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Chapter Thirty-One: 4:30am (pps249-254)

Toni tracks down the getaway vehicle

AZ: Toni may act rationally, but she should feel as if she's at the end of her tether.

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4:30 a.m.

Toni tried again to phone Stanley Oxenford at home. As before, she got the “disconnected” tone. His phone must be out of order. Perhaps the snow had brought down the lines. He did not carry a mobile, but there was a phone in his Ferrari. She dialled that and left a message. “Stanley, this is Toni. Bad news—a break-in at the lab. Please call my mobile as soon as you can.” He probably would not get the message until it was too late, but at least she could say she had tried.

She stared out of the windows of the Great Hall into the darkness, waiting anxiously for the snowplough to arrive. Where was it coming from? What route would it take? How fast did it travel?

It would be coming from the south, she guessed, from Harbourmouth or beyond. It would follow the main roads, simply because that was where the Hibernian Telecom van was most likely to be spotted. If Toni’s luck turned, the police might catch the thieves before reaching the Kremlin. If not, the police should get here in half an hour or so: the plough probably travelled at about fifteen miles an hour, depending on the depth of snow it had to clear.

She was fairly sure the police would not see the van on their way here. The thieves were headed the other way. As she arrived at the Kremlin in Carl Osborne’s Jaguar, she had

seen the van come out of the gate and turn north, disappearing into the snow as Carl slowed and turned gingerly into the entrance. The van might have been heading south by a roundabout route, but she doubted it: who would take a roundabout route in this weather?

The van would be easy to spot, with the name in large white letters on a dark background. But the thieves might have thought of that, she realised. In fact they had almost certainly planned to switch vehicles soon after leaving the Kremlin. That was how she would have done it. She would have picked a nondescript car, something like a Ford Fiesta that looked the same as a dozen other models, and left it in a car park, outside a supermarket or a railway station. The thieves would drive straight to the car park and be in a completely different vehicle a few minutes after leaving the scene of the crime.

The thought dismayed her. How then would the police identify the thieves? They would have to stop every car and see whether the occupants matched the descriptions Steve and the other guards had given of the three men and one woman.

Was there anything she could do to hurry the process? She could tell the police that the van had gone north—that would help. Assuming the gang had switched vehicles somewhere near here, what were the possibilities? There were no railway stations or supermarkets. What was there? She went to the reception desk and got a notepad and ballpoint pen. North of here, immediately accessible from the main roads, she could think of several places where a vehicle might be parked for a few hours without attracting much attention. She made a list:

- *Harbourmouth Golf Club*
- *Dew Drop Inn*
- *Happy Eater*

As she has all these good thoughts, let's feel her working herself into some thing of a frenzy.

- *Greenfingers Garden Centre*
- *Scottish Smoked Fish Products*
- *Williams Press (Printing & Publishing)*

She decided to get Steve and Don to help.

She took them to the other side of the room, so that they could not be overheard by Carl Osborne, who had returned from his car to the warmth of the hall. Carl was still listening to everything. He did not yet know that he could no longer phone from his car—Steve had taken the keys from the ignition—but Toni was not taking any chances.

“We’re going to do some detective work,” she said. “Don, use the phone on the desk. Steve, call from the phone you took from Carl. I’ve got my mobile.” She tore the sheet of paper in three, then gave one strip to Steve and one to Don. “Ring these places,” she said. “Everything’s closed, of course, but you should be able to reach a caretaker or security guard. Tell them we’ve had a robbery, but don’t say what’s missing. Say that the getaway vehicle may have been abandoned on their premises. Ask them if they can see a Hibernian Telecom van outside.”

Steve nodded. “Smart thinking,” he said. “Maybe we can get on their trail and give the police a jump.”

“Exactly.”

Toni called inquiries and got the number for the golf club. She dialled it and waited. The phone rang for more than a minute, then a sleepy voice answered: “Yes? Golf club. Hello?”

Toni introduced herself and told her story. “I’m trying to locate the getaway vehicle, a van with ‘Hibernian Telecom’ on its side. Is it in your car park?”

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IT 1.1 'the getaway vehicle'. I may have missed something, but how does the receptionist know about it – Carl's TV report hasn't been shown yet, has it? Maybe he's just putting two and two together.

“Oh, I get you, the getaway vehicle, yes.”

Her heart missed a beat. “It’s there?”

“No, at least, it wasn’t when I came on duty. There’s a couple of cars here, mind you, left by gentlemen who found themselves unfit to drive by the end of lunch yesterday, do you know what I mean?”

“When did you come on duty?”

“Six o’clock yesterday afternoon.”

“Could a van have parked there since then? Perhaps at about three o’clock this morning?”

“Well, perhaps—I’ve got no way of telling.”

“Could you have a look?”

“Yes—yes, I could have a look!” he said, as if it were an idea of such startling originality that he would never have thought of it himself. “Hold the line. I’ll just be a minute.”

“Thanks.”

There was a knock as he put the phone down on a desk or table. Then he picked it up again. “I’m just going through to the bar, to look out of the window.”

“Good, thank you.”

He put the handset down again. Toni waited. Footsteps receded and returned.

“No, I don’t think there’s a van out there.”

“Okay.”

“The cars are all covered in snow, mind you, so you can’t see them properly. I’m not even sure which is mine!”

“Yes, thank you.”

“But a van, you see, would be higher than the rest, wouldn’t it? So it would stand out. No, there’s no van there.”

“You’ve been most helpful, and I appreciate it. Thank you.”

“What did they steal?”

Toni pretended not to hear the question, and hung up the phone.

She glanced at Steve and Don. Steve was talking, Don dialling. It did not look as if either had struck gold yet.

She dialled the Dew Drop Inn. The phone was answered by a cheerful young man. “Dew Drop Inn, Vincent speaking, how can I help?”

Toni thought that Vincent sounded like the kind of hotel employee who is desperately eager to please until you actually ask for something. She went through her routine again.

“There are lots of vehicles in our car park—we’re open over Christmas,” Vincent told her. “I’m looking at the television monitor, but I don’t see a van. Unfortunately, the camera doesn’t cover the entire car park.”

“Would you mind going to the window and having a good look? It’s really important.”

“I’m quite busy, actually.”

At this time of the morning? Toni did not voice the thought. Instead, she adopted a sweetly considerate tone and said: “It will save the police making a trip to interview you, you see.”

That worked. “Just hold on.”

Vincent went away and came back.

"Yes, it's here," he said.

"Really?"

"Ford Transit van, blue, with 'Hibernian Telecom' written all over it in white letters. It can't have been there long, because it's not buried in quite as much snow as the rest of the vehicles in the car park—that's why I can see the lettering."

"That's tremendously helpful, thank you. I don't suppose you noticed whether another car is missing—possibly the car they left in?"

"No, sorry."

"Okay—thanks again!" She hung up and looked across at Steve. "I've found the getaway vehicle!"

He nodded towards the window. "And the snowplough's here."

Toni may act rationally, but she should feel as if she's at the end of her tether.