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Chapter Twenty-One: 0:40am (pps190-193)

Toni has a crash

AZ: Emotional reactions should be coequal with physical details. Toni should have more forebodings about possible trouble at the Kremlin.

0:40 a.m.

Toni was driving at ten miles an hour, leaning forward over the steering wheel to peer into the blinding snowfall, trying to see the road. Her headlights did nothing but illuminate a cloud of big, soft snowflakes that seemed to fill the universe. She had been staring for so long that her eyelids hurt, as if she had got soap in her eyes.

Her mobile became a car phone when slotted into a cradle on the dashboard of the Porsche. She had dialled the Kremlin, and now she listened as it rang out unanswered.

“I don’t think anyone’s answering,” Mother said.

The repairmen must have downed the entire system, Toni thought. Feeling frustrated, she touched a button to end the call.

“Where are we?” said Mother.

Toni did not know. She was familiar with this road but could hardly see it. She seemed to have been driving for ever. She glanced to the side from time to time, looking for landmarks. She thought she recognised a stone cottage with a distinctive wrought-iron gate. It was only a couple of miles from the Fort, she recalled. That cheered her up. “We’ll be there in ten or fifteen minutes, Mother,” she said.

She looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the headlights that had been with her since Harbourmouth: the pest Carl Osborne in his Jaguar, doggedly following her at the same

sluggard pace. On another day she would have enjoyed losing him.

I must be mad, she thought, doing this just because there's something wrong with the phones. When Stanley heard about it, he would tell her she had wasted her time. But the security of the Fort was her entire job, and she was not willing to take risks with it. If my visit is superfluous, too bad, she thought. There's no harm done.

And at least she would enjoy the look on Carl Osborne's face when he realised he had driven for hours in the snow at Christmas in the middle of the night to cover the story of a telephone fault.

She seemed to be on a straight stretch, and she risked speeding up. But it was not straight for long, and almost immediately she came to a right-hand bend. She could not use the brakes, for fear of skidding, so she changed down a gear to slow the car, then held her foot steady on the throttle as she turned. The tail of the Porsche wanted to break free, she could feel it, but the wide rear tires held their grip.

Headlights appeared coming in the opposite direction, and for a change she could make out a hundred yards of road between the two cars. There was not much to see: snow eight or nine inches thick on the ground, a drystone wall on her left, a white hill on the right.

The oncoming car seemed to be travelling quite fast.

She recalled this stretch of road. It was a long, wide bend that turned through ninety degrees around the foot of the hill. She held her line through the curve.

But the oncoming car did not.

She saw it drift across the carriageway to the crown of the road, and she thought: Fool, you braked into the turn and your back broke away.

In the next instant, she realised with horror that it was heading straight for her.

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IT 1.1 What's a 'hot hatch'?

It crossed the middle of the road and came at her broadside. It was a hot hatch, and there were four men in it. They seemed to be laughing, and in the split-second for which she could see them she divined that they were young merrymakers too drunk to realise they were in danger. "Look out!" she screamed uselessly.

The front of the Porsche was about to smash into the side of the skidding hatchback. Toni acted reflexively, without conscious thought. She jerked the steering wheel to the left. The nose of the car turned. Almost simultaneously, she pushed down on the accelerator pedal. The car leaped forward and skidded. For an instant the hatchback was alongside her, inches away.

The Porsche was angled left and sliding forward. Toni swung the wheel to the right to correct the skid, and applied a featherlight touch to the throttle. The car straightened up and the tires gripped.

She thought the hatchback would hit her rear wing; then she thought it would miss by a hair; then there was a clang, loud but superficial-sounding, and she realised her bumper had been hit.

It was not much of a blow, but it destabilised the Porsche, and the rear swung left, out of control again. Toni tugged the steering wheel to the left, turning into the skid; but, before her corrective action could take effect, the car hit the drystone wall. There was a terrific bang, and the sound of breaking glass, and the car came to a complete stop.

Toni looked at her mother. She was staring ahead of her, mouth open, bewildered but unharmed.

Toni looked fearfully in her rear-view mirror, thinking the hatchback must smash into Osborne's Jaguar. She could see the red rear lights of the hatch and the white headlights of

the Jag. The hatchback fishtailed; the Jag swung hard over to the side of the road; the hatchback straightened up and went by.

The Jaguar came to a stop, and the car full of drunk boys went on into the night.

Mother said: "I heard a bang—did that car hit us?"

"Yes," Toni said. "We had a lucky escape."

"I think you should drive more carefully," said Mother.

Again, the emotional reactions should be co-equal with the physical details.

And her forebodings about possible trouble at the Fort should increase.