore and were pecking at the pieces of bread he had put out for them, oblivious of his presence or by now simply used to him. He set the torch aside and put on his night-vision goggles. There were six swans, three couples. Two were lying down while the rest were cleaning their feathers or still searching for bread.

Now. He got up, took a can in each hand and splashed the swans with petrol. Before they had a chance to fly away, he spread what remained in each of the cans and set light to a clump of dried grass among the swans. The burning petrol caught one swan and then all of them. In their agony, their wings on fire, they tried to fly away

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over the lake, but one by one plunged into the water like fireballs. He tried to fix the sight and sound of them in his memory; both the burning, screeching birds in the air and the image of hissing, smoking wings as they crashed into the lake. Their dying screams sound like broken trumpets, he thought. That's how I will remember them.

The whole thing was over in less than a minute.He was very pleased. It had gone according to plan, an auspicious beginning for what was to come.

He tossed the petrol cans into the water, tucked his jumper into the backpack and shone the torch around the place to be sure he had left nothing behind. When he was convinced he had remembered everything, he took a mobile phone from his coat pocket. He had bought the phone in Copenhagen a few days before.

When someone answered, he asked to be connected to the police. The conversation was brief. Then he threw the phone into the lake, put on his backpack and walked away into the night.

The wind was blowing from the east now and was growing stronger.

CHAPTER 2

It was the end of August and Linda Caroline Wallander wondered if there were any traits that she and her father had in common which yet remained to be discovered, even though she was almost 30 years old and ought to know who she was by this time. She had asked her father, had even tried to press him on it, but he seemed genuinely puzzled by her questions and brushed them aside, saying that she more resembled her grandfather. These "who-am-I-like?" conversations, as she called them, sometimes ended in fierce arguments. They kindled quickly, but they also died away almost at once. She forgot about most of them and supposed that he did too.

There had been one argument this summer which she had not been able to forget. It had been nothing really. They had been discussing their differing memories of a holiday they took to the island of Bornholm when she was little. For Linda there was more than this episode at stake; it was as if through reclaiming this memory she was on the verge of gaining access to a much larger part of her early life. She had been six, maybe seven years old, and both Mona and her father had been there. The idiotic argument had begun over whether or not it had been windy that day. Her father claimed she had been seasick and had thrown up all over his jacket, but Linda remembered the sea as blue and perfectly calm. They had only ever taken this one trip to Bornholm so it couldn't have been a case of their having mixed up several trips. Her mother had never liked boat journeys and her father was surprised she had agreed to this one holiday to Bornholm.

That evening, after the argument had ended, Linda had had trouble falling asleep. She was due to start working at the Ystad police station in two months. She had graduated from the police training college in Stockholm and would have much rather started working right away, but here she was with nothing to do all summer and her father couldn't keep her company since he had used up most of his holiday allowance in May. That was when he thought he had bought a house and would

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need extra time for moving. He had the house under contract. It was in Svarte, just south of the main road, right next to the sea. But the vendor changed her mind at the last minute. Perhaps because she couldn't stand the thought of entrusting her carefully tended roses and rhododendron bushes to a man who talked only about where he was going to put the kennel – when he finally bought a dog. She broke the contract and her father's agent suggested he ask for compensation, but he chose not to. The whole episode was already over in his mind.

He hunted for another house that cold and windy summer, but either they were too expensive or just not the house he had been dreaming of all those years in the flat on Mariagatan. He stayed on in the flat and asked himself if he was ever really going to move. When Linda graduated from the police training college, he drove up to Stockholm and helped her move her things to Ystad. She had arranged to rent a flat starting in September. Until then she could have her old room back.

They got on each other's nerves almost immediately. Linda was impatient to start working and accused her father of not pulling strings hard enough at the station to get her a temporary position. He said he had taken the matter up with Chief Lisa Holgersson. She would have welcomed the extra manpower, but there was nothing in the budget for additional staff. Linda would not be able to start until September 10, however much they might have wanted her to start sooner.

Linda spent the interval getting to know again two old school friends. One day she ran into Zeba, or "Zebra" as they used to call her. She had dyed her black hair red and also cut it short so Linda had not recognised her at first. Zeba's family came from Iran, and she and Linda had been in the same class until secondary school. When they bumped into each other on the street this July, Zeba had been pushing a toddler in a pushchair. They had gone to a café and had a coffee.

Zeba told her that she had trained as a barmaid, but her pregnancy had put a stop to her work plans. The father was Marcus. Linda remembered him,Marcus who loved exotic fruit and who had started his own plant nursery in Ystad at the age of 19. The relationship had soon ended, but the child remained a fact. Zeba and Linda chatted for a long time, until the toddler started screaming so loudly and insistently that they had to leave. But they had kept in touch since that chance meeting, and Linda noticed that she felt less impatient with the hiatus in her life whenever she managed to build these bridges between her present and the past that she had known in Ystad.

As she was going home to Mariagatan after her meeting with Zeba, it started to rain. She took cover in a shopping centre and – while she was waiting for the weather to clear up – she looked up Anna Westin's number in the directory. She felt a jolt inside when she found it. She and Anna had had no contact for ten years. The close friendship of their childhood had ended abruptly when they both fell in love with the same boy. Afterwards, when the feelings of infatuation were long gone, they had tried to resuscitate the friendship, but it had never been the same. Linda hadn't even thought much about Anna the last couple of years. But seeing Zeba again reminded her of her old friend and she was happy to discover that Anna still lived in Ystad.

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Linda called her that evening and a few days later they met. Over the summer they would see each other several times a week, sometimes all three of them, but more often just Anna and Linda. Anna lived on her own as best as she could on her student budget. She was studying medicine.

Linda thought she was almost more shy now than when they were growing up. Anna's father had left home when she was five or six years old and they never once heard from him again. Anna's mother lived out in the country in Löderup, not far from where Linda's grandfather had lived and painted his favourite, unchanging motifs.Anna was apparently pleased that Linda had reestablished contact, but Linda soon realised that she had to tread carefully. There was something vulnerable, almost secretive about Anna and she would not let Linda come too close.

Still, being with her old friends helped to make Linda's summer go by, even though she was counting the days until she was allowed to pick up her uniform from fru Lundberg in the stockroom.

Her father worked flat out all summer, dealing with bank and postoffice robberies in the Ystad area. From time to time Linda would hear about one case, which sounded like a series of well-planned attacks. Once her father had gone to bed, Linda would often sneak a look at his notebook and the case file he brought home. But whenever she asked him about the case directly he would avoid answering. She wasn't a police officer yet. Her questions would have to go unanswered until September.

The days went by. In the middle of one afternoon in August her father came home and said that the estate agent had called about a property near Mossbystrand. Would she like to come and see it with him? She called to postpone a rendezvous she had arranged with Zeba, then they got into her father's Peugeot and drove west. The sea was grey. Autumn was in the offing.

CHAPTER 3

The windows were boarded up, one of the drainpipes stuck out at an angle from the gutter, and several roof shingles were missing. The house stood on a hill with a sweeping view of the ocean, but there was something bleak and dismal about it. This is not a place where my father could find peace, Linda thought. Here he'll be at the mercy of his inner demons. But what are they, anyway? She began to list the chief sources of concern in his life, ordering them in her mind: first there was loneliness, then the creeping tendency to obesity and the stiffness in his joints. And beyond these? She put the question aside for the moment and joined her father as he inspected the outside of the house. The wind blew slowly, almost thoughtfully, in some nearby beech trees. The sea lay far below them. Linda squinted and spotted a ship on the horizon.

Kurt Wallander looked at his daughter.

"You look like me when you squint like that," he said.

"Only then?"

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They kept walking and behind the house came across the rotting skeleton of a leather sofa. A field vole jumped from the rusting springs. Wallander looked around and shook his head.

“Remind me why I want to move to the country.”

“I have no idea. Why do you want to move to the country?”

“I’ve always dreamed of being able to roll out of bed and walk outside to take my morning piss, if you’ll pardon my language.”

She looked at him with amusement. “Is that it?”

“Do I need a better reason than that? Come on, let’s go.”

“Let’s walk round the house one more time.”

This time she looked more closely at the place, as if she were the prospective buyer and her father the agent. She sniffed around like an animal.

“How much?”

“Four hundred thousand.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“That’s what it says,” he said.

“Do you have that much money?”

“No, but the bank has pre-approved my loan. I’m a trusted customer, a policeman who has always been as good as his word. I think I’m even disappointed I don’t like this place.An abandoned house is as depressing as a lonely person.”

They drove away. Linda read a sign by the side of the road: Mossbystrand. He glanced at her.

“Do you want to go there?”

“Yes. If you have time.”

This was where she had first told him of her decision to become a police officer. She was done with her vague plan to refinish furniture or to work in the theatre, as well as with her backpacking trips around the world. It was a long time since she had broken up with her first love, a boy from Kenya who had studied medicine in Lund. He had finally gone back to Kenya and she had stayed put. Linda had looked to her mother, Mona, to provide her with clues about how to live her own life, but all she saw in her mother was a woman who left everything half done.Mona had wanted

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two children and had only had one. She had thought that Kurt Wallander would be the great and only passion of her life, but she had divorced him and married a golf-playing retired banker from Malmö.

Eventually Linda had started looking more closely at her father, the detective chief inspector, the man who has always forgetting to pick her up at the airport when she came to visit. The one who never had time for her. She came to see that in spite of everything, now that her grandfather was dead, he was the one she was closest to. One morning just after she had woken up she realised that what she most wanted was to do what he did, to be a police officer. She had kept her thoughts to herself for a year and talked about it only with her boyfriend.When she was certain of it, she broke up with her boyfriend, flew down to Skåne, took her father to this beach and told him her news. He asked for a minute to digest what she had told him, which had made her suddenly unsure of herself. She had been convinced he would be happy. Watching his broad back, and his thinning hair blowing in the wind she had prepared for a fight, but when he turned and smiled at her, she knew.

They walked down to the beach. Linda poked her foot into some horse prints in the sand. Wallander looked at a gull hanging almost motionless above the sea.

“What are you thinking now?” she said.

“You mean about the house?”

“I mean about the fact that I’ll soon be wearing a police uniform.”

“It’s hard for me even to imagine it. It will probably be upsetting for me, though I don’t feel that way now.”

“Why upsetting?”

“I know what lies in store for you. It’s not hard to put the uniform on, but then to walk out in public is another thing. You’ll notice that everyone looks at you. You become the police officer, the one who is supposed to jump in and take care of any trouble. I know what that feels like.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“I’m not talking about fear. I’m talking about the fact that from the first day you put on the uniform it will be, inescapably, in your life.”

“How do you think I’ll do?”

“You did well at the training college. You’ll do well here. It’s all up to you when it comes down to it.”

They strolled along the beach. She told him she was going to go to Stockholm for a few days.Her graduating class was having a final party, a cadet ball, before everyone departed across the country to their new posts.

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"We never had anything like that,"Wallander said. "I didn't get much of an education, either. I still wonder how they sorted the applicants when I was young. I think they were interested in raw strength. You had to have some intelligence, of course. I do remember that I had quite a few beers with a friend after I graduated. Not in a bar, but at his place on South Förstadsgatan in Malmö."

He shook his head. Linda couldn't tell whether the memory amused or pained him.

"I was still living at home," he said. "I thought Dad was going to keel over when I came home in my uniform."

"How come he hated it so much – you becoming a police officer?"

"I think I only worked it out after he died. He tricked me."

Linda stopped. "Tricked you?"

He looked at her, smiling.

"Well, what I think now is that it was actually fine with him that I chose to be a policeman, but instead of telling me straight out, it amused him to keep me on my toes. And he certainly managed that, as you remember."

"You really believe that?"

"No-one knew him better than I did. I think I'm right. He was a scoundrel through and through.Wonderful, but a scoundrel. The only father I had."

They walked back to the car. The clouds were breaking up and it was getting warmer.Wallander looked at his watch as they were leaving.

"Are you in a hurry?" he said.

"I'm in a hurry to start working, that's all. Why do you ask?"

"There's something I should look into. I'll tell you about it as we go."

They turned on to the road to Trelleborg and turned off by Charlottenlund castle.

"I wanted to drive past since we were in the neighbourhood."

"Drive past what?"

"Marebo Manor, or – more precisely – Marebo Lake."

The road was narrow and windy. Wallander told her about it in a somewhat disjointed and confusing way. She wondered if his written reports were as disorganised as the summary she was getting.

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Yesterday evening a man had called the Ystad police. He had given neither a name nor a location and spoke with an odd accent. He had said that burning swans were flying over Marebo Lake. When the officer on duty had asked him for more details, the man hung up. The conversation was duly logged, but no-one had followed it up because there had been a serious assault case in Svarte that evening, as well as two break-ins in central Ystad. The officer in charge had decided that it was most probably a hoax call, or possibly a hallucination, but when Wallander heard of it from Martinsson he decided it was so bizarre that there might be some truth in it.

"Setting light to swans? Who would do a thing like that?"

"A sadist. Someone who hates birds."

"Do you honestly think it happened?"

Wallander turned on to a road signposted to Marebo Lake and took his time before answering.

"Didn't they teach you that at the training college? That policemen don't think anything, they only want to know. But they have to remain open to every possibility, however improbable. Which would include something like a report about swans on fire. So, yes, it could be true."

Linda didn't ask any more questions. They left the car park and headed down to the lake. Linda trailed behind her father and felt as if she was already wearing a uniform.

They walked round the lake but found no trace of a dead swan. Nor did they see that their progress was all the way observed through the lens of a telescope.

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