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Chapter Twenty-Nine: 4am (pps235-241)

Odette says the virus is for terrorists

KF: Odette is desperate to find out what the terrorists' target is. She mentions some possibilities.

4 a.m.

Carl Osborne was speaking into his mobile phone. "Is there anyone on the newsdesk yet?

Good—put me through, please."

Toni crossed the Great Hall to where Carl sat and said: "Wait. Please."

He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "What?"

"Please hang up and listen to me. Just for a minute."

He said into the phone: "I'll get back to you shortly—be ready to do a voice-record."

He pressed the hang-up button and looked expectantly at Toni.

She's so desperate, it should be hard for her to find words.

"This could finish me," she said. "I let Mark Ross steal a rabbit, and now I've let a gang steal samples of the virus itself. I'm going to be fired."

"Sorry, Toni, but it's a tough old world."

"This could ruin the company, too. Bad publicity might cause the...our investors, I mean...to back out." She was being more candid than she liked, but she was desperate.

Carl did not miss a trick. "You're talking about the Americans."

Can we hear the pleading and urgency of her vocal tones?

"It doesn't matter who. The point is that the company could be ruined. And they don't deserve it. All they're doing is trying to find cures for human illnesses, for God's sake!"

"And make money at the same time."

"As you do, when you bring the truth to the Scottish television audience."

He shook his head. "A story is a story. Besides, it's sure to come out. If I don't do it, someone else will."

Reaction?

She looked out of the windows of the Great Hall. The weather showed no sign of easing. At best, there might be some improvement with daylight. "Give me three hours," she said. "File at seven o'clock."

"What difference will that make?"

In truth, probably none, she thought; but she wanted the delay anyway. "Maybe by then we'll be able to say that the police are on the trail of the gang and expect to arrest them at any moment." She did not really believe it.

Nor did Carl. "No deal," he said. "Someone else could get the story in the meantime. I can't take that risk. Sorry, Toni." He dialled the phone.

Toni stared at him. This was all she needed. Not only had she utterly failed in her job, but now the whole world was going to know about it.

Not to mention the thousands who might die of plague.

"Record this, please," Carl said into his mobile. "You can run it with a still photo of me holding a phone. Ready?"

Toni wanted to kill him.

Carl said: "I'm speaking from the premises of Oxenford Medical, where the second biosecurity incident in two days has hit this Scottish pharmaceutical company."

biotechnology

x checked

Could she stop him? She had to try. She looked around. Steve was behind the desk. Susan was lying down, looking pale, but Don was upright. That meant she had two men to help her. Her mother was asleep. So was the puppy.

"Excuse me," she said to Carl.

He tried to ignore her. "Samples of a deadly virus, Madoba-2—"

Toni put her hand over his phone. "I'm sorry, you can't use that here."

He turned away and tried to continue. "Samples of a deadly—"

She crowded him and again put her hand between his phone and his mouth. "Steve! Don! Over here, now."

Carl said into the phone: "They're trying to stop me filing a report, are you recording this?"

Toni spoke loud enough for the phone to pick up her words. "Mobile phones may interfere with delicate electronic equipment operating in the laboratories, so they may not be used here." It was not true, but it would serve as a pretext. "Please turn it off."

He held it away from her and said loudly: "Get off me!"

Toni nodded at Steve, who snatched the phone from Carl's hand and turned it off.

"You can't do this!" Carl said.

"Of course I can. You're a visitor here, and we don't allow mobile phones."

"That's bullshit!"

"Say what you like. I make the rules in this building."

"Then I'll go outside."

"You'll freeze to death."

"You can't stop me leaving."

Toni shrugged. "That's true. But I'm not giving you back your phone."

"You're stealing it."

"Confiscating it for security reasons. We'll mail it to you."

"I'll find a phone box."

"Good luck." There was not a public phone within five miles, Toni was sure. He

would not get that far before morning.

Carl pulled on his coat and went out. Toni and Steve watched him through the windows. He got into his car and started the engine. He got out again and scraped several inches of snow off the windscreen. The wipers began to operate. Carl got in and pulled away.

Steve said: "He left the dog behind."

The snowfall had eased a little. Toni cursed under her breath. Surely the weather was not going to improve just at the wrong moment?

Carl's front bumper was pushing a pile of snow. As he climbed the rise toward the gatehouse, the pile grew and the car slowed. A couple of hundred yards from the building, it came to a stop.

Steve smiled. "I didn't think he'd get far."

The car's interior light came on. Toni frowned, worried.

Steve said: "Maybe he's going to sulk out there, engine turning over, heater on full blast, until he runs out of petrol."

Toni peered through the snowstorm, trying to see better.

"What's he doing?" Steve said. "He looks like he's talking to himself."

"Shit," Toni said. "He is talking—but not to himself."

"What?"

"He has another phone in the car. He's a reporter, he has back-up equipment. Hell. I never thought of that."

"Shall I run after him and stop him?"

She shook her head. "Too late. By the time you get there he'll have recorded enough.

Damn."

Reaction →

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EF: There might also be a stadium scene. KF: Odette Cressy is desperate to learn the intended target of the terrorists. She mentions some possibilities. Maybe Toni gets a hint of it and gives Odette a clue. In the end it is not a stadium, it's a concert hall.

NG/AB: There might be involvement by the Justice Department in Edinburgh, but terrorism is reserved to Westminster, so the Cabinet office is the likeliest.

Nothing was going right. She felt like giving up. — *move*

“When he comes back in, sneak out and see if he’s left the keys in the ignition. At least we can try to stop him doing it again.”

“Okay.”

She checked her watch. It was almost six. The story would be on television by seven. She realised she should phone Stanley Oxenford. He would be up soon anyway. She might as well wake him, and make sure he heard the news from her. She dreaded it but she did not want him to learn about the robbery from the TV.

As she reached for her phone, it rang.

She picked up the call. “Toni Gallo.”

“This is Odette.”

“Hi!” Toni had not expected to hear back from her so soon. “Any news?”

Odette sounded shaken. “When I keyed ‘Madoba-2’ into the computer, all the alarm bells went off.”

Toni frowned. “What does that mean?”

“According to our intelligence, a terrorist organisation called Scimitar has been actively shopping for Ebola or a similar virus.”

“Scimitar? An Arab group?”

“Sounds like it, but we’re not sure—the name might be intentionally misleading. Anyway, it’s likely that your thieves are working for them.”

“Why do Scimitar want a virus?”

“They aim to release it tomorrow, Boxing Day, at a major sporting event somewhere in England.”

Toni gasped. It made horrific sense. Boxing Day was traditionally a big day for sports. There would be soccer matches and horserace meetings all over Britain. In most major towns and cities, many thousands of people would be crowded together at a stadium or racecourse. Madoba-2 spread easily in droplets. It could be dispersed with the kind of spray gun that cleaning fluids came in. Thousands of people could be infected in a few minutes. And they would all go home to infect others.

Toni said: "That means our thieves must be planning to hand it over within the next few hours."

"Exactly—and we have to stop them."

"But I told you, our local police won't do anything—"

"That's all changed. The government has come down on your local police like a ton of bricks."

Toni's spirits lifted. If the thieves could be caught, the story would change. Instead of another catastrophe at Oxenford Medical, it would be a foiled attempt to steal the virus. Maybe Stanley's company would survive after all. "What are the police doing?"

"They're on their way to you."

"How?"

"In a snowplough."

"That's great!"

"There's a guy in charge called Frank Hackett. The name range a bell—he's not your ex, is he?"

"Yes. That was part of the problem. He likes to say No to me."

"Well, you'll find him a chastened man. The Justice Minister herself woke him up."

That'll get a copper out of bed quicker than an alarm clock."

"Don't waste your sympathy, he doesn't deserve it."

"Since then he's heard from my boss, another life-enhancing experience. The poor sod is coming with the snowplough."

"I'd rather have the snowplough without Frank."

"He's had a hard time, be nice to him."

"Yeah, right," said Toni.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fred". The signature is written in black ink and is underlined with a long, sweeping horizontal line that extends to the right.