

Queenland

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Part 1

May-Britt

I was standing here. Right here, between the trees. Almost like I was a tree myself amongst all the other trunks, with outstretched branches and my roots firmly planted in the ground. I was standing right here, just like this. You don't believe me? I stood here even though my knees were shaking. It started after about half an hour, maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less. I didn't dare put my hand in my pocket to check my phone. It was like my knees couldn't carry my weight. At first they trembled only slightly, like when you have the chills. But once they'd started quivering, it was impossible to get them to stop. I stood there, rustling my leaves like a tree in the forest for maybe another hour.

I could see the right corner of May-Britt's car, the one with the smashed taillight. I know how it happened. Not that it mattered now. The front of the car had hit the mountainside, but I couldn't see that part from where I was standing. I could see the taillight, and part of the trunk, and how they were walking back and forth in yellow safety vests. Cars were parked up and down the road, their blue lights flashing through the branches of the spruce trees. There were two ambulances, police cars, and a fire truck. I kept hearing more and more sirens coming for a while, then it went quiet. I was standing too far away to hear what the people were saying down there. But I understood anyway.

The forest floor was soft. Ants were crawling everywhere with no sign of any order, dragging brown pine needles, caught up in a vast undertaking where their role meant nothing. They didn't even know it themselves—why they did what they were doing, or what they were a part of. I don't know either, not anymore at least, and I don't want to know. I just stood there until my knees buckled beneath me.

I'd been at the store and was walking along the side of the road with a shopping bag in each hand. The fields along the road were freshly plowed, and wagtails were flitting in every direction, looking for worms. This is how I looked: short, dark hair with long bangs. A jean jacket that I'd taken off and tied around my waist. Black pants and a faded t-shirt that was actually Jonny's. I was easily identifiable. If someone had gotten closer, they would've seen more. And if they really dug deeper, for example if they were a police pathologist and I

was lying on a table in a lab, they would've seen that I was a nail-biter and had marks on my face from old piercings, that I was between 35 and 40 years old, that a child had never passed through my body, that I hadn't had intercourse for at least 48 hours, that I hadn't been the victim of any visible violence. Although I guess they couldn't really be certain about that last thing if I was dead.

The police came first. Or maybe the ambulance was already there? That's how it must've been. I guess I spotted the flashing blue lights, and maybe that's when I disappeared between the trees. Or it could have been the sounds. The sirens—far away at first, that blue sound closing in, more and more, until it was right here, because this was exactly where it was heading.

The ambulance was already gone by the time deputy inspector Vigdis Malmstrøm parked by the side of the road. Crime scene investigator Bård Jensen stopped his car right behind hers and turned off the motor, their doors swinging open at the same time. It was chillier outside than expected. The wind that swept through the valley took with it the last traces of winter from the mountaintops. Wood anemones sprouted through the foliage.

The road was empty. Patrol had redirected traffic and cordoned off the area, and white and blue plastic tape fluttered gently in the wind. Vigdis slammed the car door behind her and walked over to the colleague monitoring the scene. William Lund was a young man who'd only been employed in her department for a few weeks. He was swaying a bit but straightened up when she approached and nodded at her gravely. She said hi as she stepped over the tape and another gust of wind blew, sending a few strands of hair across her face. She tucked them away and tightened her ponytail. They were by the highway in the part of town called Nordbygda, just over five miles from the police station. On the way here, she'd passed fields, scattered farms on the hillsides, and the occasional housing development. The river ran alongside the road, and she could hear the distant rush of the spring thaw. The silence that always follows death lingered even though the ambulance had taken the body away. May-Britt Lange.

"I recognize the car," Bård said from beside her.

Vigdis turned to face him.

"Oh?"

"A Dodge Dart. Not many of those. I've seen her driving it around. A blonde woman? I guess she's from the village."

It was an American car, light green, at least a few decades old. It had veered off right where a farm road branched from the highway, as if the driver had been planning to turn off but changed their mind too late and ended up somewhere in between. The slope was covered with moss-covered stones that had probably been dumped there back when the field was cleared. The car had missed a thicket of birch trees on the side of the road, slipped over the mossy stones, and crashed straight into the mountainside, which was so vertical it looked like it had been cut with a cleaver. Maybe it had even been when the road was first built. The old American car was no tin can, though; aside from a large dent in the hood, it had kept most of its shape. But the bumper and grille were crushed, and the windshield was shattered.

“When did the accident occur?” Vigdis asked.

“We reported it at 2:02 PM,” William replied, still standing in the same spot. He looked a bit pale.

“Were you first on the scene?”

“Yes, me and Naima. She’s handling traffic now.”

Vigdis glanced around.

“What reason would there be to drive off the road right here?” she said, mostly to herself.

“Hard to say. Maybe she swerved for an animal,” William answered. Bård kept his eyes fixed on the car.

“Or could she have been on her phone?” he muttered.

“We’ll see when we find it,” Vigdis replied.

She climbed a few feet down the slope to get to the car, the others following. Bård was breathing heavily behind her, but he stopped while she continued, looking at the typical sixties interior through the open car door. The seats were sofa-like both front and back, covered in light blue fabric and black vinyl. The front seat was strewn with shattered glass, and dark bloodstains had seeped into the light fabric.

“I don’t see a phone,” she said, turning to Bård, who was examining the car from a few feet away.

“Was she going fast?” he asked.

“The limit here is fifty, but this is a fast stretch. Lots of people speed up here,” William said from behind them.

Bård teetered on the stones to get over to Vigdis and bent down to look inside.

“Looks like the interior is mostly intact,” he said.

The car was long, low, and angular. You could imagine it cruising through American suburbs in the late sixties, or just as easily parked outside a roadside diner in Norway on a

Saturday night. It evoked memories of aimless cruising, shouting, and laughter on bright summer evenings—anything but this silence.

“The gears are on the wheel,” Bård muttered, pointing. The steering wheel had two circles, one inside the other, and the gear stick was mounted on the right side.

“Check out the seatbelt,” he said.

Vigdis looked. It was a simple lap belt that only went over the hips, not across the chest.

She turned to William, brushing hair from her face as the wind blew it forward.

“Was she wearing a seatbelt?”

“No,” he replied.

“Are you sure? That’s odd. We’ll have to check if it works,” Vigdis said.

“I’m a little curious about her speed,” Bård said, looking up at William. “Are there any skid marks?”

“None that are obvious. We’ll have to take a closer look,” William replied, looking uncertain for a moment.

Vigdis nodded. Bård started moving up toward the roadside but she stayed behind, staring at the door on the right side of the car. The handle had a button you pressed to open it. She was suddenly reminded of the old Beetle she and Atle had driven around one summer all those years ago. It had handles like that, and she vaguely remembered sitting in the passenger seat, feeling so nauseous she almost threw up. The mere thought made her queasy.

“Can I open this door?” she called up to Bård. He gave her a thumbs-up.

She put on her gloves, opened the door, and immediately spotted a purse. It had slid off the back seat and was lying on the floor, red and shiny as a cherry. Its contents were scattered around: a phone, lipstick, a set of keys. The purse gave her a strange feeling, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. She straightened up, closed the door gently, and turned to Bård, who was examining the road.

“No sign of skid marks,” he said, looking over at William. “There’s a wide gravel shoulder here. This car doesn’t have ABS either, so there should be visible marks.”

Vigdis stepped across the stones and climbed up to the shoulder. Bård took out his camera.

“I’d like to take a closer look at the Dodge,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“There’s more to this. If she was speeding and got so distracted that she drove off the road, why aren’t there any skid marks?”

“You think she might have done it on purpose,” Vigdis said.

“Not necessarily. If that were the case, she probably would have floored it. But if she was driving over fifty, why wasn’t there more damage to the car when it hit the cliff?”

Vigdis turned and looked down at the car. She took in the green hood, the chrome details, the door handle. One taillight was broken, but it looked like it had been that way for a while.

“Solid car, I guess,” she said.

“It’s just a gut feeling. I want to check it out,” Bård said.

Vigdis turned toward her colleagues.

“I agree. Let’s secure all the evidence here, then tow the car in. I’ll head back now and open an investigation file.”

“Okay,” William said. The color had returned to his face.

Vigdis held down the police tape and stepped over it. Traffic was still being redirected. It was so quiet she didn’t even hear any birds, only the distant rush of the river and the wind in the treetops. She strode quickly toward her car. For the last few months, she’d been feeling like maybe her time with the police had come to an end, like she had nothing left to give, that her only goal was simply to get through the workdays. Now, she felt a faint thrill in her fingertips; she wanted to keep going with this.

As she got into the car, she spotted her own bag, an old leather purse she’d been meaning to get rid of for ages. It lay half-open in the passenger seat, its contents spilling out. She thought of May-Britt’s red purse. It looked more like a toy or a prop than a grown woman’s bag. Suddenly, it dawned on her what she’d instinctively sensed was off when she saw it.

She pulled out her phone and called Bård. She could see him answering on the other side of the road. When she heard his voice, she said:

“One more thing. The purse.”

Bård didn’t respond. Vigdis looked out at the thin birch trees lining the roadside. They had just a faint dusting of green leaves.

“This might sound silly, but her purse was in the back seat and had slid down to the floor. When I drive, I always put my purse on the seat next to me. It’s easier to grab there. I only put it in the back if someone’s sitting there.”

“You think she might have had a passenger?” Bård asked.

“It’s a possibility, at least,” Vigdis replied.

She started the car and headed back toward the station, passing the housing development she’d moved to six months ago and continuing along the road that stretched out between a freshly plowed field on one side and the spruce forest, dark, dense and tangled, on

the other. In the middle, the smooth asphalt cleaved the landscape in two, pushing spring to one side of a line straight as a ruler's edge. May-Britt Lange had been driving here not long ago, her gaze fixed on something beyond herself, heading toward the point where she would vanish from this world. Her mind was filled with things that mattered in one moment and were meaningless the next. Because no matter what meant nothing and what meant everything, no matter what was important or trivial—all of it ceased to exist the moment she died.

I'm still carrying the two shopping bags when I get back. Jarle is standing outside the workshop, staring at me. "What're you looking at?" I think I ask. It's a bit hard to hear what I say. Jarle doesn't respond, he just turns away and disappears through the door to the workshop. I hear a machine running—the sound gets stronger when the door opens, then fades away again when it shuts. That means they're in there, both of them. I go in the opposite direction, into the house, through the hallway without taking off my shoes, and into the kitchen with the bags. My ears are ringing. It's like everything is taking longer than usual, like being underwater. At the same time, I notice the things around me in a completely different way than I normally do. They're bigger somehow, clearer, I can see them better, as if every single thing has meaning. I open one bag and look inside: five tins of mackerel and a liter of Coke. I must've bought it today, but I don't remember doing it. I put the tins on the kitchen counter, which is covered with dirty glasses and plates where the leftover food hasn't even been scraped off. It's going to take forever to deal with all of this. I turn on the tap and start filling the tub. But instead of starting to wash the glasses, I just stand there, kneading my hands in the foamy water. At first, I just rub them against each other. Then, I pick up the scrub brush and start scrubbing them. I scrub thoroughly under my nails. They're black with dirt.

I've just finished washing the dishes when a car pulls up in the driveway. There's a faint clink as I push the window open. It's one of the neighbors; I recognize the car. I see her legs swing out as I stand frozen in front of the stack of glasses, plates, and cutlery on the kitchen counter. A low buzzing fills my head like there's a bee trapped inside, searching for an exit. I try to remember why the neighbor is here. I know there's a specific reason, but I don't know what it is. Both Jonny and Jarle come out of the workshop and stand side by side, their arms hanging straight down. They look remarkably similar and share the same frame. From a distance, you could mistake one for the other, but up close, they're different.

I don't know if I can hear what's being said or if I simply understand that she's telling them that May-Britt is dead. A low scream escapes me, I hear it myself. I think I fall, or maybe I slip, because suddenly I'm sitting on the floor. My knees are trembling so violently that I just sit there watching them. I don't cry, just shake. Sunspots dance on the walls as the window rattles in the wind. Everything is spinning around me, and I wrap my arms around my knees to hold myself steady.

Soon after, I hear boots in the hallway. I stand up quickly just before the door opens behind me.

"Unn," Jonny says. It's rare for him to use my name and it hits me like a warm blow to the gut. I turn toward him. It feels wrong to feel happy. He's standing in the doorway, hands down at his sides, just like they were outside with Jarle a moment ago. His eyes are bewildered, almost like a child's, and a hiccup escapes me. I turn toward the sink and wipe my face with my hands.

"Did you know?" Jonny asks.

"Know what?" I say.

"That May-Britt's dead."

I shake my head and look down at the sink, at the dirty water.

"What happened?" I ask quietly.

"Accident. She crashed into the mountain just over there, at the turnoff to the highway."

I want to look at Jonny, but I can't. My body feels stuck in front of the sink, I just stare straight ahead and barely manage to mumble:

"What does Jarle say?"

"Dunno," Jonny says, then he turns abruptly and leaves. I don't see his face as he disappears out the door. I stand there, feeling like I'm looking through shattered glass.