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Chapter Five: 9am (pps49-55)

Phone call from the US Embassy

AZ: Chaos and catastrophe loom, but we feel it only marginally.

- Cynthia has been accosted, nearly assaulted, and I suggest she be hysterical or on the verge.
- Toni remembers these rules she's learned, but will they work in this situation? And since she, too, is stunned by the uproar, she must struggle to come up with a message.
- And Stanley, just as agitated, may have other ideas.
- Toni may also castigate herself for having allowed the police to be called to the Ross cottage.
- Then the news that the US could pull out and ruin Oxenford needs to appal and devastate both Toni and Stanley.

Toni should react internally when he touches her or does anything else of a would-be intimate nature.

KF: There have been concerned inquiries from the office of the First Minister of Scotland and from the Department of the Environment in London.

9 a.m.

Oxenford Medical was under siege. Reporters, photographers and television crews massed outside the entrance gates, harassing employees as they arrived for work, crowding around their cars and bicycles, shouting questions and taking photographs. The security guards were trying desperately to separate the media people from the normal traffic, to prevent accidents, but were getting no cooperation. To make matters worse, a group of animal rights protestors had seized the opportunity for some easy publicity, and were holding a demonstration at the gates, waving banners and singing protest songs. The cameramen were filming the demonstration, having little else to shoot.

from whom? Where are the police? ✓

Toni Gallo was watching from Stanley Oxenford's office, a large corner room that had been the master bedroom of the old house. Stanley worked with the old and the new mingled around him: his computer work station stood on a scratched wooden table that he had had for thirty years, and on a side table was an optical microscope from the sixties that he still liked to use from time to time. The microscope was now surrounded by Christmas cards, one of them from Toni. On the wall was a Victorian engraving of the periodic table of the elements and a photograph of his late wife, Marta, in her wedding dress.

Stanley stood beside Toni at the window. They watched with dismay as the Volvos and Subarus parked along the grass verge and the crowd became noisier and more aggressive.

who had written what on it?

when a man knows he's
behaved dishonorably, and
wronged someone, he will
never forgive his victim.

"This is my fault," she said miserably.

"Is it?"

"I let a rabbit get through my security cordon, then my rotten ex-partner leaked the story to Carl Osborne."

Stanley put a hand on her shoulder lightly, a gesture of reassurance. "I hate to deprive you of an opportunity for self-pity, but I don't think your ex did it just to spite you. He would have leaked the story anyway. I imagine Osborne will show his gratitude by reporting favourably on the Harbourmouth police in general and Detective-Superintendent Frank Hackett in particular."

"It's nice of you to see it that way." All the same, Toni resolved to make sure the company did not suffer from what Frank had done.

There was a tap at the door and Cynthia Creighton, the company's public relations officer, came into Stanley's office, looking distressed. Stanley took his hand off Toni's shoulder quickly.

"This is dreadful," Cynthia said. "We must just tell everyone how terribly, terribly sorry we are."

Toni realised that Cynthia was not capable of dealing with this crisis. She was a plump, likeable woman of fifty who had previously worked in local government. Her job was to dispense a small charity budget, giving grants to school football teams and sponsored walkers, ensuring that the name of Oxenford Medical appeared frequently in the *Harbourmouth Courier* in stories that had nothing to do with viruses or experiments on animals. It was important work, Toni knew, for readers believed the local press, whereas they were sceptical of the national newspapers. Consequently, Cynthia's low-key local publicity

Toni wonders why Frank hates her. After all, she is the injured party. Stanley: "You are a meddling reprobate. He knows he behaved dishonourably. People hate the one they've wronged."

essentially

? How?

defended the company against the sensational Fleet Street scare stories that could blight any scientific enterprise. But Cynthia had never dealt with the jackal pack that was the national press in full cry.

Stanley was thinking the same thing. "Cynthia, I want you to work with Toni on this," he said. "She has useful experience of the media from her time with the police."

Cynthia looked relieved and grateful. "Have you?"

Toni nodded. "I spent two years in the press office."

"What do you think we should do?" Cynthia asked.

Toni said: "I was taught that when you're in trouble with the media, you need to do three things. One, decide what your message is. Two, make sure it's true, so that you will never be forced to go back on it. Three, keep saying it over and over again."

"That makes sense to me," Stanley said. Like Cynthia, he was not sure how to handle the press, and he was willing to take Toni's advice. "What do you think our message is?"

"We're doing work which is vital to the future of the human race. It's hazardous, but our security is as tight as mortal beings can make it. Something like that."

He nodded. "Sounds about right to me. And how would you put the message across?"

"I think you should call a press conference in a couple of hours' time. Most of these people outside will leave after that. They'll know that further developments are unlikely, and they want to go home for Christmas like everyone else."

~~"I've been thinking the same.~~ ^{Good.} Cynthia, will you make the arrangements, please?"

"We haven't got a room big enough for all those people, with their cameras—"

"Put chairs out in the Great Hall," Toni said. ^{Alert} "Warn the people outside—it will give them something to tell their news editors, and might calm them down a bit. Then phone the

news agencies and ask them to put it out on the wire, to inform any of the media who aren't already here."

"I'll get on with it right away."

As Cynthia was leaving, Stanley's secretary buzzed him and said: "Lawrence Mahoney from the United States Embassy in London is on line one."

"Thank you," Stanley said. "Leave him on hold. I'll pick him up in a minute."

"I remember him," Toni said. "He was here a few months ago. I showed him around."

Stanley had needed to raise money for the prolonged testing process through which his new antiviral drug had to pass. The U.S. military was keenly interested in the drug, because it promised to be the most powerful defence yet against biological warfare. So the Department of Defense was currently financing much of Oxenford Medical's work. Mahoney kept an eye on it from the Embassy.

Stanley said: "Mahoney is more important to us than all the British media put together. I don't want to talk to him cold. I need to know what line he's taking, so that I can think about how to handle him."

"Do you want me to feel him out?"

"Would you?"

She picked up the handset and jabbed the Line One button. "Hello, Larry—this is Toni Gallo, we met in June. How are you?"

Mahoney was a peevish press officer with a whiney voice that always made Toni think of Donald Duck. "I'm a little worried," he said.

~~"Tell me why."~~

"I was hoping to speak to Dr Oxenford."

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SE: Reference to "transfer the research to Atlanta" might also include "or Ft. Detrick" (USAMRIID).

GK: I am not aware of any drug testing for filoviruses taking place at the CDC. Most current drug testing on Ebola is done at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. CDC has done some work on transfer of antibodies to evaluate protection, and worked on vaccine development, as has USAMRIID.

"And he wants to talk to you as soon as possible. He's with the laboratory director right now, and he'll call you as soon as he has the complete picture—which will be before midday, I promise. In the meantime, can I give you any information?"

"You can tell me how the hell you let something like this happen."

"The kid sneaked a rabbit out of the lab in his duffle bag. We've already instituted a compulsory bag search at the entrance to BSL4 to ensure it can't happen again."

"My main concern is bad publicity for the United States government. We don't want to be seen as responsible for unleashing deadly viruses on the population of Scotland."

"There's no danger of that."

"Have any of the local reports played up the fact that this research is American-financed?"

"Not yet, but I think we have to assume they will pick up on it sooner or later."

"The most damaging angle for us—and therefore for you—is the one that says the research is done here because the Americans think it's too dangerous to be done in the United States."

"Thanks for the warning. I think we have a very convincing answer to that. After all, this drug was invented by Dr Oxenford right here in Scotland, so it's natural it should be tested here."

"I just don't want to get into a situation where the only way to prove our good will is to transfer the research to Atlanta."

Toni was startled. Atlanta, Georgia, was where the U.S. government's own virus research was concentrated, at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "We're not in that situation," she said flatly, wishing she could think of a more devastating put-down.

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EF: We haven't 'met' Stanley yet. We don't know what he thinks about Toni, Kit's betrayal
etc

"I sure hope so. Have Stanley call me as soon as he can."

"Thank you, Larry." She hung up the phone and said to Stanley: "They couldn't transfer your research to Atlanta, could they?"

He went a little pale. "There's certainly no provision in our contract to that effect," he said. "But, listen, they are the government of the most powerful country in the world, and what would I do—sue them? I'd be in court for the rest of my life, even if I could afford it."

"Would they do it?"

"I'm sure the microbiologists in Atlanta would prefer to be doing this research themselves, if they had the choice."

"Where would that leave you?"

"Bankrupt."

"What?" Toni was shocked.

"I've invested everything in the new laboratory. I have a personal overdraft of a million pounds. Our contract with the Department of Defense will cover the cost of the lab over four years. If they pull the rug now, I would have no way of repaying either the company's debt or my own."

"But the new drug will be worth millions."

"Eventually, yes. I'm sure of the science, which is why I was happy to borrow so much money. But I didn't foresee that the project might be threatened by mere publicity."

Toni felt angry. "And all because a stupid television personality needs a scare story."

Stanley nodded. "But there's no point in whining. We've just got to manage our publicity better. I'll call Mahoney and tell him we're about to give a reassuring press conference."

"Then we should have a rehearsal."

"You think I need to practise before talking to the press?"

"I'd like to ask you the most hostile questions I can think of, and see how you answer."

"What fun."

"That's the spirit," said Toni.

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