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Opening Extract from...

1222

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BEAUFORT SCALE 0

CALM

Wind speed: 0-1 mph

Snowflakes fall vertically, often with a side-to-side motion.

i

As it was only the train driver who died, you couldn't call it a disaster. There were 269 people on board when the train, due to a meteorological phenomenon that I have not yet understood completely, came off the rails and missed the tunnel through Finsenut. A dead train driver comprises only 0.37 per cent of this number of people. Given the circumstances, in other words, we were incredibly lucky. Although many individuals were injured in the collision, these injuries were mostly minor in nature. Broken arms and legs. Concussion. Superficial cuts and grazes, of course; there was hardly one person on board who wasn't physically marked in some way after the crash. But only one fatality. Judging by the screams that ripped through the train minutes after the accident, one could have gained the impression that a total disaster had taken place.

I didn't say anything for quite some time. I was convinced that I was one of only a few survivors, and besides I had a tiny baby I had never seen before in my arms. It came flying from behind when the impact occurred, brushed against my shoulder and hit the wall right in front of my wheelchair before landing on my lap with a soft thud. In a pure reflex action I put my arms around the bundle, which was yelling. I started to get my breath back, and became aware of the dry smell of snow.

The temperature dropped from unpleasant static heat to the level of cold that threatens frostbite within a remarkably short time. The train listed to one side. Not very much, but enough to cause pain in one of my shoulders. I was sitting on the left in the carriage, and was the only person in a wheelchair on the entire

train. A wall of dirty white was pressing against the window on my side. It struck me that the enormous quantities of snow had saved us; without them the train would have jack-knifed.

The cold was debilitating. I had taken off my sweater back in Hønefoss. Now I was sitting here in a thin T-shirt, clutching a baby to my chest as I realized it was snowing into the carriage. The bare skin on my arms was already so cold that the whirling, blue-white flakes lay there for a chilly second before melting. The windows had caved in all along the right-hand side of the carriage.

The wind must have increased in strength during the few minutes that had passed since we stopped to allow people to get on and off the train at Finse station. Only two passengers had disembarked. I had noticed how they leaned forward against the wind as they struggled across the platform towards the entrance to the hotel, but it didn't seem any worse than normal bad weather up in the high mountains. Sitting here now, with my sweater tightly wrapped around the baby and with no chance of being able to reach for my jacket, I was afraid that the wind was so strong and the snow so cold that we would freeze to death within a very short time. I curled my body over the tiny baby as best I could. With hindsight I can't actually say how long I sat like that, without any contact with anyone, without saying anything, with the shouts of the other passengers like disconnected fragments in the dense howling of the storm. Perhaps it was ten minutes. It might have been only a few seconds.

'Sara!'

A woman was glaring furiously at me and the child, which was entirely pink, from its cardigan to its tiny little socks. The small, clenched fists that I was trying to cover with my own hands, along with the furious, yelling face, had a pale pink tinge.

The mother's face, on the other hand, was blood-red. A deep cut in her forehead was bleeding freely. That didn't stop her from grabbing the baby. My sweater fell to the floor. The woman wound a blanket around her daughter with such speed and skill that this

couldn't possibly be her first-born child. She tucked the little head inside the folds, pressed the bundle to her breast and yelled accusingly at me:

'I fell! I was moving along the carriage and I fell!'

'It's OK,' I said slowly; my lips were so stiff that I had difficulty speaking. 'Your daughter isn't hurt, as far as I can tell.'

'I fell,' sobbed the mother, kicking out at me without making contact. 'I dropped Sara. I dropped her!'

Freed from the troublesome child, I picked up my sweater and put it on. Despite the fact that I was on the way to Bergen, where I was expecting pouring rain and a temperature of plus two, I had brought my padded jacket. Eventually I managed to get it down off the hook on which it was still hanging, miraculously. In the absence of a hat, I knotted my scarf around my head. I didn't have any gloves.

'Calm down,' I said, tucking my hands into the sleeves of my jacket. 'Sara's crying. That's a good sign, I think. But I'm more concerned about …'

I nodded in the direction of her forehead. She paid no attention. The child was still crying and was determined not to be consoled by her mother, who was trying to tuck her inside her own fur coat, which was far too tight. Blood was pouring from her forehead, and I could swear it was freezing before it reached the sloping floor, which was now covered in snow and blood and ice. Somebody had trodden on a carton of orange juice. The yellow lump of ice lay in the middle of all the whiteness like a great big egg yolk.

The warmth refused to come back into my body. On the contrary, it was as if my thicker clothing was making the situation worse. True, the numbness was slowly receding, but it was being replaced by piercing, stabbing pains in my skin. I was shaking so hard I had to clench my teeth to avoid biting my tongue. Most of all I wanted to try to turn my wheelchair around so that I was facing all the cries, facing the weeping of a woman who must be right behind me, and the torrent of swear words and curses coming from someone who sounded like a teenage boy whose

voice was just breaking. I wanted to find out how many people were dead, how badly injured the survivors were, and if there was any way of securing the windows against which the wind was pressing as it increased in strength with every passing second.

I wanted to turn around, but I couldn't bring myself to take my hands out of the sleeves of my jacket.

I wanted to look at my watch, but couldn't bear the thought of the cold against my skin. Time was as blurred to me as the whirling snow outside the carriage, a chaos in grey with strips of blue-lilac glimmers from the lights that had started to flicker. I couldn't grasp the idea that it was possible to be so cold. More time must have passed since the crash than I thought. It must be colder than the train driver had said over the loudspeaker on our way into Finse. He had warned the smokers: it was minus twenty, and not a particularly clever idea to try to grab a couple of minutes' pleasure. He must have been wrong. I have experienced temperatures of minus twenty many times. It has never felt like this. This was a deadly cold, and my arms refused to obey me when I decided to check the time in spite of everything.

'Hello there!'

A man had forced open the automatic glass doors leading to the luggage racks. He stood on the sloping floor with his legs wide apart, wearing a snowmobile suit, a thick leather hat with earflaps and a pair of bright yellow ski goggles.

'I've come to rescue you!' he bellowed, pulling his goggles down around his neck. 'Just take it easy. It's not far to the hotel.'

His accent indicated that he was local.

I couldn't quite work out what one man was going to be able to do in this carriage full of wailing people. And yet it was as if his very presence had a calming effect on us all. Even the pink baby stopped crying. The boy who had been swearing non-stop since the crash yelled out one last salvo:

'It's about fucking time somebody turned up! Fucking hell!'

Then he shut up.

I might have fallen asleep. Perhaps I *was* in fact on the point of

freezing to death. At any rate, the cold was no longer so troublesome. I've read about that sort of thing. Even if I can't claim that I felt the pleasant drowsiness that is said to precede death from the cold, my teeth had at least stopped chattering. It was as if my body had decided on a change of strategy. It no longer wanted to fight and shake. Instead I could feel muscle after muscle giving in and relaxing. At least in that part of my body where I still have feeling.

I'm not sure if I fell asleep.

But something has disappeared from my memory. The rescuer must have helped quite a lot of people before I gave a sudden start.

'What the hell …'

He was bending over me. His breath was burning against my cheek, and I think I smiled. Immediately after that he squatted down and examined my knees. Or rather my thigh, as I would soon learn.

'Are you disabled? Are your legs crippled? From before, I mean?'

I didn't have the strength to answer.

'Johan,' he shouted suddenly, without getting up. 'Johan, over here!'

He was no longer alone, then. I could hear the sound of an engine through the storm, and the gusts of wind from outside carried with them the faint smell of exhaust fumes. The roaring noise came and went, grew louder and then faded away, and I came to the conclusion that there must be several snowmobiles at work. The man called Johan knelt down and scratched his beard when he saw what his friend was pointing at.

'You've got a ski pole through your thigh,' he said eventually.

'What?'

'You've got a ski pole right through your thigh.'

He shook his head in fascination.

'The loop snapped off when it hit you and caught on your trousers, but the pole itself …'

His head vanished from my field of vision.

'It's sticking out about twenty centimetres on the other side,' he

called out. 'You've bled a bit. Well, quite a lot, actually. Are you cold? I mean, are you colder than … It looks as if the pole is slightly bent, so …'

'We can't pull it out,' said the man with the yellow goggles around his neck, so quietly that I only just heard him. 'She'd bleed to death. Who's been stupid enough to put a pair of poles in here?'

He looked around accusingly.

'We need to get her out of here right now, Johan. But what the hell are we going to do with the pole?'

I don't really remember anything else.

And so of the 269 people on board train number 601 from Oslo to Bergen on Wednesday 14 February 2007, only one person lost his life in the crash. He was driving the train, and can hardly have grasped what was happening before he died. Incidentally, we didn't crash into the mountain itself. At the foot of Finsenut, a concrete pipe has been sunk into the rock, as if someone thought that the ten-kilometre tunnel wasn't long enough as it was, and therefore needed to be supplemented with several metres of ugly concrete in the otherwise beautiful landscape around the lake known as Finsevann. Subsequent investigations would show that the actual derailment occurred exactly ten metres from the opening. The cause was the fact that the rails had acquired a comprehensive covering of ice. Many people have tried to explain to me how such a thing could happen. Two goods trains had passed in the opposite direction during the course of an hour before the accident happened. As I understand it, they had pushed the warmer air in the tunnel out into the increasingly colder air outside. Just like in a bicycle pump, somebody told me. Since it is more difficult for cold air to retain moisture than it is for warm air, the condensation from inside turns to droplets, which fall to the ground and turn into ice. And more ice. So much ice that not even the weight of a train can crush it in time. Since then I have thought that although I couldn't see the point of the concrete pipe at the time, it was

probably put there to create a gradual cooling of the air inside the tunnel. So far, nobody has been able to tell me if I am right.

It lies far beyond my comprehension that a weather phenomenon that must have been known since time immemorial can derail a train on a railway that has been in use since 1909. I live in a country with countless tunnels. We Norwegians should have a good knowledge of snow and ice and storms in the mountains. But in this hi-tech century with planes and nuclear submarines and the ability to place a vehicle on Mars, with the ability to clone animals and to carry out laser surgery that is accurate to the nearest nanometre, something as simple and natural as the air from a tunnel coming into contact with a snowstorm can derail a train and smash it against a huge concrete pipe.

I don't understand it.

Afterwards, the accident was referred to as the Finse disaster. Since it wasn't in fact a disaster but rather a major accident, I have come to the conclusion that the designation has been coloured by everything else that happened in and around the railway station 1222 metres above sea level in the hours and days following the collision, as the storm increased to the worst in over one hundred years.

ii

I was lying on the floor in a shabby hotel reception area when I came round. An all-pervasive smell of wet wool and stew assailed my nostrils. Just above my head a stuffed reindeer was staring glassily into the distance. Without looking I was aware that the room was full of people, weeping, sitting in silence or babbling agitatedly.

Slowly I tried to sit up.

'Don't do that,' said a voice I recognized from the train.

'I have to get going,' I said blearily to the reindeer.

The man in the blue snowmobile suit suddenly appeared in my

field of vision. Bending down with his head between the animal and me, he looked as if he had antlers.

'You're going to have to stay here for a while,' he said with a grin. 'Like the rest of us. My name is Geir Rugholmen, by the way. What's yours?'

I didn't reply.

I wasn't planning on making acquaintances during this trip. True, Finse has no road links with the outside world. Even during the summer the historic Rallarvegen is closed to general traffic. In the winter it is, at best, a snowmobile track. With a wrecked train across the railway track on the Bergen line and a snowstorm that to all intents and purposes appeared to be gaining in strength, I still thought it was only a question of time before Norwegian State Railways' enormous snow ploughs would be able to battle their way up from Haugastøl or Ustaoset in the east, and would move us all safely. I wasn't going to get to Bergen this time, but none of us would be staying in Finse for very long.

iii

It turned out there were eight doctors among the passengers from the train that had crashed. A fortunate over-representation that could be explained by the fact that seven of them were due to take part in a conference at Haukeland University Hospital on the treatment of burns. I was also on my way there when the train was derailed. Not to the conference on burns, of course, but to see an American specialist on the complications following a broken spine. Since I was shot in the back and paralysed from the waist down one night between Christmas and New Year in 2002, the rest of my body has begun to suffer. It was a while before I discovered that I couldn't hear as well as I used to. I banged my head on the floor when the shot hit me, and the doctors had concluded that the aural nerves had been damaged in the fall. It doesn't matter. I don't have

to use a hearing aid, not at all, and I get by perfectly well. Particularly in view of the fact that I rarely talk to other people, and that television sets are equipped with a volume control button.

But I do have breathing difficulties from time to time. And sometimes a pain like a kind of cramp stabs through the small of my back. That kind of thing. No more than bagatelles, really, but I had allowed myself to be persuaded. This American was supposed to be brilliant, after all.

So seven of the eight doctors from the train were specialists in a type of injury from which none of us was suffering. The eighth, a woman in her sixties, was a gynaecologist. Like an unexpected gift from the gods, all the doctors had got off very lightly in the accident. And even if they were in fact experts in skin and women's reproductive organs, they were still working their way blithely through cuts and broken bones.

I myself was taken care of by the dwarf.

He couldn't have been more than 140 centimetres tall. As if to compensate for this, he was exactly the same width. His head was far too big for his body, and his arms were even shorter, comparatively speaking, than those I had seen in persons of restricted growth before. I tried not to stare.

I stay at home most of the time. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that I can't cope with people staring at me. Bearing in mind that I am a middle-aged woman of normal appearance in a wheelchair, and therefore should not really be of particular interest to anyone, I could only imagine what it was like for this man. I saw it immediately, as he walked towards me. Someone had placed a cushion beneath my head. I was no longer compelled to gaze up at the reindeer's muzzle, where the fur had worn away and rough seams revealed the taxidermist's appalling work. As the little doctor moved through the room with an odd, rolling gait, the crowd parted before him like Moses parting the Red Sea. Every conversation died away; even the complaints and cries of pain stopped as he passed by.

They just stared. I closed my eyes.

'Mmm,' he said, kneeling down beside me. 'And what have we here?'

His voice was surprisingly deep. I had expected some kind of helium voice, as if he were an entertainer at a children's party. As it would be extremely impolite not to look at the doctor when he was speaking to me, and my closed eyes might suggest that I felt worse than I actually did, I opened them.

'Magnus Streng,' he said, taking my reluctant right hand in a thick, stubby paw.

I mumbled my name and couldn't help thinking that the doctor's parents must have had a very particular sense of humour. Magnus. The Great One.

He peered at me for a moment, and raised his index finger. Then his face broke into a huge smile. 'The policewoman,' he said enthusiastically. 'You were the one who got shot in Nordmarka a few years ago, weren't you?' Once again his face acquired an expression of exaggerated thoughtfulness. This time he placed his finger against his temple before smiling even more broadly. 'By that corrupt chief of police, isn't that right? It was—'

'It was a long time ago,' I interrupted him. 'You have a good memory.'

He toned down the smile and concentrated on my leg. Only now did I notice that the omnipresent Geir Rugholmen had sat down next to the doctor. The snowmobile suit was gone. His woolly jumper must have dated back to the war. His bare elbows protruded through holes in both sleeves. His knee breeches had presumably been blue once upon a time, but had faded to an indefinable dark-greyish shade. The man smelled of wood smoke.

'Where's my chair?' I asked.

'The pole just slipped out,' Geir Rugholmen said to the doctor, adjusting his plug of snuff with his tongue. 'We weren't going to pull it out, but we had to break it off outside the wound before we

brought her here. And it … it just slipped out. But she's not bleeding so much any more.'

'Where's my chair?'

'I know we should have left the pole in,' said Rugholmen.

'Where's her chair?' asked Dr Streng, without taking his eyes off the wound; he had ripped open my trouser leg, and I had the feeling that his hands were quick and precise in spite of their size and shape.

'Her chair? Her wheelchair? It's on the train.'

'I want my chair,' I said.

'Bloody hell, we can't go back and …'

The doctor looked up. He fished a pair of enormous horn-rimmed spectacles out of his breast pocket, put them on, and said quietly: 'I would very much appreciate it if someone could fetch this lady's wheelchair. As soon as humanly possible.'

'Have you any idea what the weather's like out there? Are you aware—'

The index finger, no longer quite so comical, pushed the spectacles up the doctor's nose before he fixed his gaze on Rugholmen.

'Fetch the chair. Now. I imagine you would find it quite unpleasant if your legs were left behind on a train while you yourself were helplessly carted off. Having seen you and your excellent colleagues working out in the storm, I presume it's a relatively simple matter to go and fetch something that is so important to our friend here.'

Once again, that big smile. I got the feeling that the man consciously made use of his handicap. As soon as you began to overlook the circus-like appearance, he made sure he resembled a clown once again. His mouth didn't even need the traditional red paint, his lips were thick enough as they were. The whole thing was very confusing. Which must have been the intention. At any rate, Geir Rugholmen got reluctantly to his feet, mumbled something and headed for the porch, where he had left his outdoor clothes.

'A man of the mountains,' said Dr Streng contentedly before taking his eyes off him. 'And this wound looks fantastic. You've been lucky. A good dose of antibiotics just to be on the safe side, and you'll be fine.'

I sat up. It took him only a few seconds to bandage my thigh.

'We really have been lucky,' he said, tucking his spectacles back in his pocket. 'This could have gone very badly indeed.'

I wasn't sure whether he meant my injury, or the accident itself. He brushed the palms of his hands against each other as if I had been covered in dust. Then he waddled off to the next patient, a terrified eight-year-old boy with his arm in a temporary sling. As I tried to haul myself over to the reception desk in order to find some support for my back, a man positioned himself in the middle of the floor in the big room, his legs spread wide apart. He hesitated for a moment, then used a chair to help him jump up on top of the five- or six-metre-long rough table that was standing by the windows facing south-west. Since he was several kilos overweight, he almost fell off. When he had regained his balance, I realized who he was. Around his neck he was wearing a red and white Brann football club scarf.

'My dear friends,' he said in a voice that suggested he was used to speaking to large groups of people, 'we have all suffered an extremely traumatic experience!'

He sounded absolutely delighted.

'Needless to say, our thoughts go out to Einar Holter's family, first and foremost. Einar was driving our train today. I didn't know him, but I have already been told that he was a family man, a much loved—'

'His family hasn't yet been informed about the accident,' a woman's voice interrupted loudly from the other side of the room.

I couldn't see her from where I was sitting, but I liked her immediately.

'It's not exactly appropriate to hold a eulogy under the circumstances,' she went on. 'Besides which, I think—'

'Of course,' said the man on the table, holding the palms of his hands up to the congregation in a gesture of resignation. 'I merely thought it was the right moment, now that we know we are all safe and no one has been seriously injured, to remind ourselves that in our mutual rejoicing at—'

'Brann are a crap team,' someone yelled, and I immediately recognized the tough kid from my carriage.

The man on the table smiled and opened his mouth to say something.

'*Brann are crap*,' the boy repeated, and burst into song. 'Vålerengaaa, you are my religion, you're one in a million, a proud old tradition!'

'Great,' said the man with the Brann scarf, smiling contentedly. 'It's good to see that young people today are committed to something. And it really does seem as if things are beginning to sort themselves out, both in here and out there as well.'

He pointed vaguely towards the entrance. I had no idea what was going on over there.

'I merely wanted to point out …'

I almost felt sorry for the bloke. People were sniggering. A few were booing quietly as if they didn't want to give themselves away, but did want to vent their contempt. This might have had some effect on the man. At any rate he had abandoned the joyous hallelujah tone when he tried to complete the sentence.

'… that for anyone who is interested, I will be holding a prayer meeting in the hobby room in quarter of an hour. If anyone needs help with the stairs, please let me know. I am surely not alone in—'

'Shut your gob!'

The boy wasn't giving up. He was on his feet now. He was standing only a couple of metres from where I was sitting, and had formed a megaphone with his hands.

'You!' I said sharply. 'Yes, you!'

The boy turned to face me. He couldn't have been more than fourteen.

His gaze was searingly familiar.

Perhaps they know it. Perhaps that's why they always try to hide their eyes, darting to and fro, behind their hair or beneath half-closed eyelids. This boy had pulled his cap down way too low over his forehead.

'Yes, you,' I said, waving him over. 'Come here. Shut up and come over here.'

He didn't move.

'Do you want me to tell everybody why you're here, or would you like to come a little bit closer? So that we can maintain a certain level of … discretion?'

Hesitantly he took a step towards me. Stopped.

'Come here,' I said, in a slightly more friendly tone of voice.

Another step. And another.

'Sit down.'

The boy leaned back against the reception desk and slid slowly down onto his bottom. He wrapped his arms around his knees, not looking at me.

'You're on the run,' I stated quietly, not bothering to ask. 'You live in a care home for young people. You've had several foster homes, but it all goes pear-shaped every single time.'

'Bullshit,' he mumbled.

'I'm not really interested in having a discussion about it. A fourteen-year-old like you, travelling alone … Or perhaps you're part of a fairytale family who just decided to take a trip, as the weather was so nice? Can you show me who you're travelling with?'

'I'm not fourteen.'

'Thirteen, then.'

'I'm fifteen, for fuck's sake.'

'In a year or two, maybe.'

'In January! A month ago! Do you want proof, or something?'

Furiously he pulled his wallet out of a pair of jeans that were way too big for him. It was made of nylon in a camouflage pattern, and was fastened to his belt by a chain. As he pulled out a credit

card I noticed that his cuticles were so badly bitten they were bloody.

'Wow,' I said, without looking at him. 'Credit cards, no less. All grown up. We'll say fifteen, then. And now you're going to listen to me. What's your name?'

He was just as interested in making winter friends as I was.

'What's your name?' I repeated sharply, catching a glimpse of the name on the card before he pushed it back in his wallet.

He glared silently and absently from beneath the peak of his cap. There was a stale smell all around the boy, as if someone had washed his clothes and not bothered to air them properly before putting them away.

'Adrian,' I said wearily. 'Right, now I'm going to tell you something.'

The boy gave a start, ran his hand over his cap and stared at me for three long seconds.

Adrian was fifteen years old. I knew nothing about him, and yet I knew everything. He was hardly in any condition to fight, he probably didn't weigh any more than fifty kilos under those oversized clothes. He was foul-mouthed. A thief, without a shadow of doubt, and I was convinced that he was already well on the way into a destructive cycle of substance abuse. A petty criminal, a little shit who hadn't yet learned to hide his expression.

'Are you psychic, or something? How do you know—'

'Yes, I am psychic. Now just shut up. Are you hurt?'

He moved his head a fraction. I interpreted this as a no.

'Your chair!'

Geir Rugholmen brought with him a cold draught from outside. Only now did I realize that the large lobby was gradually emptying.

'We need to find a room for you as well,' he said, putting together my wheelchair with surprising expertise. 'Most people have already got a bed here at the hotel. We've used the private apartments as well.'

He waved vaguely in the direction of the stairs before attaching the last wheel.

'Fortunately the hotel was more or less empty. It's not exactly high season. It will soon be the winter break; things would have been much more difficult then. We've moved most of the youngest and fittest adults over to the buildings around the station. So now we need to find a room for …'

He broke off and squinted at Adrian.

'Are you two together?' he asked sceptically.

'In a way,' I said. 'For the time being.'

'I think we've got space for you in one of the closest rooms. There are already two people in there, but with a mattress on the floor your pal here will also be able to—'

'Let's make a start then,' shouted the man wearing the Brann scarf, beckoning to a group of youngsters who were sitting at the table eating what I thought was stew, but which I later found out was hot soup. 'We're gathering down here, everybody! We've organized coffee and biscuits too!'

The response obviously hadn't matched up to his expectations. The priest eagerly grabbed the arm of a woman passing by, but let go immediately when what he presumably thought was a proper mountain ski hood turned out to be a hijab.

The teenagers continued eating in silence. They were in no hurry. Quite the reverse, in fact; without even looking at the man, they casually helped themselves to more soup. Somebody started humming an incredibly irritating nursery rhyme. One of the girls giggled and blushed.

'Can't somebody put a bullet in that fucking priest's head,' mumbled Adrian, before raising his voice: 'And I'm not fucking sleeping in the same room as other people. I'm just not.'

He ambled over to the table and threw himself down on a chair as far from the others as possible.

Geir Rugholmen scratched the dense, blue-black stubble on his chin. 'Quite the little hard man, your pal.'

He moved to help me up.

'No,' I said. 'I can manage. He's not my pal.'

'Good job.'

'Don't worry about him.'

'I'll do my best. Wouldn't you like me to—'

'No!'

My tone was sharper than necessary. As it often is. As it almost always is, if I'm perfectly honest.

'OK, OK! Take it easy! God. I only wanted to—'

'And I don't need a bed either,' I said, adjusting my position. 'I'd rather just stay here.'

'Tonight? You're going to sit in that chair all night? Here?'

'When are you expecting help to arrive?'

Geir Rugholmen straightened up. He placed his hands on his hips and looked down his nose at me. That look from those who are standing up, the tall ones, the ones whose bodies work perfectly.

Strictly speaking, I think it's perfectly OK to have mobility problems. I want to be immobile, that's the way I've chosen to live. The chair doesn't really hamper me significantly in my everyday life. It can be weeks between the occasions on which I leave my apartment. The problems arise when I am forced to go out. People are just desperate to help me all the time. Lifting, pushing, carrying.

That's why I chose the train. Flying is a complete nightmare, I have to say. The train is simpler. Less touching. Fewer strange hands. The train offers at least some degree of independence.

Except when it's derailed and crashes.

And I really don't like those looks, up and down, from those who are healthy and mobile. That's why I didn't meet his gaze. Instead I closed my eyes and pretended I was settling down for a sleep.

'I don't think you've really grasped the situation,' said Geir Rugholmen.

'We're snowed in on the mountain.'

'You could put it that way. We certainly are snowed in. At the moment a full storm is raging out there, with gusts of hurricane force. A hurricane on Finse! It's not exactly an everyday occurrence. We're in the lee of—'

'I'm really only interested in one thing: when can we expect someone to come and get us?'

There was complete silence. But I knew he was still there. The smell of wood smoke and old wool was equally strong.

'I asked you a question,' I said quietly, keeping my eyes closed. 'If you can't answer, that's fine, of course. Personally I was thinking of having a little nap.'

'You're like an ostrich.'

'What?'

'You think nobody can see you if you shut your eyes.'

'The ostrich buries its head in the sand, as far as I know. And in any case, that's supposed to be a myth.'

I gave an enormous yawn, still with my eyes closed.

'Nobody can say I haven't tried,' said Geir Rugholmen sourly. 'If you're just going to sit here being awkward, well … Sod you.'

His ski boots clumped across the floor and disappeared.

I'm good at that sort of thing.

I might even have dozed off for a little while.