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Chapter Ten: 1pm (pps91-101)

Toni at Steepfall

AZ: This chapter is essentially about the relationship between Toni and Stanley, but we're dealing with that mostly tangentially. KF: Why not?

I suggest she vacillate almost violently between entertaining the possibility of a life with him and then rejecting the idea totally. And she rejects him most strongly when she's stirred by the physical attraction.

EF: We miss Stanley's PoV. How does he feel about Kit?

AZ: When Toni sees the family in the kitchen, she should think what a great guy Stanley is to have created this warmth.

KF: Toni should tell Stanley that Osborne asked her out on a date, so that Stanley can react (realising that Toni will not be around indefinitely?)

1 p.m.

Toni was overwhelmed by the scene in the kitchen: adults and children, servants and pets, drinking wine and preparing food and quarrelling and laughing at jokes. It had been like walking into a really good party where she knew nobody: she wanted to join in, but she felt excluded. She had stood there for several minutes, bemused but fascinated, until at last they noticed her.

Then, she observed, she had got a hard look from both daughters, Olga and Miranda. It was a careful scrutiny: detailed, unapologetic, hostile. She had got a similar look from the cook, Lori, though more discreet.

She understood their reaction. For thirty years Marta had ruled that kitchen. They would have felt disloyal had they *not* been hostile. Any woman Stanley liked could turn into a threat. She could disrupt the life of the family. She might change their father's attitudes, turn his affections in new directions. She might bear him children, half-brothers and half-sisters who would care nothing about the history of the original family, would not be bound to them with the unbreakable chains of a shared childhood. She could take some or all of their inheritance.

Stanley was not feeling these undercurrents, Toni thought as she followed him into his study. Men rarely did. Stanley was not even thinking of Toni as a potential wife. His

what ^{subject} he's thinking? This. How can she know

daughters had been alarmed by a mere possibility. Nothing was actual.

There was a bookcase full of weighty microbiology texts, a Victorian pedestal desk, and a worn leather couch in front of the log fire. The dog followed then in and stretched out on the rug.

On the mantelpiece was a framed photograph of a dark-haired teenage girl in tennis whites. Her brief shorts showed off long, athletic legs. The heavy eye make-up and the hair band told Toni that the picture had been taken in the sixties. "Is that Marta?" she said.

Stanley smiled fondly. "How she looked when I first met her."

Stanley's wife had died eighteen months ago, after thirty-five years of marriage. Toni said: "She was pretty."

"She was devastating—beautiful, tall, sexy, foreign, a demon on the court, a heartbreaker off it. Men fell like flies. I could never understand why she picked me. She used to say that she couldn't resist an egghead."

No mystery there, Toni thought. Marta had liked what Toni liked: his strength. He had other attractive qualities: he was handsome, well dressed, extremely intelligent, and warm-hearted; but his outstanding trait was his strength of character. From the start, Toni had known he was a man who would do what he promised and be what he seemed, a man she could rely on without question.

He liked her, too, and enjoyed her company. She could see that, just from the way he turned on the television set and sat back on the old couch. Men were like dogs, their body language told you everything you wanted to know.

But how did she feel about Stanley, she asked herself as she sat beside him? What if his daughters' fears proved true, and his interest in Toni was romantic? What would she do?

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KF: The news includes comments from the Scottish First Minister and the British Environment Minister about the hazards from viruses.

She did not want to think about that. He was a wonderful man, Toni felt: a brilliant scientist, a loving father, a good boss, a warm friend. But a lover? She deliberately ignored the faint tremor in her chest, like the uncertain vibration of the engine of her Porsche when it was cold. She was not even going to consider it. Stanley was too old, and he was her boss. And there was Marta, on the mantelpiece, wielding her tennis racket like a cudgel.

As the TV came on, Toni ^{tried to} put Stanley's family out of her mind and concentrated on the matter at hand. Would his business be ruined? They ^{might} would know in the next five minutes. She glanced at his face. The smile of a few moments ago had been replaced by a frown of anxiety.

She took a notebook from her shoulder bag. Cynthia Creighton was videotaping the news, back at the office, so Toni would be able to watch it again, but she would ^{now} jot down any thoughts that occurred to her immediately.

The Scottish news came on before the UK bulletin. The death of Michael Ross was still the top story. But the report was introduced by a newsreader, not Carl Osborne. That was a good sign, Toni thought hopefully. There was no more of Carl's laughably inaccurate science: the virus was correctly named as Madoba-2. The anchor was careful to point out that Michael's death would be investigated by the sheriff at an inquest.

Toni guessed that a senior news executive had watched Carl's sloppy report over breakfast and come in to the office determined to sharpen up the coverage. So far, so good.

Then the picture switched to the gates of the Fort. "Animal rights campaigners took advantage of the tragedy to stage a protest outside Oxenford Medical," the anchor said. Toni was startled: that sentence was more favourable than she had hoped. It clearly implied that the demonstrators were cynical media manipulators.

After a brief shot of the demo, the report cut to the Great Hall. Toni heard her own voice, sounding more Scots than she imagined, outlining the security system at the laboratory. This was not very effective, she realised: just a voice droning on about alarms and guards. It might have been better to let the cameras film the air-lock entrance to BSL4, with its fingerprint recognition system. Pictures were always better than words.

Then there was a shot of Carl Osborne asking: "Exactly what danger did this rabbit pose to the general public?"

Toni leaned forward on the couch. This was the crunch.

They played the interchange between Carl and Stanley, with Carl posing disaster scenarios and Stanley saying how unlikely they were. Unfortunately, they cut Toni's hasty intervention, when she had said Oxenford Medical was not trying to minimise the risk to the public. As she had feared, that left an impression of complacency. "Hell," she said quietly.

"It's not over yet," said Stanley.

That was true, Toni thought. It could get better, or worse.

The final press conference shot was a close-up of Stanley, looking gravely responsible, saying: "In time, we will defeat influenza, and Aids, and even cancer—and it will be done by scientists like us working in laboratories such as this."

"That's better," Toni said. "It outweighs the dialogue about danger.

"Does it?"

"I think so. You look so reassuring."

Then there was a closing shot of the canteen staff giving out steaming hot drinks to the demonstrators in the snow. "Great—they used it!" Toni said.

"I didn't see this," Stanley said. "Whose idea was it?"

“Mine.”

Carl Osborne thrust a microphone into a woman employee’s face and said: “These people are demonstrating against your company. Why are you giving them coffee?”

“Because it’s cold out here,” the woman said.

Toni and Stanley laughed, delighted with the woman’s wit and the positive way it reflected on the company.

When the anchor reappeared, she said: “A case of, if you can’t beat them, buy them a cup of coffee.” Then she moved on to other news.

Toni said: “My god, I think we may have saved the day.”

“Giving out hot drinks was a wonderful touch—when did you think of that?”

“At the last minute. Let’s see what the UK news says.”

In the main bulletin, the story of Michael Ross came second, after an earthquake in Russia. The report used some of the same footage, but without Carl Osborne, who was a personality only in Scotland. There was a clip of Stanley saying: “The virus is not very infectious. In order to infect Michael, we think the rabbit must have bitten him.” The report was shorter, but took the same factual, unhysterical tone.

Stanley switched to an all-news channel. They watched footage of Russian earthquake victims and rescue teams for a couple of minutes. The Michael Ross story followed, and once again the tone was factual. This time, Toni herself was featured. She was startled by how plump she looked in close-up, then she remembered the saying that television puts ten pounds on everyone. Her chubby image said: “Viruses kill many people every day, as Professor Oxenford has explained, but only one person has ever died of a virus from our lab, and he was not an innocent member of the Scottish public: he was an employee who deliberately

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EF – 3rd last line: When did Toni make this identification?

Shouldn't they both be more jubilant
and relieved? High fiver? Or hug?⁹⁶ Yes.

broke the rules and knowingly put himself at risk." Out of context, the quote made her seem cold and unfeeling, but at least she had made her point forcefully.

Stanley turned the TV off. "Well, the television news isn't going to crucify us."

"No newspapers tomorrow, as it's Christmas Day," Toni observed. "By Thursday the story will be old. I think we're in the clear—barring unexpected developments."

"Yes. We'd be right back in trouble if we lost another rabbit."

"That's not going to happen," Toni said firmly. She suddenly felt embarrassed. Sitting beside Stanley, looking at a screen, she was inappropriately reminded of going to the cinema with a boyfriend at the age of fourteen, and letting him touch her breasts underneath her sweater. She put the thought out of her mind.

Stanley smiled. "I have to tell you," he said. "You have handled this whole thing extraordinarily well. I'm very grateful to you."

She was pleased. "It's a matter of following a few simple rules."

"But I didn't know that, and you did. Thank you." Stanley stood up. "Would you like to see the house?"

"Yes." Toni was startled. She was an employee, not a social visitor; and anyway men never offered to show people around, it was always the woman of the house who did that. But she was intrigued.

The kitchen and the study were at the back of the house, looking on to a yard surrounded by outbuildings. Stanley led Toni into a dining room at the front, with a view of the sea. This was the part of the house Toni had identified as a new extension. There was another picture of Marta, a full-length oil painting of her as a woman of forty, with a fuller figure and a softness around her jawline. Across the hall, also overlooking the sea, was a

drawing room with a Christmas tree. The gifts under the tree spilled out across the floor. In a corner was a cabinet of silver cups. "Marta's tennis trophies," Stanley explained. It was a warm, pleasant room, but Toni guessed the real heart of the house was the kitchen.

The layout was simple: drawing room and dining room at the front, study and kitchen at the back. "There's not much to see upstairs," Stanley said, but he went up anyway, and Toni followed.

In the older part of the house, over the study and drawing room, were three small bedrooms and a bathroom. They still bore traces of the three children who had grown up in them, Olga, Miranda and Kit. There was a poster of The Clash on one wall, an old cricket bat with its grip unravelling in a corner, a complete set of *The Chronicles of Narnia* on a shelf.

In the new extension was a master bedroom suite with a dressing room and a bathroom, and a king-size bed. The bed was made and the rooms were tidy, but still Toni felt uncomfortable in her boss's bedroom. Yet another picture of Marta stood on the bedside table, this one a colour photograph taken in her fifties. Her hair was a witchy grey and her face was thin, no doubt by reason of the cancer that had killed her. It was an unflattering photo. Toni thought how much Stanley must still love her, to cherish even this unhappy memento.

They went downstairs, Toni still wondering why she had been given the tour. It was a privilege, of course, and should have drawn her closer to Stanley; but in fact she felt excluded, as if she had looked in through a window at a family sitting at table, absorbed in one another and self-sufficient.

In the hall, the dog nudged Stanley with its nose. "Nelson wants to go outside." He looked out of the window. "The snow has stopped—shall we get a breath of fresh air?"

“Sure.”

Toni put on her parka and Stanley picked up an old blue anorak. They stepped outside to find the world painted white. Toni’s Porsche Boxster stood beside Stanley’s Ferrari and two other cars, each topped with snow, like iced cakes. The dog headed for the cliff, evidently taking an habitual route, and Stanley and Toni followed.

Their feet displaced the powdered snow to reveal tough seaside grass beneath. They crossed a long lawn bordered by a thorn hedge. A few stunted trees grew at angles, blown slantwise by the tireless wind. They met two of the children coming back from the cliff: the older boy with the attractive grin, Craig, and the sulky girl with the pierced navel, Sophie. Craig was working hard to charm Sophie, Toni thought, but the girl walked along with her arms crossed, looking at the ground.

“What are your Christmas plans?” Stanley asked.

“About as different from yours as they could be. I’m going to a health spa with some friends, all singles or childless couples, for a grown-up Christmas. No turkey, no crackers, no stockings, no Santa. Just gentle pampering and adult conversation.”

“It sounds wonderful—but I thought you usually had your mother.”

“I have done for the past few years. But this Christmas my sister Bella is having her—somewhat to my surprise.”

“Surprise? Why?”

Toni made a wry face. “Let’s just say that Bella is not normally good at taking responsibility.”

They reached the cliff. To the right, the headland sloped down to a beach, now carpeted with snow. To the left, the ground dropped sheer into the sea. On that side, the edge

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EF: Say that this is a stylish coupe.

JT: Stanley says " I thought I might lose it," as if the danger is over. Is it? The Ross scandal could still play out against him. Couldn't he say something about not wanting to lose it?

was barred by a stout wooden fence three feet high, big enough to deter small children without obstructing the view. They both leaned on the fence and looked at the waves fifty feet below. There was a long, deep swell, rising and falling like the chest of a sleeping giant. "What a lovely spot," Toni said.

"I thought I might lose it," Stanley said quietly.

"Because of Michael Ross?"

He nodded. "I had to pledge the place as security for my overdraft. If I go bust, the bank takes the house."

"But your family..."

He nodded. "They would be heartbroken." In an unemotional tone he added: "And now, since Marta went, they're all I care about."

She looked at his face. His expression was as unsentimental as his voice. He was simply stating a fact. And why was he stating it? As a message to her, Toni assumed. It was not true that his children were all he cared about—his work mattered too, she knew that. But he wanted her to understand that he would never do anything to jeopardise the family's unity. Why had he chosen this otherwise delightful moment to say so? No reason, in all probability. A man never planned such things, he just said what came into his head.

She was saved the trouble of thinking of an appropriate response by the appearance of young Tom, who came running through the snow to say: "Grandpa! Grandpa! Uncle Kit's here!"

They followed the boy back to the house. A new double row of tire tracks led to Kit's black Peugeot coupe, parked beside Toni's car. Toni did not particularly want to meet Kit. She had caught him out in a shameful act, and he would never forgive her for that. But her

shoulder bag was in the house, so she was obliged to follow Stanley inside.

Kit was in the kitchen, being welcomed by with glad cries by his family—like the prodigal son, Toni thought sourly. Miranda hugged him, Olga kissed him, Luke and Lori beamed, and the dog barked. Toni stood at the kitchen door, feeling awkward, while Stanley embraced his son.

Stanley's presence seemed to make Kit feel uneasy. "I'd better get my bag from the car," he said. "I'm in the cottage, yeah?"

Miranda looked nervous and said: "No, you're upstairs."

"But—"

Olga overrode him. "Don't make a fuss—Daddy has decided, and it's his house, after all."

Toni saw a flash of pure rage in Kit's eyes, but he covered up quickly. "Whatever," he said. He was trying to give the impression that it was no big deal, but that flash said otherwise, and Toni wondered why he cared so much where he slept.

Toni stepped into Stanley's study. Her notebook and bag lay on the desk where she had left them. She slipped the notebook into the bag, slung the bag over her shoulder, and returned to the hall.

Looking into the kitchen, she saw Stanley saying something to the cook. She waved to him. He interrupted his conversation and came over. "Toni, thanks again for everything."

"I'll call you if anything more happens, but I believe the worst is over."

"Happy Christmas."

"To you, too." She went out.

Kit was there, opening the boot of his car. Glancing inside, Toni saw a couple of grey

boxes, computer equipment of some kind. She knew Kit was an IT specialist, but she wondered what he needed to bring with him for Christmas at his father's house.

She hoped to pass him without speaking but, as she was opening her car door, he looked up and caught her eye. She forced herself to be polite. "Happy Christmas, Kit," she said brightly.

He lifted a small suitcase from the boot and slammed the lid. "Get lost, bitch," he said, and he walked into the house.

This chart is essentially about the relationship between Tori and Stanley. But we're dealing with this mostly tangentially. Suggest she vacillate almost violently between entertaining the possibility of a life with him and then ~~of~~ rejecting the idea totally. Back and forth. And she rejects him most strongly when she's stirred by the physical attraction.