

P280

Chapter Thirty-Five: 5:45am (pps280-289)

A: Kit's deception (280-282)

EF: Why don't the gang just kill the whole family? After all, they are going to be responsible for the deaths of hundreds, so they could hardly scruple a few extra. (KF: Actually, they could, for the deaths of hundreds will be remote, which is different from pointing a gun.) EF answer: Only Kit knows where the 4WD is. Nigel needs him for that. And if his entire family is slaughtered he may cease to cooperate. KF: Do all this as a Kit interior monologue.

5:45 a.m.

*what does he feel
before he thinks?*

When Nigel and Daisy pulled out guns, Kit at first thought the game was up. They could no longer pretend to be innocent motorists stranded in the snow. They had revealed that they were criminals. As soon as the news from the laboratory got out, they would be connected with the theft of the virus. It was just a matter of time.

*what fate does he
imagine for himself?*

He was finished. The others might escape: Nigel, Daisy and Elton could probably arrange alibis. They had not revealed their second names, and though the family could probably pick out each of them in a line-up, evidence of identification was easy to challenge in court. But Kit was in a different position. There would be no doubt about who he was.

He thought furiously, trying to devise a way out.

Then, as they stood frozen, staring at the vicious little dark-grey pistols, Nigel moved his gun a fraction of an inch, mistrustfully pointing it at Kit, and Kit was seized by inspiration.

There was still no reason why the family should suspect him of being one of the gang. He might have been as deceived as everyone else by the three fugitives. His story, that they were total strangers and he had offered them shelter, still stood up.

But how could he make that clear?

Slowly, he raised his hands into the air in the traditional gesture of surrender.

Everyone looked at him.

There was a moment when he thought the gang themselves would betray him. The ghost of a frown passed over Nigel's brow. Elton looked openly startled. Daisy sneered.

Kit said: "Dad, I'm so sorry I brought these people into the house. I had no idea..."

His father gave him a long look, then nodded. "Not your fault," he said. "You can't turn strangers away in this weather. There was no way you could have known..." He turned and gave Nigel a look of withering contempt. "...just what *kind* of people they are."

Nigel got it immediately, and jumped in to back up Kit's pretence. "I'm sorry to return your hospitality this way, young...Kit, is it? Yes...You saved our lives in the snow, now we're pointing guns at you. This world never was fair."

Elton's expression cleared as he grasped the deception.

Nigel went on: "If your bossy sister hadn't poked her nose in, you might never have known what bad people we are. But she would insist, and here we are."

Daisy understood, and turned away with a scornful expression.

"What's in this briefcase is worth a lot of money, you see," Nigel finished.

To reinforce the simulation, Kit said: "What is it?"

"Never you mind," said Nigel.

Kit's mobile phone rang.

He did not know what to do. The caller was probably his inside man at the Kremlin, Robert McKinnon, one of the two guards at the gatehouse. There must now have been some development at the Kremlin that Kit needed to know about. But how could he speak to Rob without betraying himself to his family? He stood paralysed, while everyone listened to his ring tone playing Beethoven's ninth symphony.

B: Craig finds the phone dead (282-287)

AZ: Has Craig ever touched a breast before? KF: Say what he did with those two previous dates.

Nigel solved the problem. "Give me that," he said.

Kit handed over his phone, and Nigel answered it. "Yes, this is Kit," he said.

The person at the other end seemed to believe him, for there was a silence of several seconds while Nigel listened.

"Got it," he said. "Thanks." He hung up and pocketed the phone. "Someone wanting to warn you about three dangerous desperadoes in the neighbourhood," he said. "Apparently the police are coming after them with a snowplough."

Craig could not figure Sophie out. One minute she was painfully shy, the next bold to the point of embarrassment. She let him touch her breasts, and had even unfastened her bra when he fumbled with the hooks, but she would not let him look at them in the candlelight. She unbuttoned his jeans herself, as if she had been doing this sort of thing for years, but when she got her hands inside his boxer shorts she did not seem to know what to do next. Craig wondered if there was some code of behaviour that he did not know about. Either that, or she was just as inexperienced as he.

Just as you mix in some pleasure with this confusion.

She was getting better at kissing, anyway. At first she had been hesitant, as if she was not really sure if she wanted to do it or not; but now, after a couple of hours' practice, she was enthusiastic.

Craig himself felt like a sailor in a storm. All night he had ridden the waves of hope and despair, desire and disappointment, anxiety and joy. At one moment she had whispered: "You're so nice. I'm not nice. I'm vile." And then, when he kissed her again, her face was wet with tears.

What are you supposed to do, he wondered, when a girl starts crying while you've got

And doing anything down there?
Does he know what to do?

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your hand inside her knickers? He had started to withdraw his hand, feeling that must be what she wanted, but she had grabbed his wrist and held him there. "I think you're nice," he had said, but that seemed feeble, so he added: "I think you're wonderful."

When he heard the noise, they were talking about how far to go.

Voices in the kitchen?

She had said: "Do you want to go the whole way?"

"Do you?"

"I do if you do."

"I really want to."

"Have you got condoms?"

"Yes." He fumbled in his jeans pocket and took out the little packet.

"So you planned this?"

"I didn't have a plan." It was not quite true, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

"But I hoped, yes. Ever since I met you I've been thinking about, well, seeing you again, and so on."

It was not very eloquent, but it seemed to be what she wanted to hear, for she said:

"All right, then."

"Are you sure you want to do it?"

"Yes. Now. Quickly."

"Good."

"Oh, my God, what's that?"

Craig had been aware that there were people in the kitchen. He had vaguely heard the murmur of voices, then someone had clattered a saucepan, and he had smelled bacon. He was not sure what the time was, but it seemed early for breakfast. However, he had taken no

notice, confident that no one would interrupt them here in the attic.

Now, however, the sound could not be ignored. First he heard Grandpa shout—an unusual event in itself. Nelson started barking like a fiend, there was a scream that sounded remarkably like Craig’s mother, and several male voices yelled at once.

Sophie said in a frightened tone: “Is this normal?”

“No,” he said. “They have arguments, not shouting matches.”

“What’s going on?”

He hesitated. Part of him wanted to forget the noise and act as if he and Sophie were in a universe of their own, lying on the old sofa under their coats. He felt he could have ignored an earthquake to concentrate on her soft skin and hot breath and moist lips. But another part of him felt the interruption was not entirely unwelcome. They had done almost everything: it might even be nice to postpone the ultimate intimacy, so that there was something else to look forward to, a further delight to anticipate.

Below them, the kitchen went quiet as suddenly as it had burst into sound.

“Strange,” he said.

“It’s spooky.”

Sophie sounded frightened, and that made up Craig’s mind. He kissed her lips once more, then stood up. He pulled up his jeans and stepped across the attic to the hole in the floor. He lay down and looked through the gap in the floorboards

He saw his mother, standing up with her mouth open, looking shocked and frightened. Grandpa was there, wiping blood off his chin with a piece of kitchen paper. There were three strangers in the room. At first he thought they were all men, then he realised one was an ugly girl with a shaved head. The young black man was holding Nelson’s collar, twisting it hard so

that it choked the dog. The older white man and the girl held guns.

Craig murmured: "Bloody hell, what's happening down there?"

Sophie lay beside him. After a moment she whispered: "Are those things guns?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my god, we're in trouble."

"We must call the police. Have you got your phone?"

"I left it in the barn."

"Damn."

"Oh, god, what can we do?"

"Think. Think. A phone. We need a phone." Craig hesitated. He was frightened. He really wanted to lie still and shut his eyes tightly. He might have done so, were it not for the girl beside him. He did not know all the rules, but he knew he was supposed to show courage when she was frightened, especially after what she had let him do. And if he was not feeling brave, he had to pretend. "There's a phone beside Grandpa's bed."

"I can't do anything, I'm too scared."

"You'd better stay here," he said.

"Okay."

He stood up. He buttoned his jeans and buckled the belt, then went to the low door. He took a breath, and opened the door. He crawled through into Grandpa's suit wardrobe, pushed at the door, and emerged into the dressing room.

The lights were on. Grandpa's dark-brown brogue-style shoes were side by side on the carpet, and the blue shirt he had been wearing yesterday was on top of a pile of clothes in the linen basket. Craig stepped into the bedroom. The bed was unmade, as if Grandpa had

just got out of it. On the bedside table was a copy of *Scientific American* magazine, open—and the phone.

Craig had never dialled 999 in his life. What were you supposed to say? He had seen people do it on television. You had to give your name and location, he thought. Then what? “There are men with guns in our kitchen.” It sounded over-dramatic—but probably all 999 calls were dramatic. He picked up the phone.

There was no dialling tone.

He put his finger on the cradle and jiggled it, then listened again.

Nothing.

He replaced the receiver. Why were the phones out? Was it just a fault—or had the strangers in the kitchen done something to the lines?

Did Grandpa have a mobile? Craig pulled open the bedside drawer. Inside was a torch and a book. Then he remembered: Grandpa had a car phone, in the Ferrari that Craig had dented a few hours ago, but he did not carry a mobile..

Craig heard a sound from the dressing room. Sophie poked her head out of the cupboard, looking frightened. “Someone’s coming!” she hissed. A moment later, Craig heard a heavy footstep outside the bedroom.

He darted into the dressing room. Sophie ducked back into the attic. Craig fell on his knees and crawled through the suit cupboard just as he heard the bedroom door open. He had no time to close the cupboard door. He wriggled through the low door, then quickly turned and softly closed it behind him.

Sophie whispered: “The older man told the girl to search the house. He called her Daisy.”

C: *Miranda hides from Daisy (287-289)*

“I heard her boots on the stairs.”

“Did you get through to the police?”

He shook his head. “Lines are dead.”

He heard Daisy’s heavy tread in the dressing room. She would see the open cupboard door. Would she spot the low door behind the suits? Only if she looked carefully.

Craig listened. Was she staring into the open cupboard at this minute? He felt shaky. Daisy had not looked big—an inch or two shorter than he was, he guessed—but despite that she seemed terrifying.

The silence seemed to drag out. Then he thought he heard her step into the bathroom. After a shorter pause, her boots stepped across the dressing and faded away through the bedroom. At last the bedroom door slammed.

“Oh, god, I’m so scared,” Sophie said.

“Me, too,” said Craig.

Miranda was in Olga’s bedroom with Hugo.

When first she stepped out of the kitchen she had not known what to do. She could not go outside—she was in her nightdress. She had raced up the stairs with the thought of locking herself in the bathroom, but she realised almost at once that that would be useless.

She stood on the landing for a moment, dithering. She was so frightened that she wanted to vomit. She struggled to control herself. She had to call the police, she decided: that was the first priority.

Olga’s mobile phone was in the pocket of that black silk negligee—she was never without it. But Hugo probably had one too.

Frightened though she was, Miranda had hesitated for a split-second outside the door. The last thing she wanted was to be in a bedroom with Hugo. Then she heard someone step out of the kitchen into the hall. Quickly, she opened Hugo's door, slid inside, and closed it quietly.

Hugo was standing at the window, looking out. He was naked, and had his back to the door. "Would you look at this bloody weather?" he said.

"It's me, Miranda, not Olga," she said.

He spun around, startled, then smiled. "And in *deshabillé*—what a lovely surprise! Let's get into bed, quick."

"You have to phone the police right now," Miranda said. "Where's your phone?"

"Just here," he said, pointing to the bedside table. "What on earth is wrong?"

"People with guns in the kitchen," Miranda said. "Dial 999, quickly!"

"Who are they?"

"Never bloody mind!" she said. Then she heard heavy footsteps on the landing. She stood frozen, but the steps went by. "They're probably looking for me, get on with it!" she said, speaking in a kind of low scream.

Hugo came out of shock. He snatched up his phone and jabbed at the On button. "Damn thing takes for ever to connect!" he said in frustration. "Did you say guns?"

"Yes!"

"How did the people get in?"

"Said they were stranded, what is that matter with that phone?"

"Searching," he said. "Come on, come on!"

Miranda heard the footsteps again. This time she was ready. She flung herself on the

floor and slid sideways under the double bed just as the door flew open.

She heard Hugo say: "Who the hell are you?"

She closed her eyes and tried to make herself small. Feeling foolish, she opened her eyes again. She saw Hugo's bare feet and a pair of motorcycle boots. She heard Hugo say: "Hello, gorgeous. Who are you?"

His charm did not work on Daisy. She said: "Give me that phone."

"I was just—"

"Now, you fat fool."

"Here, take it."

"Now come with me."

"Let me put something on."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to bite your cock off."

Miranda saw Hugo's feet step away. Daisy moved towards him. He let out a cry, as if she had done something violent. Then both pairs of feet moved towards the door. They passed out of Miranda's sight, and a moment later she heard them descending the stairs.

Miranda said to herself: "Oh, god, what do I do now?"