

**P365**

**Chapter Forty-Five: 9am (pps365-373)**

*A: Kit sends Elton to the barn (365-367)*

EF: – 9am: I like the way the timeline works. I wonder if it might be helped by adding the day.

AB: After Elton cleverly finds out how many people are in the house, I wasn't sure why he and the others took so long to try to find them?

# 9 a.m.

8.15

Kit had a scary feeling that everything was coming unglued.

It should have been a simple thing for three tough villains such as Nigel, Elton and Daisy to round up stray members of a law-abiding family. Yet things kept going wrong. Little Tom had made a suicide attack on Daisy; Ned had stunned everyone by protecting Tom from Daisy's revenge; and Sophie had escaped in the confusion.

And Toni Gallo was still nowhere to be seen.

*How badly hurt are they? Does K have any feelings for his little nephew?*

As Elton brought Ned and Tom into the kitchen at gunpoint, Kit reckoned up who was still at large. As well as Sophie and Toni, there was Craig—who would not be far from Sophie—and Caroline, who might still be asleep in the barn. Four people altogether: surely it could not take long to capture them?

Elton threw Miranda's phone on to the kitchen table. "Found it in a handbag in the cottage," he said. "The guy doesn't seem to have one." The phone landed beside the burgundy briefcase.

Kit thought of the virus, loaded into a simple spray gun and cushioned in cotton wool. That was what this whole mess was all about. He had ruined his life to get it. And he still could not be sure of his reward.

He checked his watch. It was less than three hours to the noon deadline. Outside, the

sun was shining on the snow. With a decent car they could make the rendezvous. Presumably Nigel's buyer would also be able to make it, whether by car, plane or helicopter. Kit longed

When ~~it~~ <sup>did it go up from 250?</sup> for the moment when that briefcase would be handed over, he would receive his three hundred thousand pounds, and he could make his getaway.

He was hoping that by the end of today many of Britain's major roads would have been cleared of snow. He thought he would drive to Liverpool and catch a car ferry to northern Ireland. He could cross the border into the south and drive to Shannon airport, where he could get a flight to the States.

But first they had to <sup>?</sup> silence everyone at Steepfall, in order to delay pursuit as long as possible. It was proving absurdly difficult. And there was no time to spare.

Elton made Ned lie on the floor, then tied him up. Ned was bruised and silent, but watchful. Elton then tied up Tom, who had the beginnings of a black eye and was trying not to cry.

Elton went to the pantry, intending to put Ned and Tom in with the others but, when he opened the door, they all saw there was no more room.

To Kit's surprise, the prisoners had managed to remove their gags, and now his sister Olga spoke. "Please, let Hugo out of here," she said. "He's badly injured and he's so cold. Just let him lie on the floor in the kitchen, where it's warm."

Kit was surprised that Olga was so concerned, after her husband had admitted shagging her sister. Women never ceased to surprise him.

Nigel said: "He shouldn't have punched me in the face. Shut the door, Elton."

Olga said: "Please, I'm begging you!"

Elton closed the door on her.

*B: Toni bops Elton (367-373)*

AZ: Punctuate this scene with Toni's emotional ups and downs

Kit put Hugo out of his mind. "We've got to find Toni Gallo, she's the dangerous one."

Nigel said: "Where do you think she is?"

"Well, she's not in the house, not in the cottage because Elton's just searched it, and not in the garage because Daisy's just been there. So, either she's out of doors, where she won't last long with no coat, or she's in the barn."

"All right," Elton said. "I'll go to the barn."

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Toni was looking out of the barn window.

She had now identified three of the four people who had raided Oxenford Medical. One was Kit, of course. He would have been the planner, the one who worked out how to defeat the alarm system. There was a woman whom Kit had called Daisy—an ironic nickname, presumably, for someone whose appearance would give a vampire a fright. A few minutes ago, just before the fracas in the courtyard, Daisy had addressed the young black man as Elton, which might have been a first name or a surname. Toni had not yet seen the fourth, but presumed he was the Nigel to whom Kit had shouted.

She was half scared and half thrilled. Scared, because they were clearly tough professional criminals who would kill her if necessary. Thrilled, because she was tough, too, and she had a chance to redeem herself by catching them.

But how? The best plan would be to get help, but she had no car and no phone. The house phones had been cut off, presumably by the gang. No doubt they had also grabbed any mobile phones the family had. There were two cars parked in front of the house, a Mercedes estate and a Toyota Previa; and there must be at least one more in the garage; but she had no

idea where the keys were.

That meant she had to capture the thieves on her own.

And she needed to get that virus back.

She thought about the scene she had witnessed in the courtyard. Daisy and Elton were rounding up the family. Presumably they had already dealt with those in the main house, including Stanley—locked them in a cellar, or tied them up, or both. They had just netted the little boy, Tom, and the tweedy professor, Ned, who was Miranda's boyfriend.

Sophie, the tarty kid, had escaped, and Daisy had gone after her. Toni had heard distant noises from beyond the garage—a car engine, breaking glass, and then gunfire—but she could not see what was going on, and she hesitated to expose herself by going to investigate. If she let herself get captured, all hope was lost.

She wondered who else was at liberty, if anyone. The gang must be in a hurry to get going, now that the weather had changed, but they would want to account for everyone before leaving, so that no one could call the police. Perhaps they would begin to panic and make mistakes. Toni hoped so.

She knew she could not cope with all four villains at once. Three of them were armed—with thirteen-shot Browning automatic pistols, if Steve was right. She needed to pick them off one by one. But she was not sure where to start. At some point she had to enter the main house. But, once again, she was reluctant to jump into the dark. She needed more information.

As she was racking her brains, she lost the initiative. Elton emerged from the house and came across the courtyard towards the barn.

He was younger than Toni, probably twenty-five. He was also tall, and looked fit. He

carried a pistol in his right hand, pointing down at the ground. Although she was trained in combat, she knew he would be a formidable adversary even without the gun. If possible she had to avoid getting into a fight with him.

Could she conceal herself somehow? She looked around the interior of the barn. No hiding-place suggested itself. Besides, there was no point. She had to confront the gang, and the sooner the better. This one was coming for her on his own, apparently confident he would not need help in dealing with a mere woman. Perhaps that would turn out to be his mistake.

Unfortunately, she had no weapons.

She had a few seconds to find some.

She looked at the things around her. She considered a billiard cue, but decided it was too light. A blow from one would hurt like hell, but it would not render a man unconscious, or even knock him down.

Billiard balls were more dangerous: heavy, solid and hard. She stuffed two into her jeans pockets.

She wished she had a gun.

She glanced up at the hayloft. Height was always an advantage. She scrambled up the ladder. Caroline was still fast asleep. On the floor between the two beds was an open suitcase. On top of the clothes was a plastic shopping bag. Next to the case was the cage of white rats.

The barn door opened, and Toni dropped to the floor and lay flat.

There was a fumbling sound, then the main lights came on.

Toni could not see the ground floor from her position, so she did not know exactly where Elton was; but he could not see her, either, and she had the advantage of knowing he was there.

She listened hard and heard his footsteps cross the floor.

There was an odd noise that she interpreted, after a few moments' puzzlement, as Elton overturning the camp beds in case a child was hiding underneath.

He opened the bathroom door. There was no one in there—Toni had already checked.

Next he had to climb the ladder. There was nowhere else to look.

Still lying flat, Toni took the plastic shopping bag from the open suitcase and removed the contents, a gift-wrapped package labelled: "To Daddy, happy Christmas from Sophie with love." She dropped the package back in the suitcase. Then she opened the rats' cage.

Gently, she picked up the rats one by one and put them in the plastic bag. There were five.

She felt a slight vibration in the floor that suggested to her that Elton had started to climb the ladder.

She reached forward with both arms and emptied the bag of rats over the top of the ladder.

She heard Elton give a roar of shock and disgust as five live rats dropped on his head.

His shout woke Caroline, who let out a squeal and sat upright.

There was a crash as Elton lost his footing on the ladder and fell to the floor.

Toni sprang to her feet and looked over the rail. Elton had fallen on his back. He did not seem seriously hurt, but he was yelling in panic and frantically trying to brush the rats off his clothing. They were as frightened as he, and trying desperately to cling to something.

Toni could not see his gun.

She hesitated only a fraction of a second, then she jumped off the loft.

She landed with both feet on Elton's chest. He gave an agonised grunt as the air was knocked out of him. The impact hurt Toni's legs. She could not keep her balance, and she fell with one knee on the hard wood floor and the other on Elton's shoulder.

From above, she heard Caroline scream: "My babies!" Looking up, she saw Caroline at the top of the ladder, wearing lavender pyjamas with a pattern of yellow teddy bears. Toni felt sure she must have squashed one or two of Caroline's pets, but the rats scattered, apparently unhurt.

Desperate to keep the upper hand, Toni struggled to her feet. One ankle gave her a stab of pain, but she ignored it.

Where was the gun?

Elton was hurt, but perhaps not immobilised. She fumbled in her jeans for a billiard ball. She grasped it, but it slipped through her fingers as she tried to pull it out of her pocket. She grabbed it again, and it slipped again. She suffered a moment of pure terror, a feeling that her body would not obey her brain and she was completely helpless. Then she used both hands, one to push the ball from outside her pocket and the other to grasp it as it emerged.

But the momentary delay had allowed Elton to recover from the shock of the rats. As Toni raised her right hand above her head, he rolled away from her. Instead of bringing the billiard ball down on his head in the hope of knocking him senseless, she was forced to change her mind at the last instant and throw it at him.

It was not a forceful throw, and in some part of her brain she heard her ex, Frank, say contemptuously: "You couldn't throw a ball if your life depended on it." Now her life did depend on it, and Frank was right—the throw was too weak. She hit the target, and there was an audible thud as the heavy ball connected with Elton's skull, causing him to roar in pain;

but he did not slump unconscious.

Instead he got to his knees, holding his bruised head with one hand, then struggled to his feet.

Toni took out the second billiard ball.

Elton looked at the floor all around him, searching for his gun.

Caroline had climbed half way down the ladder, and now she leaped to the floor. She stooped and grabbed one of the rats from under the billiard table. Turning to pick up another, she collided with Elton. He mistook her for his adversary, and punched her. It was a powerful blow that connected with the side of her head, and she fell to the floor. But it hurt him, too, for Toni saw him grimace in agony and wrap his arms around his chest, and she guessed she had broken a rib when she jumped on him.

Something had caught Toni's eye as Caroline had reached under the billiard table for a rat. Toni looked again and saw the gun, dull grey against the dark wood of the floor.

Elton saw it at the same time.

He dropped to his knees.

Toni got the second billiard ball out of her pocket.

As Elton reached under the table, she raised her arm high above her head and brought the billiard ball down with all her might, squarely on the back of his head.

He slumped and collapsed, unconscious.

Toni searched him for a phone but, to her disappointment, he did not have one.

She picked up his gun. Steve had been right, it was a Browning nine millimetre automatic pistol of the kind issued by the British army to "special" forces for clandestine work. The safety catch was on the left side, behind the pistol grip. She turned it to the locked

position, then stuffed the gun in the waist of her jeans.

She unplugged the television and ripped the cable out of the back of the set. Then she used it to tie Elton's hands behind his back.

Good action scene.

Again, suggest you punctuate Tom's  
emotional ups and downs.