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Chapter Twenty-Eight: 3am (pps228-234)

The gang abandon the Astra

KF: Where they have abandoned it, it will block the progress of the snowplough; then someone should ask questions on arrival at Steepfall. Better the car is abandoned on the main road.

AB: P324 is the first time anyone shows concern for Nigel's customers making it to the rendezvous point. Hasn't the race against time always been for Nigel and company to make it there by noon?

3 a.m.

Elton drove the Vauxhall Astra estate car at ten miles an hour, ploughing through more than a foot of fresh snow. Nigel sat beside Elton in the front, and Kit was in the back with Daisy. After leaving the Dew Drop Inn, they did not see another moving vehicle. About every mile, they passed an abandoned car or truck, sometimes at the side of the road, sometimes right in the middle. One was a police Range Rover on its side.

Suddenly a man stepped into the headlights, waving frantically. He wore a business suit and tie, and had no coat or hat. "Don't even dream of stopping," Nigel murmured. Elton drove straight at the man, who dived out of the way at the last moment. As they swept by, Kit glimpsed a woman in a cocktail dress, hugging a thin shawl around her shoulders, standing beside a big Bentley, looking desperate.

They passed the turning for Steepfall, and Kit wished he were a boy again, lying in bed at his father's house, knowing nothing about viruses or computers or the odds at roulette.

The snow became so heavy that little was visible through the windscreen but whiteness. Elton was almost blind, steering by guesswork, glances out of the side windows, and optimism. The temperature fell farther, the car crept forward at walking pace and slower, and Kit began to wonder if they would ever reach their destination.

He wished they had a more suitable car. His father's Nissan Patrol was not far away,

How cold and wet are ~~the~~ they?

*How despairing and
down in the dumps
is he?*

he realised, in the garage at Steepfall. If they could change cars they might have a chance. But how?

On a hill, the tyres began to slip in the snow. The car gradually lost all forward momentum. It stopped and then, to Kit's horror, began to slide backwards. Elton tried braking, but that only made the car skid faster. He turned the steering wheel. The back swerved left. Elton spun the wheel in the opposite direction, and the car came to rest slewed at an angle across the road.

Nigel cursed.

Daisy leaned forward and said: "What did you do that for, you pillock?"

Elton said: "Get out and push, Daisy."

"Screw you."

"I mean it," he said. "The brow of the hill is only a few yards away. I could make it, if someone would get out and push."

Nigel said: "We'll all push."

Nigel, Daisy and Kit got out. The cold was bitter, and the snowflakes stung Kit's eyes. They got behind the car and leaned on it. The metal was biting cold on Kit's bare hands. Only Daisy had gloves. Elton let out the clutch slowly, and they pushed. Kit's feet were soaking wet in seconds. But the tyres bit. Elton pulled away from them and drove to the top of the hill, where he halted and waited for them to catch up.

They trudged up the slope, slipping in the snow, panting with the effort, shivering. Were they going to do this on every hill for twenty miles, Kit wondered?

When they got back into the car, Nigel said: "At this rate, we could miss our noon rendezvous—and then none of us get paid."

Is this how far they still have to go?

Kit made up his mind. He said: "I know where there's a sport-utility vehicle with four-wheel drive—a Nissan Patrol."

Daisy said: "We could get stuck in that—remember the police Range Rover we passed?"

Nigel said: "It has to be better than an Astra. Where is this car?"

"At my father's house. He uses it at times like this, when the roads are too slippery for his Ferrari."

"How far away are we?"

"Only a mile, as the crow flies; probably double that by road."

"What are you suggesting?"

"We take the turnoff for Steepfall, which we passed a few hundred yards back. We park this Astra in the woods out of sight of the house. We proceed on foot, borrow the SUV, and drive to the airfield. Afterwards, Elton and I come back here. We park the SUV before daylight, I go to bed, and Elton leaves in the Astra. My father need never know."

Elton said: "Yeah, and I get stuck in the snow alone."

"It might thaw when the sun comes up."

Nigel said: "Has anyone got a better idea?"

No one did.

Elton turned the car and went back down the hill in low gear. After a few minutes, Kit pointed. "Take that side road."

As soon as they did so, he began to think they had made the wrong decision. On the main road, much of the snow had been swept away by cars, even though what remained was thick. Here, there had been no traffic all night, and the snow seemed about eighteen inches

deep. But the depth was not consistent. In places the car moved easily through a shallow layer then, just a hundred yards farther along, it was up to the headlights.

Elton kept his foot on the throttle, trying to maintain enough speed to push the snow aside, but it was a doomed project. A few hundred yards along the road, the Astra slowed to a crawl, pushing in front of it a growing mound of snow like a tidal wave; then it stopped, with a thud, as if it had bumped into something soft but immovable. The engine stalled.

We could use Kit's reaction. He's at the center.
Elton said: "This car is through. No more."

Nigel said: "How far are we from the Nissan Patrol?"

"A bit less than a mile," Kit said.

Daisy said: "It's a long way in this fucking weather."

"The alternative," Nigel said, "is to walk back to the road, wait for a vehicle that can move, and hijack it."

"We'll wait a long time," Elton said. "We haven't seen another moving car for more than an hour."

Kit said: "You three could wait here while I go and get the Nissan."

Is this what he really wants to do? Any ulterior motive?
Nigel shook his head. "Something might happen to you! You could get stuck in the

snow, and we wouldn't know. Better to stay together." There was another reason, Kit guessed, that Nigel was not saying: He did not trust Kit alone. Kit might have second thoughts and call the police.

There was a long silence. They sat still, reluctant to leave the warmth that blasted from the car's heater. Then Elton turned off the engine and they all got out of the car.

Nigel held on tightly to the burgundy leather briefcase containing the spray gun of virus. That was the reason they were all going through this. He was not going to leave it

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IT 1.15 It's 'Puffa' jacket, isn't it? A brand name. Wish I didn't know this!

anywhere.

Elton found a torch in the glove box and gave it to Kit. "You're leading the way," he said.

Without further discussion Kit headed off, ploughing through snow up to his knees. He heard grunts and curses from the others. He did not look back. They would keep up or get left behind.

The familiar lane, along which he had walked and cycled a thousand times in his boyhood, was buried out of sight, and he quickly began to feel confused about where he was. If this had been England, there would have been a hedge or wall to mark the edge of the road, but here the land on either side was uncultivated moor, and no one had ever seen any reason to fence it off.

Let's feel it in detail

He was painfully cold None of them was dressed for this. They had expected to be indoors or travelling in cars. Nigel had a light parka, Elton a jean jacket and a roll-neck sweater, and Daisy a leather jacket over some kind of T-shirt. Kit was the most warmly dressed, with a puffer jacket, and even he was shivering. They all wore ordinary street shoes, except for Daisy who had motorcycle boots.

Feeling that he had veered from the road, Kit stopped, and with his bare hands dug down into the snow at his feet to see what was below. "What now?" Nigel said.

"Just a minute." He found frozen turf. But which way had he strayed? He blew on his hands, trying to warm them. It did not help. The land to his right seemed to slope upward a little. He guessed the road was that way. He trudged a few yards in that direction, and dug down again. This time he found tarmac. "This way," he said, with more confidence than he felt.

The snow caked his jeans, then it melted from the warmth of his body, and finally it froze again, so that soon he was wearing ice next to his skin.

After half an hour, he began to feel that he was going around in a circle. He had no sense of direction. On a normal night, the lights outside the house should by now have been visible in the distance, like a beacon, but tonight nothing shone through the snowfall to give

him a sense of direction. There was no sound or smell of the sea: it might have been fifty miles away. *In such weather, isn't it likely that in no remote area even the power would fail?*

The others followed him in silence. Even Daisy stopped bitching. They were exhausted, breathless, and shivering, and had no energy to complain.

At last Kit sensed a deeper darkness around him. The snow fell less heavily. He almost bumped into the thick trunk of a big pine tree. He had reached the woods near the house. He felt so relieved that he wanted to kneel down and give thanks. From this point on, he would be able to find his way.

As he followed the winding track through the trees, he could hear someone's teeth chattering like a drum roll. He hoped it was Daisy.

He had lost all feeling in his fingers and toes, but he could still move his legs. The snow was not quite so thick on the ground, here in the shelter of the trees, and he was able to walk faster. A faint glow ahead told him he was approaching the lights of the house. At last he emerged from the woods. He headed for the light and came to the three-car garage.

The up-and-over doors were closed, but there was a side door that was never locked. Kit found it and went inside. The other three followed him in. "Thank God," Elton said grimly. "I thought I was going to die out there."

Kit shone his torch. Here was his father's blue Ferrari, parked very closed to the wall.

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NN: The reader wonders what happened to the SUV? It was there when Craig parked the dented Ferrari and we haven't seen it moved. For about 10 pages, we wonder if the author has made a mistake, until it's suggested that maybe Stanley let Luke and Lori take it. I'm wondering if we shouldn't see Stanley earlier telling them to take it because of the weather. Or at least saying something like, "Oh, you'll never make it home in your (whatever kind of car they have). I've got an idea," and stopping it there. Then you won't actually have said they're taking the SUV, but we can make the connection easily when we hear it's gone. KF: Or simply have Kit think: Luke and Lori took the Nissan.

EF/KF: Say that Luke & Lori live in a small cottage at the end of an unmarked road. It is a rough track at the best of times, so they would have needed the 4WD. Also imply here that the road and the house are impossible to find if you don't know where they are.

Next to it was Luke's old Toyota station wagon. That was surprising: Luke normally drove himself and Lori home in it at the end of the evening. Had they stayed the night? He shone his torch at the far end of the garage, where the Nissan Patrol was normally parked.

First an internal reaction. Heartbreak.
The bay was empty.
"Oh, shit," said Kit.

Nigel said: "Where's the SUV?"

"It's not here," Kit said. "Jesus Christ, now we're in trouble."