

**P169**

**Chapter Nineteen: 11:45pm (pps169-174)**

*Toni, Mother and Carl Osborne*

JT: I like Toni's mother as a character, but feel I need to know just a tiny bit more about her up front. And I feel the motive when Toni decides to take her with to Steepfall in the middle of the night needs to be stronger.

AZ: When Toni thinks about her mother, she should feel love, as well as anger about the obligation forced upon her.

AZ: Toni's relationship with Carl Osborne doesn't need to be totally abrasive.

KT: I was a bit worried about the sheepdog puppy, 6 weeks was quite young to leave its mother, maybe 8 weeks.

# 11:45 p.m.

The snow slowed Toni's progress. Poor visibility and the slippery roads forced her to drive her Porsche at thirty, sometimes less. She took two hours to reach the old folks home and three to get back. It was close to midnight when she reached the outskirts of Harbourmouth.

Mother was not in the least angry with Bella for letting her down. In fact, she seemed to think it was Toni's fault that she had been kept waiting so long. Toni had said irritably: "You do realise that Bella was supposed to pick you up hours ago."

"Yes, dear, but your sister's got a family to take care of."

"And I've got a responsible job."

"I know, it's your substitute for children."

"So it's okay for Bella to let you down, but not for me."

"Yes, dear."

Mother had fallen asleep within minutes of leaving the home. Toni had stopped the car, reclined the seat, and made a pillow with a scarf. Mother was still asleep now, with her mouth open, apparently comfortable and content.

In the town there were still revellers about. The traffic kept the main roads clear of snow, and Toni was able to drive without feeling that at any moment the car might slide out of control. She took the opportunity to call the Fort on her mobile phone, just to check.

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IT 1.9 suggest 'Toni shook her head, perplexed' rather than 'in perplexity'

The call was picked up, and Toni heard the voice of Steve Tremlett. "Oxenford Medical."

"This is Toni. How are things?"

"Hi, Toni. We have a slight problem, but we're dealing with it."

Toni felt a chill. "What problem?"

"Most of the phones are out. Only this one works, at Reception."

"How did that happen?"

"No idea. The snow, probably."

Toni shook her head in perplexity. "That phone system cost hundreds of thousands of pounds. It shouldn't break down because of bad weather. Are we getting it fixed?"

"Yes. I've called out a crew from Hibernian Telecom. They should be here in the next few minutes."

"Good. What about the alarms?"

"I don't know whether they're functional or not."

"Damn. Have you told the police?"

"Yes. A patrol car came by earlier. The men had a bit of look round, didn't see anything untoward. They've left now, gone to arrest Yuletide drunks in Harbourmouth."

A man staggered into the road in front of Toni's car, and she swerved to avoid him. "I can see why," she said. "Are you patrolling every half hour, as I told you?"

"Of course."

"Good. Let me know what the repairmen find, will you?"

"Sure. Uh, where are you?"

"Harbourmouth."

There was a pause. "I thought you were going to a health farm."

"I was, but I didn't. Long story. Call me on the mobile number, okay?"

"Sure."

They hung up. "Hell," Toni said to herself. First Mother, now this.

A few seconds later, Toni stopped outside her building, but she did not get out of the car. She sat there, wondering what to do. She wanted to go to the Fort.

If she had been at the spa, there would have been no question of her paying a visit: it was too far away. But she was not. She was here in Harbourmouth, just a few miles away. However, the journey would take at least an hour in this weather. And she had Mother beside her.

All the same, she wanted to go.

It seemed unlikely that Animals Are Free could be behind the failure of the phone system. It could not easily be sabotaged, at least by amateurs. On the other hand, she had underestimated them once before. *If Mark was responsible, why Does she blame Animals Are Free?*

She just did not like the idea of lying at home in bed while something, anything, was going wrong at the Fort.

Mother was out cold. She would not care, she probably would not even know, if they drove for another hour.

Toni sighed. There was only one decision she could make.

As she put the gearshift into first, a man got out of a light-coloured Jaguar saloon parked farther along the kerb. There was something familiar about him, she thought, and she hesitated before pulling away. He walked along the pavement towards her. By his gait she judged that he was slightly tipsy, but well in control. He came to her window, and she

recognised Carl Osborne, the television presenter. He was carrying a small bundle.

She put the gearshift in neutral and wound down the window. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," he said. "I was ready to give up."

Mother woke up and said: "Hello, is this your boyfriend?"

"This is Carl Osborne, and he's not my boyfriend."

"Perhaps he'd like to be," she said.

Carl grinned.

Toni said: "This is my mother. What do you want?"

"I brought you a present," he said, and he showed her what was in his hand. It was a puppy. "Merry Christmas," he said, and tipped it into her lap.

"Carl, for god's sake, don't be ridiculous," she said. She picked up the warm bundle and tried to give it back.

He stepped away and held up his hands. "He's yours," he said.

The little dog was soft and warm in her hands, and part of her wanted to hold it close, but she knew she had to get rid of it.

She got out of the car. "I don't want a dog," she said firmly. "I'm a single woman with a demanding job, and I can't give the poor creature the care and attention it needs."

"You'll find a way. What are you going to call him? Carl is a nice name."

She looked at the pup. It was an English sheepdog, white with grey patches, about six weeks old. She could hold it in one hand. It licked her with a rough tongue and gave her an appealing look. She hardened her heart.

She walked along the pavement to his car, put the puppy on the front seat, and closed

**P173**

IT 1.7 'ravening' – this is an unusual word to use, but I know what you mean. Would 'voracious' or 'rabid' be better? And we've still got Mark Ross here, rather than Michael.

the door gently. "You name him," she said. "I've got too much on my plate."

"Well, think about it," he said. "I'll keep him tonight, and call you tomorrow."

She got back into her car. The window was still down. "Don't call me," she said. She put the gearshift into first."

"You're a hard woman," he said as she pulled away.

For some reason, that jibe got to her. I'm not hard, she thought. Unexpected tears came to her eyes. I've had to deal with the death of ~~Mark~~ Ross, and a ravening pack of reporters, and I've been called a bitch by Kit Oxenford, and my sister has let me down, and I've cancelled the holiday I was looking forward to. I take responsibility for my mother and the Fort and everything, and I can't manage a puppy as well, and that's final.

She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, and peered ahead into the swirling snowflakes. Turning out of her Victorian street, she headed for the main road north toward the Fort.

Mother said: "Carl seems nice."

"He's not nice. He's shallow and dishonest."

"Better than nothing, though."

Toni sighed. "You might be right, Mother, but I doubt it."

The traffic thinned out rapidly as she left the town centre, and the snow lay thick on the road. Manoeuvring carefully through a series of roundabouts, she noticed a car close on her tail. Looking in the rear-view mirror, she identified it as a light-coloured Jaguar saloon.

Carl Osborne was following her.

She pulled over, and he stopped right behind her.

She got out and went to his window. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm a reporter, Toni," he said. "It's midnight on Christmas Eve, and you're looking after your elderly mother, yet you're in your car and you seem to be heading toward the Fort. This has to be a story."

"Oh, shit," said Toni.

No suggestions.