

**P290**

**Chapter Thirty-Six: 6am (pps290-298)**

*Craig & Sophie lost in the snow*

# 6 a.m.

Craig and Sophie lay side by side on the floorboards of the attic, looking down through the crack into the kitchen, as Craig's father was dragged naked into the room by Daisy.

Has he seen this on a school trip to a museum?  
 Craig was shocked and disturbed. It was a scene from a nightmare, or a Renaissance painting of naked sinners being dragged down into hell. He could hardly grasp that this

humiliated, helpless creature was his *father*, the master of the house, the only person with the nerve to stand up to Craig's domineering mother, the man who had ruled Craig for all his fifteen years of life. He felt disoriented and weightless, as if gravity had been switched off and he did not know which way was down.

Sophie began to cry softly. "This is awful," she whispered. "We're all going to be murdered."

The need to comfort her gave Craig strength. He put his arm around her narrow shoulders. She was trembling. "It is awful, but we're not dead yet," he said. "We're still free. We can get help."

"But what can we do?"

"Where is your phone, exactly?"

"I left it in the barn, the upstairs part, by the bed. I think I dropped it into my suitcase, on top of my clothes, when I changed."

“We have to go there and use it to call the police.”

“What if those terrible people see us?”

“We’ll have to stay away from the kitchen windows.”

“We can’t—the barn door is right opposite!”

She was right, Craig knew, but they had to take the risk. “They probably won’t look out.”

“But what if they do?”

“You can hardly see across the back yard anyway, in this snow.”

“They’re bound to spot us!”

He did not know what else to tell her. “We have to try.”

“I can’t do it. Let’s just stay here.”

“You can stay, if you like, while I go to the barn.”

“No—don’t leave me alone!”

“Then you’ll have to come with me.”

“I don’t want to.”

He squeezed her shoulders and kissed her cheek. “Come on. Be brave.”

She wiped her nose on her sleeve. “I’ll try.”

He stood up. Walking on tiptoe, for fear of being heard below, he found his boots and coat, and put them on. Then he looked back at Sophie. She was sitting upright, motionless, watching him in the candlelight. He knelt down and put the rubber boots on her small feet. She co-operated passively—not unwilling, but stunned by shock. He gently pulled her upright and helped her on with her anorak. He zipped it up at the front, pulled the hood over her head, then brushed her hair back with his hand. The hood gave her a gamine look, and for a fleeting

moment he thought how pretty she was.

He opened the big loft door. A freezing wind blew a dense flurry of snow into the attic. The light over the back door showed him that the snow lay thicker than ever on the ground. The dustbin lid looked like Ali Baba's hat.

There were two windows at this end of the house, one from the pantry and the other from the boot lobby. The sinister strangers were in the kitchen. If he was very unlucky, one of them might step into the pantry or the boot lobby at just the wrong moment, and spot him—but he thought the odds were in his favour.

“Come on,” he said.

Sophie stood beside him. “You go first,” she said.

He looked down. Light shone from the window of the boot lobby, but not from the pantry. Would anyone see him? On his own he might have been petrified, but her being so frightened made him braver. He swept the snow off the ledge with his hand, then walked along it to the lean-to roof over the boot lobby. He swept a section of the roof clear, then stood upright and reached out to her. He held her hand as she inched along the ledge. “You're doing fine,” he said reassuringly. It was not very difficult—the ledge was a foot wide—but she was shaky. She made it along the ledge and stepped down to the lean-to roof. “Well done,” Craig said.

Then she slipped.

Her feet skidded from under her. Craig still had hold of her hand, but he could not keep her upright, and she sat down on the roof with a thud that must have reverberated in the room below. She landed awkwardly and tipped over backwards, sliding down the icy slates on her bottom.

Craig grabbed at her and grasped a handful of anorak. He tugged, trying to arrest her slide, but his feet were on the same slippery surface, and all that happened was that she drew him along with her. He skated down the roof after her, struggling to remain upright and trying to slow her down.

When her feet hit the gutter at the lip of the roof, she came to a halt; but her bottom was half off the sloping edge. She tilted sideways. Craig tightened his grip on her coat and pulled, drawing her towards him and safety—then he slipped again. He let go of her coat, waving his arms to stay upright.

Sophie screamed loudly and fell off the roof.

She dropped ten feet and landed in soft new snow.

Craig leaned over the edge and said: "Are you all right?" At first there was no reply. She could not possibly have been knocked out. "Sophie!" he said.

"I'm okay," she said miserably.

Craig was about to jump down beside her when the back door opened.

Quickly, Craig lowered himself to a sitting position.

A man stepped out. Craig could just see his head, but could not make out who it was.

Craig glanced over the side. Sophie lay in the snow, curled up, her face averted. Already a sprinkling of big flakes patterned her anorak and made her less visible.

A voice from inside called: "Elton! What's out there?"

Elton waved a torch from side to side, but the beam showed only snowflakes. Craig flattened himself on the roof. He could still see Elton's head.

Elton turned to the right, away from Sophie, and walked a couple of yards into the storm, shining his torch in front of him..

Craig realised that the loft door was still wide open. If Elton happened to shine his torch that way he could not fail to see it and investigate. Moving slowly, Craig crawled a yard up the lean-to roof. As soon as he could reach, he got hold of the lower edge of the door and gently pushed it. It swung slowly through an arc. Craig gave it a final shove and released it. It closed with an audible click.

Elton turned.

Craig flattened himself on the roof.

He saw the beam of the torch play over the gable end of the house and the loft door.

The voice came from inside again. "Elton?"

The torch beam moved off. "I can't see nothing," Elton shouted back irritably.

Craig lifted his head to watch.

Elton walked the other way, towards where Sophie lay. He stopped at the dustbin. If he peeked around the corner, he would be able to see her lying on the ground. When that happened, Craig decided, he would dive off the roof on to Elton's head. He would probably get beaten up, but it might give Sophie a chance to get away.

After a long moment, Elton turned away. "Nothing out here but fucking snow," he called out, and he stepped back inside the house and slammed the door.

Craig groaned with relief. He found he was shaking. He made himself calm. How?

He jumped off the roof and landed beside Sophie. Bending over her, he said: "Did you hurt yourself?"

She sat upright. "No, but I'm scared!"

"Okay. Can you get up?"

"Are you sure he's gone?"

“I saw him go inside and close the door. They must have heard your scream, or maybe the bump as you slipped on the roof—but in this storm they probably aren’t sure it was anything.”

“Oh, god, I hope so.” She struggled to her feet.

“This way,” he said. “We’ll walk out into the garden a short distance, then come around to the back of the barn. That way they’re less likely to see us out of the kitchen window.”

He took her hand, and she followed him willingly enough.

He led her a few yards into the garden. They felt the wind blowing more fiercely. The storm was coming in off the sea. Away from the shelter of the house, the snow no longer fell in swirling flurries, but pelted down in hard straight lines at an angle, stinging their faces and getting into their eyes.

When he could no longer see the house, he turned at a right angle. Their progress was slow. The snow lay two feet deep on the ground, making it difficult and tiring to walk. Measuring his steps, he walked what he guessed was the length of the yard. Now completely blind, he figured he must be parallel with the barn, and turned again. He counted the paces until he should have bumped up against the wooden end wall of the barn.

But there was nothing.

He was sure he could not have gone wrong. He had been very careful. He walked another five paces. He feared they might be lost, but he did not want Sophie to know that. Suppressing a feeling of panic, he turned again, heading back towards the house. The complete darkness meant that Sophie could not see his face, so fortunately she had no way of knowing how scared he was.

They had been outside less than five minutes, but already his feet and hands were agonisingly cold. They were in serious danger, he knew. If they could not find shelter, they would freeze to death.

Sophie was not stupid. "Where are we?" she said.

"Just coming up to the barn," he said, making himself sound more confident than he felt. "A few steps more."

He should not have made such a rash prediction. After ten more steps they were still in blackness.

He figured he must have walked farther away from the buildings than he had at first reckoned. Therefore his return leg had been too short. He swung right again. Now he had turned so many times that he was no longer sure of his angles. He walked ten strides and stopped.

"Are we lost?" Sophie said in a small voice.

"We can't be far from the barn!" Craig said angrily. "We only went a few steps into the garden."

She put her arms around him and hugged him. "It's not your fault," she said.

He knew it was, but he felt grateful to her anyway.

"We could shout," she suggested. "Caroline and Tom might hear us and shout back."

"Those people in the kitchen might hear us, too."

"That would be better than freezing."

She was right, but Craig did not want to admit it. How was it possible to get lost in just a few yards? He refused to believe it.

He hugged her, but he felt despair. He had thought himself so superior to Sophie,

because she was more frightened than he, and he had felt very manly for a few moments, protecting her; but now he had got them both lost. Some man, he thought; some protector. Her boyfriend the law student would have done better, if he existed.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a light.

He turned in that direction, and it was gone. His eyesight registered nothing but blackness. Wishful thinking?

Sophie sensed his tension. "What is it?"

"I thought I saw a light." When he turned his face toward her, the light seemed to reappear in the corner of his eye. But when he looked up, it was gone again.

He vaguely remembered something from Biology about peripheral vision picking up things invisible to direct sight. There was a reason for it, that had to do with the blind spot on the retina. He turned to Sophie again. The light reappeared. This time he did not turn towards it, but concentrated on what he could make out without moving his eyes. The light flickered, but it was there.

He turned towards it, and it was gone again; but he had a clear idea of its direction. "This way," he said.

They trudged through the deep snow. The light did not immediately reappear, and Craig wondered if he had suffered a hallucination, like the mirage of an oasis seen in the desert. Then it flickered into sight and immediately disappeared again.

"I saw it!" Sophie cried.

They ploughed on. Two seconds later it came back into view, and this time it stayed. Craig felt a rush of relief, and realised that for a few moments back there he really had thought he was going to die and take Sophie with him.

When they came closer to the light, he realised that it was the one over the back door. They had walked around in a circle, and now they were back at the exact point from which they had started.