

WHITEOUT

by Ken Follett

3rd draft

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7:45 p.m.

A man with many names walked quickly along a cold London street. He was young, and wore a denim jacket and jeans with a striped college scarf. The freezing wind whipped his skin through his thin clothing. He turned into the foyer of a theatre, and felt welcomed by the bright lights and red wallpaper and velvet curtains.

He stood in line to show his ticket, grateful for the warmth of the crowded bodies. Ahead of him in the queue was a young woman with long, dark hair, apparently alone. As they waited, she took out a perfume bottle and, with a quick, efficient movement, sprayed her head and shoulders. It seemed natural. Hair that looked so beautiful should smell good, too. The young man's nostrils flared as he picked up the scent, a powerful, romantic blend of musk, sweetness, and roses.

He was not nervous. This was a trial run. He was doing nothing wrong, committing no crime, not even behaving suspiciously—not this evening. Three nights from now he would do it all again, but for real. Then he would die.

He followed the woman into the bar, where she ordered orange juice and sprayed herself again. He knew the fragrance well. It was called *Diablerie*, a French word meaning devilment or, in old books, witchcraft.

The bar was full of out-of-towners. The show, a ghost story with singing and dancing,

was more popular with tourists than with sophisticated London theatregoers. The young man had an ear for accents, and he could hear Yorkshire, Irish, French, and—most of all—American. He listened idly as they talked of their day's adventures: long lines to get into Buckingham Palace, Harrods' food hall packed like a New York subway train, five *dollars* for a cup of coffee, *une omelette epouvantable*, the most beautiful cashmere scarf. He wondered how people could lead such unutterably trivial lives.

The bell rang for curtain up, and the young man found his seat. Three rows in front of him, the woman with beautiful hair sprayed herself again with *Diablerie*. Listening to the people around him, he amused himself by distinguishing the different American accents: the sing-song of the South; someone from Boston talking like a Kennedy about where he parked his cah; a know-all with a New York twang. Americans were just people. When he saw them like this, in twos and fours, he felt nothing; no rage, no hatred, no impulse to violence.

An elderly couple came and sat beside him, the woman still beautiful, wearing pearl earrings, the man tall and stooped in a tweed jacket, someone's grandparents; ~~and~~ the husband said to the wife: "Can you see the stage okay, honey?" And the young man thought: How could I kill them? How could I kill *them*? How could I *kill* them?

In the interval, the young woman with beautiful hair would go to the ladies' room and spray herself. She would do it again as she sat down for the second act, and again in the crush as the crowd left the theatre. By the time the audience emerged on to the cold street outside, chattering about the show and humming the tunes, at least half of them would have smelled *Diablerie*.

The young man did not dislike Americans, but he hated America. The very word filled him with hot rage, making his hands twitch restlessly, and he felt ready for anything,

~~torture and destruction and murder~~, even mass murder. He felt ready to die. As the mindless ~~show began~~, he resolved to stop himself thinking about grandparents and tourists and people who needed to worry about the price of a cup of coffee. Just think of America, and stay angry. *He felt ready to die.*

✓ Show
is over

In three days' time, the young man with many names and the woman with beautiful hair would return to this theatre. They had tickets for the same show on the day after Christmas, Boxing Day. They would dress the same and arrive at the same time. The woman would again have a perfume bottle, but it would not contain *Diablerie*. The spray would be odourless, and the tourists would inhale it without noticing it. They would watch the show, and return to their hotels, and soon afterwards fly home, to Leeds and Los Angeles, Marseilles and Milwaukee, to New York and Dallas and Seattle, where they would embrace their families and greet their neighbours and go back to work.

The woman with the perfume bottle would breathe it, too, of course, and so would the young man. They would make that sacrifice together.

Ten or twelve days later, they would fall ill. "I picked up a lousy cold in England," the tourists would say. Sneezing, they would infect their relations and friends and colleagues. The symptoms would get worse, and they would go to their doctors, who would tell them they had flu. When they started to die, their doctors would realise that this was something much worse than flu. Eventually, the medical profession would understand that the illness was instantly infectious and always fatal, and they would start to panic.

But, by then, it would be too late.

Day Two

Christmas Eve

1 a.m.

Two tired men looked at Antonia Gallo with resentment and hostility in their eyes. They wanted to go home, but she would not let them. And they knew she was right, which made it worse.

They were in the personnel department of Oxenford Medical. Antonia, always called Toni, was facilities director, and her main responsibility was security. Oxenford was a small pharmaceuticals outfit—a boutique company, in stock market jargon—that did research on viruses that could kill. Security was deadly serious. Toni had organised a spot check of stocks and found that two doses of an experimental drug were missing.

The laboratories were located in a vast nineteenth-century house built as a Scottish holiday home for a Victorian millionaire. It was nicknamed The Kremlin, because of the double row of fencing, the razor wire, the uniformed guards, and the state-of-the-art electronic security. But it looked more like a church, with pointed arches ~~and~~ a tower and rows of gargoyles along the roof.

The personnel office had been one of the grander bedrooms. It still had Gothic windows and linenfold panelling, but now there were filing cabinets instead of wardrobes, and desks with computers and phones where once there had been dressing-tables crowded with crystal bottles and silver-backed brushes.

Toni and the two men were working the phones, calling everyone who had a pass to the top-security laboratory. There were four biosafety levels. At the highest, BSL4, the scientists worked in space suits, handling viruses for which there was no vaccine or antidote. Not everyone was allowed into BSL4. Biohazard training was compulsory, even for the maintenance men who went in to service air filters and repair autoclaves. Toni herself had undergone the training, so that she could enter the lab to check on security.

Only twenty-seven of the company's eighty staff had access. However, many had already departed for the Christmas vacation, and Monday had turned into Tuesday while the three people responsible doggedly tracked them down.

Toni got through to a resort in Barbados called Le Club Beach and, after much insistence, persuaded the assistant manager to go looking for a young laboratory technician called Jenny Crawford.

As Toni waited, she glanced at her reflection in the window. She was holding up well, considering the late hour. Her chocolate-brown chalk-stripe suit still looked businesslike, her thick hair was tidy, her face did not betray fatigue. Her father had been Spanish, but she had her Scottish mother's colouring, red-blond hair and green eyes. She was tall and looked fit. Not bad, she thought, for thirty-eight years old.

"It must be the middle of the night back there!" Jenny said when at last she came to the phone.

"We've discovered a discrepancy in the bio-assurity log," Toni explained. The term *bio-assurity* was borrowed from the nuclear industry. It meant keeping track of all dangerous agents by weight.

Jenny was a little drunk. "That's happened before," she said carelessly. "But no one's

ever made, like, a great big drama over it.”

“That’s because I wasn’t working here,” Toni said crisply. “When was the last time you entered BSL4?”

“Tuesday, I think. Won’t the computer tell you that?”

It would, but Toni wanted to know whether Jenny’s story would match the computer record. “And when was the last time you accessed the vault?” The vault was a locked refrigerator within BSL4 in which were kept live agents, such as samples of viruses. Because it was the most secure location in the building, it was also used to store the experimental drugs.

Jenny’s tone was becoming surly. “I really don’t remember, but it will be on video.” The touchpad combination lock on the vault activated a security camera that rolled the entire time the door was open.

“Do you recall the last time you used Madoba-2?”

“Bloody hell, is that what’s gone missing?”

“No, it’s not. All the same—“

“I don’t think I’ve ever handled an actual virus. I mostly work in the tissue culture lab.”

That agreed with the information Toni had. “Have you noticed any of your colleagues behaving in a way that was strange, or out of character, in the last few weeks?”

“This is like the sodding Gestapo,” Jenny said.

“Be that as it may, have you—“

“No, I have not.”

“Just one more question. Is your temperature normal?”

“Fuck me, are you saying I might have Madoba-2?”

“Have you got a cold or fever?”

“No!”

“Then you’re all right. You left the country eleven days ago—by now you would have flu-like symptoms if anything were wrong. Thank you, Jenny. It’s probably just an error in the log, but we have to make sure.”

“Well, you’ve spoiled my night.” Jenny hung up.

“Shame,” Toni said to the dead phone. She cradled the receiver and said: “Jenny ^{An idiot} Crawford checks out. ~~A cow~~, but straight.”

The laboratory director was Howard McAlpine. His bushy grey beard grew high on his cheekbones, so that the skin around his eyes looked like a pink mask. He was meticulous without being prissy, and Toni normally enjoyed working with him, but now he was bad-tempered. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “The overwhelming likelihood is that the material unaccounted for was used perfectly legitimately by someone who simply forgot to make entries in the log.” His tone of voice was testy: he had said this twice before.

“I hope you’re right,” Toni said non-comittally. She got up and went to the window. The personnel office overlooked the extension that housed the BSL4 laboratory. The new building seemed similar to the rest of the Kremlin, with barley-sugar chimneys and a clock tower; so that it would be difficult for an outsider to guess, from a distance, where in the complex the high-security lab was located. But its arched windows were opaque, the carved oak doors could not be opened, and closed-circuit television cameras gazed one-eyed from the monstrous heads of the gargoyles. It was a concrete blockhouse in Victorian disguise. The

new building was on three levels. The labs were on the ground floor. As well as research space and storage, there was an intensive-care medical isolation facility for anyone who became infected with a dangerous virus. It had never been used. On the floor above was the air handling equipment. Below, elaborate machinery sterilized all waste coming from the building. Nothing left alive, except human beings.

“We’ve learned a lot from this exercise,” Toni said in a placatory tone. She was in a delicate position, she thought anxiously. The two men were senior to her in rank and age—both ~~were~~ in their fifties. She had no right to give them orders, but she had insisted they treat the discrepancy as a crisis. They both liked her, but she was stretching their goodwill to the limit. ^{Still} ~~But~~ she felt she had to push. ~~At~~ At stake were public safety, the company’s reputation, and her career. “In future we must always have live phone numbers for everyone who has access to BSL4, wherever in the world they might be, so that we can reach them quickly in emergency. And we need to audit the log more than once a year.”

McAlpine grunted. As lab director, he was responsible for bio-assurity, and the real reason for his mood was that he really should have been the one to discover the discrepancy. Toni’s efficiency made him look bad.

She turned to the other man, who was the director of human resources. “How far down your list are we, James?”

James Elliot looked up from his computer screen. He dressed like a stockbroker, in a pinstriped suit and spotted tie, as if to distinguish himself from the tweedy scientists. He seemed to regard the safety rules as tiresome bureaucracy, perhaps because he never worked hands-on with viruses. Toni found him pompous and silly. “We’ve spoken to all but one of the twenty-seven staff that have access to BSL4,” he said. He spoke with exaggerated

precision, like a tired teacher explaining something to the dullest pupil in the class. “All of them told the truth about when they last entered the lab and opened the vault. None has noticed a colleague behaving strangely. And no one has a fever.”

“Who’s the missing one?”

“Michael Ross, a lab technician.”

“I know Michael,” Toni said. He was a shy, clever man about ten years younger than Toni. “In fact I’ve been to his home. He lives in a cottage about fifteen miles from here.”

“He’s worked for the company for eight years without a blemish on his record.”

McAlpine ran his finger down a printout and said: “He last entered the lab three Sundays ago, for a routine check on the animals.”

“What’s he been doing since?”

“Holiday.”

“For how long—three weeks?”

Elliot put in: “He was due back today.” He looked at his watch. “Yesterday, I should say. Monday morning. But he didn’t show up.”

“Did he call in sick?”

“No.”

Toni raised her eyebrows. “And we can’t reach him?”

“No answer from his home phone or his mobile.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

“That a single young man should extend his vacation without forewarning his employer? About as odd as rain in ^{Scotland} ~~Glen Coe~~.”

Toni turned back to McAlpine. “But you say Michael has a good record.”

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The lab director looked worried. "He's very conscientious. It's surprising that he should take unauthorised leave."

Toni asked: "Who was with Michael, ^{when he} ~~on the last occasion he~~ entered the lab?" She knew he must have been accompanied, for there was a two-person rule in BSL4: because of the danger, no one could work there alone.

McAlpine consulted his list. "Dr Ansari, a biochemist."

"I don't think I know him."

"Her. It's a woman. Monica."

Toni picked up the phone. "What's her number?"

Monica Ansari spoke with an Edinburgh accent and sounded as if she had been fast asleep. "Howard McAlpine called me earlier, you know."

"I'm sorry to trouble you again."

"It's all right. Has something happened?"

"It's about Michael Ross. We can't track him down. I believe you were in BSL4 with him two weeks ago last Sunday."

"Yes. Just a minute, let me put the light on." There was a pause. "God, is that the time?"

Toni pressed on. "Michael went on holiday the next day."

"He told me he was going to see his mother in Devon."

That rang a bell. Toni recalled the reason she had gone to Michael Ross's house. About six months ago she had mentioned, in a casual conversation ~~in the canteen~~, how much she liked Rembrandt's pictures of old women, with every crease and wrinkle lovingly detailed. You could tell, she had said, how much Rembrandt must have loved his mother.

Michael had lit up with enthusiasm and revealed that he had a number of Rembrandt's ^{prints} ~~works not originals, which he could not afford, but copies~~ cut out of magazines and auction-house catalogues. She had gone home with him after work to see the pictures, tastefully framed and covering one wall of his small living room, all etchings of old women. ~~She had worried that he was going to ask her for a date—she liked him, but not that way—~~ ~~but to her relief he genuinely wanted only to show off his collection.~~ He was, she had concluded, a mother's boy.

"That's helpful," Toni said to Monica. "Just hold on." She turned to James Elliot. "Do we have his mother's contact details on file?"

Elliot moved his mouse and clicked. "She's listed as next of kin." He picked up the phone.

Toni spoke to Monica again. "Did Michael seem his normal self that afternoon?"

"Totally."

"Did you enter BSL4 together?"

"Yes. Then we went to separate changing rooms, of course."

"When you entered the lab itself, was he already there?"

"Yes, he changed quicker than I did."

"Did you work alongside him?"

"No. I was in a side lab, dealing with tissue cultures. He was checking on the animals."

"Did you leave together?"

"He went a few minutes before I did."

"It sounds to me as if he could have accessed the vault without your knowing about

it.”

“Easily.”

“What’s your impression of Michael?”

“He’s all right...inoffensive, I suppose.”

“Yeah, that’s a good word for him. Do you know if he has a girlfriend?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you find him attractive?”

“Nice-looking, but not sexy.”

Toni smiled. “Exactly. Anything odd about him, in your experience?”

“No.”

Toni sensed a hesitation, and remained silent, giving the other woman time. Beside her, Elliot was speaking to someone, asking for Michael Ross or his mother.

After a moment, Monica said: “I mean, the fact that someone lives alone doesn’t make them a nutcase, does it?”

Beside Toni, Elliot was saying into the phone: “How very strange. I’m sorry to have troubled you so late at night.”

Toni’s curiosity was pricked by what she could hear of Elliot’s conversation. She ended her call, saying: “Thanks again, Monica. I hope you get back to sleep all right.”

“My husband’s a family doctor,” she said. “We’re used to phone calls in the middle of the night.”

Toni hung up. “Michael Ross had plenty of time to open the vault,” she said. “And he lives alone.” She looked at Elliot. “Did you reach his mother’s house?”

“It’s an old folks’ home,” Elliot said. He looked frightened. “And Mrs Ross died last

winter.”

“Oh, shit,” said Toni.

3 a.m.

Powerful security lights lit up the towers and gables of the Kremlin. The temperature was five below zero, but the sky was clear and there was no snow. The building faced a Victorian garden, with mature trees and shrubs. A three-quarter moon shed a grey light on naked nymphs sporting in dry fountains while stone dragons stood guard.

The silence ~~of the night~~ was shattered by the roar of engines as two vans drove out of the garage. Both were marked with the international biohazard symbol, four broken black circles on a vivid yellow background. The guard at the gatehouse had the barrier up already. They drove out and turned south, going dangerously fast. Toni Gallo was at the wheel of the lead vehicle, driving as if it were her Porsche, using the full width of the road, racing the engine, powering through bends. She feared she was too late.

In the van with Toni were three men trained in decontamination. The ~~ambulance~~ ^{second van} ~~behind~~ was a mobile isolation unit with a paramedic at the wheel and a doctor, Ruth Solomons, ~~beside him.~~ ^{in the passenger seat.}

Toni was afraid she might be wrong, but terrified she might be right.

~~She could easily be wrong.~~ She had activated a red alert on the basis of nothing but suspicion. The drug might have been used legitimately by a scientist who just forgot to make the appropriate entry in the log, as Howard McAlpine believed. Michael Ross might simply

have extended his holiday without permission; and the story about his mother might have been no more than a misunderstanding. In that case, someone was sure to say that Toni had overreacted—like a typical hysterical woman, James Elliot would add. She might find Michael Ross safely asleep in bed with his phone turned off, and she winced to think what she would then say to her boss, Stanley Oxenford, in the morning.

But it would be much worse if she turned out to be right.

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An employee was absent without leave; he had lied about where he was going; and supplies from the vault ^{were} ~~had gone~~ missing. There were two reasons why someone would steal the experimental anti-viral drug. One was to sell it. It might be hugely valuable to a competitor company. The other was to use it. Michael Ross might have planned to do something that put him at risk of catching a virus. The drug was still in the trial stage, and was not effective against all viruses, but he would have figured it was better than nothing.

Whatever he was up to, he had wanted to make sure no one called at his house for a couple of weeks; and so he had pretended he was going to Devon, to visit a mother who was no longer alive.

Monica Ansari had said: “The fact that someone lives alone doesn’t make them a nutcase, does it?” It was one of those statements that meant the opposite of what it said. The biochemist had sensed something odd about Michael even though, as a rational scientist, she hesitated to rely on mere intuition.

Toni believed that intuition should never be ignored.

She could hardly bear to think of the consequences if the virus had escaped. It was highly infectious, spreading fast through coughs and sneezes. And it was fatal.

The road was deserted and it took only twenty minutes to reach Michael Ross’s

isolated home. The entrance was not clearly marked, but Toni remembered it. She turned into a short drive that led to a low stone cottage behind a garden wall. The place was dark. Lucy stopped the van next to a Volkswagen Golf, presumably Michael's. She sounded her horn long and loud.

Nothing happened. No lights came on, no one opened a door or window. Lucy turned off the engine. ~~Silence.~~

If Michael had gone away, why was his car here?

"Bunny suits, please, gentlemen," she said.

They all climbed into orange space suits, including the medical team from the second van. It was an awkward business, Toni found. The suit was made of a heavy plastic that did not easily yield or fold. It closed with an airtight zip. They helped each other attach the gloves to the wrists with duct tape. Finally they worked the plastic feet of the suits into rubber overboots.

The suits were completely sealed. The wearer breathed through a HEPA filter—a High Efficiency Particulate Air filter—with an electric fan powered by a battery pack worn on the suit belt. The filter would keep out any breathable particles that might carry germs or ~~viruses~~ viruses. ~~It also took out all but the strongest smells.~~ The fan made a constant shushing noise that some people found oppressive. A headset in the helmet enabled them to speak to one another and to the switchboard at the Kremlin over a secure scrambled radio channel.

When they were ready, Toni looked again at the house. If someone glanced out of a window now, and saw seven people in orange space suits, he would think UFO aliens were real.

If there was someone in there, he was not looking out of any windows.

"I'll go first," Toni said.

She went up to the front door, walking stiffly in the clumsy plastic suit. She rang the bell and banged the knocker. ~~She waited~~ ^{After} a few moments, ~~then~~ ^{she} went around the building to the back. There was a neat garden with a wooden shed. ~~Toni could see into the kitchen by moonlight.~~ She found the ^{Kitchen} door unlocked, and stepped inside. She remembered ~~standing in the~~ ^{waiting there} ~~kitchen with Michael~~ while ~~he~~ made tea. She walked quickly through the house, turning on lights. The Rembrandts were still on the living room wall. The place was clean, tidy and empty.

She spoke to the others over the headset. "No one home." She could hear the dejected tone of her own voice.

Why had he left his house unlocked? Perhaps he was never coming back.

This was a blow. If Michael had been here, the mystery could have been solved quickly. Now there would have to be a search. He might be anywhere in the world. There was no knowing how long it would take to find him—days, perhaps weeks.

She went back out into the garden. To be thorough, she tried the door of the garden shed. It, too, was unlocked. When she opened it, she caught the trace of a smell, unpleasant but vaguely familiar. It must be very strong, she realized, to penetrate the suit's filter. Blood, she thought. The shed smelled like a slaughterhouse. She murmured: "Oh, my god."

Ruth Solomons, the doctor, heard her and said: "What is it?"

"Just a minute." The inside of the little wooden building was black: there were no windows. She fumbled in the dark and found a switch. When the light came on, she cried out in shock.

~~The others all spoke at once, asking what was wrong.~~

“Come quickly!” she said. “To the garden shed. Ruth first.”

Michael Ross lay on the floor, face up. He was bleeding from every orifice: eyes, nose, mouth, ears. Blood pooled around him on the plank floor. Toni did not need the doctor to tell her that Michael was suffering from a massive multiple haemorrhage—a classic symptom of Madoba-2, ~~and similar infections. He was very dangerous,~~ his body an unexploded bomb ~~full of the deadly virus.~~ ^{still} But he was alive, ^{moved} His chest ~~went~~ up and down, and a weak bubbling sound came from his mouth. She bent down, kneeling in the sticky puddle of fresh blood, and looked closely at him. “Michael!” she said, shouting to be heard through the plastic of her helmet. “It’s Toni Gallo from the lab!”

There was a flicker of intelligence in his ~~red~~ ^{blood shot} eyes. He opened his mouth and mumbled something.

“What?” she shouted. She leaned closer.

“No cure,” he said. Then he vomited. A jet of black fluid exploded from his mouth, splashing Toni’s faceplate. She ~~jerked back and~~ cried out in alarm, even though she knew she was protected by the suit. ^{The she was in}

~~She felt herself pushed aside. She wiped her faceplate with her sleeve and saw Ruth~~ ^{bent} and Solomons ~~bending~~ over Michael.

“The pulse is very weak,” the doctor said over the headset. She opened Michael’s mouth and used her gloved fingers to clear some of the blood and vomit from his throat. “I need a laryngoscope—fast!” Seconds later, a paramedic rushed in with the implement. Ruth pushed it into Michael’s mouth, clearing his throat so that he could breathe more easily. “Bring the isolation stretcher, quick as you can.” She opened her medical case and took out a syringe already loaded—with ~~either~~ ^{and} morphine ^{or} a blood coagulant, ~~Toni assumed, or~~

~~perhaps both~~. Ruth pushed the needle into Michael's neck and depressed the plunger. When she pulled the syringe out, Michael bled copiously from the small hole.

"Okay," Ruth said. "Let's get him out of here."

Two paramedics picked Michael up. ~~Outside the shed stood~~ ^{and carried him to} a gurney bearing a ~~stretcher~~ enclosed in a transparent plastic tent. They slid the patient through a porthole in one end of the tent, then sealed it. ~~They wheeled the isolation stretcher across Michael's garden.~~

Before getting into the ambulance, they now had to decontaminate themselves ~~and the stretcher~~. One of Toni's team had already got out a shallow plastic tub like a children's paddling pool. Now Dr Solomons and the paramedics took ~~in~~ ^{ing} turns to stand in the tub and be sprayed with a powerful disinfectant that destroyed any virus by oxidising its protein.

Toni watched, aware that every second's delay made it less likely that Michael would survive, ^{but} knowing that the decontamination procedure had to be followed rigorously to prevent other deaths. She felt distraught that a deadly virus had escaped from her laboratory. It had never occurred before in the history of Oxenford Medical. The fact that she had been right to make such a fuss about the missing drugs, and her colleagues had been wrong to play it down, was small consolation. Her job was to prevent this happening, and she had failed. ~~Would poor Michael die in consequence? Would others die?~~

The paramedics loaded the stretcher into the ambulance. Dr Solomons jumped into the back with the patient. They slammed the doors and roared off into the night.

Toni said: "Let me know what happens, Ruth. You can phone me on this headset."

Ruth's voice was already weakening with distance. "He's gone into a coma," she said. She added something else, but she was out of range, and her words became indistinguishable, then faded away altogether.

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~~Toni shook herself to get rid of her gloomy torpor. There was work to be done.~~ “Let’s clean up,” ^{Toni} ~~she~~ said,

One of the men took a roll of yellow tape that read: “Biohazard—do not cross line” and began to run it around the entire property, ^{including} ~~house and shed and garden, and around~~ Michael’s car. It was a blessing that there were no other houses near enough to worry about. If Michael had lived in a block of flats with communal air vents, it might already be too late for decontamination.

The others got out plastic garden sprayers already filled with disinfectant, boxes of cleaning cloths, garbage bags, and large white plastic drums. Every surface had to be sprayed and wiped down. Hard objects and precious possessions such as jewellery would be sealed in the drums and taken to the Kremlin to be sterilized by high-pressure steam in an autoclave. Everything else would be double-bagged and destroyed in the medical incinerator underneath the BSL4 lab.

Toni got one of the men to help her wipe Michael’s black vomit off her suit and spray her. She had to repress an urge to tear the defiled suit off her body.

While the men cleaned up, she looked around, searching for clues as to why this happened. In the shed there was a glass case with an air extractor, rather like an improvised biosafety cabinet. She had hardly looked at it before, because she was concentrating on Michael, but now she saw that there was a dead rabbit in the case. It looked as if it had died of the illness that had infected Michael. Had it come from the laboratory?

Beside it was a water bowl labelled “Joe”. That was significant. Laboratory staff rarely named the creatures they worked with. They were kind to the subjects of their experiments, but they did not allow themselves to become attached to animals that were

going to be killed. However, Michael had given this creature an identity, and treated it as a pet. Did he feel guilty about his work?

She stepped outside. A police patrol car was drawing up alongside the biohazard van. Toni had been expecting them. In accordance with the Critical Incident Response Plan that Toni herself had devised, ~~her~~^{the} security guards at the Kremlin had automatically phoned regional police headquarters at Inverburn to notify them of a Red Alert. Now they were coming to find out how real the crisis was.

Toni had been a police officer herself, all her working life, until two years ago. For most of her career, she had been a golden girl—promoted rapidly, shown off to the media as the new style of modern cop, and tipped to be Scotland's first woman chief constable. Then she had clashed with her boss over a hot-button issue, racism in the force. He maintained that police racism was not institutionalised. She said that officers routinely concealed racist incidents, and that amounted to institutionalisation. The row had been leaked to a newspaper, she had refused to deny what she believed, and she had been forced to resign. ~~Bada boom.~~

At the time she had been living with Frank Hackett, another detective. They had been together eight years, although they had never married. ~~But~~^{When} she fell out of favour, he left her. It still hurt when she thought about it.

Two young officers got out of the patrol car, a man and a woman. Toni knew most local police of her own generation, and some of the older ones remembered her late father, Sergeant Antonio Gallo, inevitably called Spanish Tony. However, she did not recognise these two. Over the headset, she said: "Jonathan, the police have arrived. Would you please decontaminate and talk to them? Just say we have confirmed the escape of a virus from the lab. They'll call Jim Kincaid, and I'll brief him when he gets here."

Superintendent Kincaid was responsible for what they called CBRN—chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents. He had worked with Toni on her plan. The two of them would implement a careful, low-key response to this incident.

By the time Kincaid arrived, she would like to have some information to give him about Michael Ross. She went into the house. Michael had turned the second bedroom into his study. On a side table were three framed photographs of the same woman at different ages: as a slim teenager in a tight sweater; as a mother, holding a baby that looked like Michael; and in her sixties, with a fat black-and-white cat in her lap. ~~Michael must have been very attached to his mother, Toni thought.~~ said

Still in her biohazard suit, she sat at his desk and read his emails. He had ordered a book called *Animal Ethics* from Amazon. He had also inquired about university courses in moral philosophy. She checked his internet browser, and found he had recently visited animal-rights web sites. Clearly, he had become troubled about the morality of his work. But it seemed no one at Oxenford Medical had realised that he was unhappy.

Toni sympathised with him. Every time she saw a beagle or a hamster lying in a cage, deliberately made ill by a disease the scientists were studying, she felt a tug of pity. But then she remembered her father's death. He had suffered a brain tumour in his fifties, and he had died bewildered, humiliated and in pain. His condition might one day be curable thanks to research on monkey brains. Animal research was a sad necessity, in her opinion.

Michael kept his papers in a cardboard filing box, neatly labelled: Bills, Guarantees, Bank Statements, Instruction Manuals. Under Memberships, Toni found an acknowledgement of his subscription to an organisation called Animals Are Free. The picture was becoming clear.

She realised that she was ~~enjoying herself~~, despite her anxiety. She had always been good at detective work. Being forced out of the police had been a bitter blow. It felt good to use her old skills, and know that she still had the talent.

She found Michael's address book and his appointments diary in a drawer. The diary showed nothing for last two weeks. As she was opening the address book, a blue flash caught her eye through the window, and she looked out to see a grey Volvo saloon with a police light on its roof. That would be Jim Kincaid.

She went outside and got one of the team to decontaminate her. Then she took off her helmet to talk to the Superintendent. However, the man in the Volvo was not Jim. When ~~he~~ ^{caught} ~~turned~~ his face ~~to~~ the moonlight, Toni saw that it was Superintendent Frank Hackett—her ex. Her heart sank. ~~She hated seeing Frank.~~ Although he was the one who had left, he always acted as if he had been the injured party.

She resolved to be calm, friendly and businesslike.

He got out of the car and came towards her. She said: "Please don't cross the line—I'll come out." She realised right away she had made an error of tact. He was the police officer and she was the civilian—he would feel that he should be giving orders to her, not the other way around. The frown that crossed his face showed her that he had felt the slight. Trying to be more friendly, she said: "How are you, Frank?"

"What's going on here?"

"A technician from the lab appears to have caught a virus. We've just taken him away in an isolation ambulance. Now we're decontaminating his house. Where's Jim Kincaid?"

"He's on holiday."

"Where?" Toni hoped Jim might be reached and brought back for this emergency.

“Portugal. He and his wife have a ~~was~~ time-share.”

A pity, Toni thought. Kincaid knew about biohazards, but Frank did not.

Reading her mind, Frank said: “Don’t worry.” He had in his hand a photocopied document an inch thick. “I’ve got the protocol here.” It was the plan Toni had agreed with Kincaid. Frank had obviously been reading it in the car while waiting for her, ~~to be~~ ~~decontaminated~~. “My first duty is to secure the area.” He looked around.

Toni had already secured the area, but she said nothing. Frank needed to assert himself.

He called out to the two uniformed officers in the patrol car. “You two! Move that car to the entrance of the driveway, and don’t let anyone by without asking me.”

“Good idea,” Toni said, though in truth it made no difference to anything.

Frank was referring to the document. “Then we have to make sure no one leaves the scene.”

Toni nodded. “There’s no one here but my team, all in biohazard suits.”

“I don’t like this protocol—it puts civilians in charge of a crime scene.”

“What makes you think this is a crime scene?”

“Samples of a drug were stolen.”

“Not from here.”

Frank let that pass. “How did your man catch the virus, anyway? You all wear those suits in the laboratory, don’t you?”

“The local health board ^{has to} ~~must~~ figure that out,” Toni said, prevaricating. “There’s no point in speculation.”

“Were there any animals here when you arrived?”

Toni hesitated.

That was enough for Frank, who was a good detective because he did not miss much.

“So an animal got out of the lab and infected the technician when he wasn’t wearing a suit?”

“I don’t know what happened, and I don’t want half-baked theories ~~getting into~~ circulation^{ins.}. Could we concentrate for now on public safety?”

“Aye. But you’re not just worried about the public. You want to protect the company and your precious Professor Oxenford.”

Toni wondered why he said “precious”—but before she could react she heard a chime from her helmet. “I’m getting a phone call,” she said to Frank. “Sorry.” She took the headset out of the helmet and put it on. The chime came again, then there was a hiss as the connection was made, and she heard the voice of a security guard on the switchboard at the Kremlin. “Doctor Solomons is calling Ms Gallo.”

Toni said: “Hello?”

The doctor came on the line. “Michael died, Toni.”

Toni closed her eyes. “Oh, Ruth, I’m so sorry.”

“He would have died even if we’d got to him twenty-four hours earlier. I’m almost certain he had Madoba-2.”

“We did all we could.”

“He seems to have done this to himself. But why, Toni?”

Toni fought back tears. “He was troubled about cruelty to animals. And I think he may have been unbalanced by the death of his mother, a year ago.”

“Poor boy.”

“Ruth, I’ve got the police here. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay.” The connection was broken. Toni took off the headset.

Frank said: “So he died.”

“His name was Michael Ross, and he appears to have contracted a virus called Madoba-2.”

“What kind of animal was it?”

On the spur of the moment, Toni decided to set a little trap for Frank. “A hamster,” she said. “Named Fluffy.”

“Could others have become infected?”

“That’s the number one question. Michael lived here alone; he had no family and few friends. Anyone who visited him before he got sick would be safe, unless they did something highly intimate, ^{or} ~~like~~ ^{ed} sharing a hypodermic needle. Anyone who came here when he was showing symptoms would surely have called a doctor, ~~for him~~. So there’s a good chance ~~he~~ ^{was contained} ~~has not passed~~ the virus ~~on~~.” Toni was playing it down. If she had been talking to Kincaid, she would have been more candid, for she could have trusted him not to start a ^{panic} ~~scare~~. But Frank was different. She finished: “~~But~~ obviously our first priority must be to contact everyone who might have met Michael in the last sixteen days.”

Frank tried a different tack. “I heard you say he was troubled about cruelty to animals. Did he belong to a group?”

“Yes—Animals Are Free.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been checking his personal stuff.”

“That’s a job for the police.”

“I agree. But you can’t go into the house.”

“I could put on a suit.”

“It’s not just the suit, it’s the biohazard training that you have to undergo before you’re allowed to wear one.”

Frank was becoming angry again. “Then bring the stuff out here to me.”

“Why don’t I get one of my team to fax all his papers to you? We could also upload the entire hard disk of his computer.”

“I want the originals! What are you hiding in there?”

“Nothing, I promise you. But everything in the house has to be decontaminated, either with disinfectant or by high-pressure steam. Both processes destroy papers and might well damage a computer.”

“I don’t like this protocol. I’m going to get it changed. I wonder whether the chief constable knows what Kincaid has let you get away with.”

Toni felt weary. It was the middle of the night, she had a major crisis to deal with, and she was being forced to pussyfoot around the feelings of a resentful former lover. “Oh, Frank, for God’s sake—you might be right, but this is what we’ve got, so could we try to forget the past and work as a team?”

“Your idea of teamwork is everyone doing what you say.”

She laughed. “Fair enough. What do you think should be our next move?”

“I’ll inform the health board. They’re the lead agency, according to the protocol. Once they’ve tracked down their designated biohazard consultant, he’ll want to convene a meeting here first thing in the morning. Meanwhile, we should start contacting everyone who might have seen Michael Ross. I’ll get a couple of detectives phoning every number in that address book. I suggest you question every employee at the Kremlin. It would be useful to have that

done by the time we meet with the health board.”

“All right.” Toni hesitated. She had something she had to ask Frank. His best friend was Carl Osborne, a local television reporter who valued sensation more than accuracy. If Carl got hold of this story he would start a riot.

She knew that the way to get something from Frank was to be matter-of-fact, ~~not appearing either assertive or needy~~. “There’s a paragraph in the protocol I’ve got to mention,” she began. “It says that no statements should be made to the press without first being discussed by the main interested parties, including the police, the health board and the company.”

“No problem.”

“The reason I mention it is that this doesn’t need to become a major public scare. The chances are that no one is in danger.”

“Good.”

“We don’t want to hold anything back, but the publicity should be calm and measured. No one needs to panic.”

Frank grinned. “You’re frightened of tabloid stories about killer hamsters roaming the highlands.”

“You owe me, Frank. I hope you remember.”

His face darkened. “I *owe* you?”

She lowered her voice, although there was no one nearby. “You remember Farmer Johnny Kirk.” Kirk had been a big-time cocaine importer. Born in the rough Glasgow neighbourhood of Garscube Road, he had never seen a farm in his life, but got the nickname from the oversize green rubber boots he wore to ease the pain of the corns on his feet. Frank

had put together a case against Farmer Johnny. During the trial, by accident, Toni had come across evidence that would have helped the defence. She had told Frank, but Frank had not informed the court. Johnny was as guilty as sin, and Frank had got a conviction—but, if the truth ever came out, Frank's career would be over.

Now Frank said angrily: "Are you threatening to bring that up again if I don't do what you want?"

"No, just reminding you of a time when you needed me to keep quiet about something, and I did."

His attitude changed again. He had been frightened, for a moment, but now he was his old arrogant self. "We all bend the rules from time to time. That's life."

"Yes. And I'm asking you not to leak this story to your friend Carl Osborne, or anyone else in the media."

Frank grinned. "Why, Toni," he said in a tone of mock indignation. "I never do things like that."

7 a.m.

Kit Oxenford woke early, feeling eager and anxious at the same time. It was a strange sensation.

Today he was going to rob Oxenford Medical.

The idea filled him with excitement. It would be the greatest prank ever. It would be written up in books with titles like “The Perfect Crime”. Even better, it would be revenge on his father. The company would be destroyed, and Stanley Oxenford would be ruined financially. The fact that the old man would never know who had done this to him somehow made it better. It would be a secret gratification that Kit could hug to himself for the rest of his life.

But he was anxious, too. This was unusual. By nature, he was not a worrier. Whatever trouble he was in, he could generally talk his way out. He rarely planned anything. *But*

He had planned today. Perhaps that was his problem.

He lay in bed with his eyes closed, thinking of the obstacles he had to overcome.

First, there was the physical security around the Kremlin: the double row of fencing, the razor wire, the lights, the intruder alarms. Those alarms were protected by tamper switches, shock sensors, and end-of-line circuitry that would detect a short-circuit. The

alarms were directly connected to regional police headquarters at Inverburn via a phone line that was continuously checked by the system to verify that it was operational.

None of that would protect the place against Kit and his collaborators.

Then there were the guards, watching important areas on closed-circuit television cameras, patrolling the premises hourly. Their TV monitors were fitted with high-security biased switches that would detect equipment substitution, for example if the feed from a camera were replaced by a signal from a videotape player.

Kit had thought of a way around that.

Finally there was the elaborate scheme of access control: the plastic credit-card passes, each bearing a photo of the authorised user plus details of the user's fingerprint embedded in a chip.

Defeating this system would be complicated, but Kit knew how to do it.

His degree was in computer science, and he had been top of his class, but he had an even more important advantage. He had designed the software that controlled the entire security set-up at the Kremlin. It was his baby. He had done a terrific job for his ungrateful father, and the system was virtually impenetrable to an outsider, but Kit knew its secrets.

At around midnight tonight, he would walk into the holy of holies, the BSL4 laboratory, the most secure location in Scotland. With him would be his client, a quietly menacing Londoner called Nigel Buchanan, and two ^{other} collaborators. Once there, Kit would open the refrigerated vault with a simple four-digit code. Then Nigel would steal samples of Stanley Oxenford's precious new antiviral drug.

They would not keep the samples long. Nigel had a strict deadline. He had to hand over the samples by ten o'clock tomorrow morning, Christmas Day. Kit did not know the

reason for the deadline. He did not know who the customer was, either, but he could guess. It had to be one of the pharmaceuticals multinationals. Having a sample to analyse would save years of research. The company would be able to make its own version of the drug, instead of paying Oxenford millions in licensing fees.

It was dishonest, of course, but men found excuses for dishonesty when the stakes were high. Kit could picture the company's distinguished chairman, with his silver hair and pinstriped suit, saying hypocritically: "Can you assure me that no employee of our organisation broke any laws in obtaining this sample?"

The best part of Kit's plan, he felt, was that the intrusion would go unnoticed until long after he and Nigel had left the Kremlin. Today, Tuesday, was Christmas Eve. Tomorrow and the next day were holidays. At the earliest, the alarm might be sounded on Friday, when one or two eager-beaver scientists would show up for work; but there was a good chance the theft would not be spotted then or at the weekend, giving Kit and the gang until Monday of next week to cover their tracks. It was more than they needed.

So why was he frightened? The face of Toni Gallo, his father's security chief, came into his mind. She was a freckled redhead, very attractive in a muscular sort of way, though too formidable a personality for Kit's taste. Was she the reason for his fear? Once before he had underestimated her—with disastrous results.

But his plan was brilliant. "Brilliant," he said aloud, trying to convince himself.

"What is?" said a female voice beside him.

He grunted in surprise. He had forgotten that he was not alone. He opened his eyes. The apartment was pitch dark.

"What's brilliant?" she repeated.

"The way you dance," he said, improvising. He had met her in a club last night.

"You're not bad yourself," she said in a strong Glasgow accent. "~~Nifty footwork.~~"

He racked his brains for her name. "Maureen," he said. She must be Catholic, with a name like that. He rolled over and put his arm around her, trying to remember what she looked like. She felt nicely rounded. He liked girls not too thin. ~~She moved towards him willingly. Blonde or brunette? he wondered. It might be interestingly kinky to have sex with a girl not knowing what she looked like.~~ He was reaching for her breasts when he remembered what he had to do today, ~~and his amorousness evaporated.~~ "What's the time?" he said.

"Time for a wee shag," Maureen ^{said} ~~said eagerly.~~

Kit rolled away from her. The digital clock on the hi-fi said 07:30. "Got to get up," he ~~said~~ "Busy day." He wanted to be at his father's house in time for lunch. He was going there ostensibly for the Christmas holiday, actually to steal something he needed for tonight's robbery.

"How can you be busy on Christmas Eve?"

"Maybe I'm Santa Claus." He sat on the edge of the bed and switched on the light.

Maureen was disappointed. "Well, this wee elf is going to have a lie in, if that's all right with Santa," she said grumpily.

He glanced at her, but she had pulled the duvet over her head. He still ~~did not know~~ ^{couldn't} ~~remember her name or what she looked like.~~

He walked naked to the kitchen and started making coffee.

His loft was divided into two big spaces. There was a living room, with open kitchen, and a bedroom beyond. The living room was full of electronic gear: a big flat-screen television, an elaborate sound system, and a stack of computers and accessories connected by

a jungle of cables. Kit had always enjoyed picking the locks of other people's computer defences. The only way to become an expert in software security was to be a hacker first.

While he was working for his father, designing and installing protection for the BSL4 laboratory, he had pulled off one of his best scams. With the help of Ronnie Sutherland, then head of security, ~~for Oxford Medical~~, he had devised a way of skimming money from the company. He had rigged the accounting software so that, in summing a series of suppliers' invoices, the computer simply added one per cent to the total, then transferred the one per cent to Ronnie's bank account in a transaction that did not appear on any report. The scam relied on no one checking the computer's arithmetic—and no one had, until one day Toni Gallo had seen Ronnie's wife parking a new Mercedes coupé outside Marks & Spencer's in Inverburn.

Kit had been astonished and frightened by the dogged persistence with which Toni had investigated. There was a discrepancy, and she had to have the explanation. She just never gave up. Worse, when she figured out what was going on, nothing in the world would prevent her from telling the boss, Kit's father. He had pleaded with her not to bring anguish to an old man. He had tried to convince her that Stanley Oxenford ~~in his rage~~ would fire her, not Kit. Finally he had rested a hand lightly on her hip, given her his best naughty-boy grin, and said ~~in a come-to-bed voice~~: "You and I should be friends, not enemies." None of it had worked.

Kit had not found employment since being fired by his father. Unfortunately, he had continued to gamble. Ronnie had introduced him to an illegal casino where he was able to get credit, doubtless because his father was a famous millionaire scientist. He tried not to think of how much money he now owed: the figure made him sick with fear and self-~~disgust~~ ^{loathing} ~~and he~~.

~~just wanted to throw himself off the Forth Bridge.~~ But his reward for tonight's work would pay off the entire sum and give him a fresh start.

He took his coffee into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. At one time he had been in the British team for the Winter Olympics, and he had spent every weekend either skiing or training. Then, he had been as lean and fit as a greyhound. Now he saw a little softness in his outline. "You're putting on weight," he said. But he still had thick black hair that flopped over his forehead, adorably. His face looked strained. He tried his Hugh Grant expression, ~~head down bashfully~~, looking up ^{bashfully} ~~out of the corners of his blue eyes~~ with a winning smile. Yes, he could still do it. Toni Gallo might be immune, but Maureen had fallen for it only last night.

While shaving he turned on the bathroom TV and got a local news programme. The British Prime Minister had arrived in his Scottish constituency for Christmas. Glasgow Rangers had paid nine million pounds for a striker called Giovanni Santangelo. "There's a good old Scots name," Kit said to himself. The weather was going to continue cold but clear. A fierce blizzard in the Norwegian Sea was drifting south, but was expected to pass to the west of Scotland. Then came a local news story that froze Kit's blood.

He heard the familiar voice of Carl Osborne, a Scottish television celebrity with a reputation for lurid reports. Glancing at the screen, Kit saw the very building he was planning to rob ~~tonight~~. Osborne was broadcasting from outside the gates of Oxenford Medical. It was still dark, but powerful security lights illuminated the ornate Victorian architecture. "What the hell is this?" Kit said worriedly.

Osborne said: "Scientists experiment with some of the most dangerous viruses in the world right here in Scotland, in the building behind me, dubbed 'Frankenstein's Castle' by

local people.”

Kit had never heard anyone call it “Frankenstein’s Castle”. Osborne was making that up. Its nickname was the Kremlin.

“But today, in what seems to some observers to be Nature’s retribution for Mankind’s meddling, a young technician died of one of these viruses.”

Kit put down his razor. This would be woundingly bad publicity ^{for his father} ~~for Oxenford~~ Medical, ~~he realised immediately~~. Normally, he would have ^{been} gloated ^{in a} ~~at his father’s trouble~~, but today he was more worried about the effect of such publicity on his own plans.

“Michael Ross, thirty-one, was struck down by a virus called Ebola, after the African village where it germinated. This agonising affliction causes painful, suppurating boils all over the victim’s body.”

Kit was pretty sure Osborne was getting the facts wrong, but his audience would not know. This was tabloid television. But would the death of Michael Ross jeopardize Kit’s planned robbery?

“Oxenford Medical has always claimed its research poses no threat to local people or the surrounding countryside, but the death of Michael Ross throws that claim into serious doubt.”

Osborne was wearing a bulky anorak and a woolly hat, and he looked as if he had not slept much last night. Someone had woken him up in the early hours of the morning with a tip-off, Kit guessed.

“Ross may have been bitten by an animal he stole from the laboratory here and took to his home a few miles away,” Osborne went on.

“Oh, no,” said Kit. This was getting worse and worse. ~~Surely he was not going to be~~

~~forced to abandon his grand scheme? It would be too much to bear.~~

“Did Michael Ross work alone, or was he part of a larger group that may attempt to free more plague-carrying animals from Oxenford Medical’s secret laboratories? Do we face the prospect of innocent-seeming dogs and rabbits roaming free over the Scottish landscape, spreading the lethal virus wherever they go? No one here is prepared to say.”

Whatever they might or might not say, Kit knew what the people at the Kremlin were doing: upgrading their security as fast as they could. Toni Gallo would be there already, tightening up procedures, checking alarms and cameras, briefing the security guards. It was the worst possible news for Kit. ~~He was enraged. “Why do I have such bad luck?” he said~~
~~aloud.~~

“Be that as it may,” ~~said~~ ^{was saying,} Carl Osborne, “Michael Ross appears to have died for love of a hamster named Fluffy.” His tone was so tragic that Kit half expected the reporter to wipe a tear from his eye, but Osborne stopped short of that.

The studio anchor, an attractive blonde ~~with carved hair,~~ ^{interrupted} now said: “Carl, has Oxenford Medical made any comment at all on this extraordinary incident?”

“Yes.” Carl looked at a notebook. “They say they are saddened and distressed by the death of Michael Ross, but the indications are that nobody else will be affected by the virus. Nevertheless, they would like to speak to anyone who has seen Ross in the past sixteen days.”

“Presumably, people who have been in contact with him may have picked up the virus.”

“Yes, and perhaps infected others. So the company’s statement that no one else is affected seems more like a pious hope than a scientific prediction.”

“A very worrying story,” the anchor said to camera. “Carl Osborne with that report.

And now football.”

In a fury, Kit stabbed at the remote control, trying to turn off the television, but he was too agitated, and kept pressing the wrong buttons. In the end he grabbed the lead and yanked the plug out of its socket. ~~He was tempted to throw the set through the window.~~ This was a catastrophe.

Osborne’s doomsday forecast about the virus spreading might not be true, but the one sure consequence was that security at the Kremlin would be watertight. Tonight was the worst possible time to try to rob the place. Kit would have to call it off. He was a gambler: if he had a good hand, he was willing to bet the farm, but he knew that when the cards were against him it was best to fold.

At least I won’t have to spend Christmas with my father, he thought sourly.

Maybe they could do the job some other time, when the excitement had died down, and security had returned to its normal level. Perhaps the customer could be persuaded to postpone his deadline. Kit shuddered when he thought of his enormous debt ~~remaining~~ ~~unpaid.~~ But there was no point in going ahead when failure was so likely.

He ~~went out of~~ ^{left} the bathroom. The clock on the hi-fi said 07:28. It was early to telephone, but this was urgent. He picked up the handset and dialled.

The call was answered immediately. A man’s voice said simply: “Yes?”

“This is Kit. Is he in?”

“What do you want?”

“I need to speak to him. It’s important.”

“He’s not up yet.”

“Shit.” Kit did not want to leave a message. And, on reflection, he did not want

Maureen to hear what he had to say. "Tell him I'm coming round," he said. He hung up
without waiting for a reply.

7.30 a.m.

Toni Gallo thought she would be out of work by lunchtime.

She looked around her office. She had not been here long. She had only just begun to make the place her own. On the desk was a photograph of her with her mother and her sister, Bella, taken a few years ago when Mother was in good health. Beside it was her battered old dictionary—she had never been able to spell. Just last week she had hung on the wall a picture of herself in her police constable's uniform, taken seventeen years ago, looking young and eager.

She could hardly believe she had already lost this job.

She now knew what Michael Ross had done. He had devised a clever and elaborate way of getting around all her security precautions. He had found the weaknesses and exploited them. There was no one to blame but herself.

She had not known this two hours ago, when she had phoned Stanley Oxenford, chairman and majority shareholder in Oxenford Medical, and told him about ^{Michael's} ~~the~~ death of ~~Michael.~~

She had been dreading the call. She had to give him the worst possible news, and take the blame. She steeled herself for his disappointment, ~~indignation, or perhaps rage.~~

The first thing he had said was: "Are you all right?"

She almost cried. She had not anticipated that his first thought would be for her welfare. She did not deserve such kindness. "I'm fine," she ~~had~~ said. "~~We all put on bunny suits before we went into the house.~~"

"But you must be exhausted."

"I snatched an hour's sleep at around five."

"Good," Stanley said, and briskly moved on. "I know Michael Ross. Quiet chap, about thirty, been with us for a few years—an experienced technician. How the hell did this happen?"

"I found a dead rabbit in his garden shed. I think he brought home a laboratory animal and it bit him."

"I doubt it," Stanley said crisply. "More likely he cut himself with a contaminated knife. Even experienced people may get careless. The rabbit is probably a ^{NAST} ~~normal~~ pet that starved after Michael fell ill."

Toni wished she could pretend to believe that, but she had to give her boss the facts. "The rabbit was in an improvised biosafety cabinet," she argued.

"I still doubt it. Michael can't have been working alone, in BSL4. Even if his buddy wasn't looking, there are television cameras in every room—he couldn't have stolen a rabbit without being seen on the monitors. Then he had to pass several security guards on the way out—they would have noticed if he were carrying ~~a rabbit~~. ^{an animal. And even if he could it have} ~~Finally~~, the scientists working in the lab the following morning would have realised immediately that an animal was missing. They might not be able to tell the difference between one rabbit and another, but they certainly know how many there are in the experiment."

smuggled out

Early though it was, his brain had fired up like the V12 engine in his Ferrari, Toni

thought. But he was wrong. "I put all those security barriers in place," she said. "And I'm telling you that no system is perfect."

"You're right, of course." If you gave him good arguments, he could back down alarmingly fast. "I presume we have video footage of the last time Michael was in BSL4?"

"Next thing on my check list."

"I'll be there at about eight. Have some answers for me then, please."

"One more thing. As soon as the staff begin arriving, rumours will spread. May I tell people that you'll be making an announcement?"

"Good point. I'll speak to everyone in the Great Hall at, say, nine-thirty." The grand entrance hall of the old house was the biggest room in the building, always used for large meetings.

Toni had then summoned Susan Mackintosh, one of the security guards, a pretty girl in her twenties with a boyish haircut and a pierced eyebrow. Susan immediately noticed the picture on the wall. "You look good in a uniform," she said.

"Thanks. I realise you're due to go off duty, but I need a woman for this job."

Susan raised an eyebrow flirtatiously. "I know the feeling."

Toni recalled the company Christmas party, last Friday. Susan had dressed like John Travolta in the movie "Grease", with slicked hair, drainpipe jeans, and the kind of crepe-soled shoes known in Glasgow as brothel creepers. She had asked Toni to dance. Toni had smiled warmly and said: "I don't think so." A little later, after a few more drinks, Susan had asked her if she slept with men. "Not as much as I'd like," Toni had said.

Now she ignored Susan's glance and said,
~~Toni was flattered that someone so young and pretty was attracted to her, but she~~
~~pretended not to notice.~~ "I need you to stop all employees as they arrive. Set up a desk in the

Great Hall, and don't let them go to their offices or labs until you've spoken to them."

"What should I say?"

"Tell them there's been a virus security breach, and Professor Oxenford is going to give them a full briefing this morning. Be calm and reassuring, but don't go into detail—best leave that to Stanley."

"Okay."

"Then ask them when they last saw Michael Ross. Some will have been asked that question over the phone last night, but only those certified for BSL4, and it does no harm to double check. If anyone has seen him since he left here on Sunday two weeks ago, tell me immediately."

"Okay."

Toni ~~had a slightly delicate question to ask, and she~~ ^{asked,} hesitated, then ~~decided just to~~
~~come out with it.~~ "Do you think Michael was gay?"

"Not actively."

"Are you sure?"

"Inverburn is a small town. There are two gay pubs, a club, a couple of restaurants, a church...I know all those places and I've never seen him in any of them."

"Okay. I hope you don't mind my assuming you'd know, just because...."

"It's all right." Susan smiled and gave Toni a direct look. "You'll have to work harder than that to offend me."

"Thanks."

That was almost two hours ago. Toni had spent most of the time since then viewing video footage of Michael Ross on his last visit to BSL4. She now had the answers Stanley

after she found wanted. ~~She was going to tell~~ him what had happened, ~~and then~~ he would probably ask for her resignation.

She recalled her first meeting with Stanley. She had been at the lowest point of her entire life. She had been forced to quit the police force, ~~a job she loved~~ ^{and} she was pretending to be a freelance security consultant, but she had no clients. Her partner of eight years, Frank, had left her. And her mother ~~had started to become~~ ^{was becoming} senile. Toni had felt like Job after he was forsaken by God.

Stanley had summoned her to his office and offered her a short-term contract. He had invented a drug so valuable that he feared he might be the target of industrial espionage. He wanted her to check. She had not told him it was her first real assignment.

After combing the premises for listening devices, she had looked for signs that key employees were living above their means. No one was spying on Oxenford Medical, as it turned out—but, to her dismay, she had discovered that Stanley's son, Kit, was stealing from the company.

Kit had tried to persuade her to hush it up. He told her that Stanley would never believe her, indeed would punish her for the allegation by making sure she never got hired by any business in the country. She had taken the threat seriously: it would have been a natural reaction, unjust but human. Kit promised never to do it again if Toni would keep quiet this time. She had been tempted: she did not want to risk the wrath of the only man in Scotland who had been willing to give her a job. But it would have been dishonest.

So, in the end, ~~and with great trepidation~~ she had told Stanley everything.

It had been the right decision. Her integrity had been rewarded. Stanley had fired Kit and given Toni a full-time job. For that, ~~she would always owe him her iron loyalty~~. She was

fiercely determined to repay his trust.

And life had improved. Stanley quickly promoted her from Head of Security to Facilities Manager and gave her a raise. She bought a red Porsche.

When she mentioned, one day, that she had played squash for the national police team, Stanley challenged her to a game on the company court. She beat him, but only just, and they began to play every week. He was very fit, and had a longer reach, but she was twenty years younger, with hair-trigger reflexes. He took a game from her now and again, when her concentration slipped, but in the end she usually won.

And she got to know him better. He played a shrewd game, occasionally taking risks that often paid off. He was competitive, but good-humoured about losing. Her quick mind was a match for his brain, and she enjoyed the cut-and-thrust. The more she got to know him, the better she liked him. Until, one day, she realised that she did not just like him. It was more than that.

Now she felt that the worst part of losing this job would be not seeing him any longer.

She was about to head down to the Great Hall, to meet him on his way in, when her phone rang.

A woman's voice with a southern English accent said: "This is Odette."

"Hi!" Toni was pleased. Odette Cressy was a detective with the Metropolitan Police in London. They had met on a course at Hendon five years ago. They were the same age. Odette was single and, since Toni had split up with Frank, they had been on holiday together twice. Had they not lived so far apart, they would have been best friends. As it was, they spoke on the phone every couple of weeks. Now Toni said: ~~"How's Mr Pants?" She knew~~ that Odette was dating a handsome actor who was unusually well hung.

~~"As you've~~ *probably heard,* " we have an *emergency* here.

*This is a letter
under the
circumstances
doesn't
make sense
to point*

"A disappointment," Odette said. "No imagination. You know, once he's shown you his monster, he feels he's done his duty. I often find that with well-endowed men, don't you?"

Toni laughed. "I don't have your breadth of experience."

"How are you getting on with your handsome boss?"

Toni had not told anyone how she felt about Stanley, but Odette was telepathic. "I don't believe in sex at work, you know that. Anyway, his wife died recently—"

"Eighteen months ago, as I recall."

"Which is not long after nearly forty years of marriage. And he's devoted to his children and grandchildren, who would probably hate anyone who tried to replace his late wife."

"There's one objection you haven't mentioned."

"What?"

"You don't fancy him."

"Oh, I don't know, he's all right, I suppose; nice-looking, kind—"

"Yeah," Odette said with a sneer. "But how does an old man like that look on the squash court, in shorts?"

"Pretty good, actually, in fact he—"

"Bingo! There it is. You fancy him."

"Odette, please!"

"You know the good thing about sex with an older man? He's so worried about not being young and vigorous that he works twice as hard to please you."

"I'm going to have to take your word for that."

ed

"That's what I'm really about, said Odette who was

50

~~"And what else? Oh, yes, I almost forgot, ha ha, he's rich. Listen, all I'm going to say is this: if you decide you don't want him, I'll have him. Meanwhile, this call is semi-official."~~

~~"Semi?"~~

~~"It's about your virus victim."~~

~~"Why would you be interested?" Odette was on the anti-terrorist team. "I suppose I shouldn't ask."~~

~~"Correct. I'll just say that the name Madoba-2 rang an alarm bell here, and leave you to work it out."~~

Toni frowned. As a former cop, she did not take long to guess what was going on. Odette had intelligence indicating that some group was interested in Madoba-2. A suspect might have mentioned it under interrogation, or the virus had come up in a bugged conversation, or someone whose ^{e-mails} phone lines were being monitored had typed the name into a computer search engine. Now, any time a quantity of the virus went astray, the anti-terrorist unit would suspect that it had been stolen by fanatics. "I don't think Michael Ross was a terrorist," Toni said. "I think he just became attached to a particular laboratory animal."

"What about his friends?"

"I found his address book, and the Inverburn police are checking the names right now."

"Did you keep a copy?"

It was on her desk. "I can fax it to you right away."

"Thanks—it will save me time." Odette recited a number and Toni wrote it down.

"Please call me if there are any developments," Odette said in parting.

Toni hung up and glanced out of the window. Stanley Oxenford's dark-blue Ferrari

was pulling into the chairman's parking space. She put the copy of Michael's address book into the fax machine and dialled Odette's number.

Then, feeling like a criminal about to be sentenced ~~by the judge,~~ she went to meet her boss.

8 a.m.

The Great Hall was like the nave of a church. It had tall arched windows that let in shafts of sunlight to make patterns on the flagstone floor. The room was spanned by the mighty timbers of an open hammer-beam roof. In the middle of this graced space, incongruously, was a modern oval reception desk with high counters. A uniformed security guard sat on a stool inside the oval.

Stanley Oxenford came in through the grand entrance. He was a tall man of sixty with thick grey hair and blue eyes. He did not look the part of a scientist—no bald dome, no stoop, no spectacles. ~~Toni thought he was more like the kind of actor who plays the general in a movie about the second world war.~~ ^{Toni} She liked the way he ~~was~~ always well dressed without seeming stuffy. Today he wore a soft grey tweed suit with a waistcoat, a light blue shirt and—out of respect for the dead, perhaps—a black knitted tie.

Susan Mackintosh had placed a trestle table near the front door. She spoke to Stanley as he ~~walked through the door.~~ ^{came in.} He replied briefly then turned to Toni. “This is a good idea—buttonholing everyone as they arrive and asking when they last saw Michael.”

“Thank you.” ~~I’ve done one thing right, at least, Toni thought.~~

Stanley went on: “What about staff who are on holiday?”

“Personnel will phone them all this morning.”

“Good. Have you found out what happened?”

Unfortunately
 “Yes. I was right and you were wrong. It was the rabbit.”

↑
 Despite the tragic circumstances, he ~~looked faintly amused~~ *smiled.* He liked people to challenge him, especially attractive women. “How do you know?”

“From the video footage. Would you like to see it?”

“Yes.”

They walked along a wide corridor with oak linenfold panelling, then turned down a side passage to the Central Monitoring Station, normally called the control room. This was the security centre. It had once been a billiards room, but the windows had been bricked up ~~for security~~, and the ceiling ~~had been~~ lowered to create a hiding place for a snake’s nest of cabling. One wall was a bank of television monitors showing key areas of the site, including every room within BSL4. On a long desk were touch screens for monitoring alarms. Thousands of electronic control points monitored temperature, humidity, and air management systems in all the laboratories—if you held a door open too long an alarm would sound. A guard in a neat uniform sat at a work station that gave access to the central ~~security~~ computer.

Stanley said in a surprised tone: “This place has been tidied up since last I was here.”

When Toni had taken over security, the control room had been a mess, littered with dirty coffee cups, old newspapers, ~~broken~~ *bikes*, and half-empty Tupperware lunch boxes. Now it was clean and tidy, with nothing on the desk except the file the guard was reading. She was pleased Stanley had noticed.

He glanced into the adjacent equipment room, once the gun room, now full of support devices, including the central processing unit for the phone system. It was brightly lit. Each of a thousand cables was clearly labelled with nonremovable, easy-to-read tags, to minimise

downtime in case of technical failure. ~~Everything was as it should be, Toni knew.~~ Stanley nodded approval.

This was all to the good, Toni felt; but Stanley already knew she was an efficient organiser. The most important part of her job was making sure nothing dangerous escaped ~~from the~~ BSL4 lab—and in that she had failed.

There were times when she did not know what Stanley was thinking, and this was one ^{of them.} Was he grieving for Michael Ross, fearful for the future of his company, or furious about the security breach? Would he turn his wrath on her, ~~or the dead Michael,~~ or Howard McAlpine? When Toni showed him what Michael had done, would Stanley praise her for having figured it out so quickly, or fire her for letting it happen?

They sat side by side in front of a monitor, and Toni tapped the keyboard to bring up the pictures she wanted him to see. The computer's vast memory stored images for twenty-eight days before erasing them. She was intimately familiar with the program and navigated it with ease.

Sitting beside Stanley, she was absurdly reminded of going to the pictures with a boyfriend at the age of fourteen, and allowing him to put his hand up her sweater. The memory embarrassed her, and she felt her neck redden. She hoped Stanley would not notice.

On the monitor, she showed him Michael arriving at the main gate and presenting his pass. "The date and time are on the bottom of the screen," she said. "It was fourteen twenty-seven on the eighth of December. She tapped the keyboard, and the screen showed a green Volkswagen Golf pulling into a ^{parking} space. A slight man got out and took a duffle bag from the back of the car. "Watch that bag," Toni said.

"Why?"

“There’s a rabbit in it.”

“How did he manage that?”

“I guess it’s tranquillised, and probably ~~wrapped up~~ ^{wrapped} tightly. Remember, he’s been dealing with laboratory animals for years. He knows how to keep them calm.”

The next shot showed Michael presenting his pass again at Reception. A pretty Pakistani woman of about forty came into the Great Hall. “That’s Monica Ansari,” said Stanley.

“She was his buddy. She needed to do some work on tissue cultures, and he was performing the routine weekend check on the animals.”

They walked along the corridor Toni and Stanley had taken, but went past the ~~turning~~ ~~for~~ the control room and continued to the door at the end. It looked like all the other doors in the building, with four recessed panels and a brass knob, but it was made of steel. On the wall beside the door was the yellow-and-black warning of the international biohazard symbol.

Dr Ansari waved a plastic pass in front of a remote card reader, then pressed the forefinger of her left hand to a small screen. There was a pause, while the computer checked that her fingerprint matched the information on the microchip embedded in the smart card. This ensured that lost or stolen cards could not be used by unauthorised persons. While she waited, she glanced up at the television camera and gave a mock salute. Then the door opened and she stepped through. Michael followed.

Another camera showed them in a small lobby. A row of dials on the wall monitored the air pressure in the lab. The further you went inside BSL4, the lower the air pressure. This downward gradient ensured that any leakage ~~of air~~ was inward, not outward. From the lobby they went to separate men’s and women’s changing rooms. “This is when he took the rabbit

*I think there
is a better
phrase for
this*

out of the bag,” Toni said. “If his buddy that day had been a man, the plan wouldn’t have worked. But he had Monica and, of course, there are no cameras in the changing rooms.”

“But damn it, you can’t put security cameras in changing rooms,” Stanley said. “No one would work here.”

“Absolutely,” said Toni. “We’ll have to think of something else. Watch this.”

The next shot came from a camera inside the lab. It showed ~~conventional~~^{the} rabbit racks housed in a clear plastic isolation cover. Toni froze the picture. “Could you explain to me what the scientists are doing in this lab, exactly?”

“Of course. Our new drug is effective against many viruses, but not all. In this experiment it was being tested against Madoba-2, a variant of the Ebola virus that causes a lethal haemorrhagic fever in both rabbits and humans. Two groups of rabbits were Challenged with the virus.”

“Challenged?”

“Sorry—it’s the word we use. It means they were infected. Then one group was injected with the drug.”

“What did you find?”

“The drug doesn’t defeat Madoba-2 in rabbits. ~~We’re a bit disappointed.~~ Almost certainly, it won’t cure this type of virus in humans either.”

“But you didn’t know that sixteen days ago.”

“Correct.”

“In that case, I think I understand what Michael was trying to do.” She touched the keyboard ~~to unfreeze the picture.~~^{The picture moved.} A figure stepped into shot wearing a light blue plastic space suit with a clear helmet. He stopped by the door to push his feet into rubber overboots. Then

he reached up and grabbed a curly yellow air hose hanging from the ceiling. He connected it to an inlet on his belt. As air was pumped in, the suit inflated, until ^{he} ~~it~~ looked like the Michelin Man.

“This is Michael,” Toni said. “He changed faster than Monica, so at the moment he’s in there alone.”

“It shouldn’t happen, but it does,” Stanley said. “The two-person rule is observed, but not minute-by-minute. *Merda*.” Stanley often cursed in Italian, having learned a ripe vocabulary from his wife. Toni, who spoke Spanish, usually understood.

On screen Michael went up to the rabbit rack, moving with deliberate slowness in the awkward costume. His back was to the camera and, for a few moments, the pumped-up suit shielded what he was doing. Then he stepped away and dropped something on a stainless steel laboratory bench.

“Notice anything?” Toni said.

“No.”

“Nor did the security guards who were watching the monitors.” Toni was defending her staff. If Stanley had not seen what happened, he could hardly blame the guards for missing it too. “But look again.” She went back a couple of minutes and froze the frame as Michael stepped into shot. “One rabbit in that top right-hand cage.”

“I see.”

“Look harder at Michael. He’s got something under his arm.”

“Yes—wrapped in blue plastic suit fabric.”

She ran the footage forward, stopping again as Michael moved away from the rabbit rack. “How many rabbits in the top right-hand cage?”

“Two, damn it.” Stanley looked perplexed. “I thought your theory was that Michael took a rabbit out of the lab. You’ve shown him bringing one in!”

“A substitute. Otherwise the scientists would have noticed one was missing.”

“Then what’s his motivation? In order to save one rabbit, he has to condemn another to death!”

“In so far as he was rational at all, I imagine he felt there was something special about the rabbit he saved.”

“For god’s sake, one rabbit is the same as another.”

“Not to Michael, I suspect.”

Stanley nodded. “You’re right. Who knows how his mind was working at this point?”

Toni ran the video footage forward. “He did his chores as usual, checking the food and water in the cages, making sure the animals were still alive, ticking his tasks on a checklist. Monica came in, but she went to a side laboratory to work on her tissue cultures, so she could not see him. He went next door, to the larger lab, to take care of the macaque monkeys. Then he came back. Now watch.”

Michael disconnected his air hose, as was normal when moving from one room to another within the lab—the suit contained three or four minutes’ worth of fresh air, and when it began to run out the faceplate would fog, warning the wearer. He stepped into a small room containing the vault, a locked refrigerator used for storing live ^{virus} samples, ^{AS} ~~of viruses~~ ~~Being~~ the most secure location in the entire building, it also held all ~~stocks of~~ the priceless antiviral drug. He tapped a combination of digits on its keypad. A security camera inside the refrigerator showed him selecting two doses of the drug, already measured and loaded into disposable syringes.

“The small dose for the rabbit and the large one, presumably, for himself,” Toni said. “Like you, he expected the drug to work against Madoba-2. He planned to cure the rabbit and immunise himself.”

“The guards could have seen him taking the drug from the vault.”

“But they wouldn’t find that suspicious. He’s authorised to handle these materials.”

“They might have noticed that he didn’t write anything in the log.”

“They might have, but remember that one guard is watching thirty-seven screens, and he’s not trained in laboratory practice.”

Stanley grunted.

Toni said: “Michael must have figured that the discrepancy wouldn’t be noticed until the annual audit, and even then it would be put down to clerical error. He didn’t know I was planning a spot check.”

On the television screen, Michael closed the vault and returned to the rabbit lab, reconnecting his air hose. “He’s finished his chores,” Toni explained. “Now he returns to the rabbit racks.” Once again, Michael’s back concealed what he was doing from the camera. “Here’s where he takes his favourite rabbit out of its cage. I think he slips it into its own miniature suit, probably made from parts of an old one he had worn out.”

Michael turned his left side to the camera. As he walked to the exit, he seemed to have something under his right arm, but it was hard to tell.

Leaving BSL4, everyone had to pass through a chemical shower that decontaminated the suit, then take a regular shower before dressing. “The suit would have protected the rabbit ~~in~~ ^{from} the chemical shower,” Toni said. “My guess is that he then dumped the rabbit suit in the incinerator. ~~The water~~ ^{no shower} shower would not have ~~done~~ the animal any harm. ~~In the dressing~~ ^{at the annual} + he was able to put it in the double bag when he was

room, ~~he put the rabbit in the duffle bag~~. As he exited the building, the guards saw him carrying the same bag he came in with, and suspected nothing.”

Stanley sat back in his seat. “Well, I’m damned,” he said. “I would have sworn it was impossible.”

“He took the rabbit home. I think it may have bitten him when he injected it with the drug. He injected himself and thought he was safe. But he was wrong.”

Stanley looked sad. “Poor boy,” he said. “Poor, foolish boy.”

“Now you know everything I know,” Toni said. She looked at him, waiting for the verdict. ~~Was this phase of her life over?~~ Would she be out of work for Christmas?

He gave her a level ^{glance} look. “There’s one obvious security precaution we could have taken that would have prevented this.”

“I know,” she said. “A bag search for everyone entering and leaving BSL4.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ve instituted it from this morning.”

“Thereby closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. ~~He wanted her to quit, she felt sure,~~ “You pay me to stop this kind of thing happening. I’ve failed. I expect you’d like me to tender my resignation.”

He looked irritated. “If I want to fire you, you’ll know soon enough.”

She stared at him. ~~Had she been reprieved?~~

His expression softened. “All right, you’re ^a conscientious ~~person~~ and you feel guilty, even though neither you nor anyone else could have anticipated what happened.”

“I could have instituted the bag check.”

“I probably would have vetoed it, on the grounds that it would upset staff.” ^{In any case}

~~“Oh.”~~

~~“So I’ll tell you this once.”~~ Since you came, our security has been tighter than ever before. You’re damn good, and I aim to keep you. Now, please, no more self-pity.”

She suddenly felt weak with relief. “Thank you,” she said.

“Now, we’ve got a busy day ahead—let’s get on with it.” He went out.

You have no idea, she thought. I love you with all my heart, and you have no idea at all.

8:30 a.m.

Miranda Oxenford ordered a cappuccino Viennoise, ^{topped} with a pyramid of whipped cream, ~~on~~
~~top~~. At the last moment she asked for a piece of carrot cake as well. She stuffed her change
 into the pocket of her skirt and carried her breakfast to the table where her thin sister Olga
 was seated with a double espresso and a cigarette. ~~The place was bedecked with paper chains,~~
~~and~~ a Christmas tree twinkled over the panini toaster, but someone with a nice sense of irony
 had put the Beach Boys ~~on the music system, and they were~~ singing "Surfin' USA".

Miranda often ran into Olga first thing in the morning at this coffee bar, ~~in Saucyhall~~
~~Street~~, in the centre of Glasgow. They worked nearby: Miranda was managing director of a
 recruitment agency specialising in IT personnel, and Olga was a barrister. They both liked to
 take five minutes to gather their thoughts before going ^{to} ~~into~~ their offices.

They did not look like sisters, Miranda thought, catching a glimpse of her reflection in
 a mirror. She was short, with curly blonde hair, and her figure was, well, cuddly. Olga was
 tall like Daddy, but she had the same black eyebrows as their late mother, who had been
 Italian by birth and was always called Mamma Marta. Olga was dressed for work in a dark
 grey suit and sharply pointed shoes. She could have played the part of Cruella Deville. She
 probably terrified juries.

Miranda took off her coat and scarf. She wore a pleated skirt and a sweater

embroidered with small flowers. She dressed to charm, not to intimidate. As she sat down, Olga said: "You're working on Christmas Eve?"

"Just for an hour," Miranda replied. "To make sure nothing's left undone over the holiday."

"Same here."

"Have you heard the news? A technician at the Kremlin died of a virus."

"Oh, God, that's going to blight our Christmas."

Olga could seem heartless, but she was not, ^{really} really so, Miranda thought. "It was on the radio. I haven't spoken to Daddy yet, but it seems the poor boy became fond of a lab hamster and took it home."

"It" said Miranda

"What did he do, have sex with it?" *said Miranda,*

"It probably bit him. He lived alone, so nobody called for help. At least that means he probably didn't pass the virus to anyone else. All the same, it's awful for Daddy. He won't show it, but he's sure to feel responsible."

"He should have gone in for a less hazardous branch of science—something like atomic weapons research."

Miranda smiled. She was especially pleased to see Olga today. ~~She was glad of the chance of a quiet word.~~ The whole family was about to gather at Steepfall, their father's house, for Christmas. She was bringing her fiancé, Ned Hanley, and she wanted to make sure Olga would be nice to him. But she approached the subject in a roundabout way. "I hope this doesn't spoil the holiday. I've been looking forward to it so much. You know Kit's coming?"

"I'm deeply sensible of the honour our little brother is doing us."

"He wasn't going to come, but I talked him round."

“Daddy will be pleased.” Olga spoke with a touch of sarcasm.

“He will, actually,” Miranda said reproachfully. “You know it broke his heart to fire Kit.”

“I know I’ve never seen him so angry. I thought he would kill someone.”

“Then he cried.”

“I didn’t see that.”

“Nor did I. Lori told me.” Lori was Stanley’s housekeeper. “But now he wants to forgive and forget.”

Olga stubbed her cigarette. “I know. Daddy’s magnanimity is boundless. Does Kit have a job yet?”

“No.”

“Can’t you find him something? It’s your field, and he’s good.”

“Things are quiet—and people know he was sacked by his father.”

“Has he stopped gambling?”

“He must have. He promised Daddy he would. And he’s got no money.”

“Daddy paid his debts, didn’t he?”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to know.”

“Come on, Mandy.” Olga was using Miranda’s childhood name. “How much?”

“You should ask Daddy—or Kit.”

“Was it ten thousand pounds?”

Miranda looked away.

“More than that? Twenty?”

Miranda whispered: “Fifty.”

“Good God! That little bastard pissed away fifty grand of our inheritance? Wait till I see him.”

“Anyway, enough of Kit. You’re going to get to know Ned much better this Christmas. I want you to treat him as one of the family.”

“Ned should *be* one of the family by now. When are you getting married? You’re too old for a long engagement. You’ve both been married before—it’s not as if you have to save up for your trousseau.”

This was not the response Miranda was hoping for. ~~She wanted Olga to feel warm towards Ned.~~ “Oh, you know what Ned’s like,” she said defensively. “He’s lost in his own world.” Ned was editor of the Glasgow Review of Books, a respected cultural-political ~~journal~~ ^{big one}, but he was not practical.

“I don’t know how you stand it. I can’t abide vacillation.”

~~The conversation was not going the way Miranda wanted.~~ “Believe me, it’s a blessed relief after Jasper,” ^{said} ^{Ned} Miranda, [^] first husband had been a bully and a tyrant. Ned was the opposite, and that was one of the reasons she loved him. “Ned will never be organised enough to boss me around—half the time he can’t remember what day it is.”

“Still, you managed perfectly well without a man for five years.”

“I did, and I was proud of myself, especially when the economy turned down and they stopped paying me those big bonuses.”

“So why do you want another man?”

“Well, you know....”

“Sex? Oh, please. Haven’t you heard of vibrators?”

Miranda giggled. “It’s not the same.”

“Indeed it’s not. A vibrator is bigger and harder and more reliable, and, when you’ve done with it, you can put it back in the bedside table and forget about it.”

Miranda ~~began to feel attacked~~, ^{went on the defense} as often happened when she talked to her sister. “Ned’s very good with Tom,” she said. Tom was her eleven-year-old son. “Jasper hardly ever spoke to Tom, except to give him orders. Ned takes an interest in him, asks him questions and listens to the answers.”

“Speaking of stepchildren, how does Tom get along with Sophie?” Ned’s daughter by his first marriage was fourteen.

“She’s coming to Steepfall too—I’m picking her up later this morning. Tom looks at Sophie the way the Greeks regarded the gods, as supernatural beings who are dangerous unless pacified by constant sacrifices. He’s always trying to give her sweets. She’d rather have cigarettes. She’s as thin as a stick and prepared to die to stay that way.” Miranda looked pointedly at Olga’s pack of Marlboro Lights.

“We all have our weaknesses,” said Olga. “Have some more carrot cake.”

Miranda put down her fork and took a sip of coffee. “Sophie can be difficult, but it’s not her fault. Her mother resents me, and the child is bound to pick up that attitude.”

“I bet Ned leaves you to deal with the problem.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Now that he’s living in your flat, does he pay you rent?”

“He can’t afford it. That magazine pays peanuts. And he’s still carrying the mortgage on the house his ex lives in. He’s not comfortable about being financially dependent, believe you me.”

“I can’t think why ~~he wouldn’t be comfortable~~. He can have a bonk whenever he feels

like it, he's got you to look after his difficult daughter, and he's living rent-free."

Miranda was hurt. "That's a bit harsh."

"You shouldn't have let him move in without committing to a date for the wedding."

The same thought had occurred to Miranda, but she was not going to admit it. "He just thinks everyone needs more time to get used to the idea of his remarriage."

"Who's 'everyone', then?"

"Well, Sophie, for a start."

"And she reflects her mother's attitudes, ~~you've already admitted~~. So what you're saying is that Ned won't marry you until his ex gives permission."

"Olga, please take off your barrister's wig when you're talking to me."

"Someone's got to tell you these things."

"You oversimplify everything. I know it's your job, but I'm your sister, not a hostile witness."

"I'm sorry I spoke."

"I'm glad you spoke, because this is just the kind of thing I *don't* want you to say to Ned. He's the man I love, and I want to marry him, so I'm asking you to be nice to him over Christmas."

"I'll do my best," Olga said lightly.

Miranda wanted her sister to understand how important this was. "I need him to feel that he and I can build a new family together, for ourselves and the two children. I'm asking you to help me convince him we can do that."

"All right. Okay."

"If this holiday goes well, I think he'll agree to a date for the wedding."

Olga touched Miranda's hand. "I get the message. I know how much it means to you. I'll be good."

Miranda had made her point. Satisfied, she turned her mind to another area of friction. "I hope things go all right between Daddy and Kit."

"So do I, but there's not much we can do about it."

"Kit called me a few days ago. For some reason, he's dead keen to sleep in the guest cottage at Steepfall."

Olga bridled. "Why should he have the cottage all to himself? That means you and Ned and Hugo and I will all have to squeeze into two poky bedrooms in the old house!"

Miranda had expected Olga to resist this. "I know it's unreasonable, but I said it was okay by me. It was difficult enough to persuade him to come—I didn't want to put an obstacle in the way."

"He's a selfish little bastard. What reason did he give you?"

"I didn't question him."

"Well, I will." Olga took her mobile phone from her briefcase and pressed a number.

"Don't make an issue of this," Miranda pleaded.

"I just want to ask him the question." Speaking into the phone, she said: "Kit—what's this about you sleeping in the cottage? Don't you think it's a bit—" She paused. "Oh. Why not? I see...but why don't you—" She stopped abruptly, as if he had hung up on her.

Miranda thought, sadly, that she knew what Kit had said. "What is it?"

Olga put the phone back into her bag. "We don't need to argue about the cottage. He's changed his mind. He's not coming to Steepfall after all."

9 a.m.

Oxenford Medical was under siege. Reporters, photographers and television crews massed outside the entrance gates, harassing employees as they arrived for work, crowding around their cars and bicycles, shoving cameras and microphones in their faces, shouting questions.

The security guards were trying desperately to separate the media ~~people~~ ^{Oxenford employees} from the ~~normal~~ traffic, to prevent accidents, but were getting no cooperation from the journalists. To make matters worse, a group of animal rights protestors had seized the opportunity for some publicity, and were holding a demonstration at the gates, waving banners and ~~singing~~ ^{shouting} protest ~~songs~~ ^{songs}. The cameramen were filming the demonstration, having little else to shoot. Toni Gallo watched, feeling angry and helpless.

She was in Stanley Oxenford's office, a large corner room that had been ^{once} the master bedroom ~~of the house~~. Stanley worked ~~with~~ ^{in an incongruous mix of} the old and ~~the~~ new, mingled around him: his computer work station stood on a scratched wooden table he had had for thirty years, ~~and on a side table~~ ^{was} an optical microscope from the sixties that he still liked to use from time to time, ~~The microscope was now surrounded by Christmas cards, one of them from Toni.~~ ^{rested on an original bedside stand.} On the wall ~~was~~ ^{hung beside} a Victorian engraving of the periodic table of the elements ~~and~~ a photograph of a striking black-haired girl in a wedding dress—his late wife, Marta.

Stanley mentioned his wife often. "As cold as a church, Marta used to say...When

Marta was alive we went to Italy every other year...Marta loved irises." But he had spoken of his feelings about her only once. Toni had said how beautiful Marta looked in the photograph. "The pain fades, but it doesn't go away," Stanley had said. "I believe I'll grieve for her every day for the rest of my life." It made Toni want to cry, partly for pity, and partly because she feared no one would ever love her the way Stanley had loved Marta.

Now Stanley stood beside Toni at the window, their shoulders not quite touching. They watched with dismay as more Volvos and Subarus parked on the grass verge, and the crowd became noisier and more aggressive.

"I'm so sorry about this," Toni said miserably.

"Not your fault."

"I know you said no more self-pity, but I let a rabbit get through my security cordon, then my bastard ex-partner leaked the story to Carl Osborne."

"I gather you don't get on with your ex."

She had never talked candidly to Stanley about this, but Frank had now intruded into her working life, and she welcomed the chance to explain. "I honestly don't know why Frank hates me. I never rejected him. He left me—and he did it at a moment when I really needed help and support. You'd think he'd punished me enough for whatever I did wrong. But now this."

"I can understand it. You're a ^{living} ~~standing~~ reproach to him. Every time he sees you, he's reminded of how weak and cowardly he was when you needed him."

Toni had never thought about Frank in quite that way, and now his behaviour made a ^{certain} kind of sense. ~~She felt a warm surge of gratitude.~~ Careful not to show too much emotion, she ~~said~~: "That's perceptive." she said,

He shrugged. "We never forgive those we've wronged."

Toni smiled at the paradox. Stanley was clever about people as well as viruses, ~~she~~
~~thought.~~

He put a hand on her shoulder lightly, a gesture of reassurance—or was it something more? He rarely made physical contact with his employees. She had felt his touch exactly three times in the year she had known him. He had shaken her hand when he gave her the initial contract, when he took her on the staff, and when he promoted her. At the Christmas party, he had danced with his secretary, Dorothy, a heavy woman with a maternally efficient manner, like an attentive mother duck. He had not danced with anyone else. ~~Toni had wanted to ask him, but she was afraid of making her feelings obvious. Afterwards she had wished she were more brash, like Susan Mackintosh.~~

"Frank may not have leaked the story merely to spite you," Stanley said. "I suspect he would have done it anyway. I imagine Osborne will show his gratitude by reporting favourably on the Inverburn police in general and Superintendent Frank Hackett in particular."

~~His hand warmed her skin through the silk of her blouse. Was this a casual gesture, made without thought? She suffered the familiar frustration of not knowing what was in his mind. She wondered if he could feel her bra strap. She hoped he could not tell how much she enjoyed being touched by him.~~

She was not sure he was right about Frank and Carl Osborne. "It's generous of you to look at it that way," she said. All the same, she resolved that somehow she would make sure the company did not suffer from what Frank had done.

There was a knock at the door and Cynthia Creighton, the company's public relations

officer, came in. Stanley took his hand off Toni's shoulder quickly.

Cynthia was a thin woman of fifty in a tweed skirt and knitted stockings. She was a sincere do-gooder. Toni had once made Stanley laugh by saying Cynthia was the kind of person who made her own muesli. Normally hesitant in manner, she was now on the ^{verge} ~~edge~~ of hysteria. ~~Her hair was dishevelled, she was breathing hard, and she talked too fast.~~ "Those people ^{out there} shoved me," she said. "They're animals! Where are the police?"

^{^ The police the} "A ~~patrol car~~ is on ~~its~~ way," Toni said. "They should be here in ten or fifteen minutes."

"They should arrest the lot of them."

Toni realised, with a sinking feeling, that Cynthia was not capable of dealing with this crisis. Her ~~main~~ job was to dispense a small charity budget, giving grants to school football teams and sponsored walkers, ensuring that the name of Oxenford Medical appeared frequently in the *Inverburn Courier* in stories that had nothing to do with viruses or experiments on animals. It was important work, Toni knew, for readers believed the local press, whereas they were sceptical of national newspapers. Consequently, Cynthia's low-key publicity immunised the company against the virulent Fleet Street scare stories that could blight any scientific enterprise. But Cynthia had never dealt with the jackal pack that was the British press in full cry, and she was too distressed to make good decisions.

Stanley was thinking the same thing. "Cynthia, I want you to work with Toni on this," he said. "She has experience of the media from her time with the police."

Cynthia looked relieved and grateful. "Have you?"

"I did a year in the press office—although I never dealt with anything this bad."

"What do you think we should do?"

^{said, really}
 “Well.” Toni ~~did not feel she was qualified to take charge, but this was an emergency,~~
~~and it seemed~~ she was the best candidate available. ~~She went back to first principles.~~ “There’s ^{one}
^{three} ~~a~~ simple rule ^s for dealing with the media.” ~~It~~ ^{They} might be too simple for this situation, she
 thought, but she did not say so. “One, decide what your message is. Two, make sure it’s true,
 so that you’ll never have to go back on it. Three, keep saying it over and over again.”

“Hmm.” Stanley looked sceptical, but he ~~did not seem to have a better suggestion.~~

Cynthia said: “Don’t you think we should apologise?”

“No,” Toni said quickly. “It will be interpreted as confirmation that our security was
 slack. That’s not true. Nobody’s perfect, but our security is top notch.”

Stanley said: “Is that our message?”

“I don’t think so. Too defensive.” Toni ~~thought for a moment.~~ “We should start by
 saying that we’re doing work here which is vital for the future of the human race. ^{“ ”} No, that’s ^{she thought for a moment}
 too apocalyptic. We’re doing medical research that will save lives—that’s better. And it has
 its hazards, but our security is as tight as mortal beings can make it. One thing certain is that
 many people will die unnecessarily if we *stop*.”

“I like that,” said Stanley.

“Is it true?”

“No question. Every year a new virus comes out of China and kills thousands. Our
 drug will save their lives.”

Toni nodded. “That’s perfect. Simple and telling.”

Stanley was still worried. “How will we get the message across?”

“I think you should call a press conference in a couple of hours’ time. By midday the
 newsdesks will be looking for a fresh angle on the story, so they’ll be glad to get something

more from us. ^{But once they do} ~~And~~ most of ^{the} ~~these~~ people outside will leave, ~~once that's happened.~~ They'll know that further developments are unlikely, and they ^{will} want to go home for Christmas like everyone else."

"I hope you're right," Stanley said. "Cynthia, will you make the arrangements, please?"

Cynthia had not yet recovered her composure. "But what should I do?"

Toni took over. "We'll hold the press conference in the Great Hall. It's the only room big enough, and the chairs are already being set out for Professor Oxenford's address to the staff at half past nine. The first thing you should do is alert the people outside. It will give them something to tell their editors, and might calm them down a bit. Then phone the Press Association and Reuters and ask them to put it on the wire, to inform any of the media who aren't already here."

"Right," Cynthia said uncertainly "Right." She turned to go. Toni made a mental note to check on her as soon as possible.

As Cynthia left, Dorothy buzzed Stanley and said: "Laurence Mahoney from the United States embassy in London is on line one."

"I remember him," Toni said. "He was here a few months ago. I showed him around." The U.S. military was financing much of Oxenford Medical's research. The Department of Defense was keenly interested in Stanley's new antiviral drug, which promised to be a powerful counter to biological warfare. Stanley had needed to raise money for the prolonged testing process, and the American government had been eager to invest. Mahoney kept an eye on things on behalf of the Defense Department.

"Just a minute, Dorothy." Stanley did not pick up the phone. He said to Toni:

“Mahoney is more important to us than all the British media put together. I don’t want to talk to him cold. I need to know what line he’s taking, so that I can ~~think about~~ ^{decide} how ^{best} to handle him.”

“Do you want me to ~~stall him?~~ ^{feel him out} Stanley nodded.

“Feel him out.”

Toni picked up the handset and touched a button. “Hello, Larry, this is Toni Gallo, we met in September. How are you?”

Mahoney was a peevish ~~press officer~~ ^{man} with a whiney voice that made Toni think of Donald Duck. “I’m worried,” he said.

“Tell me why.”

“I was hoping to speak to Professor Oxenford,” he answered with an edge to his voice.

“And he’s keen to talk to you at the first opportunity,” Toni said as sincerely as she could manage. “Right now he’s with the laboratory director.” In fact he was sitting on the edge of his desk, watching her, ~~with an expression on his face that might have been either fond or merely interested.~~ She caught his eye and he looked away. “He’ll call you as soon as he has the complete picture—which will certainly be before midday.”

“How the hell did you let something like this happen?”

“The young man sneaked a rabbit out of the laboratory in his duffle bag. We’ve already instituted a compulsory bag search at the entrance to BSL4 to make sure it can’t happen again.”

“My concern is bad publicity for the American government. We don’t want to be blamed for unleashing deadly viruses on the population of Scotland.”

"There's no danger of that," Toni said with her fingers crossed.

"Have any of the local reports played up the fact that this research is American-financed?"

"No."

"They'll pick it up sooner or later."

"We should certainly be prepared to answer questions about that."

"The most damaging angle for us—and therefore for you—is the one that says the research is done here because Americans think it's too dangerous to be done in the United States."

"Thanks for the warning. I think we have a very convincing response to that. After all, the drug was invented right here in Scotland by Professor Oxenford, so it's natural it should be tested here."

"I just don't want to get into a situation where the only way to prove our goodwill is to transfer the research to Fort Detrick."

Toni was shocked into silence. Fort Detrick, in the town of Frederick, Maryland, was the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. How could the research be transferred there? It would mean the end of the Kremlin. After a long pause, she said: "We're *certainly* not in that situation, ~~not by a million miles.~~" She wished she could think of a more devastating put-down.

"I ~~sure~~ hope not. Have Stanley call me."

"Thank you, Larry." She hung up and said to Stanley: "They can't transfer your research to Fort Detrick, can they?"

He went pale. "There's certainly no provision in the contract to that effect," he said.

“But they are the government of the most powerful country in the world, and they ~~can do~~ ^{know it.} ~~anything they want.~~ What would I do—sue them? I’d be in court for the rest of my life, even if I could afford it.”

Toni was rocked ~~by~~ seeing Stanley appear vulnerable. ~~He was always the calm,~~ ~~reassuring one who knew how to solve the problem.~~ Now he just looked daunted. She longed ~~to give him a comforting hug.~~ ^{why} “Would they do it?”

“I’m sure the microbiologists at Fort Detrick would prefer to be doing this research themselves, if they had the choice.”

“Where would that leave you?”

“Bankrupt.”

“What?” Toni was appalled.

“I’ve invested everything in the new laboratory,” Stanley said grimly. “I have a personal overdraft of a million pounds. Our contract with the Department of Defense ~~would~~ ^{will} cover the cost of the lab over four years. But if they pull the rug now, I’ve got no way of paying the debts—either the company’s or my own.”

Toni could hardly take it in. How could Stanley’s entire future—and her own—be threatened so suddenly? “But the new drug is worth millions.”

“It will be, eventually. I’m sure of the science—that’s why I was happy to borrow so much money. But I didn’t foresee that the project might be destroyed by mere publicity.”

She touched his arm. “And all because a stupid television personality needs a scare story,” she said. “I can hardly believe it.”

Stanley patted the hand ~~she had rested on his arm, then removed it~~ and stood up. “No point in whining. We’ve just got to manage our way out of this.”

“Yes. You’re due to speak to the staff. Are you ready?”

“Yes.” They walked out of his office together. “It will be good practice for the press later.”

As they passed Dorothy’s desk, she held up a hand to stop them. “One moment, please,” she said into the phone. She touched a button and spoke to Stanley. “It’s the First Minister of Scotland,” she said. “Personally,” she added, evidently ~~somewhat~~ impressed. “He wants a word.”

Stanley said to Toni: “Go down to the hall and hold them. I’ll be as quick as I can.” He went back into his office.

9:30 a.m.

Kit Oxenford waited more than an hour for Harry McGarry.

McGarry, known as Harry Mac, had been born in Govan, a working-class district of Glasgow. He was raised in a tenement near Ibrox Park, the home of Rangers, the city's Protestant football team. With his profits from drugs, illegal gambling, theft and prostitution he had moved—only a mile geographically, but a long way socially—across the Paisley Road to Dumbreck. Now he lived in a large new-built house with a pool.

The place was decorated like an expensive hotel, with reproduction furniture and framed prints on the wall, but no personal touches: no family photographs, ~~no pets~~, no ornaments, no flowers. Kit waited nervously in the spacious hall, staring at the striped yellow wallpaper and the spindly legs of the occasional tables, watched by a fat bodyguard in a black suit.

Harry Mac's empire covered Scotland and the north of England. He worked with his daughter, Diana, always called Daisy. The nickname was ironic: she was a violent, sadistic thug.

Harry owned the illegal casino where Kit played. Most gamblers were stupid, Kit believed; and the people who ran casinos were not much brighter. An intelligent player

should always win. In blackjack there was a correct way to play every possible hand—a system called Basic—and he knew it backwards. Then, he improved his chances by keeping track of the cards that were dealt from the six-pack deck. Starting with zero, he added one point for every low card—twos, threes, fours, fives and sixes—and took away one point for every high card—tens, jacks, queens, kings and aces. (He ignored sevens, eights and nines.) When the number in his head was positive, the remaining deck contained more high cards than low, so he had a higher-than-average chance of drawing a ten, which was usually a winning card. That was the time to bet high.

But Kit had suffered a run of bad luck and, when the debt reached fifty thousand pounds, Harry had asked for his money.

Kit had gone to his father and begged to be rescued. It was humiliating, of course. When Stanley had fired him, Kit had accused his father bitterly of not caring about him. Now he was admitting the truth: his father did love him, and would do almost anything for him, and Kit knew that perfectly well. His pretence had collapsed ignominiously. But it was worth it. Stanley had paid.

Kit had promised he would never gamble again, and meant it, but the temptation had been too strong. It was madness; it was a disease; it was shameful and humiliating; but it was the most exciting thing in the world, and he could not resist.

Next time his debt reached fifty thousand he had gone back to his father, but this time Stanley put his foot down. “I haven’t got the money,” he said. “I could borrow it, perhaps, but what’s the point? You’d lose it and come back for more until we both were broke.” Kit had accused him of heartlessness and greed, called him Shylock and Scrooge and fucking Fagin, and sworn never to speak to him again. The words had hurt—he could always hurt his father,

he knew that—but Stanley had not changed his mind.

At that point, Kit should have left the country.

He dreamed of going to Italy to live in his mother's home town of Lucca. The family had visited several times during his childhood, before the grandparents died. It was a pretty walled town, ancient and peaceful, with little squares where you could drink espresso in the shade. He knew some Italian—Mamma Marta ~~had~~ spoken her native tongue to all of them when they were small. He could rent a room in one of the tall old houses and get a job helping people with their computer problems, easy work. He thought he could be happy, living like that.

But, instead, he had tried to win back what he owed.

His debt went up to a quarter of a million.

For that much money, Harry Mac would pursue him to the North Pole. He wondered if he should kill himself, ^{Sometimes saying like} ~~and even looked at~~ tall buildings in central Glasgow, wondering if he could get up on the roofs ^{one of and off.} ~~in order to~~ throw himself ~~to his death.~~

Three weeks ago, he had been summoned to this house. He had felt sick with fear. He was sure they were going to beat him up. When he was shown into the drawing room, with its yellow silk couches, he wondered how they would prevent the blood spoiling the upholstery. "There's a gentleman here wants to ask you a question," Harry had said. Kit could not imagine what question any of Harry's friends would want to ask him, unless it was *Where's the fucking money?*

The gentleman was Nigel Buchanan, a quiet type in his forties wearing expensive casual clothes: a cashmere jacket, dark slacks, and an open-necked shirt. Speaking in a soft London accent, he said: "Can you get me inside the Level Four laboratory at Oxenford

Medical?"

There had been two other people in the yellow drawing room at the time. One was Daisy, a muscular girl of about twenty-five with a broken nose, bad skin, and a ring through her lower lip. She was wearing black leather gloves. The other was Elton, a handsome black man about the same age as Daisy, apparently a sidekick of Nigel's.

Kit was so relieved at not being beaten up that he would have agreed to anything.

Nigel offered him a fee of three hundred thousand pounds for the night's work.

Kit could hardly believe his luck. It would be enough to pay his debts and more. He could leave the country. He could go to Lucca and realise his dream. He felt overjoyed. His problems were solved at a stroke.

Later, Harry had talked about Nigel in reverent tones. A professional thief, Nigel stole only to order for a prearranged price. "He's the greatest," Harry said. "You're after a painting by Michelangelo? No problem. A nuclear warhead? He'll get it for you—if you can afford it. Remember Shergar, the racehorse that was kidnapped? That was Nigel." He added: "He lives in Liechtenstein," as if Liechtenstein were a more exotic place of residence than Mars.

Kit had spent the next three weeks planning the theft of the anti-viral drug. He felt the occasional twinge of remorse as he refined the scheme to rob his father, but mostly he felt a delirious glee at the thought of revenge on the ^{father} ~~Daddy~~ who had fired him then refused to rescue him from gangsters. It would be one hell of a poke in the eye for Toni Gallo, too.

Nigel had gone over the details with him meticulously, questioning everything. Occasionally he would consult with Elton, who was in charge of equipment, especially cars. Kit got the impression that Elton ^{Nigel regarded as} ~~was to be~~ a valued technical expert ^{as} ~~who had worked with Nigel for some years~~. Daisy was to join them on the raid, ostensibly to provide extra muscle

if necessary—though Kit suspected her real purpose was to take £250,000 from him as soon as the fee was in his hands.

Kit had suggested they rendezvous at a disused airfield near the Kremlin. Nigel looked at Elton. “That’s cool,” Elton said. He spoke with a broad London accent: “We could meet the buyer there after ^{wards} he might want to fly in.”

In the end, Nigel had pronounced the plan brilliant, and Kit had glowed with pleasure.

Now, today, Kit had to tell Harry the whole deal was off. He felt wretched: ~~disappointed~~, depressed, and scared.

At last he was summoned to Harry’s presence. Nervous, he followed the bodyguard through the laundry at the back of the house to the pool pavilion. It was built to look like an Edwardian orangery, with glazed tiles in sombre colours, the pool itself an unpleasant shade of dark green. Some interior decorator had proposed this, Kit guessed, and Harry had said yes without looking at the plans.

Harry was a stocky man of fifty with the grey skin of a lifelong smoker. He sat at a wrought-iron table, dressed in a purple towelling robe, drinking dark coffee from a small china cup and reading the *Sun*. The newspaper was open at the horoscope. Daisy was in the water, swimming laps tirelessly. Kit was startled to see that she seemed to be naked except for diver’s gloves. She always wore gloves.

“I don’t need to see you, laddie,” Harry said. “I don’t want to see you. I don’t know anything about you or what you’re doing tonight. And I’ve never met anyone called Nigel Buchanan. Are you catching my drift?” He did not offer Kit a cup of coffee.

The air was hot and humid. Kit was wearing his best suit, a midnight-blue mohair, with a white shirt open at the neck. ^{the hour of it suddenly and} ~~It seemed an effort~~ to breathe, and his skin felt

uncomfortably damp under his clothes. He realised he had broken some ^{unspoken} rule ~~of criminal~~
~~etiquette~~ by contacting Harry on the day of the robbery, but he had no alternative. "I had to
talk to you," Kit said. "Haven't you seen the news?"

"What if I have?"

Kit suppressed a surge of irritation. Men such as Harry could never bring themselves
to admit to not knowing something, however trivial. "There's a big flap on at Oxenford
Medical," Kit said. "A technician died of a virus."

"What do you want me to do, send flowers?"

"They'll be tightening security. This is the worst possible time to rob the place. It's
difficult enough anyway. They have a state-of-the-art alarm system. And the woman in
charge is as tough as a rubber steak."

"What a whinger you are."

Kit had not been asked to sit down, so he leaned on the back of a chair, feeling
awkward. "We have to call it off."

"Let me explain something to you." Harry took a cigarette from a packet on the table
and lit it with a gold lighter. Then he coughed, an old smoker's cough from the depths of his
lungs. When the spasm had passed, he spat into the pool and drank some coffee. Then he
resumed. "For one thing, I've said it's going to happen. Now you may not realise this, being
so well brought up, but when a man says something's going to happen, and then it doesn't,
people think he's a wanker."

"Yes, but—"

"Don't even dream of interrupting me."

Kit shut up.

“For another thing, Nigel Buchanan’s no drugged-up schoolboy wanting to rob Woolworth’s, ~~in Govan Cross~~. He’s a legend, and more important than that, he’s connected with some highly respected people in London. When you’re dealing with folk like that, ~~even~~ ^{particularly} ~~more~~ you don’t want to look like a wanker.”

He paused, as if daring Kit to argue. Kit said nothing. How had he got himself involved with these people? ~~He had walked into the wolves’ cave, and now he stood paralysed, waiting to be torn to pieces.~~

“And for a third thing, you owe me a quarter of a million pounds. No one has ever owed me that much money for so long and still been able to walk without crutches. I trust I’m making myself clear.”

Kit nodded silently. He was so scared he felt he might throw up.

~~That means you~~
“~~So~~ don’t tell me ~~we have~~ to call it off.” Harry picked up the *Sun* as if the conversation were over.

Kit forced himself to speak. “I meant postpone it, not call it off,” he managed. “We can do it another day, when the fuss has died down.”

Harry did not look up. “Ten a.m. on Christmas Day, Nigel said. And I want my money.”

“There’s no point in doing it if we’re going to get caught!” Kit said desperately. Harry did not respond. “Everyone can wait a little longer, can’t they?” It was like talking to the wall. “Better late than never.”

Harry glanced towards the pool and made a beckoning gesture. Daisy must have been keeping an eye on him, for she immediately climbed out of the pool. She did not take off the gloves. She had powerful shoulders and arms. Her shallow breasts hardly moved as she

walked. Kit saw that she had a tattoo over one breast and a nipple ring in the other. When she came closer, he realised she was shaved all over. ~~She had a flat belly and lean thighs, and her pubic mound was prominent.~~ Every detail was visible, not just to Kit but to her father, if he cared to look. ~~Kit felt weird.~~ *Kit thought it was weird but*

Harry did not seem to notice. ^A“Kit wants us to wait for our money, Daisy.” He stood up and tightened the belt of his robe. “Explain to him how we feel about that—I’m too tired.” He put the newspaper under his arm and walked away.

Daisy grabbed Kit by the lapels of his best suit. “Look,” he pleaded. “I just want to make sure this doesn’t end in disaster for all of us.” Then Daisy jerked him sideways. He lost his balance ^{and} ~~He would have fallen to the ground, but she took his weight~~ ^{caught him} then threw him into the pool.

It was a shock but, if the worst thing she did was ruin his suit, he would count himself lucky, ~~he thought.~~ Then, as he got his head above the surface, she jumped on him, her knees smashing into his back (painfully) ~~so~~ that he cried out and swallowed water as his head went under.

They were at the shallow end. When his feet touched the bottom he struggled to stand upright, but his head was clamped by Daisy’s arm, and he was pulled off balance again. She held him face down under the water.

He held his breath, expecting her to punch him, ~~or something,~~ but she remained still. Needing to breathe, he began to struggle, trying to break her hold, but she was too strong. He became angry, and lashed out feebly with his arms and legs. ~~He felt like a child in a tantrum, flailing helplessly in the grip of its mother.~~

His need for air became desperate, and he fought down panic as he resisted the urge to

open his mouth and gasp. He realised that Daisy had his head under her left arm and was down on one knee with her own head just above the surface. He made himself still, so that his feet floated down. Perhaps she would think he had lost consciousness. His feet touched the bottom. Her grip did not slacken. He got a firm footing then put all his strength into a sudden upward jerk of his body, to dislodge Daisy's hold. She hardly moved, just tightening her grip on his head. It was like having his skull squeezed by steel pincers.

He opened his eyes underwater. His cheek was pressed against her bony ribs. He twisted his head an inch, opened his mouth, and bit her. He felt her flinch, and her grip weakened a little. He clamped his jaws together, trying to bite all the way through the fold of skin ~~between his teeth~~. Then he felt her gloved hand on his face and her fingers pushing into his eyes. Reflexively, he tried to pull away, and involuntarily relaxed his jaws and let her flesh slip from his bite.

Panic overcame him. He could not hold his breath any longer. His body, starved of oxygen, forced him to gasp for air, and water rushed into his lungs. He found himself coughing and vomiting at the same time. After each spasm more water poured down his throat. He realised he would soon die if this went on.

Then she seemed to relent. She jerked his head out of the water. He opened his mouth wide and sucked in blessed pure air. He coughed a jet of water out of his lungs. Then, before he could take a second breath, she shoved his head under again, and instead of air he inhaled water.

Panic turned to something worse. Mad with fear, he thrashed about. Terror gave him strength, ~~and Daisy struggled to hold him~~, but he could not ^{loosen her grip.} ~~get his head up~~. He no longer tried to keep his mouth shut, but let the water flood into him. The sooner he drowned, ~~he~~

~~thought~~, the sooner the agony would be over.

^{Suddenly}
Daisy pulled his head out ~~again~~.

He spewed water and drew in a precious gasp of air. Then his head was submerged ~~yet~~ again.

~~He screamed, but no sound came out.~~ His struggles weakened. He knew Harry had not intended for Daisy to kill him, for then there would be no robbery—but Daisy was not very sane, and ~~it seemed she was going to go too far.~~ He decided he was going to die. His eyes ~~were open, showing him only a green blur; then his vision began to darken, as if night~~ ^{led to a darkening blur,} ~~were falling.~~

At last he passed out.

10 a.m.

Ned could not drive, so Miranda took the wheel of the Toyota Previa. Her son, Tom, sat behind with his Game Boy. The back row of seats had been folded away to make room for a stack of Christmas presents wrapped in red and gold paper, ~~and tied with green ribbon.~~

As they pulled away from the Georgian terrace off the Great Western Road where Miranda had her flat, a light snowfall began. ~~There was a blizzard over the sea to the north, but the weather forecasters said it was going to bypass Scotland.~~ / said

She felt content, driving with the two men in her life, heading for ~~Christmas~~ with her family ^{to} her father's house. She was reminded of driving home from university for the Christmas holidays, looking forward to ~~home cooking~~, clean bathrooms, ^{and} ironed sheets, ^{and} ~~and~~ feeling ^{of being} loved and cared for ~~again.~~

She headed first for the suburb where Ned's ex-wife lived. They were to pick up his daughter, Sophie, before ^{going} ~~driving~~ to Steepfall.

Tom's toy played a descending melody, probably indicating that he had crashed his spaceship, or been beheaded by a gladiator, ~~and~~ he sighed and said: "I saw ~~an~~ advertisement ~~in a car magazine~~ for these really cool screens that go in the back of the headrests, so the people in the back seat can watch movies and stuff."

"A must-have accessory," said Ned with a smile.

"Sounds expensive," said Miranda.

"They don't cost that much," Tom said.

Miranda looked at him in the driving mirror. "Well, how much?"

"I don't know, ~~just~~ but they didn't *look* expensive, d'you know what I mean?"

"Why don't you find out the price, and we'll see if we can afford one."

"Okay, great! And if it's too ^{much} ~~dear~~ for you, I'll ask Grandpa."

Miranda smiled. Catch Grandpa in the right mood and he would give you anything.

Miranda had always hoped Tom would be the one to inherit his grandfather's scientific genius. The jury was still out. His school work was ^{good} ~~excellent~~, but not astonishingly so. However, she was not sure what, exactly, her father's talent was. Of course he was a brilliant microbiologist, but he had something more. It was partly the imagination to see in which direction progress lay, and partly the leadership to inspire a team of scientists to pull together. How could you tell whether an eleven-year-old had that kind of ability? Meanwhile, nothing captured Tom's imagination half as much as a new computer game.

She turned on the radio. A choir was singing a ~~Christmas~~ ^S carol. Ned said: "If I hear 'Away in a Manger' one more time, I may have to commit suicide by impaling myself on a Christmas tree." Miranda changed the station and got John Lennon singing "War is Over". Ned groaned, ~~and said~~ ^{in hell they} "Do you realise that ~~Radio Hell~~ ¹ plays Christmas music all the year round? It's a well known fact."

Miranda laughed. After a minute she found a classical station, ~~that was playing a piano~~ ~~trio~~. "How's this?"

"Haydn—perfect."

Ned was curmudgeonly about popular culture. It was part of his egghead act, like not

knowing how to drive. Miranda did not mind: she, too, disliked pop music, soap operas, and cheap reproductions of famous paintings. But she liked carols.

She was fond of Ned's idiosyncrasies, but her conversation with Olga in the coffee bar nagged at her. Was Ned weak? She sometimes wished he were a little more assertive. Her husband, Jasper, had been too much so. But she sometimes hankered after the kind of sex she had had with Jasper. He had been selfish in bed, taking her roughly, thinking only of his own pleasure—and Miranda, to her shame, had felt liberated ~~by that~~, and ~~had~~ enjoyed it. The thrill had worn off, eventually, when she got fed up with his being selfish and inconsiderate about everything else. All the same, she wished Ned could be like that ~~just sometimes~~ occasionally.

Her thoughts turned to Kit. She was desperately disappointed that he had cancelled. She had worked so hard to persuade him to join the family for Christmas. At first he had refused, then he had relented, so she could hardly be surprised that he had changed his mind again. All the same, it was a painful blow, for she ~~badly~~ wanted them all to be together, as they had been ~~most Christmases~~ before Mamma died. The rift between Daddy and Kit scared her. Coming so soon after Mamma's death, it made the family seem dangerously fragile. And if the family was vulnerable, what could she be sure of?

She turned into a street of old stone-built workers cottages and pulled up outside a larger house that might have been occupied by an overseer. Ned had lived here with Jennifer until they split up two years ago. Before ~~then~~ ^{that}, they had modernised the place at great expense, and the payments still burdened Ned. Every time Miranda drove past this street she felt angry about the amount of money Ned was ~~paying Jennifer~~ ^{paying} ~~laying out~~ ^{each month}.

Miranda ~~engaged the handbrake~~ ^{stopped}, but left the engine running. She and Tom stayed in the car while Ned walked up the path to the house. Miranda never went inside. Although Ned

had left ^{his wife} ~~the marital home~~ before he met Miranda, Jennifer was as hostile as if Miranda had been responsible for the break-up. She avoided meeting her, spoke curtly to her on the phone, and—according to the indiscreet Sophie—referred to her as “that fat tart” when speaking to her women friends. Jennifer herself was as thin as a bird, with a nose like a beak.

The door was opened by Sophie, a fourteen-year-old in jeans and a skimpy sweater. Ned kissed her and went inside.

The car radio played one of Dvorak’s Hungarian dances. In the back seat, Tom’s Game Boy beeped irregularly, ~~but Miranda was used to that.~~ Snow blew around the car in flurries. ^{and} She turned the heater higher. Ned came out of the house, looking annoyed.

~~He came to Miranda’s window.~~ “Jennifer’s out,” he said, ^{when Miranda opened} “Sophie hasn’t even begun ^{her} to get ready. Will you come in and help her pack?” ^{window.}

“Oh, Ned, I don’t think I should,” Miranda said unhappily. She felt uncomfortable about going inside when Jennifer was not there.

Ned looked panicked. “To tell you the truth, I’m not sure what a girl needs.”

Miranda could believe that. Ned found it a challenge to pack a case for himself. He had never done it while he was with Jennifer. When he and Miranda were about to ^{take} ~~set off on~~ their first holiday together—a ~~cultural~~ trip to the museums of Florence—she had refused, on principle, to do it for him, and he had been forced to learn. However, on subsequent trips—a weekend in London, four days in Vienna—she had checked his luggage, and each time found that he had forgotten something important. To pack for someone else was beyond him.

She sighed and killed the engine. “Tom, you’ll have to come too.”

The house was attractively decorated, Miranda thought as she stepped into the hall. Jennifer had a good eye. She had combined plain rustic furniture with colourful fabrics ~~in the~~ ^{maintaining its old-fashioned charm.}

~~way an overseer's houseproud wife might have done a hundred years ago.~~ There were Christmas cards on the mantelpiece, but no tree.

It seemed strange to think that Ned had lived here. He had come home every evening to this house, just as now he came home to Miranda's flat. He had listened to the news on the radio, sat down to dinner, read Russian novels, brushed his teeth ~~automatically~~, and gone unthinkingly to bed to hold a different woman in his arms.

Sophie was in the living room, lying on a couch in front of the television. She had a pierced navel with a cheap jewel in it. Miranda smelled cigarette smoke. Ned said: "Now, Sophie, Miranda's going to help you get ready, okay, poppet?" There was a pleading note in his voice that made Miranda wince.

"I'm watching a film," Sophie said sulkily.

Miranda knew that Sophie would respond to firmness, not supplication. She picked up the remote control and turned the television off. "Show me your bedroom, please, Sophie," she said briskly.

Sophie looked rebellious.

"Hurry up, we're short of time."

Sophie stood up reluctantly and walked slowly from the room. Miranda followed her upstairs to a messy bedroom decorated with posters of boys with peculiar haircuts and ludicrously baggy jeans.

"We'll be at Steepfall for five days, so you need ten pairs of ^{paunties} ~~knickers~~, for a start."

"I haven't got ten."

Miranda did not believe her, but she said: "Then we'll take what you've got, and you can do laundry."

Sophie stood in the middle of the room, a mutinous expression on her pretty face.

“Come on,” Miranda said. “I’m not going to be your maid. ~~Get some knickers out.~~”

She stared at the girl.

Sophie was not able to stare her out. She dropped her eyes, turned away, and opened the top drawer of a chest. It was full of underwear.

“Pack five bras,” Miranda said.

Sophie began taking items out.

Crisis over, Miranda thought. She opened the door of a closet. “You’ll need a couple of frocks for the evenings.” She took out a red dress with spaghetti straps, much too sexy for a fourteen-year-old. “This is nice,” she lied.

Sophie thawed a little. “It’s new.”

“We should wrap it so that it doesn’t crease. Where do you keep tissue paper?”

“In the kitchen drawer, I think.”

“I’ll fetch it. You find a couple of clean pairs of jeans.”

Miranda went downstairs, feeling that she was beginning to establish the right balance of friendliness and authority with Sophie. Ned and Tom were in the living room, watching TV. Miranda entered the kitchen and called out: “Ned, do you know where tissue paper is kept?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“Stupid question,” Miranda muttered, and she began opening drawers.

She eventually found some at the back of a cupboard of sewing materials. She had to kneel on the tiled floor to pull the packet from under a box of ribbons. ~~It was an effort to reach into the cupboard, and she felt herself flush.~~ This is ridiculous, she thought. I’m only

thirty-five, I should be able to bend without effort. I must lose ten pounds. No roast potatoes with the Christmas turkey.

As she took the packet of tissue paper from the cupboard, she heard the back door of the house open, then a woman's footsteps. She looked up to see Jennifer.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Jennifer said. She was a small woman, but managed to look formidable, with her high forehead and arched nose. She was smartly dressed in a tailored coat and high-heeled boots.

Miranda got to her feet, panting slightly. To her mortification, she felt perspiration break out on her throat. "I was looking for tissue paper."

"I can see that. I want to know why you're in my house at all."

Ned appeared in the doorway. "Hello, Jenny, I didn't hear you come in."

"Obviously I didn't give you time to sound the alarm," she said sarcastically.

"Sorry," he said, "but I asked Miranda to come in and—"

"Well, don't!" Jennifer interrupted. "I don't want your women here."

She made it sound as if Ned had a harem. In fact he had dated only two women since Jennifer. The first he had seen only ~~once~~ ^{a couple of times}, and the second was Miranda. But it seemed childishly quarrelsome to point that out. Instead, Miranda said: "I was just trying to help Sophie."

"I'll take care of Sophie. Please leave my house."

Ned said: "I'm sorry if we startled you, Jenny, but—"

"Don't bother to apologise, just get her out of here."

Miranda blushed hotly. ~~She hardly knew what to do.~~ No one had ever been so rude to her. "I'd better leave," she said.

“That’s right,” Jennifer said.

Ned said: “I’ll bring Sophie out as soon as I can.”

Miranda was as angry with Ned as with Jennifer, though for the moment she was not sure why. She turned towards the hall.

“You can use the back door,” Jennifer said.

To her shame, Miranda hesitated. She looked at Jennifer and saw on her face the hint of a smirk. That gave Miranda an ounce of courage. “I don’t think so,” she said quietly. She went to the front door. “Tom, come with me,” she called.

“Just a minute,” he shouted back.

She stepped into the living room. Tom was watching TV. She grabbed his wrist, hauled him to his feet, and dragged him out of the house.

“That hurts!” he protested.

She slammed the front door. “Next time, come when I call.”

She felt like crying as she got into the car. ~~Now she had to sit waiting, like a servant, while Ned was in the house with his ex-wife.~~ Had Jennifer actually planned this whole drama as a way of humiliating Miranda? It was possible. Ned had been hopeless. She knew now why she was so cross with him. He had let Jennifer insult her without a word of protest. He just kept apologising. And for what? If Jennifer had packed a case for her daughter, or even got the girl to do it herself, Miranda would not have had to enter the house. And then, worst of all, Miranda had taken out her anger on her son. She should have shouted at Jennifer, not Tom.

She looked at him in the driving mirror. “Tommy, I’m sorry I hurt your wrist,” she said.

“It’s okay,” he said without looking up from his Game Boy. “I’m sorry I didn’t come when you called.”

“All forgiven, then,” she said. A tear rolled down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away.