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Chapter Thirty-Nine: 6:45am (pps315-321)

Toni diverts the snowplough



6:45 a.m.

The convoy moved slowly along the two-lane road in the dark. After the snowplough went Frank's grey Volvo, a police car, Carl Osborne's Jaguar, and another police car. Two other ^{non-related} cars had joined on the end, taking advantage of the track cleared by the plough.

Why she and not Carl? Toni was at the wheel of the Jag, peering ahead as the wipers struggled to clear away the thickly falling snow. The view through the windscreen hardly changed. Immediately in front of her were the red tail lights of a police car, and in the middle distance the flashing orange roof light of the snowplough. On the near side was the bank of snow freshly shovelled up by the plough; on the off side, virgin snow across the road and over the moors as far as the cars' headlamps reached. Then she spotted a familiar direction sign saying "Beach," and she realised they must be near the turn-off for Steepfall.

Mother was asleep in the back with the puppy on her lap. Beside Toni, Carl was quiet, dozing or sulking, or both. He had told Toni that he hated other people driving his car, but she had insisted, and he had been forced to yield, as she had the keys. *Ally*

"You just never give an inch, do you?" he had muttered before sinking into silence.

"That's why I was such a good cop," she replied.

From the back, Mother had said: "It's why you haven't got a husband."

That was more than an hour ago. Now Toni was struggling to stay awake, fighting the

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EF – para 2: Toni might also guess that the thieves assumed time was on their side.

hypnotic sway of the wipers, the warmth from the car's heater, and the monotony of the view. *How does she imagine that driving does this for her?*
 She almost wished she had let Carl drive. But she needed to stay in control.

They had found the getaway vehicle at the Dew Drop Inn. It had contained no obvious clues. Frank had questioned Vincent, the young hotel employee Toni had spoken to on the phone. Vincent repeated that he had not seen the Hibernian Telecom van being parked, and had no idea what kind of vehicle the gang had left in, nor which direction they might have taken.

Guessing, Frank had decided to continue north. For once, Toni had agreed with him. It made sense for the gang to switch cars at a location that was on their route, rather than *in the opposite direction* delay their getaway with a diversion. Of course, there was always the possibility that they foresaw how the police would think and deliberately chose a location that would mislead pursuers. But in Toni's experience villains were not that subtle. Once they had the swag in their hands, they wanted to get well away from the location as fast as they could. Frank had ordered the snowplough *to go* on, leaving behind a crime scene detective to dust the Hibernian Telecom van for prints.

The police cars slowed down every time they passed a stationary vehicle. On several occasions they found people inside. Most were aching and thirsty but otherwise all right, having been able to run their engines and keep their car heaters going all night. Two of those cars had joined the convoy. One had headed back towards Harbourmouth in the track cleared by the snowplough: Toni hoped the driver had the sense to go slow, as he was forced to use the wrong side of the road.

One car had revealed a tragedy. In an old Renault that had run out of fuel, they found an elderly couple, the man dead, his wife distraught. They had called an ambulance, and one

of the police cars had waited behind until it came, catching up with the convoy later. Toni had seen the dead man, pale and thin and pathetically human in his old brown suit and tie. It had made her think about the people who might die if the Madoba-2 virus were released tomorrow. There would be dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of corpses like the man in the brown suit.

But much worse, all bleeding from their eyes and nostrils. At what point in time is this?

But she was beginning to feel pessimistic. She had hoped that by now the convoy would have found the gang in their second vehicle. After all, by the time the thieves had left the Dew Drop Inn, the roads were all but impassable, and the blizzard at its height: how far could they have got? By now the convoy should come across them, stranded somewhere on the road, half grateful to be caught by the police before they froze to death. But this scenario had not been realised. Could they have some kind of hideout nearby? It seemed improbable. Thieves did not like to go to earth close to the scene of the crime—quite the opposite. As the convoy got farther away from the Dew Drop Inn, it seemed more and more likely that Frank had guessed wrong, and the gang had turned south, not north. Now she wished she had asked for two snowploughs.

Let's feel how upset she must be. Is she berating herself?

Toni was thinking of phoning Frank in his Volvo, and suggesting they turn back, when she realised they were close to Steepfall. It occurred to her that she ought to take the opportunity to brief Stanley Oxenford. At present he did not even know that the laboratory had been robbed.

And there could be an advantage to be gained. Once Stanley knew what had happened, he might start pulling strings. Toni had achieved all she could with her contacts, but Stanley might do more. A businessman as well as a scientist, he was part of the Scottish establishment, and he knew his way around the corridors of power in Edinburgh and

Glasgow. If two, or three, or even four snowploughs were needed to hunt down the gang, Stanley would know whom to ask, and he was likely to get what he wanted.

Furthermore, she did not need to stay at Steepfall very long. She could leave again, as soon as she had briefed Stanley, and follow the track of the convoy until she caught up with the police.

Toni dreaded the moment when she would have to tell Stanley what had happened. Of course, her vigilance had ensured that the theft was discovered sooner rather than later. She had forced the police to take the biohazard seriously and give chase. And Stanley had to be impressed by the way she had made her way to him in a blizzard. But, in the end, her job was to prevent this kind of thing happening, not catch the perpetrators afterwards. Bottom line, she thought, I'm going to report my own failure. She felt herself flush with shame at the thought.

For a moment she was tempted to drive past the Steepfall turn-off. At least that would postpone the reckoning. And, she thought, who knows? Maybe in another hour we will have caught the thieves and recaptured the virus samples, and I can report a success.

The notion lasted only a second. She was not going to take decisions based on how they would make her look in the eyes of her boss. The important thing was that Stanley might be able to get the manhunt stepped up to a bigger scale. Now that she had the chance, she had to talk to him.

She used Osborne's car phone, so that she would not have to hold a mobile to her ear while driving, and called Frank's car.

Frank's voice came out of the Jaguar's speakers. "Detective Chief Superintendent Hackett speaking."

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IT last line 'She had an ace up her sleeve...Frank had a guilty secret' We know this from p20 where she reminds him of Farmer Johnny Kirk, so the reader doesn't need to know all the detail. We could have instead 'It was time to play her ace. This was an emergency, and anyway, he had shown no loyalty to her lately' Then she goes on to her conversation with Frank re Johnny.

"Toni here. We're approaching the turn-off for Steepfall, Stanley Oxenford's house."

"So?"

"I'd like to brief him on what's happened."

"So do it. You don't need my permission."

"I can't get him on the phone, but the house is only about a mile down a side road, and—"

"Forget it."

"It will only take the snowplough five or six minutes to clear the road. And you'll get me out of your hair. And my mother."

"Tempting though that is, I'm not willing to delay the search."

"Stanley may be able to assist the investigation in some way. After all, he is the victim."

"How could he help?"

Frank was not going to like the idea of Stanley going over his head to pull strings, Toni realised. "We won't know until we ask him," she said weakly.

"The answer's No," Frank said, and he hung up.

Osborne had heard both sides of the conversation. "I'm not leaving the convoy," he said. "And this is my car."

"You don't have to leave. You can just drop me off at the house and stay with the snowplough. I can borrow a car—there must be at least four at Steepfall."

"If it means I get my own car back, I'm in favour."

"But Frank isn't." Toni frowned, thinking as she peered ahead through the blizzard.

She had an ace up her sleeve and it was time to play it. Frank had a guilty secret, and she

Wonder if you shouldn't introduce this earlier, and then let her vacillate about whether and when to use it. Now, she decides!

what makes her think the Jag can get through a mile of unploughed road?

knew what it was. She felt ashamed of using such a tactic, but this was an emergency. Anyway, he had shown no loyalty to her lately.

After a moment, she dialed Frank's number again.

This time, his answer was abrupt. "What?"

"Remember Farmer Johnny Kirk."

"Go to hell."

"I'm using a hands-free phone, and Carl Osborne is beside me, listening to us both."

"Pick up the damn phone."

Toni detached the phone from its cradle and put it to her ear, so that Carl could not hear Frank. "Worried, Frank?"

"You bitch, you've always held that case over my head. You know Kirk was guilty."

"Everyone knows that. But only you and I know what you did to get a conviction."

"You wouldn't tell Carl."

"Yes, I would. I'm serious. If you don't do what I ask, I'll tell Carl everything, right now, here in the car."

"You wouldn't do that. And if you did, he wouldn't do the story."

"Are you sure?"

There was a pause, then Frank said bitterly: "I suppose there's no point in talking about loyalty between friends."

"Probably not, since the moment when you told Carl about Fluffy the hamster."

There was a long silence.

Toni said: "Make up your mind, Frank—the turnoff is just ahead."

There was a click and a hum as Frank hung up.

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NN: After Toni's "blackmail" phone call to Frank with Carl beside her -- doesn't Carl ask what that was all about? The "I'll tell Carl everything"?

Toni cradled the phone.

Carl said: "Well? Do we go to Professor Oxenford's house, or not?"

Toni shrugged. "Frank didn't say."

A few moments later, the snowplough slowed down and turned on to the side road leading to Steepfall.