

WHITEOUT

by Ken Follett

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Part I: Sunday, 9 December

1. Antonia Baxter, 40, known as Toni, is a glamorous redhead from a working-class background. Having spent most of her life as a police officer, she is now Facilities Manager for Oxenford Medical, a boutique pharmaceuticals company located near the Scottish port city of Harbourmouth. The company has developed a new antiviral drug and is in the process of testing it against a range of viruses, using mice, rats, hamsters, rabbits, Beagle dogs and monkeys. For this purpose it has built costly new biohazard laboratories.

On Sunday morning she is on her way to see her boss at his home. The company has received a threat from a group calling itself Animals Are Free. The group intends to "liberate" animals from the laboratory as a Christmas gesture. Toni's main responsibility is security, so this is her problem.

Toni is friendly with Odette Cressy, an FBI agent she met on a course at Hendon Police College. She has faxed the letter to Odette and asked her to run it past the FBI's threat assessment specialists. Odette has not yet called back.

Her boss's home, Steepfall, is on the coast five miles north of the laboratory. It stands on a cliff overlooking a long beach. It is an old stone farmhouse with low ceilings and exposed beams.

The founder and chairman of Oxenford Medical is Stanley Oxenford, 60. He is tall and fit, with thick grey hair. The son of a high street pharmacist, he has had a brilliant scientific career, and now directs a team of mainly young scientists of many nations. He is a shrewd businessman, though a risk taker. His Italian wife Marta, always called Mamma Marta, died eighteen months ago. He has three adult children.

They consider the threatening letter. Could anyone steal animals from the laboratory? Toni proposes heightened security for the areas where animals are kept prior to being used in experiments. The laboratories where viruses are tested already have a state-of-the-art security system.

Stanley is also worried about the public-relations fallout from this. His research is financed by the U.S. Department of Defense (which is worried about biological warfare). The American government is sensitive to bad publicity about Frankenstein experiments. They could pull the finance.

Toni explains that the police and the media learn of hundreds of crazy threats such as this, and they do not publicise them unless there is some strong reason to believe there is a genuine danger.

Stanley shows Toni around the house. The original building is quite small, with two rooms on the ground floor and three bedrooms above. The place is full of reminders of Mamma Marta: a portrait of her over the fireplace, several silver tennis trophies from her youth, watercolours she painted, her collection of Etruscan pottery in a display cabinet. Adjacent to the original house is the old dairy, converted into a large modern kitchen. Here Toni meets the help, a Filipino couple, Lukey and Lori. Lori, the woman, gives Toni a hard look, and Toni gets the feeling she is the first woman Stanley has shown around this house since Marta died. Next to the kitchen is a new extension, with a dining room downstairs and a master bedroom suite upstairs. There are three outbuildings: a one-bedroom guest cottage; a barn with a play area and a hayloft bedroom; and a garage containing Stanley's red Ferrari, Lukey's Toyota, and a four-wheel drive SUV for when the roads are icy.

Toni wonders why she is being given the tour. She knows Stanley likes her. He obviously enjoys her company, and they play squash once a week. (He wins.) But now she senses more than that. She finds him very attractive, but the thought of trying to step into the shoes of Mamma Marta is a nightmare.

Stanley now reveals that he has put all his money into the new laboratories, and he has pledged this house as security for a personal overdraft of a million pounds. He did so because he felt confident his new drug would make a lot of money. But, if bad publicity should force him to abandon the research before the drug is proven, he could lose everything.

As Toni drives away, she reflects that she has more than the usual reasons for wanting to protect her boss from disaster.

She was a high flyer in the police, tipped to become Britain's first woman Chief Constable, until she quarrelled with her superior (over the hot issue of racism in the force). The row got into the newspapers, and she lost her job 27 months ago. Labelled a troublemaker, she had difficulty finding a job. She set up as a private security consultant in her home town of Harbourmouth, but she got little work.

She had been living with another police officer, Frank Hackett, for eight years, although they never married. They parted after Toni was sacked. Around the same time, Toni's mother began to go senile and had to be moved into a nursing home.

A year ago Toni was at the lowest point of her entire life when Stanley hired her to investigate financial irregularities at Oxenford Medical. She discovered that the Head of Security, Ronnie Sutherland, and the Head of Systems, Stanley's son Kit, were stealing. Stanley fired them both and gave Toni a full-time job.

Toni is deeply grateful to Stanley for giving her a chance when she needed it, and fiercely determined to do a good job for him.

When she gets home, she gets a call from Odette Cressy. The FBI think the threat from Animals Are Free is serious.

2. Miranda Oxenford, 35, is Stanley's second child. She is attractive, though overweight. She is smart and determined, and usually gets what she wants. She is divorced with an eleven-year-old son, Tom. She works as managing director of a small recruitment agency for computer personnel. After a number of good years in which Miranda earned high bonuses, the company is going through a lean patch.

She rings at the entry of a Glasgow loft building and is admitted by her brother Kit, 25. The place is full of expensive electronic gear. Miranda adores her kid brother, who has charm, good looks, brains, and athletic prowess. She forgives his selfishness and dishonesty.

She is here on a peace mission. She wants to patch up the quarrel between Kit and their father.

Kit went to work for their father fifteen months ago, after getting a Master's degree in computer science and competing in the Winter Olympics. He worked with Ronnie Sutherland to devise and install the security system for the biohazard laboratories, and did a terrific job. Unfortunately, he also devised a way of skimming a percentage from invoices and hiding it in the (computerised) accounts. They netted handsome profits until Toni rumbled them nine months ago.

The way Kit sees it, after his mother died his father got involved with a gold-digging bitch who plotted to turn Stanley against his son and steal Ronnie's job.

The truth, as Miranda knows in her heart, is that Kit always wants easy money. He would rather spend all day cheating someone out of a few pounds than earn twice as much by honest work. He is a chronic gambler.

Nevertheless, he burns with resentment towards his father and Toni. A typical rogue, he always expects forgiveness, and feels indignant when his victims remember his misdeeds.

Miranda tells him that the family will gather at Steepfall this Christmas, for the first time since Mamma Marta died. She begs Kit to make friends with their father and come.

Kit refuses.

3. After Miranda has gone, Kit goes to a neighbourhood pub where he meets a casual girlfriend, Anita. He tells her bitterly a part of the story Miranda does not know.

After being fired he remained unemployed, but continued to gamble, on credit, at a casino owned by Henry McGarry, known as Harry Mac, a Glasgow gangster with a chain of casinos and brothels in Scotland and the north of England. Six months ago, when Kit owed £50,000, he phoned Stanley and vowed to give up gambling if his father would pay off the debt. Stanley refused. Consequently, Kit had no option (the way he sees it) but to try to win back the money he had lost. Now the debt stands at £300,000.

The conversation is interrupted rudely by Harry Mac's daughter and partner Diana, ironically nicknamed Daisy. A tall, muscular woman of 25 with a shaved head, she is aggressive and violent. She orders Kit to go with her to her father's house. He thinks they are going to break his legs and he is terrified.

Harry lives in a swanky house on the outskirts of the city. He introduces Kit to Nigel Buchanan, a quietly sinister Londoner. Unusually, Harry seems intimidated. Nigel says to Kit: Can you get me inside the biohazard laboratory at Oxenford Medical?

Kit says Yes.

Could you do it no later than Christmas Day?

Yes.

I'll pay you three hundred thousand pounds, says Nigel, and he leaves.

Harry explains that Nigel is a professional thief who steals only to order and for a prearranged price: works of art, industrial secrets, special jewellery, nuclear warheads. Kit

deduces that Nigel has been commissioned to steal a sample of Oxenford Medical's antiviral drug, worth millions to a competitor.

Kit has no choice but to accept this task. However, it also appeals to his sense of mischief and his need for revenge on his father and Toni.

The best time to break into the laboratory would be during the Christmas holiday, he sees immediately. For some reason, Nigel specified that this must happen no later than Christmas Day. The perfect time would be the night before Christmas. A plan begins to take shape in Kit's mind.

He calls Miranda and says he will be joining the family for Christmas after all. She is thrilled.

4. Maggie Ross, 31, drives up to the entrance gate of Oxenford Medical premises.

The company is located in a rambling nineteenth-century building known as The Fort, built as a holiday home for a Victorian industrialist, bought by Stanley twenty years ago. The newer labs are housed in a modern steel-and-glass extension.

Maggie's pass is carefully checked by the guard at the gate, even though he knows her well. She uses a plastic key card to get into the biohazard zone. She is a laboratory assistant who helps take care of the experimental animals.

There are four BioSafety Levels, BSL1 through BSL4. Maggie is going into the highest, BSL4, where they work with viruses for which there is no vaccine and no antidote.

Stanley's drug is effective against some viruses, but not all. Indications are that it does not work against viruses of the Ebola type. At present the company is testing it against one such strain that is fatal to rabbits as well as humans. Two groups of rabbits have been infected by the virus in aerosol form, and one group has been injected with the drug.

Maggie has developed a relationship with one of the rabbits, which she calls Joe. She feels he is different from the others. Some friends she has recently met, who campaign for animal rights, have explained to her that it would not be wrong for her to save Joe. She has carefully thought out a plan which she is putting into operation today.

She has bought an ordinary rabbit in a pet shop. It is in the duffle bag she has brought with her into the laboratory. She is going to substitute this one for Joe.

She enters the women's changing room, where of course there are no security cameras. She takes off her clothes and puts on hospital scrubs, then a biohazard suit with its own air supply. She enters the lab, concealing the rabbit from the cameras by positioning her body. She swaps the rabbit for Joe.

To avoid suspicion, she has to make sure the new rabbit is infected, so she gives the cage an extra dose of the aerosolised virus (so that we see how this is done). Then she takes some of the antiviral drug.

Passing out of BSL4 with Joe, she first showers in her biohazard suit, then naked. She leaves with Joe in her duffle.

As she passes through the gate, she tells the guard she has two weeks holiday, and she is going to visit friends in London.

She drives to the isolated cottage where she lives. She has prepared a cage for Joe. He will die here in peace and dignity with Maggie by his side.

In the faint hope that the drug will be effective, she gives Joe an injection. As she is doing so, he bites her.

She knows that she now has the virus.

She gives herself an injection too. But she knows the likelihood is they will both die.

Part II: Tuesday, 24 December

5. At two o'clock in the morning, Toni Baxter and a team of specialists in orange biohazard suits drive up to Maggie Ross's cottage and burst in.

They find Maggie near death. She is bleeding from her mouth, nose, ears and eyes. The skin of her tongue has come off.

They place her in an isolation container like a coffin and put it in the ambulance. She is rushed to The Fort where there is a medical facility within BSL4 designed for emergencies such as this.

Toni and some of the team remain behind to cleanse the house. They bag up everything movable for burning, then spray every inch.

The police show up, led by Toni's ex, Frank Baxter. He and Toni have a quarrel about jurisdiction.

Toni gets a call from the Fort. Maggie is dead.

Toni asks Frank not to leak this to the media. He is friendly with Carl Osborne, a television reporter and local celebrity. Toni has done a stint in police PR, and she knows a story like this cannot be kept secret, but she would like to release the news her own way.

We never leak things to the papers, Frank says smugly; and she knows he will.

6. Kit wakes early, feeling nervous. He has devised an ingenious plan for getting past the guards at The Fort and defeating his own alarm system. No one will be hurt. In fact, no one will even know what has happened until the scientists return to work two days later, after the holiday. Nevertheless, he is about to commit a serious crime, and he wishes he could get out of it.

Then something happens to make matters worse. He turns on the news. Carl Osborne is reporting from outside Kit's father's laboratory, The Fort. A young woman who worked there has died of a deadly virus after apparently taking a rabbit home. It has emerged that the Oxenford Medical received a letter, two weeks ago, threatening to liberate animals over Christmas.

Kit is appalled. This is sure to lead to heightened security at The Fort. He cannot now carry out his plan. He decides to go to Harry Mac and call it off.

7. Miranda meets her older sister Olga, 36, for breakfast. The eldest Oxenford child, Olga is tall like Stanley, with Marta's black eyebrows. A barrister, she is arrogant and tactless.

They talk about Miranda's love life. Her first husband was a bully and a tyrant. She has proved that she can take care of herself and her daughter without him, and she is proud of herself for that, but she wants more from life. She is living with Ned Hanley, 39, charming, erudite, a Shakespeare scholar, impractical and weak. He is editor of the *Edinburgh Review of Books*, a successful cultural-political journal that pays a pittance. He lives rent-free in Miranda's apartment. He is good with Tom. He, too, is divorced, and has a troubled fourteen-year-old daughter, Sophie.

Ned is what Miranda needs to complete her journey back to happiness after a failed marriage and a bad divorce. So, says Olga sceptically, what's keeping him? He is

uncomfortable being financially dependent on Miranda, and he also says everyone needs more time to get used to the idea of his remarriage.

Olga says that “everyone” means his ex-wife, Jennifer, an accomplished troublemaker. Miranda should not have let Ned move in without first getting him to commit to a wedding date. He is a free-rider who will use Miranda as long as she lets him.

Miranda says Olga is wrong, but she has a secret anxiety that that Olga might be right. She hopes this holiday will bring resolution. Jennifer is going to Nassau with a man friend. For the first time Miranda, Ned and Tom will be joined by Sophie for the holiday. Miranda hopes this will prove to Ned that they can be a family.

She calls Kit to make sure he is still planning to keep his promise and join them. She reaches him on his mobile phone (on his way to see Harry Mac, though Miranda doesn't know that). He says he isn't coming to Steepfall after all.

8. Kit is shown into the pool house, where Harry sits in a bathrobe drinking coffee. Daisy is swimming laps, stroking up and down the pool tirelessly. Kit is taken aback to see that she is naked.

Kit explains to Harry, using all his charm and persuasiveness, that the robbery of The Fort is now too hazardous. Harry says he cannot back out. He has made a commitment to Nigel, who is connected with very important people. Besides, how else can Kit pay his debt? Kit says they can do the robbery later, when the heat is off, but Harry reminds him that Nigel specified that the job must be done no later than Christmas Day. Kit says it is just not possible.

Daisy gets out of the water. She is, indeed, naked, and Kit now sees that she is shaved all over. She has tattoos and a nipple ring. Kit is weirded out by the whole scene.

Harry says to Daisy: Remind Kit how important it is to pay his debts.

Daisy pushes Kit into the pool and holds his head under the water until he passes out.

9. Miranda's holiday begins badly. She drives Ned and Tom (Ned can't drive) through a light snowfall to Jennifer's house to pick up Sophie. She is feeling very disappointed about Kit.

Jennifer is out and Sophie, a sulky teen in a skimpy sweater that shows her pierced navel, has not begun to get ready. Ned begs Miranda to help Sophie pack a case. Miranda has never been inside the marital home and she agrees only with reluctance.

Jennifer returns unexpectedly. She rudely orders Miranda out of the house. Miranda waits in the car, humiliated, wondering if Olga is right and Ned is just too weak.

10. By midmorning, The Fort is under siege by the media. Reporters, photographers and TV crews crowd outside the gate. Cleverly, an animal rights group—which may or may not include the people who sent the threatening letter—has organised a demonstration, which is filmed and photographed by the cameras.

Oxenford Medical's public relations officer is Cynthia Creighton, 50, a low-level employee whose role is to dispense a small charity budget to school football teams and sponsored walkers, thus ensuring that the company name appears regularly in the local press in soft stories that do not mention viruses or experiments on animals. She has no experience of dealing with the international media on a hot story.

Fortunately, Toni has done a stint in police PR. She advises Stanley to hold a carefully controlled press conference.

Stanley's worries are underlined by a call from Washington, DC. The head of research for the Department of Defense, Dr Larry Mahoney, would prefer to have Stanley's research within his own program, and would welcome a pretext for cancelling the contract. He now takes pleasure in telling Stanley that the US government is worried by the bad publicity resulting from the Maggie Ross incident. Stanley says he is about to give a reassuring press conference.

In the Great Hall of The Fort, Stanley and Toni speak to the assembled journalists. Stanley begins by talking about the importance of his work. Viruses of all kinds, from influenza to HIV, kill millions of people every year. Smaller than a germ, a virus is just a length of DNA in a protein capsule. It cannot reproduce itself, but propagates by hijacking a living cell and forcing the cell's own reproductive mechanism to go to work making duplicate viruses instead of duplicate cells. It cannot be killed, for it is not alive—unlike a germ, which can be killed by antibiotics. There are very few drugs for viruses, so a new one is

tremendously good news. But it must be tested, and before it is given to patients it must first be tried out on animals.

Next, Toni outlines The Fort's security. The biohazard lab has an alarm connected directly to regional police headquarters at Harbourmouth. There are security guards on duty 24 hours, and Toni has doubled them. The guards cannot enter the biohazard area, though they can see inside by closed-circuit TV. The loophole found by Maggie Ross has been closed by compulsory bag searches for everyone leaving the dressing rooms.

Carl Osborne asks hostile but shrewd questions: What was the danger to other people from Maggie and her rabbit? How many people might have died? Are the Americans using Scotland for research too dangerous to be done at home? Stanley and Toni answer as best they can, trying to prevent sensational headlines while at the same time telling the truth.

Snow begins to fall as the conference ends, and Toni has a flash of inspiration. She orders hot drinks served to the demonstrators outside. This is filmed by departing cameramen.

As Osborne is leaving, he asks Toni for a date. He is attractive—charming, glamorous, affluent, a local celebrity—but she turns him down.

Stanley also leaves. He needs to be at Steepfall to welcome his family. But he wants to review the press conference with Toni. He asks her to come by the house and watch the lunchtime news with him.

11. Miranda arrives at Steepfall with Ned, Tom and Sophie. The kids will sleep in the barn, Miranda and Ned in the main house. Miranda is about to tell her father that Kit isn't coming after all when Kit phones and says he has changed his mind again and he will be there. He repeats a demand he made a few days ago, that he sleep in the guest cottage. Miranda arranges this with Stanley.

Olga arrives with her husband Hugo and their children Caroline, 17, and Craig, 15. When Olga hears about the sleeping arrangements, she goes ballistic. Why should four adults squeeze into the cramped bedrooms of the old house, sharing a small bathroom, and give Kit all the space of the cottage to himself? She and Miranda have a row. Toni arrives in the middle of it.

Stanley is forced to arbitrate. He says Olga is right, and Kit should not have special treatment. He decides that Miranda and Ned will sleep in the guest house. Olga and Hugo will sleep in the main house, as will Kit.

Miranda fears Kit will turn around and leave.

12. Toni and Stanley watch the news together. The results are pleasing. Oxenford Medical is portrayed as a group of responsible scientists doing vital work which is endangered by mad animal activists. The closing shot shows Oxenford Medical's staff handing out hot drinks to the protestors in the snow. Stanley tells Toni: That was a brilliant touch.

They agree that the danger has passed, and there should be no serious damage to the company's reputation, provided of course that there are no further incidents.

They walk out on to the cliff and watch the snow falling on the beach. It is a romantic moment, and Toni feels a terrific sexual tension. (She is attracted to Stanley but thinks his family is a nightmare.) But before anything can happen little Tom comes running up to say that Uncle Kit has arrived.

Toni sees Kit welcomed by his adoring family and wonders if they realise how much money he stole from his father.

She sees the byplay about the bedroom. Miranda is nervous and Olga defiant as they tell him he is sleeping upstairs in the main house. Toni notices a split-second flash of rage on his face, and wonders why it is so important to him; then he smiles and says it really doesn't matter.

As she is leaving, she finds herself alone with Kit, by an unlucky chance. As politely as she can, she wishes him a happy Christmas. He replies: Get lost, bitch.

13. Craig Oxenford, Stanley's 15-year-old grandson, is on the edge of manhood, sometimes mature and responsible, sometimes mischievous. At school he is often in trouble, always top of the class. He has been looking forward eagerly to renewing his acquaintance with Sophie, 14, his aunt's boyfriend's daughter, a magnetically bad girl who wears sexy clothes and smokes cigarettes. He has met her once before, at a family gathering a few months ago, and has been thinking about her ever since.

He shows her the hayloft bedroom in the barn, which she will share with Caroline. He and Tom will sleep on camp beds in the play area.

He shows her his favourite hiding place in the house. When the dairy was converted, a large attic space was created above the new kitchen. This is used as a junk room. It is accessed via a panel at the back of a closet in Stanley's dressing-room. It contains a sofa, photograph albums, boxes of old junk, and so on. Evidence of how it has been used in the past is here in the form of candy wrappers, cigarette packets of long-forgotten brands, and a pile of old Playboys (which Sophie eagerly examines).

He shows her how you can look through a crack into the kitchen below and eavesdrop on adult conversations. He warns her that Nelson, the Labrador retriever, always knows you are here, and an alert adult may notice Nelson's behaviour and draw the right conclusion.

Craig is working his charm as hard as he can. He tells Sophie how much he likes her. She says she is dating a boy of 19. Craig does not know whether to believe her. Is she as sophisticated as she seems? Or, as he sometimes suspects, is she desperate for admiration and affection?

14. Toni returns to The Fort for a meeting with the guard supervisor, Steve Tremlett. Toni likes Steve, and she is glad he will be on duty tonight. He was a pal of the sacked Head of Security, Ronnie Sutherland, but there was no evidence that Steve was in on the scam with Ronnie and Kit. Toni decided to take a chance on him, and he has rewarded her with loyalty and efficiency.

Together they run over security arrangements for the holiday. Steve has a list of people to call in the event of fire, flood, power cut, phone breakdown, and other problems. Toni emphasizes that she will have her phone with her 24 hours and she wants to be called if anything in the least unusual happens. Steve must also call regional police headquarters in Harbourmouth without hesitation.

There are normally three guards on duty at night: one at the gate, one at Reception, and one in the Control Room with the CCTV screens and the main computer. Every hour, the one in Reception patrols the entire premises (except the biohazard lab), which takes 20 minutes.

Toni has doubled the guard tonight, so there will be two at each station, and they will patrol every half hour.

Looking at the roster, she notices that all the guards on duty tonight, except Steve, have joined the company in the last few months. She mentions this to Steve, who says he had not noticed. It appears to be a coincidence without significance.

15. Olga's husband, Hugo, is a charming philanderer. Years ago, in a moment of depression and low self-esteem, Miranda slept with him. It was a foolish act she has regretted ever since. Hugo feels no guilt and always flirts with her. Now he comes on strongly to her. She begs him not to compromise her in front of Ned. She is trying to get Ned to make a commitment, and the last thing she needs is for him to know her worst secret.

Miranda comes across Kit in their father's dressing room, going through Stanley's pockets. She asks him what he is doing. "Looking for cash," he says. "I'm broke." She scolds him and gives him £100 from her purse.

16. In fact Kit is looking for the plastic key card his father uses to gain access to the biohazard laboratory. He was sure he would find it in the bedside table, and now he is fighting down panic, for the key is essential to his whole plan.

He is also furious about the sleeping arrangements. He needs to slip away unnoticed after bedtime. This is going to be difficult in the main house.

He eventually finds the key card in his father's study.

17. Last Christmas, Toni took her mother out of the nursing home for two days. This year her younger sister Bella, not normally good at taking responsibility, has agreed to have Mother. Toni is going to a hotel with a group of friends, all singles or childless couples, for a grown-up Christmas.

But, as she is leaving, Bella calls and says that her husband does not want her to drive in the snow, so she can't pick up Mother after all. Toni can't bear the thought of Mother spending Christmas among strangers, so she cancels her plans and heads for the nursing home.

18. Stanley has left his Ferrari outside the front door of Steepfall, as usual, for Lukey to garage. Last time Craig was here, he was allowed to put the car in the garage. Now he decides to do so again, telling Sophie he does not need to ask permission. She eggs him on.

However, the snow has made the driveway slippery, and Craig cannot control the car. He skids and hits a tree, denting the door.

Sophie points out that no one seems to have seen or heard the accident. (The garage is some distance from the house.) She proposes parking the car with the dent to the wall, so that it will not be visible to a casual observer. With luck, the damage may go undetected until after Christmas.

Craig agrees.

19. Up in his room, Kit uses his inside knowledge of the computer system at The Fort to hack into the phone system, employing his laptop and mobile phone.

First, he shuts down all the phones except the one on the desk in Reception.

Next, he diverts all calls to and from The Fort to his mobile phone. He has already programmed it to recognise the likeliest callers, such as Toni.

Finally, to attract the attention of the guards, he causes every phone in the building to ring for five seconds.

Almost immediately, the guards attempt to call out on the one remaining phone. The first call is to Toni's mobile. Kit plays an "Unavailable" message. Next, they call Hibernian Telecom, the company that maintains the phones. Kit answers and promises to send an emergency repair crew.

20. Over dinner, Stanley tells his children he feels ready to begin dating. The reaction is explosive. Olga rages that after all the years he neglected her to concentrate on his work, the least she can expect is that her children will inherit his fortune. The row rages widely, and Miranda's affair with Hugo is exposed. Ned is furious and goes off to bed. Miranda sleeps in the spare room.

In the night, she hears Kit get up and leave.

21. Kit drives through the snow to a disused aerodrome five miles north of the house. There, as arranged, he finds Nigel Buchanan, Daisy McGarry, and a driver, George Cox. There is immediate friction between Kit and Daisy; but Kit has the upper hand now, and he does all he can to annoy and humiliate Daisy.

They all get into a van marked "Hibernian Telecom" and drive to The Fort.

22. Toni is slowed by the snow and gets her mother home shortly before midnight. She calls The Fort to check in. A vaguely familiar voice answers (Kit) and rapidly transfers her to Reception, where Steve Tremlett is answering the phone. He tells her that the phones have broken down but a repair crew from Hibernian Telecom is on its way.

Toni puts Mother back in the car and heads for The Fort.

As she is leaving, Carl Osborne turns up, mellow if not drunk, with a Christmas present for her—a puppy. To her annoyance, he follows her.

Part III: Wednesday, 25 December

The blizzard rapidly gets worse.

23. Kit, Nigel, Daisy and George don light disguises—glasses, wigs, and hats—so that the guards at the Fort will later give misleading descriptions of them.

They drive up to the gate in the Hibernian Telecom van. They show fake ID and are admitted.

They go to the Control Room. The room is not big enough for them and the two duty guards, so Kit asks the guards to move to reception while he is working on the computer. (Although Kit is disguised, the guards might recognise him by his voice, except that these are all men who joined the company after Kit left.)

When they have gone, he gives Nigel the key card, then watches on the screen as Nigel and George slip into the isolation lab.

Kit's plan is that the theft should take place without the guards knowing. As they cannot enter the isolation lab, and cannot see what is going on in there without the CCTV monitors, they will not learn what has happened until after the holiday.

But this plan goes wrong almost immediately, because of the extra guards put on by Toni. As Kit watches the screens, seeing Nigel in the isolation lab, he realises he is not alone. There is a guard looking over his shoulder.

As the guard begins to ask an indignant question, Daisy attacks him brutally, rendering him unconscious.

Kit has to find somewhere to put the unconscious security guard. He carries the man to the isolation lab and locks him in an empty monkey cage.

As he is coming out, he is surprised by another patrolling guard. The man overpowers him.

His phone rings, but he cannot answer it.

The guard who has captured Kit summons Steve to help him. But, instead of Steve, Daisy appears. We realise that Steve is in cahoots with Kit.

Daisy beats up the guard.

With Steve's surreptitious help, Daisy and Kit round up all the guards and lock them in the chimpanzee cage. They include Steve so that he will not fall under suspicion.

24. In the barn at Steepfall, the children are still awake.

Sophie produces a bottle of vodka. Tom has some and throws up. Caroline falls asleep. Craig is still trying to charm Sophie.

Miranda comes in, having seen lights on late. She confiscates the vodka, scolds Craig and Sophie, cleans up the bathroom, and sends them all to their beds.

When she has gone, Craig and Sophie get up again.

25. Toni realises that Carl Osborne is following her. She stops the car and speaks to him. He is not all that drunk, and he has guessed there must be a story here. She tells him to stop following her, but he refuses.

26. At the Fort, Kit's plan has gone awry, but the situation can still be rescued. Kit has lost much of his anticipated time advantage. The theft will not now remain undiscovered beyond the arrival of the next shift of guards at six a.m. However, by then he and the others could be back at the disused airfield, where they are due to meet Nigel's customer at dawn.

Nigel puts on a space suit and enters BSL4, the most dangerous area. Kit expects him to take samples of the antiviral drug. (We understand where and how all this stuff is stored because of Chapter 4, when Maggie handled it all.) To Kit's horror, Nigel goes to the freezer and takes several containers of the most deadly viruses. He places them carefully in a carpet bag. Then he goes through the decontamination procedure.

Kit realises he is involved in something much more sinister than he imagined. These samples could kill thousands of people. But what can he do? He still owes a fortune to Harry Mac, and Daisy is right here beside him to prevent his doing anything to undermine the operation. He can only stick with the program and hope to come out unscathed at the end.

The four of them get back into the Hibernian Telecom van and drive away from the Fort.

27. In the barn at Steepfall, Craig at last succeeds in kissing Sophie. He realises right away that she is not such a bad girl as she pretends to be. In fact she seems no more experienced than he is.

This is all right, but unfortunately Tom is still awake, in the same room. Then Caroline passes through on her way to the bathroom. Feeling they have no privacy, Craig proposes they move.

They put on coats and boots, cross the yard in the blizzard, climb the lean-to roof, and enter the attic by the loft door.

28. Toni arrives at the lab, with Mother in her car, followed by Carl Osborne in his car with the puppy. They barely make it because of the snow.

Toni discovers the break-in. She frees the guards, calls the police, settles Mother in a comfortable chair, and debriefs Steve and the other guards. None of them knows what has been taken (except Steve, who lies), and none of them recognised any member of the gang (again except Steve, who knew Kit, but lies again.)

29. Kit and the others drive to a motel called the Dewdrop Inn near the Fort. Here they switch vehicles, dumping the Hibernian Telecom van and getting into a nondescript station wagon.

The weather is getting worse, and there is a bad-tempered argument about whether they should go on. Then Steve calls from the Fort to warn Kit that the break-in has already been discovered, and Kit realizes he has no real choice. They drive on.

Long before they reach their rendezvous, the blizzard slows them to a crawl. George, the driver, can barely see the front end of the car. They slide all over the road, and it is a good thing there is no other traffic, otherwise they would surely hit something.

They all get edgy. The customer will wait for them until noon. At this rate they could miss their rendezvous.

They are not far from Steepfall. Kit proposes they borrow his father's four-wheel-drive jeep, kept for just such weather as this. By now everyone will be in bed. He can either return the car without anyone's noticing its absence or come up with some story about rescuing people in the snow.

George turns off the main road. But the snow is even thicker on the side roads, and soon the car is stuck.

They are about a mile from Steepfall across fields. They continue on foot, freezing cold, fighting their way through snowdrifts, blinded by the whiteout, Nigel holding on grimly to a leather bag containing the nitrogen tank.

They reach the house. Kit opens the garage. The jeep has gone, but Lukey's Toyota is there. Lukey and Lori must have taken the jeep to get home to their cottage.

They are stuck. They must enter the house, or die of cold (the garage is unheated). But, before they do, as a precaution, they cut the phone lines.

30. Toni realises the thieves have taken a sample of a deadly virus. Using her mobile phone, she tells the police. They say there is nothing they can do—no traffic is moving in the blizzard.

She insists on talking to the acting commander, who happens to be her ex-boyfriend, Frank Hackett. She points out that the thieves are likely to be stranded. Almost certainly they are sitting in a car, stuck in the snow, no more than a few miles away. She demands he commandeer a snowplough and mount a search.

Frank refuses. He doesn't really grasp the scale of the biohazard—plus he enjoys saying No to Toni. Although he was the one who left her, in her hour of need, he still acts toward her as if she had wronged him.

She tries to call Stanley, but the phones seem to be out of order at Steepfall.

She calls Odette Cressy, her FBI agent friend, who is horrified by the lassitude of the Scottish police and promises to call Scotland Yard.

Unfortunately, Carl Osborne hears all this.

31. In the kitchen, Kit puts on a kettle for tea. He calls Steve, who tells him the police have refused to commandeer a snowplough. That gives Kit a breathing space.

He turns on the TV for a weather forecast. The blizzard is expected to last until midday. He cannot wait that long. As soon as it gets light, he and the others must try to reach Lukey's cottage and take the jeep.

Stanley appears, wakened by the sounds. Kit explains that his car got stuck in the snow not far from the house. He presents Nigel, Daisy and George as complete strangers who also had to abandon their car.

Stanley asks Nigel and Daisy polite questions: where were they headed, will anyone be worried about them? Their answers, being unrehearsed, are a bit implausible and inconsistent, and Kit wonders how long they can keep up the pretence of innocence.

32. Toni gets a call from Odette. The news is shocking. FBI intelligence has linked the theft of the virus with a serious terrorist group. They plan to disperse the virus tomorrow at one of the traditional big sporting events of Boxing Day.

The Bureau has already alerted the British government, which has come down on the regional police like a ton of bricks, and a snowplough is on its way.

Toni reasons that the thieves probably switched cars at the earliest opportunity. They must have had a second, less conspicuous vehicle waiting at a location where it would not attract attention—a public or semi-private car park. She starts calling likely places: a golf club, a filling station, a warehouse. Although all these places are closed, she usually gets a janitor or a guard willing to look out of a window (or into a CCTV monitor) and say whether he can see a Hibernian Telecom van.

She tracks down the getaway vehicle to the car park of the Dewdrop Inn, a couple of miles north of the Fort.

33. Kit manages to allay any suspicions Stanley might have about Nigel, Daisy and George by pretending to be suspicious himself, and asking challenging questions, thereby giving Nigel the chance to provide plausible explanations. Then Miranda appears. To Kit's dismay she, too, questions the others. She clearly doubts their story, but does not challenge them openly.

34. A team of police in three cars, led by a snowplough, arrives at the Fort. In command is Frank. He tells Toni to stay out of the way as he is now in charge.

They clash because she will not let him into the isolation lab.

He surmises that the thieves probably headed south, aiming for the nearest motorway. Toni tells him that in fact they headed north, and switched cars at the Dewdrop Inn.

The convoy heads that way. Toni puts Mother in the car and follows.

35. Miranda confides to Stanley her suspicion of Kit's companions. (They do not yet suspect Kit of involvement.) Stanley tells Miranda about the robbery at the Fort. (N.B. He still does not know what was stolen.) They decide to call the police. They find the phones are not working.

Stanley does not carry a mobile phone, though there is one in his car. Miranda has one, but she has left it in the guest cottage. She is about to go there when Olga appears.

Olga is also suspicious of Kit's companions but, unlike Miranda, she does not have the sense to be discreet. She questions them aggressively, barrister-style. Cornered, Daisy becomes violent and attacks her. When Stanley jumps to Olga's defence, Nigel pulls a gun.

Kit pretends to be shocked, so that his family will not realise he is part of the gang. After a moment's hesitation, Nigel goes along with this pretence, and Daisy and George follow suit. Miranda notes the hesitation but is not sure how to interpret it.

Before the situation settles, Miranda manages to slip out of the room.

36. Craig hears raised voices and breaks off from kissing Sophie to look into the kitchen. He sees Nigel pointing a gun at Stanley, Olga and Kit. He realises he must call the police. He steps into Stanley's bedroom suite and picks up the phone. The line is dead.

Sophie, who is watching the kitchen, hisses a warning and, a moment later, Craig hears boots on the stairs. He gets back into the attic a second before George bursts into the room.

37. To evade Daisy, Miranda steps into the guest bedroom. Hugo says: "What a lovely surprise, jump into bed with me." She passes quickly into the adjacent small bedroom. Through the keyhole, she sees Daisy pull Hugo out of bed naked.

38. The TV in the kitchen is still on, and a news bulletin reveals that a deadly virus has been stolen from the Fort.

Stanley pleads with Nigel to return the sample, pointing out that it could kill thousands of people including Nigel himself. Nigel is impervious.

While Daisy and George are still searching the house, Stanley jumps Nigel and tries to overpower him. The gun flies across the room. Kit snatches it up—and hands it back to Nigel. Stanley realises that Kit is one of the gang.

39. The snowplough and its cavalcade near Steepfall. Toni decides she could stop off here, brief Stanley, leave Mother, then catch up with the police. The snowfall is easing, and the path cleared by the plough should be drivable for another hour.

She puts this to Frank. He refuses to divert the snowplough down the Steepfall drive. Toni plays a card from her sleeve: she threatens to reveal to Frank's colleagues that he used to like dressing in her underwear. He caves in.

Toni calls the Fort and checks in with Steve. All is well there. She tells Steve she is about to stop off at Steepfall.

40. Craig recalls there is a phone in Stanley's Maserati. He and Sophie leave the attic and go to the garage. The Maserati is there, but it is locked and the keys have gone. Lukey must have locked it before going home.

41. Kit's phone rings. It is Steve. He warns Kit that the police are about to arrive at Steepfall.

Daisy pushes Stanley, Olga, Hugo into the pantry, a windowless refrigerated room, and closes the door on them.

Kit goes to meet Toni.

42. Miranda looks out of a window and sees Toni arrive with the police. She is filled with hope. Then she sees Kit come out of the house and help Toni with Mother. Toni waves goodbye to the police. Realising what is happening, Miranda yells to Toni, but the window is closed and Toni does not hear.

As Toni enters the house, Miranda appears at the top of the stairs and yells a warning. In the fracas, Toni gets away and runs to the barn.

43. Craig, in the windowless garage, has not seen the police or the snowplough. He is still hoping to phone from the Maserati. But the keys must be in the key box on the wall in the boot room, a kind of lobby to the kitchen. He decides to sneak in there and get them. Sophie will stay in the garage.

44. Kit sees his chance. The snowplough has cleared a path to Lukey & Lori's cottage. He can drive there in a normal car and pick up the four-wheel-drive jeep. With that, he should be able to reach the disused airfield. If he can deliver the goods to the customer, he will pay off his debt to Daisy's father, then he can flee the country and start a new life somewhere else.

But, before leaving Steepfall, he must make sure no one here can alert the police. He needs to round up those family members that are still at large: Ned, Miranda, and the four children.

It should not take long.

He sends Nigel to the guest cottage, Daisy to the garage, and George to the barn.

45. Craig leaves the garage, heading for the kitchen, but he sees Nigel, Daisy and George emerge, and is forced to hide behind a dustbin.

46. Toni and Caroline are hiding in the hayloft bedroom. When George comes in, they are ready for him. Caroline has taken her rats out of their cage and is holding them in her arms. She throws them at George. Then Toni hits him on the head with a pool ball.

47. Nigel emerges from the guest cottage with Ned and Tom. At the same moment, Daisy comes out of the garage with Sophie.

Tom spots Craig, hiding behind his dustbin. Terrified, Tom calls to Craig for help, revealing his hiding-place. Daisy is about to go to Craig when Sophie attacks her. Daisy beats Sophie viciously.

To everyone's surprise, indecisive Ned attacks Daisy. The Shakespeare scholar is no match for the young thug, and Ned is badly beaten up; but Daisy's attention is distracted from Sophie, and Craig escapes.

48. Craig enters the boot room and snatches the Ferrari keys, but he is not quick enough to get away, and he is forced to hide in a cupboard.

49. Kit is desperate to leave. But he doesn't know what has happened to George, and he still needs to round up Toni and two more children, Caroline and Craig. He sends Nigel to find George and tells Daisy to get a car.

50. In the barn, Toni attacks Nigel and overpowers him.

51. Craig is about to call the police on the Ferrari phone when the garage door opens and Daisy stands there. He starts the engine and runs her down.

52. Kit grabs the nitrogen tank with the virus samples and runs. He is diverted and runs to the cliff.

Back to the wall, he threatens to open the vials and kill them all.

Prevented from doing this, he tries to kill himself by jumping. Toni saves his life.