

3:45 a.m.

Daisy was shivering so much she could hardly hold the ladder. Elton climbed the rungs, grasping a pair of garden shears in one frozen hand. The exterior lamps shone through the filter of falling snow, ~~giving a light that Elton augmented with a torch he carried in his~~ mouth. Kit watched from the garage door, ~~his teeth chattering. Nigel was inside the garage,~~ arms wrapped around the burgundy leather briefcase.

The ladder was propped up against the side of Steepfall. Telephone wires emerged at the corner of the house and ran at roof height to the garage. From there, Kit knew, they connected with an underground pipe that ran to the main road. Severing the cables here would cut off the entire property, ~~from telephone contact.~~ It was just a precaution, but Nigel had insisted, and Kit had found ladder and shears in the garage.

~~Kit felt as if he were in a nightmare. He~~ had known that tonight's work would be dangerous, but in his worst moments he had never anticipated that he would be standing outside his family home while a gangster cut the phone lines and a master thief clutched a case containing a virus that could kill them all.

Elton took his left hand off the ladder, balancing cautiously, and held the shears in both hands. He leaned forward, caught a cable between the blades, pressed the handles together, and dropped the shears.

They landed points-down in the snow six inches from Daisy, who let out a yell, ~~of shock.~~

"Hush!" Kit said in a stage whisper.

"He could have killed me!" Daisy protested.

"You'll wake everyone!"

Elton came down the ladder, retrieved the shears, and climbed up again.

They had to go to Luke and Lori's cottage and take the Toyota Land Cruiser, but Kit knew they could not go immediately. They were nearly falling down with exhaustion, ^{and} worse, ~~Kit was not sure he could find Luke's place. He had almost lost his way looking for Steepfall. The snow was falling as hard as ever. If they tried to go on now, they would get lost or die of exposure or both.~~ They had to wait until the blizzard eased, or until daylight gave them a better chance of finding their way. ^{Meanwhile, in case they were discovered} ~~And, to make absolutely sure no one could find out that they were here, they were cutting off the phones.~~

This time, Elton succeeded in snipping the lines. As he came down the ladder, Kit picked up the loose cable ends, twisted them into a bundle, and draped them against the garage wall where they were less conspicuous

Elton carried the ladder into the garage and dropped it. It clanged on the concrete floor. "Try not to make so much noise!" Kit said.

Nigel looked around the bare stone walls of the converted stable. "We can't stay here."

Kit said: "Better in here than out there."

"We're cold and wet and there's no heat. We could die."

~~Elton said: "Bloody right."~~

"We'll run the engines of the cars," Kit said. "That will warm the place."

"Don't be stupid," Elton said. "The fumes will kill us long before the heat warms us."

~~"We could drive the Ford outside and sit in it."~~

Daisy said: "Fuck that. I want a cup of tea and hot food, ~~and a dram~~. I'm going in the house."

"No!" The thought of these three in his family home filled Kit with horror. ~~It would be like taking mad dogs home.~~ And what about the briefcase with its virulent contents? How could he let them carry that into the kitchen?

Elton said: "I'm with her. Let's go into the house."

~~Kit wished bitterly that he had not told them how to cut off the phones.~~ "But how ^{well} would I explain you?" ~~asked Kit.~~

"They'll all be asleep."

"And if it's still snowing when they get up?"

Nigel said: "Here's what you say. ~~You don't know us. You met us~~ ^{we met} on the road. Our car ^{was} ~~is~~ stuck in a snowdrift a couple of miles away. You took pity on us and brought us back ~~here.~~ ^{with you.}"

"They aren't supposed to know I've left the house!"

"Say you went out for a drink."

~~Elton said: "Or to meet a girl."~~

Daisy said: "How old are you, anyway? You need to ask Daddy before you can go out at night?"

~~It infuriated Kit to be condescended to by a thug like Daisy.~~ "It's a question of what they'll believe, you brain-dead gorgon. ^{he} ~~Who~~ ^{shouted Kit,} would be daft enough to go out in a snowstorm

~~and drive miles~~ for a drink, when there's plenty of booze in the house ~~anyway?~~"

~~She retorted:~~ "Someone daft enough to lose a quarter of a million pounds at blackjack."

"You'll think of a plausible story, Kit," said Nigel. "Let's get inside, before our fucking feet drop off."

"You left your disguises in the van. ~~My family will see your real faces.~~"

"It doesn't matter. We're just ^{victims of the storm.} ~~unfortunate stranded motorists.~~ There'll be hundreds like us, ^{Your family} ~~it will be on the news.~~ They won't connect us with the ^{robbers,} ~~gang who robbed the~~ ~~laboratory.~~"

"I don't like it," Kit said. ~~He was scared of defying these three criminals, but desperate enough to do it.~~ "I'm not taking you into the house."

"We're not asking your permission," Nigel said contemptuously. "If you don't show us the way, we'll find it ourselves."

What they did not understand, Kit thought despairingly, was that his family were all very smart. ~~Nigel, Elton and Daisy would have difficulty fooling them.~~ "You don't look like a group of innocent people who got stranded."

"What do you mean?" Nigel said.

"You're not the average Scots family," Kit told him. "You're a Londoner, Elton's black, and Daisy's a bloody psychopath. My sisters may notice that."

"We'll just be polite and ^{as little as possible,} ~~not say much.~~"

"~~Say~~ ^{ing} nothing at all would be the best plan. Any rough stuff and the game will be up."

"Of course. We want them to think we're harmless."

"Especially Daisy." Kit turned to her. "You keep your hands to yourself."

Nigel backed Kit. "Yeah, Daisy, try not to give the bloody game away. Act like a girl, just for a couple of hours, okay?"

She said: "Yeah, yeah," and turned away.

Kit realised that at some point in the argument he had given in. "Shit," he said. "Just remember that you need me to show you where the Land Cruiser is. If any harm comes to my family, you can forget it."

~~With a fatalistic feeling that he was helpless to stop himself hurtling towards disaster,~~
he led them around the house to the back door. It was unlocked, as always. As he opened it, he said: "All right, Nellie, it's me," ~~so that the dog would not bark.~~

~~When he entered the boot lobby,~~ warm air washed over him like a blessing. Behind him, he heard Elton say: "Oh, god, that's better."

Kit turned and hissed: "Keep your voices down, please!" ~~He felt like a schoolteacher trying to quiet hoodless children in a museum.~~ ^{lead them} "The longer they stay asleep, the easier it will be for us, ~~don't you see that?"~~ He ~~passed through the lobby and~~ into the kitchen. "Be nice, Nelly," he said quietly. "These are friends."

~~The others followed him in. Nigel patted Nellie, and~~ the dog wagged her tail. They took off their wet coats ^{and} Nigel stood the briefcase on the kitchen table ~~and said:~~ "Put the kettle on, Kit."

Kit put down his laptop and turned on the small TV set on the kitchen counter. He found ^{the} ~~news channel. While waiting for the weather forecast, he filled the kettle.~~

A pretty girl on the screen said: "An unexpected change in the prevailing wind has brought a surprise blizzard to most of Scotland."

~~Daisy said: "You can say that again." He pulled off soaking wet socks.~~

~~The newsreader spoke in a seductive voice, as if inviting the viewer back to her place for a nightcap.~~ "In some parts, more than twelve inches of snow fell in as many hours."

"I'll give you twelve inches in some parts," said Elton.

They were relaxing, Kit saw with trepidation. He felt even more tense than before.

^{weatherman described}
The newsreader ~~told of~~ car accidents, blocked roads and abandoned vehicles. "To hell with all that," Kit said irately. "When's it going to stop?"

"Make the tea, Kit," said Nigel.

Kit put out mugs, a sugar bowl, and a jug of milk. Nigel, Daisy and Elton sat around the scrubbed-pine table, just like family. The kettle boiled. Kit made a pot of tea and a cafetière of coffee.

~~A weather forecaster appeared in front of a chart. They all went quiet.~~ "Tomorrow morning the blizzard will die away as quickly as it came," ^{the weatherman said.} ~~he said.~~

"Yes!" Nigel said triumphantly.

^a
"The thaw will follow before midday."

"Be precise!" Nigel said in exasperation. "What time before midday?"

"We can still make it," Elton said. He poured tea and added milk and sugar.

~~Kit shared his optimism.~~ "We should leave at first light," ^{Kit} ~~he said.~~ ~~Seeing the way~~
^{cheerily}
~~ahead cheered him up.~~

"I hope we can," Nigel said.

~~Elton sipped his tea. "By the cringe, that's better. Lazarus must have felt like this when he was raised from the dead."~~

Daisy stood up. She opened the door to the dining room and peered into the gloom.

"What room is this?"

Kit said: "Where do you think you're going?"

"I need a shot of booze in this tea." She turned on the light and went in. A moment later, she made a triumphant noise, and Kit heard her opening the cocktail cabinet.

Kit's father walked into the kitchen from the hall, wearing grey pyjamas and a black cashmere dressing-gown. "Good morning," he said. "What's all this?"

"Hello, Daddy," Kit said. "Let me explain."

Daisy came in from the dining room holding a full bottle of Glenmorangie in her gloved hand.

Stanley raised his eyebrows at her. "Do you want a glass of whisky?" he said.

"No, thanks," she replied. "I've got a whole bottle here."

4:15 a.m.

Toni called Stanley ~~Oxenford~~ at home as soon as she had a spare moment. ~~There was nothing he could do, but he would want to know what was happening. And she did not want him to learn about the break-in from the news.~~

It was a conversation she dreaded. Last time they spoke, he had said: "I adore you." Now she had to tell him that she was responsible for a catastrophe that could ruin his life. ~~How could he continue to love her after that?~~

She dialled his number ~~and got the "disconnected" tone.~~ ^{but it didn't ring.} His phone must be out of order. Perhaps the snow had brought down the lines. ~~She was relieved not to have to give him the dreadful news.~~

He did not carry a mobile, but there was a phone in his Ferrari. She dialled that and left a message. ~~"Stanley, this is Toni. Bad news - a break-in at the lab. Please call my mobile as soon as you can." He might not get the message until it was too late, but at least she had tried.~~ ^{describing the} ^{and asking her to call her}

She stared impatiently out of the windows of the Great Hall ~~into the darkness.~~ Where were the police with their snowplough? ~~They would be coming from the south, from Inverburn, on the main road. She guessed that the plough travelled at about fifteen miles per hour, depending on the depth of snow it had to clear. The trip should take~~ ^{n't} ^{more than} (twenty or thirty

minutes. It should be here by now. ~~Come on, come on!~~ *As soon as it arrived she hoped the police issued continue north and find the van.*
 She hoped it would leave here almost immediately, and get on the northward track of

~~the Hibernian Telecom van.~~ ^{IT} ~~The van~~ would be easy to spot, with the name in large white letters on ^{the} a dark background.

But the thieves might have thought of that, ~~she realised suddenly.~~ In fact, they had ~~almost certainly planned to switch~~ ^{ed} vehicles soon after leaving the Kremlin. ~~That was how she would have done it. She would have picked a nondescript car, something like a Ford Fiesta that looked the same as a dozen other models, and left it in a car park, outside a supermarket or a railway station. The thieves would drive straight to the car park and be in a completely different vehicle a few minutes after leaving the scene of the crime.~~

The thought dismayed her. How ~~then~~ would the police identify the thieves? They would have to check every car ^{on the road.} ~~and see whether the occupants were three men and a woman~~

She wondered ~~agitatedly~~ whether there was anything ^{help.} she could do to ~~hurry the~~ ~~process.~~ Assuming the gang had switched vehicles somewhere near here, what were the possibilities? They needed a location where a vehicle might be parked for several hours without attracting attention. There were no railway stations or supermarkets in the vicinity. ~~What was there?~~ She went to the reception desk and got a notepad and ballpoint pen. She made a list: *7 places with large parking lots.*

- *Inverburn Golf Club*
- *Dew Drop Inn*
- *Happy Eater*
- *Greenfingers Garden Centre*
- *Scottish Smoked Fish Products*

• *Williams Press (Printing & Publishing)*

~~She did not want Carl Osborne to know what she was doing.~~ Carl had returned from his car to the warmth of the hall, and ~~was listening to everything.~~ ^{she didn't want him to see what she} Unknown to him, he could ~~no longer phone from his car—Steve had sneaked out and taken the keys from the ignition~~ ^{was doing,} but all the same, Toni was taking no chances.

(She spoke quietly to Steve. "We're going to do some detective work," ~~she said.~~ She tore her sheet of paper into two and gave ~~one strip~~ ^{half} to Steve. "Ring these places. Everything's closed, of course, but you should find a caretaker or security guard. Tell them we've had a robbery, but don't say what's missing. Say the getaway vehicle may have been abandoned on their premises. Ask if they can see a Hibernian Telecom van ^{in their lot} ~~outside.~~"

Steve nodded. "Smart thinking—maybe we can ~~get on their trail and~~ give the police a head start."

"Exactly. But don't use the desk phone, I don't want Carl to hear. Go to the far end of the hall, where he can't eavesdrop. Use the mobile you took from him."

Toni moved well away from Carl and took out her mobile. She called ~~inquiries~~ ^{information} and got the number for the golf club. ~~She dialled and waited.~~ The phone rang for more than a minute, then a sleepy voice answered: "Yes? Golf club. Hello?"

Toni introduced herself and told the story. "I'm trying to locate a van with ^{is the} Hibernian Telecom' ~~on its side. Is it in~~ your car park?"

"Oh, I get you, the getaway vehicle, aye."

Her heart missed a beat. "It's there?"

"No, at least it wasn't when I came on duty. There's a couple of cars here, mind you, left by gentlemen who found themselves reluctant to drive by the end of lunch yesterday, do

you know what I mean?"

"When did you come on duty?"

"Seven o'clock in the evening."

"Could a van have parked ~~there~~ since then? Perhaps at about two o'clock this morning?"

"Well, maybe...I've no way of telling."

"Could you have a look?"

"Aye, I could look!" He spoke as if it were an idea of startling originality. "Hold the line, I'll just be a minute." There was a knock as he put the phone down, ~~on a desk or table.~~ ~~Then he picked it up again. "I'm away to the bar, to look out the window." He put the handset down again.~~

Toni waited. Footsteps receded and returned.

"No, I don't think there's a van out there."

"Okay."

"The cars are all covered in snow, mind you, so you can't see them properly. I'm not even sure which is mine!"

~~"Yes, thank you."~~

"But a van, ~~you see,~~ would be higher than the rest, ~~wouldn't it?~~ ~~So~~ it would stand out. No, there's no van there."

"You've been very helpful. I appreciate it."

"What did they steal?"

Toni pretended not to hear the question, and hung up. Steve was talking and clearly had not yet struck gold. She dialled the Dew Drop Inn.

The phone was answered by a cheerful young man. "Vincent speaking, how may I help you?"

Toni thought he sounded like the kind of hotel employee who is desperately eager to please until you actually ask for something. She went through her routine again.

"There are lots of vehicles in our car park—we're open over Christmas," Vincent told her. "I'm looking at the closed-circuit television monitor, but I don't see a van. Unfortunately, the camera doesn't cover the entire car park."

"Would you mind going to the window and having a good look? It's really important."

"I'm quite busy, actually."

At this time of night? Toni did not voice the thought. She adopted a sweetly ~~considerate~~ tone and said: "It will save the police making a trip to interview you, you see."

That worked. He did not want his quiet night shift disrupted by squad cars and ~~police~~ ^{detectives} policemen. "Just hold on." He went away and came back.

"Yes, it's here," he said.

"Really?" Toni was incredulous. It seemed a long time since she had enjoyed a piece of luck.

"Ford Transit van, blue, with 'Hibernian Telecom' in large white letters on the side. It can't have been there long, because it's not under ~~quite as~~ much snow as ~~the rest of the~~ ~~cars~~—that's how come I can see the lettering."

"That's tremendously helpful, thank you. I don't suppose you noticed whether another car is missing—possibly the car they left in?"

"No, sorry."

“Okay—thanks again!” She hung up and looked across at Steve. “I’ve found the ^{van} ~~getaway vehicle!~~”

He nodded towards the window. “And the snowplough’s here.”

4:30 a.m.

Daisy drained her cup of tea and filled it up again with whisky, ~~from the Glenmorangie bottle.~~

Kit felt unbearably tense. Nigel and Elton might be able to keep up the pretence of ~~being innocent travellers~~ ^{motorists} accidentally stranded, but Daisy was hopeless. She looked like a gangster and acted like a hooligan. ~~What was he going to do?~~

When she put the bottle down on the kitchen table, Stanley picked it up. "Don't get drunk, there's a good girl," he said mildly. ~~He stoppered the bottle.~~

Daisy was not used to people telling her what to do. ~~Mostly~~ ^{Uselessly} they were too frightened. She looked at Stanley as if she was ready to kill him. He ~~was~~ ^{seemed} ~~elegantly~~ vulnerable in his grey pyjamas and black robe. Kit waited for the explosion.

"A little whisky makes you feel better, but a lot makes you feel worse," Stanley said. He put the bottle in a cupboard. "My father used to say that, and he was fond of whisky."

Daisy was suppressing her rage. The effort was visible to Kit. ^{and} He feared what might happen if she should lose it. Then the tension was broken by his sister Miranda, who came in wearing a ^{bloused} pink nightgown, ~~with a flower pattern.~~

Stanley said: "Hello, my dear, you're up early."

"I couldn't sleep. I've been on the ~~sleep chair~~ ^{chair} in Kit's old study. Don't ask why." She looked at the strangers. "It's early for Christmas visitors."

"This is my daughter Miranda," Stanley said. "Mandy, meet Nigel, Elton and Daisy."

A few minutes ago, Kit had introduced them to his father and, before he realised his mistake, he gave their real names. ~~He should have invented false names, but it was too late.~~

Miranda nodded to them. "Did Santa bring you?" she said brightly.

Kit explained. "Their car died on the main road near our turn-off. I picked them up, then my car gave out too, and we walked the rest of the way here." Would she believe it? And would she ask about the burgundy leather briefcase that stood on the kitchen table like a bomb?

But she was only interested in Kit.
~~She questioned a different aspect of the story.~~ "I didn't know you'd left the house—
 where on earth did you go, [?] ^u ~~in the middle of the night, in this weather?"~~

come up with an answer
 "Oh, you know." Kit had ~~thought about how he would respond~~ to this question, and now he put on a sheepish grin. "Couldn't sleep, felt lonely, went to look up an old girlfriend in Inverburn."

"Which one? Most of the young women in Inverburn are old girlfriends of yours."

"I don't think you know her." He thought ~~of a name~~ quickly. "Lisa Freemont." He almost bit his tongue. She was a character in a Hitchcock movie.

Miranda did not react to the name. "Was she pleased to see you?"

"She wasn't in."

Miranda turned away and picked up the coffee pot.

~~Kit wondered whether she believed him. Kit was a fan of Hitchcock, he watched the films on DVD in his apartment late at night, and knew them all. Grace Kelly had played Lisa Freemont in "Rear Window", wearing a sleeveless dress. But Miranda would not know that. However, she did know that Kit would not normally visit an old girlfriend without calling~~

ahead to make sure of his welcome. He would not risk a wasted journey. The story he had made up was not really good enough. He cursed silently. Why had he not given it more thought?

However, Miranda could not possibly guess *why* he was lying. She would assume he was involved with a woman he didn't want people to know about—probably someone's wife. There were advantages to a bad reputation.

While ^{she} Miranda was pouring coffee, Stanley addressed Nigel. "Where are you from? You don't sound Scots." It seemed like small talk, but Kit knew his father was probing.

~~Nigel answered in the same relaxed tone.~~ "I live in Surrey, work in London. My office is in Canary Wharf." *Nigel remained relaxed.*

"You're in the financial world."

"I source high-tech systems and heavy machinery for third world countries, mainly the Middle East. ~~Navigation apparatus, earthmoving equipment, television cameras, light aircraft.~~ A young oil sheik wants his own discotheque and doesn't know where to buy the gear, so he comes to me and I solve his problem."

~~It sounded pat, Kit thought, as if he always said the same thing when people asked what his job was.~~

Miranda brought her coffee to the table and sat opposite Daisy. "What nice gloves," she said. ~~Daisy was wearing expensive-looking light brown suede gloves that were soaking wet.~~ "Why don't you dry them?"

Kit tensed. Any conversation with Daisy was hazardous.

Daisy ^{shot her} gave a hostile look, but Miranda did not see it, and persisted. "You need to stuff them, so they'll keep their shape," she said. She took a roll of ~~kitchen~~ ^{towels} paper from the counter.

"Here, use this."

"I'm fine," Daisy muttered angrily.

Miranda raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Have I said something to offend you?"

Kit thought: Oh, god, here it comes, ~~Daisy's going to hit someone~~

Nigel stepped in. "Don't be daft, Daisy, you don't want to spoil your gloves." There was an edge of insistence ^{to} in his voice, making the words sound more like an order than a suggestion. ~~He was as worried as Kit that Daisy's usual bad behaviour would cause trouble in a normal domestic setting. In a firm tone, Nigel added:~~ "Do what the lady says, she's being nice to you."

~~Once again, Kit waited for the explosion. But,~~ ^{Kit's} to his surprise, Daisy took off her gloves. ~~Kit was astonished to see that she had small, neat hands. He had never noticed that. The rest of her was brutish: the black eye make up, the broken nose, the zippered jacket, the boots. But her hands were beautiful, and she obviously knew it, for they were well manicured, with clean nails and a pale pink nail varnish. That would be why she liked expensive gloves.~~ ^{with Polish} Kit was bemused. Somewhere inside that monster there was an ordinary girl, ^{Daisy} he realised. What had happened to her? She had been brought up by Harry Mac, that was what.

Miranda helped her stuff the wet gloves with ^{Paper} ~~kitchen roll~~. "How are you three connected?" she asked Daisy. Her tone was conventionally polite, ~~as if she were making conversation at a dinner party but she was probing. Like Stanley,~~ she had no idea how dangerous ^{Daisy} it was.

~~Daisy looked panicked. She made Kit think of a schoolgirl being questioned on homework she has forgotten to do. Kit wanted to fill the awkward silence, but it would look~~
^{Again Nigel came to the rescue.}

~~odd if he answered for her. After a moment, Nigel spoke.~~ "Daisy's father is an old friend of mine."

That was fine, Kit thought, though Miranda would wonder why Daisy could not have said it herself.

Nigel added: "And Elton works for me."

Miranda smiled at Elton. "Right-hand man?"

"Driver," he replied brusquely. Kit reflected that it was a good thing Nigel was personable—he had to supply enough charm for the three of them.

Stanley said: "Well, I'm sorry the weather has turned out so poorly for your Christmas in Scotland."

Nigel smiled. "If I'd wanted to sunbathe, I would have gone to Barbados."

"You and Daisy's father must be good friends, to spend Christmas together."

Nigel nodded. "We go way back."

~~It seemed obvious to Kit that Nigel was lying. Was that because he knew the truth? Or~~
~~was it apparent to Stanley and Miranda too? Kit could not sit still any longer: the strain was~~
~~unbearable. He jumped up.~~ *he was sure Stanley would guess they were lying. I jumped up.*
 "I'm hungry," he said. "Dad, is it okay if I scramble some eggs for everyone?"

"Of course."

"I'll give you a hand," Miranda said. She put sliced bread in the toaster.

Stanley said: "Anyway, I hope the weather improves soon. When were you planning to return to London?"

Kit got a pack of bacon out of the fridge. Was his father suspicious, or merely curious?

"Heading back on Boxing Day," Nigel said.

"A short Christmas visit," Stanley commented, still gently challenging the story.

Nigel shrugged. "Work to do, you know."

You may have to stay longer than you anticipated. I can't see them clearing the roads by tomorrow."

The thought seemed to make Nigel anxious. He pushed up the sleeve of his pink sweater and looked at his watch.

Kit ^{wanted} realised he needed to do something to ^{distance himself from Nigel} show he was not in league with Nigel and ^{and the others,} the other two. As he began to make breakfast he resolved not to defend or excuse the ~~strangers. On the contrary, he should question Nigel sceptically, as if he mistrusted the story.~~

He might deflect suspicion from himself by ~~pretending that he, too, was dubious about the~~ strangers.

~~But, before he could put his resolution into practice, Elton suddenly became talkative.~~

~~"How about your Christmas, Professor?" he said, Kit had introduced his father as Professor~~ ^{Elton suddenly joining the conversation,}

~~Oxford.~~ "Got your family all around you, it seems. ~~What~~ [≡] two children?"

"Three."

^{And} "With husbands and wives, of course."

"My daughters have partners. Kit's single."

"And grandchildren?"

"Yes, ^{four}."

"How many? If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't mind in the least. I have four grandchildren."

~~"A quiverful!"~~

Kit was surprised that a gangster such as Elton should know that Biblical expression. Perhaps he had been given a religious upbringing. If so, it had not done him much good.

Elton went on ^{they said} "Are all the grandkids here?"

"Yes."

"That's nice for you and Mrs Oxenford."

"My wife died eighteen months ago, sadly."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Thank you."

What was this interrogation about, Kit ^{wondered} asked himself? Elton was smiling and leaning forward, as if his questions were motivated by nothing more than friendly curiosity, but Kit ^{knew} could see that it was a charade, and he wondered anxiously whether that was just as obvious to his father.

Elton had not finished. "This must be a big house, to sleep, what, ten of you?"

"We have some outbuildings."

"Oh, handy." He looked out of the window, although the snow made it difficult to see anything. "Guest cottages, like."

"There's a cottage and a barn."

"Very useful. And staff quarters, I presume."

"Our staff have a cottage a mile or so away. I doubt if we'll see them today."

"Oh. Shame." Elton lapsed into silence again—having carefully established exactly how many people were on the property.

Kit wondered if anyone else had noticed that.

5 a.m.

The snowplough was a Mercedes lorry with a blade hooked to its front, ~~attachment plate. It had~~ "Inverburn Plant Hire" ^{was printed on its side and it had} ~~on its side~~ and flashing orange lights on its roof, ~~but~~ to Toni it looked like a ~~winged~~ chariot from heaven.

~~The blade was angled to push the snow to the side of the road.~~ The plough quickly cleared the drive from the gatehouse to the main entrance of the Kremlin, its blade lifting automatically to clear speed bumps. By the time it stopped at the main entrance, Toni had her coat on, ready to go. It was four hours since the thieves had left—but, if they had got stuck in the snow, they could still be caught.

The plough was followed by three police cars and an ambulance. The ambulance crew came in first. They took Susan out on a stretcher, though she said she could walk. Don refused to go. "If a Scotsman went to hospital every time he got a kick in the head, the doctors could never cope," he said.

Frank came in ~~looking spruce. He was~~ wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a tie. He had even found time to shave, probably in the car. Toni saw the grim expression on his face and realised with dismay that he was spoiling for a fight. No doubt he resented being forced by his superiors to do what Toni wanted. She told herself to be patient ~~and reasonable~~ ~~with him~~, and avoid a showdown.

Toni's mother looked up from petting the puppy and said: "Hello, Frank! This is a surprise. Are you and Toni getting together ^{back ?} again?"

"Not today," he muttered.

"Shame."

Frank was followed by two detectives carrying large briefcases—a crime scene team, Toni presumed. Frank ^{turned to} ~~nodded to Toni and shook hands with Carl Osborne, but spoke to~~ Steve. "You're the guard supervisor?"

"Aye. Steve Tremlett. You're Frank Hackett, I've met you before."

"I gather four guards were assaulted."

"Me and three others, aye."

"Did all the assaults take place in the same location?"

What was Frank doing, Toni wondered impatiently? Why was he asking trivial questions when they needed to get going right away?

Steve answered: "Susan was attacked in the corridor. I was tripped up in about the same place. Don and Stu were held at gunpoint and tied up in the control room."

"Show me both places, please."

Toni was astonished. "We need to ^{go} ~~get~~ after these people, Frank. Why don't you leave this to your ~~crime scene~~ team?"

"Don't tell me how to do the job," he replied. He looked pleased that she had given him an opportunity to put her down. ~~She groaned inwardly. This was not the time to rerun their marital conflicts.~~ He turned back to Steve and said: "Lead the way."

Toni suppressed a curse and followed along. So did Carl Osborne.

The detectives put crime scene tape across the corridor ~~where Steve and been tripped~~

~~up and Susan had been cashed.~~ Then they went to the control room, where Stu was watching the monitors. Frank ~~put~~ ^d tape ~~across~~ the doorway.

Steve said: "All four of us were tied up and taken inside the BSL4 facility. Not the laboratory itself, just the lobby."

^{سكاند ١٥}
 "That's where I found them," Toni added. "But that was four hours ago—and the perpetrators are getting farther away every minute."

"We'll take a look at that location."

"No, you won't," Toni said. "It's a restricted area. You can see it on monitor nineteen."

"If it's not the actual laboratory, I presume there's no danger."

He was right, but Toni was not going to let him waste more time. "No one is allowed past the door without biohazard training. That's the protocol."

"Hell with your protocol, I'm in charge here."

Toni realised she had inadvertently done what she had vowed to avoid: gone head to head with Frank. She tried to sidestep the issue. "I'll take you to the door."

They went to the entrance. Frank looked at the ~~card reader~~ ^{Scanner}, then said to Steve: "I'm ordering you to give me your pass."

Steve said: "I don't have a pass. Security guards aren't allowed in."

Frank turned to Toni. "Do you have a pass?"

"I've done biohazard training."

"Give me your pass."

She handed it over. Frank waved it at the ~~card reader~~ ^{Scanner} then pushed the door. It remained locked. He pointed at the small screen on the wall. "What's that?"

Scanner

"A fingerprint ~~reader~~. The pass won't work without the correct fingerprint. It's a ~~system we installed to prevent foolish people getting in with stolen cards.~~"

"It didn't stop the thieves tonight, did it?" Having scored a point with that jibe, Frank turned on his heel.

Toni followed him. Back in the Great Hall there were two men in yellow ~~high-~~
~~visibility~~ jackets and ~~rubber~~ boots, smoking. Toni thought at first that they were ^{the} snowplough operators, but when Frank began to brief them she realised they were police officers. "You check every vehicle you pass," he said. "Radio in the registration number, and we'll find out whether it's stolen or rented. Tell us if there's anyone in the cars. You know what we're looking for—three men and a woman. Whatever you do, don't approach the occupants. These laddies have guns, and you don't, so you're strictly reconnaissance. There's an armed response unit on its way. If we can locate the perpetrators, we'll send them in. Is that clear?"

The two men nodded.

"Go north and take the first turn-off. I think they headed east."

Toni knew that was wrong. She was reluctant to confront Frank again, but she could not let the reconnaissance team go the wrong way. ~~He would be furious, but she had to do it.~~
She said: "The thieves didn't head east."

~~Frank ignored her. "That takes you to the main road for Glasgow."~~

~~Toni said again, "The perpetrators didn't go that way."~~

~~The two constables watched the exchange with interest, looking from Frank to Toni and back like spectators at a tennis match.~~

Frank reddened. "No one asked your opinion, Toni."

"They didn't take that route," she persisted. "They continued north."

"I suppose you reached that conclusion by feminine intuition?"

One of the constables laughed.

Why do you lead with your chin? Toni thought. She said calmly: "The getaway vehicle is in the car park of the Dew Drop Inn, on this road five miles north."

Frank turned redder, embarrassed because she knew something he did not. "And how did you acquire this information?"

"Detective work." I was a better cop than you, and I still am, she thought; but she kept ~~the thought to herself~~ ^{only said,} "I phoned around. Better than intuition." You asked for that, you bastard.

The constable laughed again, then smothered it when Frank glared at him.

Toni added: "The thieves might be at the motel, but more likely they switched cars there and drove on."

Frank suppressed his fury. "Go to the motel, he said to the two constables. "I'll give you further orders when you're on the road. ~~On your way.~~"

They hurried out. ~~At last, Toni thought.~~

Frank summoned a plain-clothes detective from one of the ~~convoy~~ cars and told him to follow the snowplough to the motel, check out the van, and find out whether anyone there had seen anything.

Toni turned her mind to the next step. She had achieved her immediate objective: the police were chasing the thieves. ~~What else should she do? She needed to report to Stanley, whose phones were out of order. And~~ she wanted to stay in close touch with the police operation. But she had no car. And Mother was still here.

She saw Carl Osborne buttonhole Frank ^{talk} ~~and talk~~ quietly, to ~~him~~. Carl pointed at his

Jaguar, still stuck ~~in the snow~~ half way up the drive. Frank nodded, and said something to a uniformed officer, who went outside and spoke to the snowplough driver. They were going to clear the snow from in front of Carl's car. ~~Toni guessed.~~

~~Toni addressed Carl.~~ "You're going with the snowplough." *Toni asked*
Carl He looked smug. "It's a free country."

"Don't forget to take the puppy."

"I was planning to leave him with you."

"I'm coming with you."

"You're out of your mind."

"I need to get to Stanley's house. It's on this road, five miles beyond the Dew Drop Inn. You can drop me and Mother there." After she had briefed Stanley she could borrow a car from him, leave Mother at Steepfall, and follow the snowplough. ~~She did not want to be far from the action.~~

"You want me to take your mother too?"

"Yes."

"Forget it."

Toni nodded. "Let me know if you change your mind."

He frowned, suspicious of her ready acceptance of his refusal; but he said no more, and put on his coat.

Steve Tremlett opened his mouth to speak, but Toni discreetly flapped her hand at him in a "Keep quiet" gesture.

Carl went to the door.

Toni said: "Don't forget the puppy."

He picked up the dog and went out to his car.

Toni watched ~~through the windows~~ ^{the way} as the convoy moved off. The snowplough cleared the ~~pile~~ in front of Carl's Jaguar, then climbed the slope to the guardhouse. One police car followed. Carl sat in his car for a moment, then got out again and returned to the Great Hall.

"Where are my keys?" ~~he said angrily.~~

Toni smiled sweetly. "Have you changed your mind about taking me?"

Steve jingled the bunch of keys in his pocket.

Carl made a sour face. "Get in the damn car." ~~he said.~~

5:30 a.m.

Miranda ~~felt uneasy about the weird threesome~~ ^{thought} of Nigel, Elton and Daisy, ~~Were they what~~ ^{were weird.} ~~they claimed to be?~~ Something about them made her wish she were not wearing her nightdress.

She had had a bad night. Lying uncomfortably ~~on the sleepchair~~ in Kit's old study, she had drifted in and out of consciousness, dreaming of her stupid, shameful affair with Hugo, and waking to feel resentful of Ned for failing to stand up for her once again. He should have been angry with Kit for betraying the secret, but instead he just said that secrets ^{Miranda wondered if she should cheer him up,} always come out, ~~sooner or later. They had acted out a rerun of the quarrel in the car early that~~ ~~day. Miranda had hoped this holiday would be the occasion for her family to accept Ned, but~~ ~~she was beginning to think it might be the moment when she rejected him.~~ He was just too weak.

When she heard voices downstairs she had been ^{pleased} ~~relieved~~, for it ^{gave her an excuse to} ~~meant she could~~ get up. Now, ~~however~~, she felt perturbed. The strangers were peculiar. ~~Did Nigel have no wife, family or even girlfriend who wanted to see him at Christmas? What about Elton? She was~~ pretty sure Nigel and Elton ~~were not a gay couple: Nigel had looked at her nightdress with~~ ~~the speculative eyes of a man who would like to see underneath it.~~

Daisy would seem weird in any company. She was the right age to be Elton's

girlfriend, but they seemed to dislike one another. So what was she doing with Nigel and his driver? *Their stories didn't add up.*

~~Nigel was not a friend of Daisy's family, Miranda decided. There was no warmth between them. They were more like people who had to work together even though they did not get on very well. But if they were colleagues, why lie about it?~~

Her father looked strained, too. She wondered if he was also having suspicious thoughts.

The kitchen filled with delicious smells: ~~frying~~ bacon, fresh coffee, and toast. Cooking was one of the things Kit did well, Miranda mused: his food was always attractively presented. ~~He could make a dish of spaghetti look like a royal feast.~~ Appearances were important to her brother. He could not hold down a job or ~~keep~~ ^{balance} his bank account ~~in credit~~, but he was always well dressed and drove a cool car, ~~no matter how hard up he was.~~ In his father's eyes, he combined frivolous achievements with grave weaknesses. The only time Stanley had been happy about Kit was when he was in the Winter Olympics.

Now Kit handed each of them a plate with crisp bacon, slices of fresh tomato, scrambled eggs sprinkled with chopped herbs, and triangles of hot buttered toast. The tension in the room eased a little. Perhaps, Miranda thought, that was what Kit had been aiming at. She was not really hungry, but she took a forkful of eggs. He had flavoured them with a little parmesan cheese, and they ~~tasted delightfully tangy.~~ *were delicious.*

Kit made conversation. "So, Daisy, what do you do for a living?" ~~He gave her his winning smile.~~ Miranda knew he was only being polite. Kit liked pretty girls, and Daisy was anything but that.

She took a long time to reply. "I work with my father," she said.

“And what’s his line?”

“His line?”

“I mean, what type of business ^{is he in} ~~does he do~~?”

She seemed baffled by the question.

Nigel laughed and said: “My old friend Harry has so many things going, it’s hard to say what he does.”

Kit surprised Miranda by ^{persisting,} ~~being insistent. In a challenging tone he said to Daisy:~~

“Well, give us an example of one of the things he does, then.”

She brightened and, as if struck by inspiration, said: “He’s into property.” She seemed to be repeating something she had heard.

“Sounds as if he likes owning things.”

“Property development.”

“I’m never sure what that means, ‘property development’.”

It was not like Kit to question people aggressively, Miranda thought. Perhaps he, too, found the guests’ account of themselves hard to believe. She felt relieved. This proved that they really were strangers. Miranda had had, in the back of her mind, a fear that in reality Kit ~~knew them, and~~ was involved in some kind of shady business with them. You never knew, with him.

There was impatience in Nigel’s voice as he said: “Harry buys an old tobacco warehouse, applies for planning permission to turn it into luxury flats, then sells it to a builder at a profit.”

Once again, Miranda realised, Nigel was answering for Daisy. Kit ^{apparently had the} ~~seemed to have the~~ same thought, for he said: “And how exactly do you help your father with this work, Daisy? I

should think you'd be a good saleswoman."

Daisy looked as if she would be better at evicting sitting tenants.

~~She gave Kit a hostile glare.~~ "I do different things," she said ^{alarms} ~~then tilted up her chin,~~
as if defying him to find fault with her answer.

"And I'm sure you do them with charm and efficiency," Kit said.

~~Kit's flattery was becoming sarcastic, Miranda thought anxiously. Daisy was not subtle, but she might know when she was being insulted.~~

The tension ^{was spiky} ~~spoiled~~ Miranda's breakfast. She ^{was} ~~had to~~ talk to her father ^{was} ~~about this.~~ She ~~swallowed, coughed, and pretended to have something stuck in her throat.~~ Coughing, she got up from the table. "Sorry," she spluttered.

Her father snatched up a glass and filled it at the tap.

Still coughing, Miranda left the room. As she intended, her father followed her into the hall. She closed the kitchen door and motioned him into his study. She coughed again, for effect, ~~as they went in.~~

He offered her the glass, and she waved it away. ~~"I was pretending,"~~ she said. "I wanted to talk to you. What do you think about our guests?"

He put the glass down on the green leather top of his desk. "A weird bunch. I wondered if they were shady friends of Kit's, until he started questioning the girl."

"Me, too. They're lying about something, though."

"But what? If they're planning to rob us, they're getting off to a slow start."

"I don't know, but I feel threatened."

"Do you want me to call the police?"

"That might be an overreaction. But I wish *someone* knew these people were in our

house.”

“Well, let’s think—who can we phone?”

“How about Uncle Norman?” Her father’s brother, a university librarian, lived in Edinburgh. They loved one another in a distant way, content to meet about once a year.

“Yes. Norman will understand. I’ll tell him what’s happened, and ask him to phone me in an hour and make sure we’re all right.”

“Perfect.”

Stanley picked up the phone on his desk and put it to his ear. He frowned, ~~replaced~~ ^{hung up} ~~the handset~~, and picked it up again. “No dialling tone,” he said.

Miranda felt a stab of fear. “Now I *really* want us to call someone.”

“It’s probably the weather. Heavy snow sometimes brings down the lines.”

“All the same...”

“Where’s your mobile phone?”

“In the cottage. Don’t you have one?”

“Only ~~the car phone~~ in the Ferrari.”

“Olga must have one.”

“No need to wake her.” Stanley glanced out of the window. “I’ll just throw on a coat over my pyjamas and go to the garage.”

“Where are the keys?”

“Key cupboard.”

The key cupboard was on the wall in the boot lobby. “I’ll fetch them for you.”

They stepped into the hall. Stanley went to the front door and found his boots. Miranda put her hand on the knob of the kitchen door, then hesitated. She could hear, ^{her sister} ~~coming~~

from the kitchen, the voice of her sister Olga. Miranda had not spoken to her sister since the moment last night when Kit had ~~treacherously blurted out the secret~~. What would she say to Olga, or Olga to her?

She opened the door and ~~stepped into the kitchen~~^{saw}. Olga ~~was~~ leaning against the kitchen counter, wearing a black silk wrap, ~~that reminded Miranda of a barrister's gown~~. Nigel, Elton and Daisy sat at the table like a panel. Kit stood behind them, hovering anxiously. Olga was in full courtroom mode, interrogating the strangers across the table. She said to Nigel: "What on earth were you doing out so late?" ~~He might have been a delinquent teenager.~~

Miranda noticed a rectangular bulge in the pocket of the silk robe: Olga never went anywhere without her phone. Miranda was going to turn and tell her father not to put his boots on, but she was arrested by Olga's performance.

Nigel ~~frowned~~^{frowning} with disapproval, ~~but answered all the same~~^{said}. "We were on our way to Glasgow."

"Where had you been? There's not much north of here."

"A big country house."

"We probably know the owners. Who are they?"

"Name of Robinson."

Miranda watched, waiting for an opportunity to quietly borrow Olga's phone.

"Robinson doesn't ring a bell. Almost as common as Smith and Brown. What was the occasion?"

"A party."

Olga raised her dark eyebrows. "You come to Scotland to spend Christmas with your

old friend, then you and his daughter go off to a party and leave the poor man alone?"

"He wasn't feeling too well."

Olga turned ~~her headlights on~~ ^{to} Daisy. "What sort of a daughter are you, to leave your sick father at home on Christmas Eve?"

Daisy stared back in mute anger. Miranda suddenly feared that Daisy could be violent. Kit seemed to have the same thought, for he said: "Take it easy, Olga."

Olga ignored him. "Well?" she said to Daisy. "Haven't you got anything to say for yourself?"

Daisy picked up her gloves. For some reason, Miranda found that ominous. Daisy put the gloves on then said: "I don't have to answer your questions."

"I think you do." Olga looked back at Nigel. "~~You're~~ three complete strangers, sitting in my father's kitchen filling yourselves with his food, ~~and the story you tell is highly implausible.~~ I think you need to explain yourselves."

Kit said anxiously: "Olga, is this really necessary? They're just people who got stranded—"

"Are you sure?" she said. She turned her gaze back to Nigel.

Nigel had seemed relaxed ~~and urbane~~, but now ~~he was shaken.~~ ^{his} Anger showed as he said: "I don't like being interrogated."

"If you don't like it, you can leave, ~~of course,~~" Olga said. "But if you want to stay in my father's house, you need to tell a better story than this farrago."

"We can't leave," Elton said indignantly. "Look out the window, it's a fucking blizzard."

"Please don't use that word in this house. ~~My mother always forbade obscenities.~~

~~except in foreign languages, and we've kept her rule since her death~~" Olga reached for the coffee pot, then pointed to the burgundy briefcase on the table. "What's this?"

"It's mine," Nigel said.

"Well, we don't keep luggage on the table." She reached out and picked it up. "Not much in it—ow!" She yelled because Nigel had grabbed her arm. "That hurts!" she cried.

Nigel's mask of urbanity had gone. He spoke quietly but distinctly. "Put the case down. Now."

Stanley appeared beside Miranda in a coat, gloves, and boots. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he said to Nigel. "Take your hands off my daughter!"

Nellie barked loudly. With a quick movement, Elton reached down and grabbed the dog's collar.

Olga stubbornly kept hold of the briefcase.

Kit said: "Put the case down, Olga."

Daisy grabbed the case. Olga tried to keep hold of it, and ~~they vied for possession for a moment~~. Somehow the case flew open. Polystyrene packing chips scattered all over the kitchen table. Kit gave a shout of fear, ^{as} ~~and Miranda wondered momentarily what he was so frightened of. Out of the case fell a perfume bottle in a polythene bag~~ ^{fell out of the case.}

With her free hand, Olga slapped Nigel's face.

Nigel slapped her back. ~~Everyone shouted at once.~~ Stanley gave a grunt of rage, pushed past Miranda and strode towards Nigel. Miranda shouted: "No—"

Daisy stood in Stanley's way. He tried to push her aside. There was a blur of movement, and Stanley cried out and fell back, bleeding from his ~~mouth~~.

Then, suddenly, both Nigel and Daisy were ^{Grandisley} ~~holding~~ guns.

was silent
Everyone ~~went quiet~~ except Nellie, who was barking frantically. Elton twisted her collar, throttling her, until she shut up. ~~The room was silent.~~

Olga said: "Who the hell are you people?"

Stanley looked at the perfume spray on the table and said fearfully: "Why is that bottle double-bagged?"

Miranda slipped out through the door.

5:45 a.m.

Kit stared at in fear at the *Diablerie* bottle on the kitchen table. But the glass did not smash; the top did not fall off; the double plastic bags stayed intact. The lethal fluid remained safely inside its fragile container. ~~Perhaps he was not going to be killed by Madoba-2, not yet.~~

But ~~he might go to prison.~~ Now that Nigel and Daisy had pulled guns, the game was up. They could no longer pretend to be innocent motorists, ~~stranded in the snow.~~ They had ~~revealed that they were criminals.~~ As soon as the news from the laboratory got out, they would be connected with the theft of the virus.

~~The others might escape. Nigel, Daisy and Elton could probably arrange alibis. They had not revealed their second names and, though the family could probably pick out each of them in a line-up, evidence of identification was easy to challenge in court. But Kit was in a different position. There was no doubt who he was. Even if he escaped today, he would be a fugitive from justice for the rest of his life.~~

Even if they escaped, Kit's identity was known.

~~He thought furiously, trying to devise a way out.~~

Then, as everyone stood frozen, staring at the vicious little ~~dark grey~~ pistols, Nigel moved his gun a fraction of an inch, mistrustfully pointing it at Kit, ~~and Kit was seized by~~ *giving him an* inspiration.

There was still no reason why the family should suspect him of being one of the gang.

He might have been as deceived as everyone else by the ~~three~~ fugitives. His story, that they were total strangers ~~and he had offered them shelter, still stood up.~~ ^{could stand.}

~~But how could he make that clear?~~

Slowly, he raised his hands in the traditional gesture of surrender.

Everyone looked at him. There was a moment when he thought the ~~gang themselves~~ ^{the house} would betray him. ~~A frown passed over Nigel's brow. Elton looked openly startled. Daisy sneered.~~ ^{openly.}

Kit said: "Dad, I'm so sorry I brought these people into the house. I had no idea..."

His father gave him a long look, then nodded. "Not your fault," he said. ~~"You can't turn strangers away in a blizzard. There was no way you could have known..."~~ He turned and gave Nigel a look ^{Scorching,} of ~~scorching contempt.~~ "...just what *kind* of people they are."

Nigel got it immediately, ~~and jumped in to back up~~ ^{ed} Kit's pretence. "I'm sorry to return your hospitality this way, ~~young...~~ Kit, is it? Yes... You saved our lives in the snow, now we're pointing guns at you. This old world never was fair."

Elton's ~~expression cleared as he~~ ^{ly} grasped the deception.

Nigel went on: "If your bossy sister hadn't poked her nose in, ~~you might never have~~ ^{use me, you have} ~~known what bad people we are.~~ ^{left peacefully!} But she would insist, and here we are."

Daisy ^{smiled} understood, and turned away, ~~with a scornful expression.~~

It occurred to Kit that ~~Nigel and the gang~~ ^{the time} might just kill his family. ^{he} They were willing to steal a virus that would slaughter thousands, why would they hesitate to gun down the Oxenfords? ~~It was different, of course: the notion of killing thousands with a virus was a bit abstract, whereas shooting adults and children in cold blood would be more difficult. But they might do it if they had to. They might kill Kit, too, he realised with a shudder of dread.~~ ^{him when they no longer needed him.}

~~Fortunately, they still needed him. He knew the way to Luke's cottage and the ~~Ferrata~~ Land Cruiser. They would never find it without him. He resolved to remind Nigel of that at the first opportunity.~~

Fortunately he was the only one who

"What's in that bottle is worth a lot of money, you see," Nigel finished.

~~To reinforce the simulation, Kit said: "What is it?"~~

~~"Never you mind," said Nigel.~~

Just then
 Kit's mobile phone rang.

~~He did not know what to do. The caller was probably Hamish, his inside man at the Kremlin. There must have been some development that he thought Kit needed to know about. But how could he ~~spea~~^{answer} to Hamish without betraying himself to his family? He stood paralysed, while everyone listened to his ring tone playing Beethoven's ninth symphony.~~

Nigel solved the problem. "Give me that," he said.

Kit handed over his phone, and Nigel answered, ^{with} "Yes, this is Kit," he said, ~~in~~ a fair imitation of a Scots accent.

The person at the other end seemed to believe him, for there was a silence while Nigel listened.

"Got it," he said. "Thanks." He hung up and pocketed the phone. "Someone wanting to warn you about three dangerous ^{thieves!} desperadoes in the neighbourhood," he said. "Apparently the police are coming after them with a snowplough."

Craig could not figure Sophie out. One minute she was painfully shy, the next bold to the point of embarrassment. She let him put his hands inside her sweater, and even unfastened her bra when he fumbled with the hooks; and he thought he would die of pleasure when he

held both her breasts in his hands—but then she refused to let him look at them in the candlelight. He got even more excited when she unbuttoned his jeans, as if she had been doing this sort of thing for years; but she did not seem to know what to do next. Craig wondered whether there was some code of behaviour that he did not know, ~~about~~. Or she was just as inexperienced as he? ~~She was getting better at kissing, anyway. At first she had been hesitant, as if not really sure whether she really wanted to do it, but after a couple of hours' practice she was enthusiastic.~~

~~Craig felt like a sailor in a storm. All night he had ridden waves of hope and despair, desire and disappointment, anxiety and delight. At one moment she had whispered: "You're so nice, I'm not nice, I'm vile."~~ ^{when he uses kisses her,} ^{and I'm not,} [^] And then, when he kissed her again, her face was wet with tears. ~~What are you supposed to do, he wondered, when a girl starts crying while you've got your hand inside her knickers? He had started to withdraw his hand, feeling that must be what she wanted, but she had grabbed his wrist and held him there. "I think you're nice," he had said, but that sounded feeble, so he added: "I think you're wonderful."~~

~~Although he felt bewildered, he was also intensely happy. He had never felt so close to a girl. He was bursting with love and tenderness and joy. When he heard the noise from the kitchen, they were talking about how far to go.~~

~~She had said: "Do you want to go the whole way?"~~ ^{she asked}

~~"Do you?"~~

~~"I do if you do."~~

~~Craig nodded. "I really want to."~~

~~"Have you got condoms?"~~

~~"Yes." He fumbled in his jeans pocket and took out the little packet.~~

"So you planned this?"

^{No, but}
~~"I didn't have a plan." It was half true: he hadn't had much of a plan.~~ "I was hoping
~~though.~~ Ever since I met you I've been thinking about, well, seeing you again, and so on. And
 all day today..."

"You were so persistent."

"I just wanted to be with you like this."

~~It was not very eloquent, but it seemed to be what she wanted to hear. "All right, then.~~

~~Let's do it."~~

~~"Are you sure?"~~

~~"Yes. Now. Quickly."~~

~~"Good."~~

"Oh, my god, what's that?" ^{Sophie said startled,}

Craig had been ^{vaguely} aware of people in the kitchen below. ~~He had vaguely heard the~~
~~murmur of voices, then someone had clattered a saucepan, and he had smelled bacon. He was~~
~~not sure what the time was, but it seemed early for breakfast. However,~~ ^{but} he had taken no
 notice, confident ~~that no one~~ ^{they not be} would interrupt ~~them~~ here in the attic. Now, ~~however, the~~
~~sounds could not be ignored. First he heard Grandpa shout, an unusual event in itself. Nellie~~
~~started barking like a friend, there was a scream that sounded remarkably like Craig's mother,~~
 then several male voices yelled at once.

Sophie said in a frightened voice: ~~"Is this normal?"~~

~~"No," he replied. "They have arguments, but not shouting matches."~~

~~"What's going on?"~~

He hesitated. Part of him wanted to forget the noise and act as if he and Sophie were

in a universe of their own, ~~lying on the old sofa under their coats.~~ He could have ignored an earthquake to concentrate on her soft skin and hot breath and moist lips. But another part of him felt that the interruption was not entirely unwelcome. ~~They had done almost everything.~~ ~~it might even be nice to postpone the ultimate intimacy, so that there was something else to~~ ~~to look forward to, a further delight to anticipate.~~

~~was suddenly~~
Below them, the kitchen ~~went quiet as suddenly as it had burst into sound.~~

"Strange," he said.

"It's spooky."

Sophie sounded frightened, and that made up Craig's mind. He kissed her lips once more, then stood up. He pulled up his jeans and stepped across the attic to the hole in the floor. He lay down and looked through the gap in the floorboards.

He saw his mother, ~~standing up with her mouth open, looking shocked and frightened.~~ ~~was~~
Grandpa ~~was there, wiping blood off his chin with a piece of kitchen paper. Uncle Kit had his~~
~~hands in the air.~~ There ~~were~~ ^{were} three strangers in the room. At first he thought they were all men, then he realised one was an ugly girl with a shaved head. The young black man was holding Nellie's collar, twisting it hard. ~~The older man and the girl held guns.~~ ^{The other two}

Craig murmured: "Bloody hell, ~~what's happening down there?~~"

~~Sophie lay beside him. After a moment she gasped. "Are those things guns?" she~~
~~whispered.~~

~~"Yes."~~

~~"Oh, my god, we're in trouble."~~

Craig thought, "We have to call the police. Where's your phone?"

"I left it in the barn."

~~"Damn."~~

~~"Oh, god, what can we do?"~~

"Think. Think. A phone. We need a phone." Craig hesitated.

~~He was frightened. He really wanted to lie still and shut his eyes tightly. He might have done that, were it not for the girl beside him. He did not know all the rules, but he knew that a man was supposed to show courage when a girl was frightened, especially when they were lovers, or nearly. And if he was not feeling brave, he had to pretend.~~

~~Where was the nearest phone?~~ "There's an extension beside Grandpa's bed."

Sophie said: "I can't do anything, I'm too scared."

"You'd better stay here."

"Okay."

~~Craig stood up. He buttoned his jeans and buckled the belt, then went to the low door.~~
~~He took a breath, then opened it. He crawled into Grandpa's ~~suit~~ cupboard, pushed at the door, and emerged into the dressing room.~~

~~The lights were on. Grandpa's dark-brown brogue-style shoes were side by side on the carpet, and the blue shirt he had been wearing yesterday lay on top of a pile of clothes in the linen basket. Craig stepped into the bedroom. The bed was unmade, as if Grandpa had just got out of it. On the bedside table was a copy of Scientific American magazine, open and the phone.~~

Craig had never dialled 999 in his life. What were you supposed to say? He had seen people do it on television. You had to give your name and location, he thought. Then what? "There are men with guns in our kitchen." It sounded melodramatic—but probably all 999 calls were dramatic.

He picked up the phone. There was ~~no dialling tone~~. ^{dead.}

He ~~put his finger on the cradle and~~ jiggled it, then ~~listened~~ ^{tried.} again. Nothing.

He replaced the handset. ~~Why were the phones out? Was it just a fault or had the~~ ^E ~~strangers cut off the house?~~ ^{Must have cut the wires.}

Did Grandpa have a mobile? Craig pulled open the bedside drawer. ~~Inside he saw a~~ ^{There was} ~~torch and a book, but no phone.~~ ^{nothing else.} Then he remembered: Grandpa had a ~~car~~ phone, in the Ferrari, ~~but did not carry a mobile.~~

He heard a sound from the dressing room. Sophie poked her head out of the ~~suit~~ cupboard, looking frightened. "Someone's coming!" she hissed. A moment later, Craig heard a heavy footstep on the landing ~~outside the bedroom.~~

He darted into the dressing room. Sophie ducked back into the attic. Craig fell on his knees and crawled through the ~~suit~~ cupboard just as he heard the bedroom door open. He had no time to close the ~~cupboard door~~. ^{closet,} He wriggled through the low door, then ~~quickly turned~~ ~~and~~ closed it softly behind him.

Sophie whispered: "The older man told the girl to search the house. He called her Daisy."

"I heard her boots on the landing."

"Did you get through to the police?"

He shook his head. "The phone's dead."

~~"No!"~~

He heard Daisy's heavy tread in the dressing room. She would see the open ~~cupboard~~ ^{could see into the closet} ~~door. Would she spot the low door behind the suits? Only if she looked carefully.~~ ^{but perhaps she would overlook}

Craig listened. ~~Was she staring into the open cupboard at this minute? He felt shaky.~~

Daisy was not big—~~an inch or two shorter than he was, he guessed~~ but she looked absolutely terrifying.

~~The silence dragged out. He thought he heard her step into the bathroom. After a shorter pause,~~ her boots crossed the dressing room and faded away, ^{then} ~~through the bedroom.~~ The bedroom door slammed.

“Oh, god, I’m so scared,” Sophie said.

“Me, too,” said Craig.

Miranda was in Olga’s bedroom with Hugo.

When ~~first~~ she ^{left} ~~stepped out~~ of the kitchen, she had not known what to do. She could not go outside—she was in her nightdress and bare feet. She had raced up the stairs with the thought of locking herself in the bathroom, but realised almost at once that that would be useless.

She stood on the landing, dithering. ~~She was so frightened that she wanted to vomit. She struggled to control herself.~~ She had to call the police, ~~she realised~~: that was the priority.

Olga had her mobile in the pocket of her negligee—but Hugo probably had his own.

Frightened though she was, Miranda had hesitated for a split-second outside the door. The last thing she wanted was to ~~be in a bedroom with~~ ^{go} Hugo. Then she heard someone ~~step out of the kitchen~~ ^{enter} into the hall. Quickly, she opened Hugo’s door, slid inside, and closed it quietly.

Hugo was standing at the window, looking out. He was naked, and had his back to the door. “Would you look at this bloody weather?” he said, obviously thinking his wife had come back.

~~Miranda was momentarily arrested by his casual tone. Obviously Olga and Hugo had made up their quarrel, after yelling at one another half the night. Had Olga already forgiven her husband for having sex with her sister? It seemed quick but perhaps they had had this row before, about other women. Miranda had often wondered about Olga's deal with her flirtatious husband, but Olga had never spoken of it. Maybe they had a script: infidelity, discovery, quarrel, reconciliation, then back to infidelity.~~

"It's me," Miranda said.

He spun around, startled, then smiled. "And in *déshabillé*—what a lovely surprise! Let's get into bed, quick."

She heard heavy footsteps on the stairs ~~and at the same time noticed that Hugo's belly was much bigger than when she had gone to bed with him—he looked like a little round gnome—and she wondered how she could have found him attractive.~~ ^{and hurried. "Get dressed!"} "You have to phone the police right now," she said. "Where's your mobile?"

"Just here," he said, pointing to the bedside table. "What on earth is wrong?"

"People with guns in the kitchen—dial 999, quickly!"

"Who are they?"

~~"Never bloody mind!"~~ ^{They} She heard heavy footsteps on the landing. She stood frozen, terrified that the door would burst open, but the steps went by. Her voice became a kind of low scream. "They're probably looking for me, get on with it!"

Hugo came out of shock. He snatched up his phone, ~~dropped it on the floor, picked it up,~~ and jabbed at the On button. "Damn thing takes for ever!" he said in frustration. "Did you say guns?"

"Yes!"

"How did the people get in?"

"Said they were stranded—what is that matter with that phone?"

"Searching," he said. "Come on, come on!"

Miranda heard the footsteps outside, ~~again. This time she was ready.~~ She flung herself on the floor and slid sideways under the double bed just as the door flew open.

She closed her eyes and tried to make herself small. ~~Feeling foolish, she opened her eyes again.~~ She saw ~~Hugo's bare feet, with hairy ankles,~~ and a pair of black motorcycle boots with steel-tipped toes. She heard Hugo say: "Hello, gorgeous, who are you?"

His charm did not work on Daisy. She said: "Give me that phone."

"I was just—"

"Now, you fat fool."

"Here, take it."

||
"~~Now~~ come with me."

"Let me put something on."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to bite your little cock off."

Miranda ~~saw Hugo's feet step away from Daisy.~~ ^{is feet move toward Hugo,} ~~She moved quickly towards him,~~
~~then~~ there was the sound of a blow, and he let out a cry. ^{Then} Both pairs of feet moved towards the door, ~~together. They passed out of Miranda's sight,~~ and a moment later she heard them going down the stairs.

Miranda said to herself: "Oh, god, what do I do now?"

6 a.m.

Craig and Sophie ~~lay side by side on the floorboards of the attic,~~ ^{were} looking down through the ~~hole into the kitchen,~~ ^{in the attic floor} as Craig's father was dragged naked into ~~the room by Daisy.~~ ^{the kitchen.}

Craig was shocked, ~~and disturbed.~~ It was a scene from a nightmare, ~~or an old painting~~ of sinners being dragged down into hell. He could hardly grasp that this ~~humiliated,~~ helpless figure was his *father, the master of the house,* the only person with the nerve to stand up to his domineering mother, the man who had ruled Craig for all fifteen years of his life. ~~He felt disoriented and weightless, as if gravity had been switched off and he did not know which way was down.~~

Sophie began to cry softly. "This is awful," she whispered. "We're all going to be murdered."

The need to comfort her gave strength Craig. He put his arm around her narrow shoulders. ~~She was trembling.~~ "It is awful, but we're not dead yet," he said. ~~"We're still free."~~

"We can get help."

"~~But what can we do?~~"

"Where is your phone, exactly?"

"I left it in the barn, upstairs by the bed. I think I dropped it into my suitcase, ~~on top of my clothes,~~ when I changed."

"We have to go there and ~~use it to~~ call the police."

"What if those terrible people see us?"

"We'll ~~have to~~ stay away from the kitchen windows."

"We can't—the barn door is right opposite!"

She was right, Craig knew, but they had to take the risk. "They probably won't look out."

"But what if they do?"

"You can hardly see across the back yard anyway, in this snow."

"They're bound to spot us!"

~~He did not know what else to tell her. "We have to try."~~

~~"I can't do it. Let's just stay here."~~

~~It was tempting, but~~ Craig knew that if he hid himself and did nothing to help his family, he would ~~feel ashamed~~. ^{never forgive himself.} "You can stay, if you like, while I go to the barn."

"No—don't leave me alone!"

~~He had guessed she might say that.~~ "Then you'll have to come with me."

~~"I don't want to."~~

~~He squeezed her shoulders and kissed her cheek.~~ "Come on. Be brave."

She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I'll try."

He stood up and put on his boots and coat. Sophie sat motionless, watching him in the candlelight. Trying to walk softly, for fear of being heard below, he found her rubber boots, then knelt down and put them on her small feet. She co-operated passively; ~~not unwilling, but~~ ^{still w} ~~stunned~~ by shock. He gently pulled her upright and helped her on with her anorak. He zipped it up at the front, pulled the hood over her head, then brushed her hair back with his hand.

~~The hood gave her a gamine look, and for a fleeting moment he thought how pretty she was.~~

He opened the big loft door. A freezing wind blew a dense flurry of snow into the attic. The lamp over the back door spread a small half-circle of light, ~~illuminating~~^{on} the snow lying thicker than ever on the ground. ~~The dustbin lid looked like Ali Baba's hat.~~

There were two windows at this end of the house, one ~~from~~ⁱⁿ the pantry and the other ~~from~~ⁱⁿ the boot lobby. The ~~sinister~~ strangers were in the kitchen. If he was ~~very~~ unlucky, one of them might step into the pantry or the boot lobby at just the wrong moment, ~~and spot him~~ but he thought the odds were in his favour.

"Come on," he said.

Sophie stood beside him and looked down. "You go first."

He leaned out. There was a light in the boot lobby, but not ~~in~~ the pantry. ~~Would anyone see him?~~ On his own he might have been terrified, but her ~~being so frightened~~^{seems} made him braver. He swept the snow off the ledge with his hand, then walked along it to the ~~lean-to~~ roof of the boot lobby. He swept a section of the roof clear, then stood upright and reached out to her. He held her hand as she inched along the edge. "You're doing fine," he said ~~in a low murmur~~^{sadly}. It was not difficult—the ledge was a foot wide—but she was ~~shaky~~^{shaky}. At last she stepped down to the lean-to roof. "Well done," Craig said.

~~Then she slipped.~~

~~Her feet skidded~~^{out} from under her. Craig still had hold of her hand, but he could not keep her upright, and she sat down with a thud that must have reverberated below. ~~She landed awkwardly and tipped over backwards, sliding down the icy slates on her bottom.~~

~~Craig grabbed at her and grasped a handful of anorak. He tugged, trying to arrest her slide, but his feet were on the same slippery surface, and all that happened was that she drew~~

but he couldn't slow her momentum and he was pulled after her down the roof.

~~him along with her. He skated down the roof after her, struggling to remain upright and trying to slow her down.~~

When her feet hit the gutter at the lip of the roof, she came to a half ~~stop~~ but her bottom was half off the sloping ~~side~~ edge. She tilted sideways, Craig tightened his grip on her coat and pulled, drawing her towards him and safety ~~and~~ then he slipped ~~again~~ and he let go of her coat, ~~waving his arms to stay upright.~~

~~Sophie~~ screamed and fell off the roof.

~~She dropped ten feet and landed in soft new snow~~ ^{landed} behind the dustbin.

Craig leaned over the edge. Little light fell in that dark corner, ~~and he could hardly see her.~~ "Are you all right?" he said. ~~There was no reply.~~ Had she been knocked unconscious? "Sophie!"

"I'm okay," she said miserably.

The back door opened.

Quickly, Craig lowered himself to a sitting position.

A man stepped out ^{side} of the boot lobby. ~~Craig could just see a head of short dark hair.~~ He glanced over the side. ~~The extra light spilling from the open door made Sophie just visible. Her pink anorak disappeared into the snow, but her dark jeans showed. She lay still. He could not see her face.~~ ^{Sophie}

A voice ~~from inside~~ called: "Elton! Who's out there?"

Elton waved a torch from side to side, but the beam showed nothing but snowflakes.

Craig flattened himself on the roof.

~~Elton turned to the right, away from Sophie, and walked a few steps into the storm, shining his torch in front of him.~~

Craig ~~pressed himself to the roof, hoping Elton would not glance up. Then he~~ realised that the loft door was still wide open. If Elton happened to shine his torch that way, he could not fail to see it and investigate ~~which would be disastrous~~. Moving slowly, Craig crawled up the lean-to roof. As soon as he could reach, he got hold of the lower edge of the door and gently pushed it. ~~It swung slowly through an arc. Craig gave it a final shove and released it,~~ ^{closed.} then ^{he} quickly lay down again. ~~The door closed with an audible click.~~

Elton turned.

Craig lay still.

He saw the beam of the torch play over the gable end of the house and the loft door.

The voice came from inside again. "Elton?"

The torch beam moved off. "I can't see ^{anything} ~~nothing~~," Elton shouted back irritably.

Craig risked moving his head to look. Elton was walking the other way, towards Sophie. He stopped at the dustbin. If he ~~peeked around the angle of the lobby and~~ shone his torch into the corner, he would see her. When that happened, Craig decided, he would dive off the roof on to Elton's head. He would probably get beaten up, but Sophie might escape.

After a long moment, Elton turned away. "Nothing out here but fucking snow," ~~he called out, and he~~ stepped back inside the house and slammed the door.

Craig groaned ~~aloud~~ with relief. ~~He found he was shaking. He tried to make himself calm. Thinking about Sophie helped.~~ He jumped off the roof and landed beside ^{Sophie} ~~her~~. Bending down, he said: "Did you hurt yourself?"

She sat upright. "No, but I'm so scared."

"Okay. Can you stand up?"

"Are you sure he's gone?"

"I saw him go in and close the door. They must have heard your scream, ~~or maybe the~~ ^{didn't know what it was} ~~bump~~ as you slipped on the roof—but in this storm they ~~probably aren't sure it was~~ ~~anything.~~"

"Oh, god, I hope so." She struggled to her feet.

Craig frowned, thinking. ~~The gang were obviously alert.~~ If he and Sophie went directly across the yard to the barn, they could be seen by someone looking out of the kitchen windows. They would do better to strike out into the garden, circle around the guest cottage, and approach the barn from behind. They ~~would~~ ^{could} still ~~risk being~~ ^{be} seen going in ~~through~~ the door, but the roundabout route would minimise their exposure. "This way," he said. ~~"We'll take the long way round and stay out of sight."~~

He took her hand, and she followed him willingly enough.

~~He led her into the garden.~~ They felt the wind blowing more fiercely. The storm was coming in off the sea. Away from the shelter of the house, the snow no longer fell in swirling flurries, but ~~pelted~~ ^{drove} down ~~in hard straight lines~~ at an angle, stinging their faces and ~~getting into~~ their eyes.

When Craig could no longer see the house, he turned at a right angle. ~~Their progress was slow. The snow lay two feet deep, making it tiring to walk. He could not see the cottage.~~ Measuring his steps, Craig walked what he guessed was the width of the yard. Now completely blind, he figured he must have drawn level with the barn, and he turned again. He counted the paces until he should have bumped up against its wooden end wall.

But there was nothing.

~~He felt sure he could not have gone wrong. He had been meticulous.~~ He walked another five paces. He feared they might be lost, but he did not want Sophie to know that.

~~Suppressing a feeling of panic,~~ he turned again, heading back towards the main house. The complete darkness meant that Sophie could not see his face so, fortunately, she did not know how scared he was.

They had been outside less than five minutes, but already his feet and hands were agonisingly cold. ~~Craig realised they were in serious danger.~~ If they could not find shelter, they would freeze to death.

Sophie was not stupid. "Where are we?"

Craig made himself sound more confident than he felt. "Just coming up to the barn. A few steps more."

He should not have made such a rash prediction. After ten more steps they ~~were still in blackness.~~ *were still lost.*

~~He figured he must have walked farther away from the buildings than he had at first~~ reckoned. Therefore his return leg had been too short. He swung right again. Now he had turned so many times that he was no longer sure of his angles. He trudged ten more strides and stopped.

Do you know where we are?
"Are we lost?" Sophie said in a small voice.

"We can't be far from the barn!" Craig said angrily. ~~"We only went a few steps into the garden."~~

She put her arms around him and hugged him. "It's not your fault."

He knew it was, but he was grateful to her anyway.

"We could shout," she suggested. "Caroline and Tom might hear us and shout back."

"Those people in the kitchen might hear us too."

"That would be better than freezing."

She was right, but Craig did not want to admit it. ^{Then} ~~How was it possible to get lost in just a few yards? He refused to believe it.~~

~~He hugged her, but felt despair. He had thought himself superior to Sophie, because she was more frightened than he, and he had felt very manly for a few moments, protecting her, but now he had got them both lost. Some man, he thought, some protector. Her boyfriend the law student would have done better, if he existed.~~

~~From the corner of his eye, he saw a light. ^{when he turned it was gone.} He turned in that direction, and it was gone. His eyes registered nothing but blackness. Wishful thinking?~~

Sophie sensed his tension. "What?"

~~"I thought I saw a light." ^{When he turned his face to her, the light seemed to reappear in the corner of his eye. But when he looked up again it was gone.}~~

He vaguely remembered something from Biology about peripheral vision registering things invisible to direct sight. There was a reason for it, that had to do with the blind spot on the retina. He turned to Sophie ^{and} ~~again.~~ The light reappeared. This time he did not turn towards it, but concentrated on what he could make out without moving ~~his eyes.~~ The light flickered, but it was there.

^{when he turned again, it disappeared}
~~He turned towards it, and it was gone again;~~ but he knew its direction. "This way."

They ploughed through the snow. The light did not immediately reappear, ~~and Craig wondered if he had suffered a hallucination, like the mirage of an oasis seen in the desert.~~ Then it flickered into sight ~~and immediately disappeared again.~~

"I saw it!" Sophie cried.

They trudged on. ~~Two seconds later, it came back into view, and this time it stayed.~~ ^{did not vanish,}

Craig felt a rush of relief, and realised that for a few moments back there he really had thought he was going to die and take Sophie with him.

When they came closer to the light, he saw that it was the one over the back door.
They had walked around in a circle, ^{The were back where} ~~and now they were back at the exact point from which~~
they had started.

6:15 a.m.

Miranda lay still for a long time. She was terrified that Daisy would return, ~~but unable to do anything about it. In her mind, Daisy came stomping into the room in her motorcycle boots, and knelt on the floor, and looked under the bed.~~ Miranda could see ^{the} Daisy's brutish face, the shaved skull and the broken nose, ~~and the dark eyes that looked bruised by the black eyeliner.~~ ~~The vision of that face was so scary that sometimes Miranda just squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could, until she saw fireworks on the back of her eyelids.~~

In the end it was the thought of Tom that made her move. Somehow she had to protect her eleven-year-old son, ~~from the violent gang that had invaded her father's house.~~ But how? There was nothing she could do alone. ~~She would be willing to put her body between the gang and the children, but it would be pointless. she would be thrown aside like a sack of potatoes.~~ Civilised people were no good at violence, that was what made them civilised.

The answer was the same as before. She had to find a phone and get help.

That meant she had to go to the guest cottage. She had to ^{crawl} ~~get out~~ from under the bed, leave the bedroom, and creep downstairs, hoping she would not be heard ~~by the gang in the kitchen, praying that one of them would not step into the hall and see her.~~ She needed to grab a coat and boots, ~~for she was barefoot and naked but for a cotton nightdress, and she knew she could not go three yards, dressed as she was, in a blizzard with the snow two feet deep.~~

~~and~~
~~Then she had to make her way around the house, staying well away from the windows of the~~
~~house, to the cottage, and get the phone she had left in her handbag on the floor by the door.~~

IT wasn't that loud!
 She tried to summon her nerve. ~~What was she frightened of? The tension, she thought;~~
~~the strain was petrifying.~~ But it would not be for long. Half a minute to go down the stairs; a
 minute to put on coat and boots; two minutes, perhaps three, to tramp through the snow to the
 cottage. Less than five minutes, that was all,

She began to feel resentful. How dare they make her scared to walk around her ~~own~~
 father's house? Indignation gave her courage.

Shaking, she slid out from under the bed. The bedroom door was open. She peeped
 out, saw that all was clear, and ~~stopped~~ ^{went} on to the landing. She could hear voices from the
 kitchen. She looked down.

There was a hat stand at the foot of the stairs. Most of the family's coats and boots
 were kept in a walk-in closet in the boot lobby by the back door, but Daddy always left his in
 the hall, and she could see his old blue anorak hanging from the stand, and below it ~~the~~ ^{two}
 leather-lined rubber boots, ~~that kept his feet warm while he walked Nellie.~~ They should be
~~enough to keep her from freezing to death while she ploughed through the snow to the~~
~~cottage.~~ It would take her only a few seconds to slip them on and sneak out through the front
 door.

If she had the guts.

She started to tiptoe down the stairs.

The voices from the kitchen became louder. ~~There was an argument going on.~~ She
 heard Nigel say: "Well bloody well look again, then!" Did that mean someone was going to
 search the house? She turned and ran back, going up the stairs, ~~two at a time.~~ As she reached

the landing, she heard heavy boots in the hall—Daisy.

It was no good hiding under the bed again. If Daisy was being sent back for a second search, she was bound to look harder this time. Miranda stepped into her father's bedroom.

There was one place she could hide: the attic. ~~When she was ten years old, she had made it her den. All the children had, at different times.~~

The door of the suit cupboard stood open.

She heard Daisy's steps on the landing.

She fell to her knees, crawled inside, and opened the ~~low~~ door that led to ~~the attic~~. Then she turned and closed the cupboard door behind her, ~~she~~ backed into the attic and closed the ~~low~~ door. ^{that} ~~low~~ door, ~~too~~.

She realised immediately that she had made ^{mistake} ~~an error that might be fatal~~. Daisy had searched the house ^{before} ~~a quarter of an hour or so ago~~. She must have seen the door of the suit cupboard standing open. Would she ^{when} ~~now~~ remember that, and realise that someone must have closed it [?] ~~subsequently? And would she be smart enough to guess why?~~

Miranda heard footsteps in the dressing room. She held her breath as Daisy walked to the bathroom and back. She heard the sound of cupboard doors being flung open. She bit her thumb to keep from screaming with fear. There was a brushing sound as Daisy rummaged among suits and shirts. The ^{attic} ~~low~~ door was hard to see, unless you got down on your knees and looked under the hanging clothes. Would Daisy be so thorough?

There was a long moment of quiet.

Then Daisy's footsteps receded through the bedroom.

Miranda felt so relieved that she wanted to cry. ~~She stopped herself: she had to be brave.~~ What was happening in the kitchen? She remembered the hole in the floor. ~~She~~

and
crawled slowly across to take a look.

#

Hugo looked so pathetic that Kit almost felt sorry for him. He was a short man, ~~and podgy.~~
with
He had fatty breasts with ~~big nipples~~ and a belly that hung over his genitals. ~~The thin legs~~
~~below his round body made him look like an ill-designed doll.~~ He seemed all the more tragic
by contrast with his usual ~~self.~~ ^{nattyly-dressed self.} He was normally poised and self-assured, ~~dressed in natty~~
~~suits that flattered his figure, and he flirted with the confidence of a matinee idol. Now he~~
~~looked foolish and mortified.~~

The family were crowded together at one end of the kitchen, ~~by the pantry door,~~ away
from any exits: Kit himself, ~~his sister~~ Olga in her black silk wrap, their father ~~with swollen~~
^{his lips still bleeding}
~~lips where Daisy had punched him,~~ ^{from is low} and Olga's husband, the naked Hugo. Stanley was sitting
~~down, holding Nellie, stroking her to keep her calm, afraid she would be shot if she attacked~~
~~the strangers.~~ Nigel and Elton stood on the other side of the table, ~~and Daisy was searching~~
~~the upstairs.~~

~~Hugo stepped forward.~~ "There are towels and things in the laundry," ^{Hugo} ~~he~~ said. ~~The~~
~~laundry was off the kitchen, on the same side as the dining room.~~ "Let me get something to
^{Nigel}
wrap around me."

Daisy heard this as she returned from her search. She picked up a tea-towel. "Try
this," she said, and flicked it at his crotch. ~~Kit remembered, from school shower-room~~
~~horseplay, how that could sting.~~ Hugo let out an involuntary yelp. ~~He turned around, and she~~
~~flicked it again, catching him on the backside. He skipped away, into the corner, and Daisy~~
laughed. Hugo was completely humiliated.

It was unpleasant to see, and Kit felt slightly sick.

"Stop playing around," Nigel said angrily. "I want to know where the other sister is—
Miranda. ~~She was here.~~ She must have slipped out. Where did she go?"

Daisy said: "I've looked all over the house ^{again} ~~twice.~~ She's not in the building."

"She could be hiding."

"And she could be the invisible fucking woman, but I can't find her."

Kit knew where she was. A minute ago he had seen Nellie cock her head and lift one black ear. Someone had entered the attic ~~over the kitchen, and~~ it had to be Miranda. ~~Kit wondered if his father had noticed Nellie's reaction. Miranda was no great threat, up in the attic with no phone, wearing only a nightdress.~~ Still Kit wondered if there was ^{some} a way he could warn Nigel, ~~about her.~~

Elton said: "Maybe she went outside. That noise we heard was probably her."

Nigel's reply betrayed exasperation. "So how come you didn't see her when you went to look?"

"Because it's bloody dark!" ~~Elton was becoming irritated by Nigel's hectoring tone.~~

Kit ^{still thought} ~~guessed~~ the noise outside had been ^{one} ~~some~~ of the kids, fooling around. ~~There had been a thud, then a scream, as if a person or animal had hit the back door. A deer might have bumped into the door, but deer did not scream, they made a mooing sound like cattle. A large bird could conceivably have been blown against the door by the storm, and might have made a noise like a scream. However, Kit thought~~ the likeliest culprit was Miranda's son, young Tom. He was ² ~~eleven,~~ just the right age for creeping around at night, playing commandos.

If Tom had looked through the window, and seen the guns ~~in Nigel and Daisy's hands,~~ what would he do? First he would look for his mother, ^{and when he} ~~but he would not find her. Then~~ he would wake his sister, ~~perhaps,~~ or Ned. Either way, Nigel had little time to spare. He

needed to ^{find} capture the rest of the family before anyone made a phone call. But there was nothing ^{he} ~~Kit~~ could do about any of this without blowing his cover, ^{for the moment} so he sat tight and kept his ~~mouth shut.~~

"She was only wearing a nightdress," Nigel said. "She can't have gone far."

Elton said: ^{Well,} "I'll go and check the outbuildings, shall I?"

"Wait a minute." ^{Said} Nigel, ~~frowned, thinking.~~ "We've searched every room in the house, yeah?"

Daisy said: "Aye, like I told you."

"We've taken ^{away these} mobile phones ~~from three of them—Kit, the naked gnome, and the snotty sister.~~ And we're sure there are no others in the house."

"Aye." Daisy had checked for phones when she was searching.

"Then we'd better check the other buildings."

"Right," Elton said. "There's a cottage, a barn and a garage, the old man said."

"Check the garage first—there will be phones in the cars. Then the cottage and the barn. Round up the rest of the family and bring them here. ~~Make sure you get all their phones.~~ We'll ~~just~~ keep them all under guard ~~here~~ for an hour or two, then we'll scarper."

It was not a bad plan, Kit thought. When all the family was in one place, ~~with no phones,~~ there would be nothing they could do. No one was going to come to the door on Christmas morning ~~no milkman, no postman, no delivery van from Tesco or Majestic Wine.~~ ^{They} so there was no danger of any outsider becoming suspicious. ~~The gang~~ could sit tight and wait for daylight.

Elton put on his jacket and looked out of the window, peering into the snow. Following his gaze, Kit noticed that the cottage and barn across the courtyard were barely

visible through the snow by the light of the outside lamps. ~~There was still no let-up.~~

Daisy said: "I'll check the garage."

Elton said: "I'll go to the cottage, then."

Nigel said: "Get on with it, someone might be dialling 999 right now."

Daisy pocketed her gun and zipped up her leather jacket.

That was when Hugo jumped Nigel.

It was completely unexpected. ~~Everyone was taken totally by surprise.~~ Kit had written Hugo off, as ~~had the gang~~ ^{the others}. But he leaped forward with furious energy, punching Nigel in the face again and again, ~~with both fists~~. He had chosen his moment well, for Daisy had put her weapon away, and Elton had never drawn his, so Nigel was the only one with a gun in his hand, and he was too busy trying to dodge blows ~~that he could not use it.~~ ^{to} ~~He~~

~~Nigel staggered back, bumping against the kitchen counter behind him.~~ ^{while} Hugo went at him like a fiend, ~~thumping his face and body, in a mad rage,~~ screaming something incomprehensible. In a few seconds he landed a lot of blows, but Nigel did not drop the gun.

Elton was the quickest to react. He grabbed Hugo and tried to pull him off, ~~Nigel.~~ ^{but} ~~Being naked, Hugo was hard to grasp, and, for a moment, Elton could not get a grip, his hands sliding off Hugo's moving shoulders.~~

Stanley released Nellie, ~~who was barking furiously,~~ ^{who bled} and the dog flung herself on Elton, biting his legs. She was an old dog, and had a soft mouth, but she was a distraction.

Daisy reached into the pocket where she had stowed her gun. The barrel ~~seemed to~~ ^{caught} ~~catch on the pocket lining as she tried to draw it out.~~ ^{and} Then Olga picked up a ~~breakfast~~ plate and threw it ~~across the room~~ ^{hitting her} at Daisy, ~~Daisy dodged, and the plate hit her glancingly on the~~ shoulder.

Kit stepped forward to grab Hugo, then stopped himself.

The last thing he wanted was for the family to overwhelm the gang. Although he was shocked by the true purpose of the theft he had organised, ~~and horrified at the thought that he might be responsible for mass murder,~~ nevertheless his own survival was uppermost in his mind. It was less than twenty-four hours since Daisy had ^{nearly drowned him} almost killed him in the swimming pool, ~~and he knew that, if he failed to repay her father, he faced an end every bit as painful as death from the virus, in the perfume bottle. He would intervene on Nigel's side, against his own family, if he had to—but did he have to? He still wanted to maintain the fiction that he~~ ^{was an} had never seen Nigel before tonight. So he stood helplessly looking on as contrary impulses ^{warred within him, so for the moment he simply stood and watched,} ~~elashed within him.~~

Elton put both arms around Hugo ^{who} ~~and grasped him in a powerful bear hug. Hugo struggled, but he was smaller and less fit than Elton, and could not shake him off. Hugo struggled gamely, but he was smaller and less fit than Elton, and could not shake him off. Elton lifted Hugo's feet off the ground and stepped back, pulling him away from Nigel.~~

Daisy kicked Nellie accurately in the ribs with a heavy boot, and the dog whimpered and fled to the corner of the room.

Nigel was bleeding from his nose and mouth, ~~and there were angry red marks around his eyes.~~ He glared malevolently at Hugo and raised his right hand, which still grasped the gun.

Olga took a step forward, shouting: "No!"

Instantly, Nigel swung his arm and pointed the gun at her.

Stanley ~~grabbed her and~~ held her back, saying at the same time: "Don't shoot, please don't shoot."

Nigel kept the gun pointed at Olga and said: "Daisy, have you still got that sap?"

Looking pleased, Daisy took out ^{her} the cosh, with which she had knocked out Susan Mackintosh.

Nigel nodded towards Hugo. "Hurt this bastard."

Seeing what was coming, Hugo began to struggle, but Elton tightened his hold.

Daisy drew back her right arm and smashed the cosh into Hugo's face. It hit his cheekbone with a sickening crunch. ~~He made a noise between a shout and a scream.~~ Daisy hit him again, ~~just as hard, lower down,~~ and blood spurted from his mouth, ~~and ran down his bare chest.~~ With a spiteful grin, Daisy eyed his genitals, then kicked him in the groin, ^{then} she hit him with the cosh again, this time on the top of his head, and he slumped unconscious. ~~But that made no difference to Daisy. She hit him full on the nose, then kicked him again.~~

Olga let out a wail ~~of grief and rage~~, broke free of her father's grasp, and threw herself at Daisy.)

Daisy swung the cosh at her, but Olga was too close, and the blow whistled behind her head.

Elton dropped Hugo, ^{to} who slumped unconscious on the tiled floor, and made a grab for Olga, ^{who was scrambling}

~~Olga got her hands on Daisy's face, and scratched.~~

~~(Nigel had his gun pointed at Olga but he hesitated to shoot,~~ ^{ing} ~~no doubt fearing that he would hit Elton or Daisy, both of whom were~~ ^{now} ~~struggling with Olga.~~

^{In the confusion} Stanley turned to the stovetop and picked up the heavy frying pan ~~in which Kit had scrambled a dozen eggs.~~ He raised it high in the air ^{is} then brought it down on Nigel, ~~aiming at the man's head.~~ At the last instant Nigel saw it coming, and dodged. The pan hit his right

shoulder. ~~He cried out in pain,~~ and the gun flew from his hand.

Stanley tried to catch ^{it} ~~the gun,~~ but missed. ^{The gun} It landed on the kitchen table and inch from the perfume bottle. ~~It bounced on to the seat of a pine chair,~~ rolled over, and dropped to the floor at Kit's feet.

Kit bent down and picked it up.

Nigel and Stanley ^{watched} ~~looked at him,~~ ^{as} Sensing the dramatic change, Olga, Daisy and Elton stopped fighting and turned to ^{to} look at Kit, ~~holding the gun.~~

Kit hesitated, ^{as they all,} ~~torn in half by the agony of the decision.~~

~~They all~~ stared at him for a long moment, ~~of stillness.~~

At last he turned the gun around, ^{and} holding it by the barrel, ~~and~~ gave it back to Nigel.

6:30 a.m.

Craig and Sophie found the ~~door to~~ the barn at last.

They had waited a few minutes by the back door, ~~hesitating~~, then ~~realised they would~~ freeze to death if they stayed there indefinitely. ~~Screwing up their courage, they had crossed~~ ^{headed directly across} ~~the yard directly, heads bent, praying that no one would look out of the kitchen windows. The~~ ^{the yard} ~~twenty paces from one side to the other seemed to take forever through the thick snow. Then~~ ~~they had followed the front wall of the barn, always in full view~~ ^{of} ~~from~~ the kitchen. Craig did not dare to look in that direction, ~~he was too frightened of what he might see. When at last~~ ^{but when} they reached the door, he took one swift glance. In the dark he could not see the building itself, just the lighted windows. ~~The snow further obscured his view, and he could see only~~ ~~vague figures moving in the kitchen.~~ There was no sign that anyone had glanced out at the wrong moment.

He pulled the big door open, ~~they~~ stepped inside, and he closed it gratefully. Warm air washed over ^{them} ~~him. He was shivering, and Sophie's teeth were chattering like castanets. She~~ ^{Sophie} threw off her snow-covered anorak, and sat on one of the big hospital-style radiators. ~~Craig would have liked to take a minute to warm himself, but there was no time for that — he had to~~ ~~get help fast~~

The place was ~~dimly~~ lit by a night light next to the camp bed where Tom lay. Craig

looked closely at the boy, wondering whether to wake him. ~~There was no sign that he had thrown up again.~~ He seemed to have recovered from Sophie's vodka, and was sleeping peacefully in his Spiderman pyjamas.

Craig's eye was caught ~~by a gleam of light reflected off~~ something on the floor beside the pillow. It was a photograph. Craig picked it up and held it ^{under} ~~in~~ the light. It appeared to have been taken at his mother's birthday party, and showed Tom with Sophie, her arm around his shoulders. Craig smiled to himself. I'm not the only one who was captivated by her that afternoon, he thought. He put the picture back, ^{silently,} ~~saying nothing to Sophie.~~

There was no point in waking Tom, he decided. There was nothing the boy could do, and he would only be terrified. He was better off asleep.

Craig went quickly up the ladder that led to the hayloft bedroom. On one of the narrow beds he could make out the heap of blankets that covered his sister Caroline. ~~She seemed fast asleep.~~ Like Tom, she was better off ^{asleep.} ~~that way. If she woke up and found out what was going on she would have hysterics.~~ He would try not to wake her.

~~The second bed was neatly made.~~ On the floor next to the bed he could see ^{clear} ~~the shape~~ of an open suitcase. Sophie said she had dropped her phone on top of her clothes in the case. Craig crossed the room, moving cautiously in the near-dark. As he bent down ~~by the suitcase,~~ he heard, ^a ~~very near to him,~~ the soft rustle and squeak of ~~something alive,~~ and he grunted a startled curse; ~~his heart hammering in his chest;~~ then he realised it was Caroline's damn rats ~~moving in their cage.~~ He pushed the cage aside and began to search the case.

~~Working by touch, he rummaged in the contents.~~ On top was a plastic shopping bag containing a gift-wrapped parcel. Otherwise it was mostly clothes, neatly folded: someone had helped Sophie pack, he guessed, for he did not take her to be a tidy person. He was

momentarily distracted by a silky bra, then his hand closed over the oblong shape of a mobile phone. ~~He flipped its lid, but no lights came on. He could not see well enough to find the on-off switch.~~

He hurried back down the ladder with the phone in his hand. There was a standard lamp by the bookshelf. He turned it on and held Sophie's phone under the light. He found the power button ~~immediately~~, and pressed it, but nothing happened. He could have cried with frustration. "I can't get the bloody thing to come on!" he whispered.

She held out her hand, still sitting on the radiator, and he gave her the phone. She pressed the same button, frowned, pressed it again, ^{and} then jabbed at it repeatedly. ~~At last she~~ said: "The battery has run down."

"Shit! Where's the charger?"

"I don't know."

"In your suitcase?"

"I don't think so."

Craig became exasperated. "How can you *possibly* not know where your phone charge is?"

Sophie's voice went small. "I think I left it at home."

"Jesus Christ!" Craig ~~controlled his temper with an effort. He~~ wanted to tell her she was a stupid fool, but that would not help. ~~He was silent for a moment. The memory of kissing her came back to him, and he could not be angry. His rage evaporated, and~~ he put his arms around her. "All right," he said. "Never mind."

She rested her head on his chest. "I'm sorry."

"Let's think of something else."

~~"There must be more phones, or a charger we can use."~~

He shook his head. "Caroline and I don't carry mobiles—my mother won't let us have them. She doesn't go to the toilet without hers, but she says we don't need them."

~~"Tom hasn't got one. Miranda thinks he's too young."~~

~~"Hell."~~

"Wait!" She pulled away from him. "Wasn't there ^{a phone} ~~one~~ in your grandfather's car?"

Craig snapped his fingers. "The Ferrari—right! And I left the keys in. All we have to do is get to the garage, and we can phone the police."

"You mean we have to go outside again?"

"You can stay here."

"No. I want to come."

"You wouldn't be alone—Tom and Caroline are here."

"I want to be with you."

Craig tried not to show how pleased he was. "You'd better get your coat on again, then."

Sophie ~~came off the radiator. Craig picked her coat up from the floor and helped her~~ into it. She looked up at him, and he tried an encouraging smile. "Ready?" ^{he said helping her on with her coat.}

A trace of her old spirit came back. "Yeah. Like, what can happen? We could be murdered, that's all. Let's go."

They went outside. ~~It was still pitch dark, and the snowfall was heavy, bursts of~~ ~~stinging pellets rather than clouds of butterflies.~~ Once again, Craig looked nervously across the yard to the house, but he could see no more than before, which meant the strangers in the kitchen were unlikely to see him. He took Sophie's hand. Steering by the courtyard lights, he

led her to the end of the barn, away from the house, then crossed the yard to the garage.

The side door was unlocked, ~~as always. They stepped in.~~ It was as cold inside as out. There were no windows, so Craig risked switching on the lights.

^{The} Grandpa's Ferrari was where Craig had left it, parked close to the wall, ~~to hide the dent. Like a flash, he remembered the shame and fear he had felt twelve hours ago, after he had crashed into the tree.~~ It seemed strange, now, that he had been so anxious ~~and afraid~~ about something as trivial as a dent in a car. ^{He looked around the garage.} ~~He recalled how eager he had been to impress Sophie and get her to like him. It was not long ago, but it seemed far in the past.~~

~~Also in the garage was Luke's Ford Mondeo.~~ ^{was there, but} The Toyota Land Cruiser ^{was} had gone: Luke must have borrowed it last night.

He went to the Ferrari and pulled the door handle.)

It would not open.)

He tried again, but the door was locked. "Fuck," he said feelingly.

"What's the matter?" Sophie said.

"The car's locked."

~~"Oh, no!"~~

He looked inside. "And the keys have gone."

"How did that happen?"

Craig banged his fist on the car roof in frustration. "Luke must have noticed that the car was unlocked last night, ~~when he was leaving. He must have removed the keys from the ignition,~~ locked the car, and taken the keys back to the house for Grandpa."

"What about the other car?"

Craig tried the door of the Ford. It was locked, too. "Anyway, I doubt if Luke has a

ear phone.”

“Can we get the Ferrari keys back?”

Craig made a face. “Maybe.”

“Where are they kept?”

“In the key box, on the wall of the boot lobby.”

“At the back of the kitchen?”

Craig nodded grimly. “Just about two yards from those people with guns.”

6:30 a.m.

Wegreat
358-363
Skip to 370

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Craig nodded grimly. “Just about two yards from those people with guns.”

6:45 a.m.

The snowplough moved slowly along the two-lane road in the dark. ~~Carl~~ Osborne's Jaguar followed it ^{with} Toni ~~was~~ at the wheel ~~of the Jag, peering ahead~~ as the wipers struggled to clear away the thickly falling snow. ~~The view through the windscreen did not change. Straight ahead were the flashing lights of the snowplough; on her near side was the bank of snow freshly shovelled up by the blade; on the off side, virgin snow across the road and over the floors as far as the car's headlamps reached~~

Mother was asleep in the back with the puppy on her lap. Beside Toni, Carl was quiet, dozing or sulking ~~or both~~. He had told Toni that he hated other people driving his car, but she had insisted, and he had been forced to yield, as she had the keys.

"You just never give an inch, do you?" he had muttered before sinking into silence.

"That's why I was such a good cop," she had replied.

From the back, Mother had said: "It's why you haven't got a husband."

That was more than an hour ago. Now Toni was struggling to stay awake, fighting the hypnotic sway of the wipers, the warmth from the heater, and the monotony of the view. She almost wished she had let Carl drive. ~~But she needed to stay in control.~~

They had found the getaway vehicle at the Dew Drop Inn. It had contained wigs, false moustaches and ~~plain-lensed spectacles, obviously disguise materials;~~ but no clues as to

~~She~~
 Steepfall. ~~Now she had to put the second part of her plan into operation. She had to go to the~~
 house and brief Stanley.

~~She was dreading it. Her job was to prevent this kind of thing happening. She had done several things right: her vigilance had ensured that the theft was discovered sooner rather than later; she had forced the police to take the biohazard seriously and give chase; and Stanley had to be impressed by the way she had reached him in a blizzard. But she wanted to be able to tell him that the perpetrators had been caught and the emergency was over. Instead, she was going to report her own failure. It would not be the joyous reunion she had anticipated. It was heartbreaking that this should happen just when he had declared his love~~
she has to confess complete failure

for her. Still, there was nothing she could do about it.

~~Frank was at the Kremlin.~~ Using Osborne's car phone, Toni dialed his mobile *Frank's* ~~at the Kremlin~~

~~Frank's voice came out of the Jaguar's speakers.~~ "Detective Superintendent Hackett."

"Toni here. The snowplough is approaching the turn-off for Stanley Oxenford's house. I'd like to brief him on what's happened."

"You don't need my permission."

"I can't get him on the phone, but the house is only a mile down a side road—"

"Forget it. I've got an armed response team here now, bristling with firepower and itching to go. I'm not going to delay finding the gang."

"It will take the snowplough five or six minutes to clear the lane—and you'll get me out of your hair. And my mother."

"Tempting though that is, I'm not willing to hold up the search for five minutes."

"Stanley may be able to assist the investigation in some way. ^u ~~After all, he is the~~
~~victim.~~"

That shot went home. Frank began to sound defensive. "Carl wouldn't do the Farmer Johnny story. He's a mate."

"Your trust is deeply touching—him being a journalist, and all."

There was a long silence.

Toni said: "Make up your mind, Frank—the turning is just ahead. Either the snowplough diverts, or I spend the next hour briefing Carl, ~~on Farmer Johnny.~~"

There was a click and a hum as Frank hung up.

~~Toni cradled the phone.~~

Carl said: "What was that all about?"

"If we drive past the next ~~left~~ turn, I'll tell you."

A few moments later, the snowplough turned on to the side road leading to Steepfall.

7 a.m.

Hugo lay bleeding on the tiled floor, unconscious but breathing.

Olga was weeping. Her chest heaved as she was wracked with uncontrollable sobbing.

She was close to hysterics.

Stanley Oxenford was grey with shock. He looked like a man who has been told he is dying. He stared at Kit, his face showing despair and ~~bewilderment and~~ suppressed rage. His expression said *How could you do this to us?* Kit tried not to look at him.

~~Kit was in a rage. Everything was going wrong. He was exposed to his family, and there was no way they would lie about his role in this, which meant the police would eventually know the whole story. He was doomed to a life on the run from the law. He could hardly contain his fury.~~

He was also afraid. The virus ~~sample in its perfume bottle~~ ^{of} lay on the kitchen table, protected only by ^{a glass bottle and} two transparent plastic bags. ~~Kit's fear heated his fury.~~

Nigel ordered Stanley and Olga to lie face down beside Hugo, threatening them with his gun. He was so angry at the beating ~~he~~ had taken from Hugo that he might have welcomed an excuse to pull the trigger. ~~Kit would not have tried to stop him. The way he felt, he could have killed someone himself.~~

Elton searched out improvised ropes—appliance leads, a length of clothesline, and a

ball of stout cord

Daisy tied up Olga, the unconscious Hugo, and Stanley, binding their feet together and their hands behind their backs. She pulled the cords tight, so that they cut into the flesh ~~and yanked at the knots to make sure there was no looseness.~~ Her face wore the ugly little smile she showed when she was hurting people.

Kit said to Nigel: "I need my phone."

Nigel said: "Why?"

Kit said: "In case there's a call to the Kremlin that I need to intercept."

Nigel hesitated.

Kit said: "For Christ's sake, I gave you your gun!"

Nigel shrugged and handed over the phone.

"How can you do this, Kit?" Olga said, as Daisy knelt on their father's back. ~~"How can you watch your family being treated this way?"~~

"It's not my fault!" he rejoined angrily. "If you'd behaved decently to me, none of this would have happened."

"Not your fault?" his father said ~~in bewilderment.~~

"First you fired me, then you refused to help me financially, so I ended up owing money to gangsters."

"Oh, god."

"I was forced into this!"

Stanley spoke in a voice of authoritative contempt that was familiar to Kit from childhood. "No one is forced into something like this."

Kit hated that tone: it used to be a sign that he had done something particularly stupid.

"You don't understand."

"I fear I understand all too well."

That was just typical of him, Kit thought. He always thought he knew best. Well, he looked pretty stupid now, with Daisy tying ^{him up,} ~~his hands behind his back.~~

"What is this about, anyway?" Stanley said.

"Shut your gob," Daisy said.

He ignored her. "What in god's name are you up to with these people, Kit? And what's in the perfume bottle?"

"I said shut up!" Daisy kicked Stanley in the face.

He grunted with pain, ~~and blood came out of his mouth.~~

That will teach you, Kit thought with ~~savage~~ satisfaction.

Nigel said: "Turn on the TV, Kit. Let's see when this bloody snow is going to stop."

They watched advertisements: January sales, summer holidays, cheap loans. Elton took Nellie by the collar and shut her in the dining room. Hugo stirred and appeared to be coming round, ~~and Olga spoke to him in a low voice.~~ A newscaster appeared wearing a Santa hat. Kit thought bitterly of other families waking up to normal Christmas celebrations. "A freak blizzard hit Scotland last night, bringing a ~~surprise~~ white Christmas to most of the country this morning," the newscaster said.

"Shit," Nigel said with feeling. "How long are we going to be stuck here?"

"The storm, which left dozens of drivers stranded overnight, is expected to ease around daybreak; ^a ~~and the~~ thaw should set in by mid-morning."

Kit was cheered. They could still make it to the rendezvous ^{in time,}

Nigel had the same thought. "How far away is that four-wheel drive, Kit?"

"A mile."

"We'll leave ~~here~~ at first light. Have you got yesterday's paper?"

"There must be one somewhere—why?"

"Check what time sunrise is."

Kit went into his father's study and found *The Scotsman* ~~in a canterbury~~. He brought it into the kitchen. "Four minutes past eight," he said.

Nigel checked his watch. "Less than an hour." ~~He looked worried. "But then we have~~ to walk a mile in the snow, and drive another ten. We're going to be cutting it fine." He took a phone out of his pocket. He began to dial, then stopped. "Dead battery," he said. "Elton, give me your phone." He took Elton's phone and dialled. "Yeah, it's me, what about this weather, then?" Kit guessed he was speaking to the customer, or the customer's pilot. "Yeah, should ease up in an hour or so...I can get there, but can you?" Nigel was pretending to be more confident than he really felt. Once the snow stopped, a helicopter could take off and go anywhere, but it was not so easy ~~for the gang,~~ travelling by road. "Good. So I'll see you at the appointed time." He pocketed the phone.

The newscaster said: "At the height of the blizzard, thieves raided the laboratories of Oxenford Medical, near Inverburn."

~~The kitchen went silent.~~ That's it, Kit thought; the truth is out.

^{They} ~~The gang~~ got away with samples of a dangerous virus."

Stanley spoke through ^{swollen} ~~smashed~~ lips. "So that's what's in the perfume bottle...Are you people mad?"

"Carl Osborne reports from the scene,"

The screen showed a photo of Osborne with a phone to his ear, ~~and his voice was~~

~~heard over a phone line.~~ "The deadly virus that killed laboratory technician Mark Ross only yesterday is now in the hands of gangsters."

Stanley was incredulous. "But why? Do you imagine you can sell the stuff?"

Nigel said: "I know I can."

~~On television,~~ ^{Still talking,} Osborne was ~~saying:~~ ^{robbery} "In a meticulously planned Christmas caper, three men and a woman defeated the laboratory's state-of-the-art security and penetrated to Biosafety Level Four, where the company keeps stocks of incurable viruses in a locked refrigerator."

Stanley said: "But, Kit, you didn't help them do this, did you?"

~~Olga spoke up.~~ ^{Olga} "Of course he did," ~~she~~ said disgustedly.

^{themselves} "The armed ~~gang~~ overcame security guards, injuring two, one seriously. But many more will die if the Madoba-2 virus is released into the population."

Stanley rolled over with an effort and sat upright. His face was bruised, ~~one eye was closing,~~ and ~~there~~ was blood down the front of his pyjamas; yet he still seemed the most authoritative person in the room. "Listen to that fellow on TV," he said.

Daisy moved towards Stanley, but Nigel stopped her with a raised hand.

"You're going to kill yourselves," Stanley said. "If you really have Madoba-2 in that bottle on the table, there's no antidote. If you drop it and the bottle smashes ~~and the fluid leaks out,~~ ^{you} you're dead. Even if you sell it to someone else, and they release it after you've ~~left,~~ it spreads so fast that you could easily catch it and die."

On the screen, Osborne said: "Madoba-2 is believed to be more dangerous than the Black Death that devastated Britain in... ~~ancient times.~~"

Stanley raised his voice ^{to be heard} over the commentary. "He's right, ~~even if he doesn't know~~"

~~what century he's talking about. In Britain in 1348~~ the Black Death killed one person in three.

This could be worse. Surely no amount of money is worth that risk?"

Nigel said: "I won't be in Britain when it's released."

Kit was ^{startled} shocked. Nigel had not previously mentioned this. Had Elton also made plans ^{to go ahead. And} ~~to travel?~~ What about Daisy and Harry Mac? ~~Kit himself intended to be in Italy—but now he~~ wondered if that was far enough away.

Stanley turned to Kit. "You can't possibly think this makes sense."

He was right, Kit thought. ~~The whole thing bordered on insane.~~ But then, the world was crazy. "I'm going to be dead anyway if I don't pay my debts."

"Come on, they're not going to kill you, ^{actually} ~~for a debt.~~"

Daisy said: "Oh, yes we are."

"How much do you owe?"

"A quarter of a million pounds."

"Good God!"

"I told you I was desperate, three months ago, but you wouldn't listen, you bastard."

"How the hell did you manage to run up a debt—no, never mind, forget I asked."

"Gambling on credit. My system is good—I just had a very long run of bad luck."

Olga spoke up. "Luck? Kit, wake up—you've been had! These people lent you the money then made sure you lost, because they needed you to help them rob the laboratory!"

~~Kit did not believe that. He said scornfully:~~ "How would you know ^{7" said Kit} ~~a thing like that?"~~

"I'm a lawyer, I ^{know} ~~meet~~ these people, I hear their pathetic excuses when they're caught."

~~I know more about them than I care to."~~

Stanley spoke again. "Look, Kit, surely we can find a way out of this without killing

innocent people?"

"Too late, now. I made my decision, and I've got to see this through."

"But think about it, lad. How many people are you going to kill? ~~Dozens?~~ Thousands? Millions?"

"I see you're willing for me to be killed. You'd protect a crowd of strangers, but you wouldn't rescue me."

~~Stanley groaned.~~ "God knows I love you, and I don't want you to die, but are you sure you want to save your own life at that price?"

~~As Kit opened his mouth to reply,~~ ^{Bayer could} his phone rang.

~~Taking it out of his pocket, he wondered whether Nigel would trust him to answer it. But no one moved, and he held the phone to his ear. He heard the voice of Hamish McKinnon. She just called. Kit knew he was referring to Toni Gallo. She spoke to Steve, but he told us what she said.~~ ^{and}

~~Stanley said: "Whoever it is, Kit, please tell them what's going on here!"~~

~~Kit ignored his father. There was no point in telling Hamish anything. "Go on."~~

~~She's following the snowplough. She's persuaded them to divert to your place. She'll be there any minute. And there are two police officers in the lorry.~~ ^{and}

~~Kit ended the call and looked at Nigel. "The police are coming here, now."~~ ^{with plan} ^{will be any minute}

7:15 a.m.

Craig opened the side door of the garage and peeped out. There were three ~~lit~~ ^{were} windows in the gable end of the house, but the curtains were drawn ~~in each of them~~ ^{one} so no ~~casual observer~~ could see him.

He glanced back to where Sophie sat. ~~He had turned out the lights in the garage, but he knew she was in the front passenger seat of Luke's Ford, her pink anorak pulled close around her against the cold. He waved in her direction, then stopped outside.~~

Moving as quickly as he could, ~~lifting his feet high as he stepped in the deep snow~~, he went along the blind wall of the garage until he ~~came~~ ^{was} level with the front of the house.

~~He was going to get the Ferrari keys. He would have to sneak into the lobby at the back of the kitchen and take them from the key box. Sophie had wanted to go with him, but he had persuaded her that it was more dangerous for two people than for one, and she had seen the sense of that.~~

^{car keys}
^{two people were more likely to be spotted than one}

He was more frightened without her beside him. ~~For her sake, he had to pretend to be brave, and that made him braver. But now he had a bad attack of nerves. As he hesitated at the corner of the house, his hands were shaking and his legs felt strangely weak. He could easily be caught by the strangers, and then he did not know what he would do. He had never been in a real fight, not since he was about eight years old. He knew boys of his own age who~~

~~fought—outside a pub, usually, on a Saturday night—and all of them, without exception, were stupid. The three strangers in the kitchen were none of them much bigger than Craig, but all the same he was frightened of them. It seemed to him that they would know what to do in a fight, and he had no idea. Anyway, they had guns. They might shoot him. How much would that hurt?~~

He looked along the front of the house. He was going to have to pass the windows ~~of~~ ⁱⁿ the living room and the dining room, where the curtains were not drawn. The snowfall was not as thick as before, and he could easily be seen by someone glancing out.

He forced himself to move forward.

He stopped at the first window and looked into the living room. ~~Fairy lights flashed on the Christmas tree,~~ ^{The Christmas tree lights} dimly outlining the familiar ~~couches and tables,~~ ^{furniture and} the television set, and ~~four oversize children's stockings on the floor in front of the fireplace, stuffed with boxes and packages.~~ ^{The room was empty,}

~~There was no one in the room.~~

He walked on. The snow seemed deeper here, blown into a drift by the wind off the sea. ~~Wading through it was surprisingly tiring. He almost felt like lying down. He realised he had been without sleep for twenty-four hours. He shook himself and pressed on. Passing the front door, he half expected that it would suddenly fly open, and the Londoner in the pink sweater would leap out and grab him. But nothing happened.~~

As he drew level with the ~~dark dining room windows,~~ he was startled by a soft bark. ~~For a moment his heart seemed to bang against his chest,~~ then he realised it was only Nellie. They must have shut her in there. The dog recognised Craig's silhouette, and gave a low ~~le~~ ^{me} ~~me out-of-here whine.~~ "Quiet, Nellie, for God's sake," ~~he murmured.~~ He doubted whether

^{heard}
the dog ~~could hear him~~, but she fell silent anyway.

~~He passed the parked cars, Miranda's Toyota Previa and Hugo's Mercedes-Benz estate. Their sides as well as their tops were all white, so that they looked as if they might be snow all the way through, snow cars for snowmen.~~ He rounded the corner of the house. There was a light in the window of the boot lobby. Cautiously, he ^{looked inside,} ~~peeped around the edge of the~~ window frame. He could see the big walk-in cupboard where anoraks and boots were kept. There ^{the big walk-in closed,} ~~was~~ a watercolour of Steepfall that must have been painted by Aunt Miranda, ~~a yard brush leaning in a corner~~ and the steel key box, screwed to the wall.

The door from the lobby to the kitchen was closed. That was lucky.

He listened, but he could not hear ^{anything} ~~anything from~~ inside the house.

~~What happened when you punched someone? In the cinema they just fell down, but~~ he was pretty sure that would not happen in real life. More important, what happened when someone punched you? How much did it hurt? What if they did it again and again? And what was it like to be shot? He had heard somewhere that the most painful thing in the world was a ~~bullet in the stomach. He was absolutely terrified, but he forced himself to move.~~

He grasped the handle of the back door, turned it as gently as he could, and pushed. The door swung open and he stepped inside. The lobby was a small room, six feet long, narrowed by the brickwork of the massive old chimney and the deep cupboard beside it. The key box hung on the chimney wall. Craig reached to open it. There were twenty keys on numbered hooks, but he instantly recognised the Ferrari ¹⁵ keys. He grasped them and lifted, but the fob snagged on the hook. He jiggled it, ~~fighting down panic.~~ Then someone rattled the handle of the kitchen door, ~~but unfamiliar with the house pushed~~

~~Craig's heart leaped in his chest. The person was trying to open the door between the~~
~~instead of pulled.~~

~~kitchen and the lobby. He or she had turned the handle, but was obviously unfamiliar with the house, and was pushing instead of pulling.~~ In the moment of delay, Craig stepped into the coat cupboard and closed the door behind him.

He had done it without thought, abandoning the keys. As soon as he was inside, he realised it would have been almost as quick to go out of the back door into the garden. ~~He tried to remember whether he had closed the back door. He thought not. And had fresh snow fallen from his boots on to the floor? That would reveal that someone had been there in the last minute or so, for otherwise it would have melted.~~ And he had left the key box open.

~~An observant person would see the clues and guess the truth in an instant.~~

He held his breath and listened.

Nigel rattled the handle until he realised that the door opened inwards, ~~not out~~. He pulled it wide and looked into the boot lobby. "No good," he said. "Door and a window." He crossed the kitchen and flung open the door to the pantry. "This will do. No other doors and only one window, ~~overlooking the courtyard~~. Elton, put them in here."

"It's cold in there," Olga protested. ~~There was an air conditioning unit in the pantry.~~

"Oh, stop it, you'll make me cry," Nigel said sarcastically.

"My husband needs a doctor."

"After punching me, he's lucky he doesn't need a fucking undertaker." Nigel turned back to Elton. "Stuff something in their mouths so they can't make ^{any} a noise. Quick, we may not have much time!"

Elton found a drawer full of clean tea towels. He gagged Stanley, Olga and Hugo, who was now conscious, ~~though dazed~~. Then he ^{dragged} got the bound prisoners to their feet and

pushed them into the pantry.

"Listen to me," Nigel said to Kit. ~~Nigel was superficially calm, planning ahead and giving orders, but he was pale, and the expression on his narrow, cynical face was grim. Beneath the surface, Kit saw, he was wound as tight as a guitar string.~~ "When the police get here, ~~you're going to the door,~~ Nigel went on. ^{go to the door and} ~~Speak to them nicely, look relaxed, the law-abiding citizen.~~ Say that nothing's wrong here, and everyone in the house is still asleep except you."

~~Kit did not know how he was going to appear relaxed when he felt as if he were facing a firing squad.~~ ^{Kit} He gripped the back of a kitchen chair to stop himself shaking. "What if they want to come in?"

"Discourage them. If they insist, bring them into the kitchen. We'll be in that little back room." He pointed to the boot lobby. "Just get rid of them as fast as you can."

"Toni Gallo is coming along with the police," Kit said. "She's head of security at the lab."

"Well, tell her to go away."

"She'll want to see my father."

"Say she can't."

"She may not take no for an answer—"

Nigel raised his voice. "For crying out loud, what is she going to do—knock you down and walk in over your unconscious body? Just tell her to fuck off."

"All right," Kit said. "But we need to keep my sister Miranda quiet. She's hiding in the attic."

"Attic? Where?"

"Directly above this room. Look inside the first cupboard in the dressing room. Behind the suits is a low door leading into ^{the attic} ~~the roof space~~."

Nigel did not ask how Kit knew Miranda was there. He looked at Daisy. "Take care of it."

Miranda saw her brother speaking to Nigel and heard his words as he betrayed her.

She leaped to her feet. ~~She crossed the attic in a moment~~ and crawled through the door into Daddy's suit cupboard. She was panting hard, ~~her heart was racing, and she felt flushed~~, but she was not in a panic, not yet. She jumped out of the cupboard into the dressing room.

She had heard Kit say the police were coming and, for a joyful moment, she had thought they were saved. All she had to do was sit tight until men in blue uniforms walked in through the front door and arrested the thieves. Then ~~she had watched and~~ listened with horror as Nigel rapidly devised a way of getting rid of the police. ~~What was she to do if the police seemed about to leave without arresting anyone? She had decided she would open a bedroom window and start screaming.~~

~~Now Kit had spoiled that plan.~~

She was terrified of meeting Daisy again, but she held on to her reason, just.

She could hide in Kit's bedroom, on the other side of the landing, while Daisy searched the attic. That would not fool Daisy for more than a few seconds, but it might give Miranda just long enough to open a window and yell for help.

She ran through the bedroom. As she put her hand on the door knob, she heard heavy boots on the stairs. She was too late.

The door flew open.

Miranda hid behind it. *as*

Daisy stormed through the bedroom and into the dressing room without looking back.

Miranda slipped out of the door. She crossed the landing ^{went} and stepped into Kit's room, *and*

~~She ran to the window, and pulled back the curtains,~~ hoping to see police cars with flashing lights.

There was no one outside.

She peered in the direction of the lane. It was getting light, and she could see the trees laden with snow at the edge of the wood, but no cars.)

~~She almost despaired.~~ Daisy would take only a few seconds to look around the attic and make sure no one was there. Then, she would check the rest of the upstairs rooms.

Miranda needed more time. ~~How far away could the police be?~~

Was there any way she could shut Daisy in the attic?

She did not give herself a ~~split~~ ^{think}-second to ~~worry about risks.~~ ^{Running} She ran back to her father's room, ^{to the} She could see the door of the ~~suit~~ cupboard standing open. ~~There was no sign of Daisy; she~~ must be in the attic right now, staring around with those bruised-looking eyes, wondering if there were any hiding places big enough to conceal a grown woman, ~~somewhat~~ ^{overweight}.

Without forethought, Miranda closed the cupboard door. /

There was no lock, but it was made of solid wood. If she could jam it shut, Daisy would have trouble busting it open, especially as she would have little room to manoeuvre inside the cupboard.

There was a narrow gap at the bottom of the door. If she could wedge something into it,

~~the gap,~~ ^{stick,} the door would ~~be stuck,~~ at least for a few seconds. ~~What could she use?~~ She needed a piece of wood, or cardboard, or even a sheaf of paper. She pulled open her father's bedside drawer and found a volume of Proust.

She started ripping pages out.

Kit heard the dog bark in the next room.

~~It was a loud, aggressive bark, the kind she gave when a stranger was at the door.~~
Someone was coming. Kit pushed through the swing door that led to the dining room. The dog was standing with her forepaws on the windowsill.

Kit went to the window. The snow had eased to a light scatter of flakes. He looked towards the wood and saw ~~emerging from the trees,~~ a big truck with a flashing orange light ~~on top and a snowplough blade in front.~~ ^{S,}

"They're here!" he called out.

Nigel came in. The dog growled, and Kit said: "Shut up." Nellie retreated to a corner. Nigel flattened himself against the wall beside the window, peering ^{out,} ~~around the edge of the curtain, so that he could not be seen from outside.~~

The snowplough cleared a path eight or ten feet wide. It passed the front door and came as close as it could to the parked cars. At the last moment it turned, sweeping away the snow in front of Hugo's Mercedes and Miranda's Previa. Then it reversed to the garage block, turned off the drive and cleared a swathe of the concrete apron in front of the garage doors. As it did so, a light-coloured Jaguar ~~S-type~~ came past it, ~~using the track it had made in the snow,~~ and pulled up at the front door.

~~A figure got out of the car,~~ a tall, slim woman with bobbed hair, ^{got out of the car,} ~~wearing a leather~~

~~flying jacket with a sheepskin lining. In the reflected light from the headlamps,~~ Kit recognised Toni Gallo.

"Get rid of her," said Nigel.

"What's happened to Daisy? She's taking a long time--"

~~"She'll deal with your sister."~~

~~"She'd better."~~

"I trust Daisy more than I trust you. Now go to the door." Nigel retreated into the boot lobby with Elton.

Kit ~~went to the front door and opened it.~~ *He found door.*

Toni was helping someone out of the back of the car. Kit frowned. It was an old lady in a long wool coat and a fur hat. ~~He said aloud:~~ "What the hell...?"

Toni took the old lady's arm and they turned around. ~~Toni's face darkened with disappointment when she saw who had come to the door.~~ "Hello, Kit," she said. She walked the old woman towards the house.

Kit said: "What do you want?"

"I've come to see your father. There's an emergency at the laboratory."

"Daddy's asleep."

"He'll want to wake up for this, trust me."

"Who's the old woman?"

"This *lady* is my mother, Mrs Gallo."

"And I'm not an old woman," said the old woman. "I'm seventy-one, and as fit as a butcher's dog, so you mind your manners, ["]~~you cheeky young whippersnapper."~~

"All right, Mother, he didn't mean to be rude."

~~Kit ignored that.~~ "What's she doing here?" ~~said Kit.~~

"I'll explain to your father."

The snowplough had turned around in front of the garage, and now it returned along the track it had cleared, heading back ~~through the woods~~ towards the main road. The Jaguar followed.

Kit ~~felt~~ panicked. ~~What should he do?~~ The cars were leaving, but Toni was still here..

The Jaguar stopped suddenly. ~~Kit hoped the driver had not seen something suspicious.~~
~~and~~ The car reversed back to the house. The driver's door opened, and a ~~small bundle~~ ^{dropped out} fell out into the snow. ~~It looked,~~ ^{Then} Kit thought, almost like a puppy ~~—~~

~~The~~ door slammed, and the car pulled away.

Toni went back and picked up the bundle. It was a puppy, a black-and-white English sheepdog about eight weeks old.

Kit ~~was bewildered, but he~~ decided not to ask questions. "You can't come in," he said to Toni.

"Don't be stupid," she replied. "This is not your house, it's your father's, and he'll want to see me." She continued walking slowly towards him with her mother on one arm and the puppy cradled in the other.

Kit was stymied. He had expected Toni to be in her own car, and his plan had been to tell her she should come back later. For a moment, he considered running after the Jaguar and telling the driver to come back. ~~But the driver would surely ask why. And~~ the police in the snowplough might ask what the fuss was about. ~~It was too dangerous. Kit did nothing~~

Toni ~~came to a stop~~ ^{ed} in front of Kit ~~because he was~~ ^{who} blocking the doorway. "Is something wrong?" she said.

He was stuck, he realised. If he persisted in trying to obey Nigel's orders, he might bring the police back. Toni on her own was more manageable, ~~than the police force.~~ "You'd better come in," he said.

"Thanks. By the way, the puppy's name is Osborne."

~~Kit stood aside to let them in.~~

Toni and her mother stepped into the hall. "Do you need the bathroom, Mother?" Toni asked. "It's just here."

Kit watched the lights of the snowplough and the Jaguar disappear into the woods. He relaxed slightly. ~~He was saddled with Toni, but he had got rid of the police. He closed the front door.~~

~~There~~ ^{Just then there} was a loud bang from upstairs, like a hammer hitting a wall.

"What the heck was that?" said Toni.

Miranda had taken a thick sheaf of pages from the book and folded them into a wedge which she had shoved into the gap under the cupboard door. ~~But~~ ^{that} would not hold Daisy for long. She needed a more solid barrier. Beside the bed was an antique commode ~~chest~~ used as a bedside table. With a huge effort, she dragged the heavy mahogany chest across the carpet, tilted it at a forty-five degree angle, and jammed it against the door. Almost immediately, she heard Daisy pushing at the other side of the door. ~~When pushing failed, she banged.~~

Miranda guessed Daisy was lying with her head in the attic and her feet in the cupboard, kicking the door with the soles of her boots. The door shuddered but did not fly open. However, Daisy was tough, and she would find a way. Nevertheless, Miranda had won a few precious seconds.

She flew to the window. To her dismay, she saw two vehicles—^{snow plow} a lorry and a saloon car—driving away from the house. “Oh, no!” she said aloud. The vehicles were already too far for the people inside ~~to~~ to hear her scream. ~~Was she too late?~~ She ran out of the bedroom ^{and}

She stopped at the top of the stairs. Down in the hall, there was an old woman she had never seen before, going into the cloakroom.

~~What was happening?~~

Next she recognised Toni Gallo, taking off a ^{her} flying jacket and hanging it on the hat stand.

A small black-and-white puppy was sniffing the umbrellas.

Kit came into view. There was another bang from the dressing room, and Kit said to Toni: “The children must be awake.”

Miranda was bewildered. ~~How could this be?~~ Kit was acting as if there was nothing wrong...

He must be ^{trying to convince} ~~fooling~~ Toni, ~~Miranda realised.~~ He was hoping to make her think that all was well. Then he would either persuade her to leave, or overpower her and tie her up with the others.

~~Meanwhile, the police were driving away.~~

~~Toni closed the cloakroom door on her mother. No one had yet noticed Miranda.~~

Kit said to Toni: “You’d better come into the kitchen.”

That was where they would jump her, Miranda guessed. Nigel and Elton would be waiting, and they would take her by surprise.

There was a crash from within the bedroom: Daisy had broken out of the cupboard.

↑ ^{Screamed} Miranda ~~acted~~ without thinking, "Toni!" ~~she screamed.~~

Toni looked up the stairs and saw her.

Kit said: "Shit, no—"

Miranda yelled: "The thieves, they're here, they've tied Daddy up, they've got guns—"

Daisy burst out of the bedroom and crashed into Miranda, sending her tumbling down the stairs.