

Ken Follett

From: Emily Kischell [EKischell@WritersHouse.com]
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To: kenprivate@ken-follett.com
Subject: WHITEOUT

Dear Ken,

As promised, I spent much of Sunday reading and rereading your outline for White Out, and as you'll see I'll be making three main suggestions:

1. Toni, drawing on the others in the house, prevails against the bad guys without the help of the police. When the cops come, safety is already in hand.
2. You combine the characters of Ronnie and Davey, and make him the main bad guy.
3. We make the virus into an active, on stage horror.

Toni: You hint at an incipient relationship between her and Stanley, I suggest you take this further. She is in fact having an affair with him or alternatively is secretly married to him. Either way, they have agreed that she will come to Steepfall on Christmas or the day after, at which time he will announce to his family either that they are getting married or that they are already married. And not only is she to become his wife, but he has decided that she would be the best person to run his company as and when he dies or retires. She is no scientist of course, but she has demonstrated managerial and administrative skills which have impressed him and have impressed others, so much so that he can think of no one else better qualified. She also appears to have developed a passion for the company and for the important work it is doing. A woman turning forty, she also is eager and even desperate to have a child of her own. At some point early in the story, it could be that she gets news that she is pregnant.

Ronnie: Up until a year or two ago, he held an important position in the company, possibly Chief Financial Officer, and he imagined that he would be his father's heir and eventually take over. But in the course of a routine inspection, Toni or one of her minions discovered something he was doing that appeared suspicious and that led her to find that he had been taking kickbacks from suppliers. His father gave him the sack. He has been invited home for Christmas for what Stanley hopes will be reconciliation with his son, but Ronnie's bitterness and anger has driven him almost insane during the intervening period. He has been living on what he stole, and is now almost destitute. An African man whom he knew as a fellow student at University 15 years ago has approached him about getting hold of some deadly virus, and Ronnie, with the money he's being offered, imagines escaping to the Caribbean, buying a small hotel with swimming pool and bar, and living an easy life in the tropics with lots of women and rum. And it's this dream which he shares with Karim, who also was a pal back at University. He knows about his father's relationship and hates Toni as well.

Cliffie: He has been mad about Sophie since he first masturbated. He is a virgin, and has arrived at Steepfall determined to seduce Sophie and smother her with his love. Everything he knows about love and sex, he has learned from books, so that much of what he does and tries to do is somewhat funny, but he does prevail in the end. He's also a kid who is not happy at home and is hoping that Grandpa Stanley will foot the bill so that he can go away to boarding school and be able to join several of his friends. His long-term dream is to become a race car driver. Finally, as an avid reader of mysteries and police procedurals, he has

read about all kinds of ways to outwit criminals.

Miranda: She adores Ned who is an erudite and charming editor of a newspaper book section, but a man who makes almost no money. Her idea to alleviate their condition is to get Stanley to open a London office where Ned could do PR for the pharmaceutical company. He is willing to do this, but refuses to ask his father himself. Miranda has computer programming and hacking skills which she brings to bear against the bad guys. She met Ned at an extracurricular literature course which he taught; and she dreams of writing a novel but feels she has no talent. She and Toni have become close.

I see the action of the story unfolding more or less as follows: The first chapter begins with a demonstration by the animal rights people outside the plant. These agitators clearly pose a threat of sorts; but I see little or no logic in their sending a letter that they are going to break into the plant over Christmas. I think we can cut that. The danger to the plant is physically there with their taunts, jeers, and maybe even tossing of eggs and bricks. The hero of the scene, of course, is Toni, who restrains her guards and the police from violence and brilliantly manages to melt the whole thing down. In her, we see lots of ingenuity and physical courage. Stanley is grateful and congratulatory, and they go inside where we see their love for each other and also he sets the rendezvous for her to come to his house around Christmas. It could be here that she tells him that she's pregnant. Or she might learn this later, and tell him when she gets to Steepfall. I like the idea of the press conference, but I fear that it may overload the chapter. And what she then says (or Stanley says) could be repetitive of her words to the demonstrators. Either the first part of the scene or that last part also ought to vivify the horrendous powers of these viruses. We might see, for example, a room in which dead animals of one kind or another are robotically inserted into incredibly thick metal containers for disposal. Any slight chance of human contact with them would mean certain death. Then we see how gingerly all this is done, and we might learn too that the company is having a difficult time finding places where they can bury these sealed boxes.

In chapter two, Ronnie enlists Karim. I suggest that this be more of a seduction and less a threat of violence. Ronnie has already hired Nigel, or thinks he has, not knowing that Nigel who was recommended by the African is actually in the employ of the African. Nigel presumably has expertise with locks, with the handling of dangerous and deadly materials, and with the use of firearms, if these should prove to be needed. Ronnie has met him several times and is in awe of him.

Chapter three introduces Miranda. We establish her as a larger than life character by her skillful handling of Tom who throws a tantrum for no good reason and Ned proves incapable of calming him down. Miranda does have to struggle, but in the end she prevails and we see how both compassionate and skillful she is. In this scene she might also seduce Ned into agreeing that he'll take the PR job if his dad offers it.

The fourth chapter would then introduce Cliffie, perhaps unpacking some sex manuals, sexy novels, condoms, baiting the trap as it were for his encounter with Sophie which might also begin as soon as he has parked and dented the big car.

Chapter five would then be the robbery.

In six, Toni finds out, calls the cops but they all are pretty much off duty for the holiday and do not take her seriously.

And in chapter seven Ronnie and his crew get to Steepfall.

At this point, I think we should be about third of the way into the story, and the remaining back and forth actions should all take place in

and around Steepfall. As you have it now, the preparation for their getting to Steepfall appears to take somewhat longer. If we can, I think we need to speed that up.

What follows next are some small notes I've made on individual scenes:

1. We need to know a bit more about this company. Aside from development of a new product, what does it make and sell which keeps the place going? We'll need at least mention of some world-renowned scientist who is directing the research. My suggestion would be to make him and his helpers foreign - Russian, or Czech, or Japanese. And specifically, what good results has this crew already had?

As far as I know the mission of the FBI is to protect the U.S. in the U.S.; so that if Toni is dealing with a U.S. operative, it's more likely to be someone in the CIA or perhaps Scotland Yard. When push comes to shove, the outfit for her to contact, I think, would be the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta who could get right to the President of the U.S.

I like having Carl Osbourne in the story, but if Toni is hooked up with Stanley, then Osbourne won't work as a potential lover. Might he be a journalist who is also her brother?

Having had two senile parents, I know that it is virtually impossible to take such a person out of an old folk's home. If Toni is to do this, then her mother could be deaf, blind, unable to walk, feeble in some other physical way, but it's all but impossible to take the old woman anywhere if she has lost her marbles.

Stanley's particular anxiety about the family reunion is whether or not he'll be able to patch things up with Ronnie.

2. I suggest that Miranda be a triathlon competitor in lieu of a skier. As a result, she vigorously maintains her fitness; and in her very first scene, we could meet her as she returns from a five or an eight mile run. Her stamina could then, of course, play a role at Steepfall.

3. This house stands on the edge of a cliff, but this important geographical element ought at some point to work its way into the story. Someone should fall, be pushed, could slip down the side of this embankment, could be threatened with being thrown over etc.

I think we can keep Marta, but as the long-term housekeeper and the woman who has in fact raised Stanley's three kids. He could be either a widower or divorced. Marta could have come to work there as a very young woman from Spain or Italy. She might have been married to a young man who was the gardener-landscaper and who has died; and she could play pretty much the same role in the story which she now does, except of course that she is not Stanley's wife or the biological mother of his children.

Caroline appears to play no role in the action, and it seems to me that either we give her some skill which at some point she brings to bear in the action or we eliminate her.

4. The point of view character in the Karim scene should be Ronnie. He is the one with everything at stake and the one who desperately needs the help of his old buddy.

5. I suggest that you cut Miranda's previous affair with Hugo. It serves to cheapen her a little and more importantly it distracts, I feel, from the main thrust of the story.

I suggest that you give both Olga and Hugo skills which might be useful

in dealing with the bad guys once they come on the scene. Hugo, for example, could be an amateur ventriloquist; and Olga might have brought with her an electronic keyboard at which the family would be singing Christmas carols and at some point could become a distraction while one or another of the family try to do something against the criminals.

I think we can dispense with Veronique. Your story will work better, I feel, without this tepid secondary villain.

6. Toni's mother, if she is loud and eccentric though enfeebled in some way, could add nice comic relief to the tense scene at Steepfall.

7. Sophie, as a somewhat older granddaughter of Stanley's, presumably would know as much about Steepfall as Cliffie, although she might not know about the attic over the kitchen. Nor about the hunting paraphernalia which might be at the house and which might hold a particular fascination for him. Might Stanley have dogs, guns, all that sort of stuff not uncommon to certain British country homes?

8. Now that we have combined Nigel and George. Nigel would be more interesting, I think, if he appears to be a charming fellow, easy going, friendly etc; but then at even a mild provocation there erupts his vicious and violent side. Ronnie, I suggest, has already been paid \$50,000 for "expenses"; and he expects to receive a balance of \$950,000 on delivery. He has been assured that the virus would be used only in Africa, presumably in one of these countries where coups and rebellions are taking place; and he frankly doesn't give a shit what happens to a few thousand Africans.

Ronnie thinks that he is the mastermind of all this and that he's arranged for this telecommunications van, but actually Nigel has stolen it.

9. We'll need to think of some interesting way for Ronnie, who is well known, to get into the plant.

10. Wouldn't Cliffie think that some alcohol might free Sophie from her inhibitions? But does she have any?

11. Finally we have our adolescent seduction scene, but you keep it off stage. Here too I see an opportunity for comic relief, maybe a little emotional relief too. And what great fun too if this is going on in juxtaposition with the rest of the family being terrorized.

Given the changes I've suggested above, I can see you conceiving new amendments and revisions to the ups and downs at Steepfall between our good guys and bad guys; and the complexity of how you then move these people back and forth against each other is an area I'll be eager to comment upon when you've completed a second draft. One important addition to this section should be, I think, someone getting sick and actually dying from this virus.

I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, and I do hope we'll have time for lunch together.

Warmest wishes,
Al