

11 a.m.

“Viruses kill thousands of people every day,” Stanley Oxenford said. “About every ten years, an epidemic of influenza kills around twenty-five thousand people in the United Kingdom. In 1918, flu caused more deaths than the whole of World War One. In the year 2002, three million people died of Aids, which is caused by Human Immunodeficiency Virus. And viruses are involved in ten per cent of cancers.”

Toni listened intently, sitting beside him in the Great Hall, under the varnished timbers of the mock-medieval roof. He sounded calm ~~and controlled~~, but she knew him well enough to recognise the barely audible tremor of strain in his voice. He had been shocked and dismayed by ~~the~~ Laurence Mahoney’s threat, and the fear that he might lose everything was only just concealed by his unruffled façade.

She watched the faces of the assembled reporters. Would they hear what he was saying, and understand the importance of his work? She knew journalists. Some were intelligent, many stupid. A few believed in telling the truth; the majority just wrote the most sensational story they could get away with. ~~She felt indignant that they could hold in their hands the fate of a man such as Stanley.~~ Yet the power of the tabloids was a brutal fact of modern life. If enough ^{Papers} ~~of these hacks~~ chose to portray Stanley as a ^{dangerous} ~~mad~~ scientist in a Frankenstein castle, the Americans might be embarrassed enough to pull the finance, ~~and~~

~~Oxenford Medical would be finished.~~

That would be a tragedy—not just for Stanley, but for the world. True, someone else could finish the testing programme for the antiviral drug, but a ruined and bankrupt Stanley would invent no more miracle cures. ~~Toni thought angrily that she would like to slap the dumb faces of the journalists and say: “Wake up—this is about your future too!”~~

“Viruses are a fact of life, but we don’t have to accept that fact passively,” Stanley ~~was saying~~ ~~went on~~. Toni admired the way he spoke. His voice was measured but relaxed. He used this tone when explaining things to younger colleagues. His speech sounded more like a conversation. “Scientists can defeat viruses. Before Aids, the great killer was smallpox, ~~the most lethal human infection~~—until a scientist called Edward Jenner invented vaccination in 1796. Now smallpox has disappeared from human society. Similarly, polio has been eliminated in large areas of our world. In time, we will defeat influenza, and Aids, and even cancer—and it will be done by scientists like us, working in laboratories such as this.”

A ~~journalist~~ ^{woman} put up a hand and called out, ~~a question~~. “What are you working on here—exactly?”

~~The questioner was a woman~~ ^{the journalist} Toni did not recognise. ~~Toni said:~~ “Would you mind identifying yourself?” ~~she asked.~~

“Edie McAllan, science correspondent, *Scotland on Sunday*.”

Cynthia Creighton, sitting on the other side of Stanley, made a note.

Stanley said: “We have developed an antiviral drug. That’s rare. There are plenty of antibiotic drugs, which kill bacteria, but few that attack viruses.”

A man said: “What’s the difference?” He added: “Clive Brown, *Daily Record*.”

The *Record* was a tabloid. Toni was pleased with the direction the questions were

taking. She wanted the press to concentrate on real science. The more they understood, the less likely they were to print damaging rubbish.

Stanley said: "Bacteria, or germs, are tiny creatures that can be seen with a normal microscope. Each of us is host to billions of them. Many are useful, helping us digest food, for example, or dispose of dead skin cells. A few cause illness, and some of those can be treated with antibiotics. Viruses are smaller and simpler than bacteria. You need an electron microscope to see them. A virus cannot reproduce itself—instead, it hijacks the biochemical machinery of a living cell and forces the cell to produce copies of the virus. No known virus is useful to humans. And we have few medicines to combat them. That's why a new antiviral drug is such good news for the human race."

Edie McAllan asked: "What particular viruses is your ^{new} drug effective against?"

~~It was another scientific question.~~ Toni began to ^{think she} believe that ~~this~~ press conference would do all that she and Stanley hoped, ^{but} ~~she quelled her optimism with an effort.~~ She knew, ^{but} from ~~her~~ experience, ^{as a police press officer,} that a journalist could ask serious and intelligent questions ~~at a press conference~~ then go back to the office and write inflammatory garbage.

Even if the writer turned in a sensible piece, it might be rewritten by ~~someone ignorant and~~ ^{an} irresponsible editor.

Stanley replied: "That's the question we're trying to answer. We're testing the drug against a variety of viruses to determine its range."

Clive Brown said: "Does that include dangerous viruses?"

Stanley said: "Yes. No one is interested in drugs for safe viruses."

The audience laughed, ~~It was a witty answer to a stupid question.~~ But Brown looked annoyed, ~~and~~ Toni's heart sank. A humiliated journalist would stop at nothing to get revenge.

She intervened quickly. "Thank you for that question, Clive," she said, trying to mollify him. "Here at Oxenford Medical we impose the highest possible standards of security in laboratories where special materials are used. In BSL4, which stands for BioSafety Level Four, the alarm system is directly connected with regional police headquarters at Inverburn. There are security guards on duty twenty-four hours a day, and this morning I have doubled the number of guards. As a further precaution, security guards cannot enter BSL4, but monitor the laboratory via closed-circuit television cameras."

Brown was not appeased. "If you've got perfect security, how did the hamster get out?"

Toni was ready for this. "Let me make three points. One, it was not a hamster. You've got that information from the police, and it's wrong." ~~She had deliberately given Frank and information, and he~~ had fallen into her trap, betraying himself as the source of the leaked story. "Please rely on us for the facts about what goes on here. It was a rabbit, and it was not called Fluffy."

They laughed at this, and even Brown smiled.

"Two, the rabbit was smuggled out of the laboratory in a bag, and we have today instituted a compulsory bag search at the entrance to BSL4, to make sure this cannot happen again. Three, I didn't say we had perfect security. I said we set the highest possible standards. That's all human beings can do."

"So you're admitting your laboratory is a danger to innocent members of the Scottish public."

"No. You're safer here than you would be driving on the M8 or taking a flight from Prestwick. ^{Although} Viruses kill many people every day, ~~but~~ only one person has ever died of a virus

from our lab, and he was not an innocent member of the ~~Scottish~~ public—he was an employee who deliberately broke the rules and knowingly put himself at risk.”

On balance it was going well, Toni thought as she looked around for the next question. The television cameras were rolling, the flash^{lights} ~~guns~~ were popping, and Stanley was coming across as what he was, a brilliant scientist with a strong sense of responsibility. But she was afraid the TV news would throw away the undramatic ^{Scientific} ~~footage of the press conference~~ in favour of the crowd of youngsters at the gate chanting slogans about animal rights. She wished she could think of something more interesting for the cameramen to point their lenses at.

Frank’s friend Carl Osborne spoke up for the first time. He was a good-looking man of about ~~Toni’s age~~ ⁶⁰ with movie-star features. His hair was a shade too yellow to be natural. “Exactly what danger did this rabbit pose to the general public?”

Stanley answered: “The virus is not very infectious across species. In order to infect Michael, we think the rabbit must have bitten him.”

“What if the rabbit had got loose?”

Stanley looked out of the window. A light snow was falling. “It would have frozen to death.”

“Suppose it had been eaten by another animal. Could a fox have become infected?”

“No. Viruses are adapted to a small number of species, usually one, sometimes two or three. This one does not infect foxes, or any other form of Scottish wildlife, as far as we know. Just humans, macaque monkeys, and certain types of rabbit.”

“But Michael could have given the virus to other people.”

“By sneezing, yes. This was the possibility that alarmed us most. However, Michael

seems not to have seen anyone during the critical period. We have already contacted his colleagues and friends. Nonetheless, we would be grateful if you would use your newspapers and television programmes to appeal for anyone who did see him to call us immediately.”

“We aren’t trying to minimise this,” Toni put in hastily. “We are deeply concerned about the incident and, as I’ve explained, we have already put in stronger security measures. But at the same time we must be careful not to exaggerate.” Telling journalists not to exaggerate was a bit like telling lawyers not to be quarrelsome, she thought wryly. “The truth is that the public have not been endangered.”

Osborne was not finished. “Suppose Michael Ross had given it to a friend, who had given it to someone else...how many people might have died?”

Toni said quickly: “We can’t ^{entertain} ~~enter into~~ that kind of wild speculation. The virus did not spread. One person died. That’s one too many, but it’s no reason to start talking about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” She bit her tongue. That was a stupid phrase to use: someone would probably quote it, out of context, and make it seem as if she had been forecasting doomsday.

Osborne said: “I understand your work is financed by the American Army.”

“The Department of Defense, yes,” Stanley said. “They are naturally interested in ways of combating biological warfare.”

“Isn’t it true that the Americans have this work done in Scotland because they think it’s too dangerous to be done in the United States?”

“On the contrary. A great deal of work of this type goes on in the States, at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, and at the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick.”

“So why was Scotland chosen?”

“Because the drug was invented here at Oxenford Medical.”

Toni decided to quit while she was ahead and close the press conference. “I don’t want to cut the questioning short, but I know some of you have midday deadlines,” she said. “You should all have an information pack, and Cynthia here has extra copies.”

“One more question,” said Clive Brown of the *Record*. “What’s your reaction to the demonstration outside?”

Toni realised she still had not thought of something more interesting for the cameras.

Stanley said: “They offer a simple answer to a complex ethical question. Like most simple answers, theirs is wrong.”

It was the right response, but sounded a little hard-hearted, so Toni added: “And we hope they don’t catch cold.”

While the audience was laughing at that, Toni stood up to indicate the conference was over. Then she was struck by inspiration. She beckoned to Cynthia Creighton. Turning her back on the audience, she spoke in a low, urgent voice. “Go down to the canteen, quickly,” she said. “Get two or three canteen staff to load up trays with cups of hot coffee and tea, and hand them out to the demonstrators outside the gate.”

“What a kind thought,” said Cynthia.

Toni was not being kind—in fact she was being cynical—but there was no time to explain that. “It must be done in the next couple of minutes,” she said. “Go, go!”

Cynthia hurried away.

Toni turned to Stanley and said: “Well done. You handled that perfectly.”

He took a ~~red-spotted~~ handkerchief from his jacket pocket and discreetly mopped his

face. "I hope it's done the trick."

"We'll know when we see the lunch time news on television. Now you should slip away, otherwise they'll all be trying to corner you for an exclusive interview." He was under pressure, and she wanted to protect him.

"Good thinking. I need to get home, anyway." He lived in a farmhouse on a cliff five miles from the lab. "I'd like to be there to welcome the family."

That disappointed her. She had been looking forward to reviewing the press conference with him. "Okay," she said. "I'll monitor the reaction."

"At least no one asked me the worst question."

"What was that?"

"The survival rate from Madoba-2."

"What does that mean?"

"No matter how deadly the infection, there are usually some individuals who live through it. Survival rate is a measure of how dangerous it is."

"And what is the survival rate for Madoba-2?"

"Zero," said Stanley.

Toni stared at him. She was glad she had not known that before.

Stanley nodded over her shoulder. "Here comes Osborne."

"I'll head him off at the pass." She moved to intercept the reporter, and Stanley left by a side door. "Hello, Carl. I hope you got everything you needed?"

"I think so. I was wondering what Stanley's first success was."

"He was a member of the team that developed acyclovir."

"Which is?"

He surprised her by following up quickly. "Would you like to have dinner?"

"Dinner?" she said.

"Yes."

"As in, go out on a date with you?"

"Yes, again."

It was the last thing she had expected. "No!" she said. Then she remembered how dangerous this man could be, and tried to soften her rejection. "I'm sorry, Carl, you took me by surprise. I've known you so long that I just don't think of you that way."

"I might change your thinking." He ^{smiled.} ~~looked boyishly vulnerable.~~ "Give me a chance."

The answer was still no, but she hesitated for a moment. Carl was handsome, charming, well paid, a local celebrity. Most ~~single women pushing forty~~ would jump at the chance. But she was not even mildly attracted to him. Even if she had not given her heart to Stanley, she would not have been tempted to go out with Carl. Why?

It took her only a second to find the answer. Carl had no integrity. A man who would distort the truth for the sake of a sensational story would be equally dishonest in other areas of life. He was not a monster. There were plenty of men like him, and a few women. But Toni could not contemplate becoming intimate with someone so shallow. ~~How could you kiss, and confess secrets, and lose your inhibitions, and open your body, with someone who could not be trusted? The thought was revolting.~~

"I'm flattered," she lied. "But no."

He was not ready to give up. "The truth is, I always fancied you, even when you were with Frank. You must have sensed that."

"You used to flirt with me, but you did that with most women."

“It wasn’t the same.”

“Aren’t you seeing that weather girl? I seem to remember a photo in the newspaper.”

“Marnie? That was never serious. I did it for publicity, mainly.”

He seemed irritated by the reminder, and Toni guessed that Marnie had thrown him over. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said sympathetically.

“Show your compassion in actions, not words. Have dinner with me tonight. I even have a table booked at La Chaumière.”

It was a swanky restaurant. He must have made the reservation some time ago—probably for Marnie. “I’m busy tonight.”

“You’re not still carrying a torch for Frank, are you?”

Toni laughed bitterly. “I did for a while, fool that I am, but I’m over him now. Very over.”

“Someone else, then?”

“I’m not seeing anyone.”

“But you’re interested in someone. It’s not the old professor, is it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Toni said.

“You’re not blushing, are you?”

“I hope not, though any woman subjected to this kind of interrogation would be entitled to blush.”

“My god, you fancy Stanley Oxenford.” Carl was not good at taking rejection, and his face became ugly with resentment. “Of course, Stanley’s a widower, isn’t he? Children grown up. All that money, and just the two of you to spend it.”

“This is really offensive, Carl.”

“The truth so often is. You really like high flyers, don’t you? First Frank, the fastest-rising detective in the history of the Scottish police. And now a millionaire scientific entrepreneur. You’re a starfucker, Toni!”

She had to end this before she lost her temper. “Thank you for coming to the press conference,” she said. She held out her hand, and he shook it automatically. “Goodbye.” She turned and walked away.

She was shaking with anger. He had made her deepest emotions seem unworthy. She wanted to strangle him, not go out with him. She tried to make herself calm. She had a major professional crisis to deal with, and she could not let her emotions get in the way.

She went to the reception desk near the door and spoke to the ^{head} ~~supervisor~~ of the security ~~guards~~ Steve Tremlett. “Stay here until they’ve all left, and make sure none of them tries to take an unofficial tour.” No guest could get into BSL4, but a determined snoop might enter medium-security areas by “tailgating”—waiting for someone with a pass then going through the door right behind them.

“Leave it to me,” Steve said.

She began to feel calmer. She put on her coat and went outside. The snow was falling more heavily, but she could see the demonstration. She walked to the guard booth at the gate. Three canteen staff were handing out hot drinks. The protestors had temporarily stopped chanting and waving their banners, and were smiling and chatting instead.

And all the cameras were photographing them.

Everything had gone perfectly she thought. So why did she feel depressed?

She returned to her office. She closed the door and stood still, grateful to be alone. for a minute. She had controlled the press conference well, she thought. She had protected her

boss from Osborne. And the idea of giving hot drinks to the demonstrators had worked like a charm. It would be unwise to celebrate before seeing the actual coverage, of course, but she felt that every decision she had made had been right.

So why did she feel so down?

Partly it was Osborne. Any encounter with him could leave a person feeling low. But mainly, she realised, it was Stanley. After all she had done ~~for him~~ this morning, he had slipped away with barely a word of thanks. That was what it meant to be the boss, she supposed. And she had long known how important his family was to him. ~~She~~, by contrast, ~~she~~ was just a colleague: valued, liked, respected—but not loved.

The phone rang. She looked at it for a moment, resenting its cheerful ~~warble~~, ^{tone} ~~not~~ ~~wanting to talk~~. Then ~~she~~ picked it up.

It was Stanley, calling from his car. “Why don’t you drop in at the house in an hour or so? We could watch the news, and learn our fate together.”

Her mood lifted instantly. ~~She felt as if the sun had come out.~~ “Of course,” she said. “I’d be delighted.”

~~“We might as well be crucified side by side,”~~ he said.

~~“I would consider it an honour.”~~

12 noon

The snow became heavier as Miranda drove north. Big white flakes swooped on the windscreen of the Toyota Previa, to be swept aside by the long wipers. She had to slow down as visibility diminished. ~~The snow seemed to soundproof the car, and there was no more than a background swish of tyres to compete with the classical music from the radio.~~

The atmosphere inside was subdued. In the back, Sophie was listening to her own music on headphones, while Tom was lost in the beeping world of Game Boy. Ned was quiet, occasionally conducting ^{on the radio} the orchestra with one waving forefinger. As he gazed into the snow and listened to Elgar's cello concerto, Miranda watched his tranquil, bearded face, and realised that he ^{probably} had no idea how badly he had let her down.

He sensed her discontent. "I'm sorry about Jennifer's outburst," he said.

Miranda looked in the rear-view mirror, ~~and saw that Sophie was nodding her head in time to the music from her iPod.~~ ^{Sophie was absorbed with her iPod} Satisfied that ~~the girl could not hear her,~~ Miranda said:

"Jennifer was bloody rude."

"I'm sorry," he said again. He obviously felt no need to explain or apologise for his own role.

She had to destroy his comfortable illusion. "It's not Jennifer's behaviour that bothers me," she said. "It's yours."

“I realise it was a mistake to invite you in without warning her.”

“It’s not that. We all make mistakes.”

He looked puzzled and annoyed. “What. Then?”

“Oh, Ned! You didn’t defend me!”

“I thought you were well able to defend yourself.”

“That’s not the point! Of course I can look after myself. I don’t need mothering. But you should be my champion.”

“A knight in shining armour.”

“Yes!”

“I thought it was more important to get things calmed down.”

“Well, you thought wrong. When the world turns hostile, I don’t want you to take a judicious view of the situation—I want you to be on my side.”

“I’m afraid I’m not the combative type.”

“I know,” she said, and they both fell silent.

They were on a narrow road that followed the shore of a sea loch. They passed small farms with a few horses in winter blankets cropping the grass, and drove through villages with white-painted churches and rows of houses along the waterfront. Miranda felt depressed. Even if her family embraced Ned as she had asked them to, did she want to marry such a passive man? She had longed for someone gentle and cultured and bright, but she now realised that she also wanted ^{him} ~~a man~~ to be strong. Was it too much to expect? She thought of her father. He was always kind, rarely angry, never quarrelsome—but no one had ever thought him weak.

Her mood lifted as they approached Steepfall. The house was reached by a long lane

that wound through woods. Emerging from the trees, the drive swept around a headland with a sheer drop to the sea.

The garage came into view first. Standing sideways ~~on~~ to the drive, it was an old cowshed that had been renovated and given three ^{sliding} ~~up and over~~ doors. Miranda drove past it and along the front of the house.

Seeing the ~~old farmhouse overlooking the beach, its~~ thick stone walls with their small windows and the steep slate roof, she was overwhelmed by ^{memories} ~~a sense of her~~ childhood. She had first come here at the age of five, and every time she returned she became, for a few moments, a little girl in white socks, sitting on the granite doorstep in the sun, playing teacher to a class of three dolls, two guinea pigs ~~in a cage~~, and a sleepy old dog. ~~The sensation was intense, but fleeting. suddenly she remembered exactly how it had felt to be herself at five, but trying to hold on to the memory was like grabbing at smoke.~~

Her father's dark blue Ferrari F50 was at the front of the house, where he always left it for Luke, the handyman, to ^{put away} ~~garage~~ it. The car was dangerously fast, ~~obscenely curvaceous~~, and ludicrously expensive for his daily five-mile commute to the laboratory. Parked here on a bleak Scottish cliff top, it was as out of place as a high-heeled courtesan in a muddy farmyard. But he had no yacht, no wine cellar, no racehorse; he did not go skiing in Gstaad or gambling in Monte Carlo. The Ferrari was his only indulgence.

Miranda parked the Toyota. "Leave the presents for now," she said. "Let's go in and say hello to Grandpa."

Tom rushed in. Sophie followed more slowly: she had not been here before, though she had met Stanley once, at Olga's birthday party a few months back. Miranda decided to forget about Jennifer for now. She took Ned's hand and they went in together.

They entered, as always, by the ~~kitchen door at the side of the house~~^{door,}. There was a lobby, ~~where Wellington boots were kept~~^{with} in a cupboard, ~~then a second door into the spacious kitchen.~~^{full of Wellington boots} ~~To Miranda this always felt like coming home.~~[↑] The familiar smell ~~filled her head:~~^{↑ Miranda's} roast dinners and ground coffee and apples, and a persistent trace of the French cigarettes Mamma Marta had smoked. No other house had replaced this one as the home of Miranda's soul: not the flat in Camden Town where she had sown her wild oats, nor the modern suburban house where ~~she had been~~^{lived with} briefly married to Jasper Casson, nor the apartment in Georgian Glasgow in which she had raised Tom, at first alone and now with Ned.

A full-size black standard poodle called Nellie wagged her whole body with joy and licked everyone. Miranda greeted Luke and Lori, the Filipino couple who were preparing lunch. Lori said: "Your father just got home, he's washing."

Miranda told Tom and Sophie to lay the table. She did not want the children to put down roots in front of the TV and stay there all afternoon. "Tom, you can show Sophie where everything is." And having a job to do would help Sophie feel part of the family.

There were several bottles of Miranda's favourite white wine in the fridge. Daddy did not drink much, but Mamma had always had wine, and Daddy made sure there was plenty in the house. Miranda opened a bottle and poured a glass for Ned.

This was a good start, Miranda thought: Sophie happily helping Tom put out knives and forks, and Ned contentedly sipping Sancerre. Perhaps this, rather than the scene with Jennifer, would set the tone for the holiday.

If Ned was going to be part of Miranda's life, he had to love this house and the family that had grown up in it. He had been here before, but he had never brought Sophie and he had never stayed overnight, so this was his first major visit. She so wanted him to have a good

time and get on well with everyone.

Miranda's husband, Jasper, had never liked Steepfall. At first he had gone out of his way to charm everyone, but on later visits he had been withdrawn ~~while here~~ and ^{then} angry after they left. He seemed to dislike Stanley, and complained that he was authoritarian, which was odd, as Stanley rarely told anyone what to do—whereas Marta was so bossy they sometimes called her Mamma Mussolini. Now, with hindsight, Miranda could see that Jasper's hold over her was threatened by the presence of another man who loved her. Jasper did not feel free to bully her while her father was around.

The phone rang. Miranda picked up the extension on the wall by the big fridge. "Hello?"

"Miranda, it's Kit."

She was pleased. "Hello, little brother! How are you?"

"A bit shattered, actually."

"How come?"

"I fell in a swimming pool. Long story. How are things at Steepfall?"

"We're just sitting around drinking Daddy's wine, wishing you were with us."

"Well, I'm coming after all."

"Good!" She decided not to ask what had changed his mind. He would probably just say *long story* again.

"I'll be there in an hour or so. But, listen, can I still have the cottage?"

"I'm sure you can. It's up to Daddy, but I'll talk to him."

As Miranda cradled the handset, her father came in. He wore the waistcoat and trousers of his suit, but he had rolled the cuffs of his shirt. He shook hands with Ned and

kissed Miranda and the children. He was looking very trim, Miranda thought. "Are you losing weight?" she asked.

"I've been playing squash. Who was on the phone?"

"That was Kit. He's coming, after all." She watched her father's face, anxious to see his reaction.

"I'll believe it when I see him."

"Oh, Daddy! You might sound more enthusiastic."

He patted her hand. "We all love Kit, but we know what he's like. I hope he shows up, but I'm not counting on it." His tone was light, but Miranda could tell that he was ~~trying~~ ~~to hide an inner~~ hurt.

"He really wants to sleep in the cottage."

"Did he say why?"

"No."

Tom piped up: "He's probably bringing a girl, and doesn't want us all to hear her squeals of delight."

The kitchen went quiet. Miranda was astonished. Where had that come from? Tom was eleven, and never talked about sex. After a moment, they all burst out laughing. Tom looked bashful, and said: "I read that in a book." He was probably trying to seem grown-up in front of Sophie, Miranda decided. He was still a little boy, but not for much longer.

Stanley said: "Anyway, I don't mind where anyone sleeps, you know that." He looked at his watch distractedly. "I have to watch the lunch time news on television."

Miranda said: "I'm sorry about the technician who died. What made him do it?"

"We all get weird ideas into our heads, but a lonely person has no one to tell him not

to be crazy.”

The door opened and Olga came in. As always, she entered speaking. “This weather is a nightmare! People are skidding all over the place. Is that wine you’re drinking? Let me have some before I ~~explode~~. ^{collapses} Nellie, please don’t sniff me there, ~~it’s considered vulgar in human society~~. Hello, Daddy, how are you?”

“*Nella merde*,” he said.

Miranda recognised one of her mother’s expressions. It meant “in the shit”. Mamma Marta had fondly imagined that if she swore in Italian the children would not understand.

Olga said: “I heard about the guy who died. Is it so bad for you?”

“We’ll see when we watch the news, ^{\\} ~~at lunch time.~~”

Olga was followed in by her husband Hugo, a small man with impish charm. When he kissed Miranda, his lips lingered on her cheek a second too long.

Olga said: “Where shall Hugo put the bags?”

“Upstairs,” said Miranda.

“I suppose you’ve staked your claim to the cottage.”

“No, Kit’s having it.”

“Oh, please!” Olga protested. “That big double bed and a nice bathroom and ^{one crammed} kitchenette, all for one person, while the four of us ~~share the poky old bathroom~~ upstairs?”

“He particularly asked for it.”

“Well, I’m particularly asking for it.”

Miranda felt irritated with her sister. “For God’s sake, Olga, think of someone other than yourself for a change. You know Kit hasn’t been here since...that whole mess. I just want to make sure he has a good time.”

“So he’s getting the best bedroom because he ^{is a thief} ~~stole from Daddy~~—is that your logic?”

“You’re talking like a barrister again. Saved ~~it~~ it for your learned friends.”

“All right, you two,” their father said, soundings just as he had when they were small.

“In this case, I think Olga’s right. It’s selfish of Kit to demand the cottage all to himself. Miranda and Ned can sleep there.”

Olga said: “So no one gets what they want.”

Miranda sighed. Why was Olga arguing? They all knew their father. Most of the time he would give you anything you wanted, but when he said no it was final. He might be indulgent, but he could not be bullied.

Now he said: “It will teach you not to quarrel.”

“No, it won’t. You’ve been imposing these judgements of Solomon for thirty years, and we still haven’t learned.”

Stanley smiled. “You’re right. My approach to child-rearing has been wrong all along. Should I start again?”

“Too late.”

“Thank god for that.”

Miranda just hoped Kit would not be offended enough to turn around and drive away ^{but} ~~again~~. The argument ~~was~~ ^{was} ended ~~by~~ ^{with} the entrance of Caroline and Craig, the children of Hugo and Olga.

Caroline, seventeen, was carrying a cage containing several white rats. Nellie sniffed it excitedly. Caroline related to animals as a way of avoiding people. It was a phase many girls went through but, Miranda thought, at seventeen she should have got over it.

Craig, fifteen, carried two plastic rubbish bags crammed with wrapped gifts. He had

Hugo's wicked grin, though he was tall like Olga. He put the bags down, greeted the family perfunctorily, and made a beeline for Sophie. They had met once before, Miranda recalled, at Olga's birthday party. "You got your belly-button pierced!" Craig said to Sophie. "Cool! Did it hurt?"

Miranda became aware that there was a stranger in the room. The newcomer, a woman, stood by the door to the hall, so must have come in by the front entrance. She was tall, with striking good looks: high cheekbones, ~~and a curved nose~~, lush red-blond hair and marvellous green eyes. She wore a brown chalk-stripe suit that was a bit ruffled, and her expert make-up did not quite hide signs of tiredness under her eyes. She was gazing with amusement at the animated scene in the crowded kitchen. Miranda wondered how long she had been watching in silence.

The others began to notice her, and ~~slowly the room fell silent~~. At last, Stanley turned around. "Ah! Toni!" he said, jumping up from his seat, and Miranda was struck by how pleased he looked. "Kind of you to drop in. Kids, this is my colleague, Antonia Gallo."

The woman smiled as if she thought there was nothing more delightful than a big quarrelsome family. She had a wide, generous smile and full lips. This was the ex-cop who had caught Kit stealing from the company, Miranda realised. Despite that, Stanley seemed to like her.

Stanley introduced them, and Miranda noticed the pride in his tone. "Toni, meet my daughter Olga, her husband Hugo, and their children, Caroline with the pet rats, and Craig the tall one. My other daughter Miranda, her boy Tom, her fiancé Ned, and Ned's daughter, Sophie." Toni looked at each member of the family, nodding pleasantly, seeming keenly interested. It was hard to take in eight new names at a time, but Miranda had a feeling Toni

would remember them all. "That's Luke peeling carrots and Lori at the stove. Nellie, the lady does not want a chew of your rawhide bone, touched though she is by your generosity."

Toni said: "I'm very glad to meet you all." She sounded as if she meant it, ~~but at the same time she seemed to be under strain.~~

Miranda said: "You must be having a difficult day. I'm so sorry about the technician who died."

Stanley said: "It was Toni who found him."

"Oh, god!"

Toni nodded. "We're pretty sure he didn't infect anyone else, thank heaven. Now we're just hoping the media won't crucify us."

Stanley looked at his watch. "Excuse us," he said to his family. "We're going to watch the news in my study." He held the door for Toni and they went out.

The children started to chatter again, and Hugo said something to Ned about the Scottish rugby team. Miranda turned to Olga. Their quarrel was forgotten. "Attractive woman," she said musingly.

"Yes," Olga said. "About, what, my age?"

"Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, yes. And Daddy's lost weight."

"I noticed that."

"A shared crisis brings people together."

"Doesn't it just?"

"So what do you think?"

"I think what you think."

Miranda drained her glass of wine. "I thought so."

1 p.m.

Toni was overwhelmed by the scene in the kitchen: adults ~~and~~ ^{and} children, servants ~~and~~ ~~pets~~, drinking wine and preparing food and quarrelling and laughing at jokes. It had been like walking into a really good party where she knew nobody. She wanted to join in, but ~~she felt~~ ^{was} ~~excluded~~ ^{sure how}. This was Stanley's life, she thought. He and his wife had created this family, this home, this warmth. She admired him for it, and envied his children. They probably had no idea how privileged they were. She had stood there for several minutes, bemused but fascinated. No wonder he was so attached to his family.

~~It thrilled and dismayed her. She could, if she allowed herself, entertain a fantasy about being part of this group, sitting beside Stanley as his wife, loving him and his children, basking in the comfort of their togetherness. But she repressed that dream. It was impossible, and she should not torture herself. The very strength of the family bonds kept her out.~~

When at last they noticed her, she got a hard look from both daughters, Olga and Miranda. It was a careful scrutiny: detailed, unapologetic, hostile. She had got a similar look from Lori, the cook, though more discreet.

She understood their reaction. For thirty years Marta had ruled that kitchen. They would have felt disloyal to her had they *not* been hostile. Any woman Stanley liked could turn into a threat. She could disrupt the ~~life of the~~ family. She might change their father's

attitudes, turn his affections in new directions. She might bear him children, half-brothers and half-sisters who would care nothing about the history of the original family, ~~would not be bound to them with the unbreakable chains of a shared childhood.~~ She would take some of their inheritance, perhaps all of it. Was Stanley sensing these undercurrents? As she followed him into his study, she felt again the maddening frustration of not knowing what was in his mind.

It was a masculine room, with a Victorian pedestal desk, a bookcase full of weighty microbiology texts, and a worn leather couch in front of a log fire. The dog followed them in and stretched out by the fire like a curly black rug. On the mantelpiece was a framed photograph of a dark-haired teenage girl in tennis whites—the same girl as the bride in the picture on his office wall. Her brief shorts showed long, athletic legs. The heavy eye make-up and the hair band told Toni that the picture had been taken in the sixties. “Was Marta a scientist, too?” Toni asked.

“No. Her degree was in English. When I met her, she was teaching A-level Italian at a high school in Cambridge.”

Toni was surprised. She had imagined that Marta must have shared Stanley’s passion for his work. So, she thought, you don’t need a doctorate in biology to be married to him. “She was pretty.”

“Devastating,” Stanley replied. “Beautiful, tall, sexy, foreign, a demon on the court, a heartbreaker off it. I was struck by lightning. Five minutes after I met her, I was in love.”

“And she with you?”

“That took longer. She was surrounded by admirers. Men fell like flies. I could never understand why she picked me in the end. She used to say she couldn’t resist an egghead.”

No mystery there, Toni thought. Marta had liked what Toni liked: Stanley's strength. You knew right away that here was a man who would do what he said and be what he seemed / ~~to be~~, a man you could rely on. ~~That was why he was a rock of stability for everyone around him, employees and family.~~ He had other attractions: he was warm and clever and even well dressed. But what made him infinitely desirable to Toni was his strength of character.

She longed to say *Do you think you could love again?* ~~The thought of speaking out in that way gave her a tremor in her chest like the uncertain vibration of the engine of her Porsche when it was cold. Stanley was her boss. She had no right to ask him about his deepest feelings.~~ ^{but} And there was Marta, on the mantelpiece, wielding her tennis racket like a cudgel.

~~Sitting on the couch beside Stanley, she felt emotionally close to him. She tried to put her emotions aside and concentrate on the crisis at hand.~~ "Did you call the U.S. Embassy?" she asked ~~him~~ ^{to change her mood.}

"Yes. I got Mahoney calmed down, for the moment, but he'll be watching the news like us."

A lot hung on the next few minutes, Toni thought. The company could be destroyed or saved, Stanley could be bankrupted, she could lose her job, and the world could lose the services of a great scientist. ~~Don't panic, she told herself; be practical.~~ She took a notebook from her shoulder bag. Cynthia Creighton was videotaping the news, back at the office, so Toni would be able to watch it again later, but she would now jot down any ~~notes that occurred to her~~ ^{immediate thoughts.}

The Scottish news came on before the UK bulletin.

The death of Michael Ross was still the top story, but the report was ^{not} introduced by ~~an~~

~~newsreader,~~ not Carl Osborne. That was a good sign, Toni thought hopefully. There was no more of Carl's laughably inaccurate science. The virus was correctly named as Madoba-2. The anchor was careful to point out that Michael's death would be investigated by the sheriff at an inquest.

"So far, so good," Stanley murmured.

Toni said: "It looks to me as if a senior news executive watched Carl Osborne's sloppy report over breakfast and came in to the office determined to sharpen up the coverage."

The picture switched to the gates of the Kremlin. "Animal rights campaigners took advantage of the tragedy to stage a protest outside Oxenford Medical," the anchor said. Toni was pleasantly surprised. That sentence was more favourable than she would have hoped, ~~it~~ ^{ins that} implied the demonstrators were cynical media manipulators.

After a brief shot ~~of the demo,~~ ^{camera on} the ~~report~~ cut to the Great Hall. Toni heard her own voice, sounding more Scots than she expected, outlining the security system at the laboratory. This was not very effective, she realised: just a voice droning on about alarms and guards. It might have been better to let the cameras film the air-lock entrance to BSL4, with its fingerprint recognition system and submarine doors. ~~Pictures were always better than words.~~

Then there was a shot of Carl Osborne asking: "Exactly what danger did this rabbit pose to the general public?"

Toni leaned forward on the couch. This was the crunch.

They played the interchange between Carl and Stanley, with Carl posing disaster scenarios and Stanley saying how unlikely they were. This was bad, Toni knew. The audience would remember the idea of wildlife becoming infected, even though Stanley had

said firmly that it was not possible.

On the screen, Carl said: "But Michael could have given the virus to other people."

Stanley replied gravely: "By sneezing, yes."

Unfortunately, they cut the exchange at that point.

Stanley muttered: "Bloody hell."

"It's not over yet," Toni said. It could get better—or worse.

Toni hoped they would show her hasty intervention, when she had tried to counter the impression of complacency by saying that Oxenford Medical was not trying to downplay the risk. But, instead, there was a shot of Susan Mackintosh on the phone, with a voiceover explaining how the company was calling every employee to check whether they had had contact with Michael Ross. That was all right, Toni thought with relief. The danger was bluntly stated, but the company was shown taking positive action.

The final press conference shot was a close-up of Stanley, looking responsible, saying: "In time, we will defeat influenza, and Aids, and even cancer—and it will be done by scientists like us, working in laboratories such as this."

"That's good," Toni said.

"Will it outweigh the dialogue with Osborne, about infecting wildlife?"

"I think so. You look so reassuring."

Then there was a shot of the canteen staff giving out steaming hot drinks to the demonstrators in the snow. "Great—they used it!" said Toni.

"I didn't see this," Stanley said. "Whose idea was it?"

"Mine."

Carl Osborne thrust a microphone into the face of a woman employee and said:

“These people are demonstrating against your company. Why are you giving them coffee?”

“Because it’s cold out here,” the woman replied.

Toni and Stanley laughed, delighted with the woman’s wit and the positive way it reflected on the company.

The anchor reappeared and said: “The First Minister of Scotland issued a statement this morning, saying: ‘I have today spoken to representatives of Oxenford Medical, the Inverburn police, and the Inverburn regional health authority, and I am satisfied that everything possible is being done to ensure that there is no further danger to the public.’ And now other news.”

Toni said: “My god, I think we saved the day.”

“Giving out hot drinks was a great idea—when did you think of that?”

“At the last minute. Let’s see what the UK news says.”

~~In the main bulletin,~~ ^{followed reports of} the story of Michael Ross ~~came second, after~~ an earthquake in Russia. The ~~report~~ ^{coverage} used some of the same footage, but without Carl Osborne, who was a personality only in Scotland. There was a clip of Stanley saying: “The virus is not very infectious across species. In order to infect Michael, we think the rabbit must have bitten him.” There was a low-key statement from the British Environment Minister in London. The report continued the same ~~unhysterical~~ ^{calm} tone ^{as} of the Scottish news. Toni was hugely relieved.

Stanley said: “It’s good to know that not all journalists are like Carl Osborne.”

“He asked me to have dinner with him.” Toni wondered why she was telling him this.

Stanley looked surprised. “*Ha la faccia peggio del culo!*” he said. “Hell of a nerve.”

She laughed. What he had actually said was: “His face is worse than his arse,” presumably one of Marta’s expressions. “He’s an attractive man,” she said.

"You don't really think so, do you?"

Well

"He's handsome, ~~anyway~~." She realised she was trying to make him jealous. Don't
 1
 play games, she told herself.

He said: "What did you say to him?"

"I turned him down, of course."

"I should think so, too." Stanley ~~looked embarrassed and added: "Not that it's any of~~
~~my business, but he's not worthy of you, not by a light year."~~ He returned his attention to the
~~television and switched to an all-news channel.~~

They watched footage of Russian earthquake victims and rescue teams for a couple of
 minutes. Toni felt foolish for having told Stanley about Osborne, but pleased by his reaction.

The Michael Ross story followed, and once again the tone was coolly factual. This
 time, Toni herself was featured. She was startled by how plump she looked in close-up, then
 she remembered the saying that television puts ten pounds on everyone. Her chubby image
 said: "Viruses kill many people every day, but only one person has ever died of a virus from
 our lab, and he was not an innocent member of the Scottish public—he was an employee who
 deliberately broke the rules and knowingly put himself at risk." Out of context, the quote
 made her seem a bit heartless, but at least she had made the point forcefully.

Stanley turned off ^{TV} the set. "Well, we escaped crucifixion by ^{today} TV."

"No newspapers tomorrow, as it's Christmas ~~Day~~," Toni observed. "By Thursday the
 story will be old. I think we're in the clear—barring unexpected developments."

"Yes. If we ^{lose} ~~lost~~ another rabbit, we'd ^{be right} ~~be right~~ back in ^{the soup} ~~trouble~~."

"There will be no more security incidents at the lab," Toni said firmly. "I'll make sure
 of that."

keyed, Toni

Stanley smiled. "I have to say, you've handled this whole thing extraordinarily well.

I'm very grateful to you."

Toni ^{smiled} ~~glowed~~. "We told the truth, and they believed us," ~~she said.~~ ^{Just then}

~~She suddenly had a feeling that Stanley was going to kiss her. Perhaps it was the way they were seated, side by side on a couch; as if they were youngsters who had been out on a date, and she had invited him in for coffee, and was now waiting for him to make his move.~~

~~Stanley looked faintly embarrassed, as if the same thought had occurred to him. Then~~ ^{Stanley} the phone rang, and ~~he~~ jumped up.

~~He reached across his desk and picked up the phone.~~ "Oxenford," he said. "Yes, patch him through here, please, I'm keen to speak to him." He looked up at Toni and mouthed: "Mahoney."

Toni stood up nervously. She and Stanley were convinced they had controlled the publicity well—but would the US government agree? She watched Stanley's face.

He spoke into the phone. "Hello again, Larry, did you watch the news?...I'm glad you think so...We've avoided the kind of hysterical reaction that you feared...You know my facilities director, Antonia Gallo—she handled the press...a great job, I agree...Absolutely right, we must keep a very tight grip on security from now on...yes. Good of you to call. Bye."

Stanley hung up and grinned at Toni. "We're in the clear." Exuberantly, he put his arms around her and hugged her.

She pressed her face into his shoulder. The tweed of his waistcoat was surprisingly soft. She breathed in the warm, faint smell of him, and realised it was a long time since she had been this close to a man. ~~She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him back,~~

all this is unnecessary
she knew she
loves him &
then make
them go the
same silly
I said
"How time to
the time"

~~feeling her breasts press against his chest.~~

She would have stayed like that forever, but after a few seconds he gently ~~disengaged,~~ ^{released her,}
~~looking bashful. As if to restore propriety, he shook her hand. "All credit to you," he said.~~

The brief moment of physical contact had aroused her. Oh, god, she thought, I'm wet,
~~how could it happen so quickly?~~

~~He said:~~ "Would you like to see the house?" ^{he called}

"I'd love to." ~~Toni was thrilled. A man rarely offered to show guests the house. It was~~
~~another kind of intimacy.~~

The two rooms she had already seen, kitchen and study, were at the back, looking on
^{the} to a yard, ~~surrounded by outbuildings.~~ Stanley led Toni to the front ^{out} ~~of the house~~ and into a
 dining room with a view of the sea. ~~This part looked like a new extension to the old~~
~~farmhouse.~~ In a corner was a cabinet of silver cups. "Marta's tennis trophies," Stanley said
 proudly. "She had a backhand like a rocket launcher."

"How far did she get with her tennis?"

"She qualified for Wimbledon, but never competed because she got pregnant with
 Olga."

Across the hall, also overlooking the sea, was a drawing room with a Christmas tree.
 The gifts under the tree spilled across the floor. There was another picture of Marta, a full-
 length painting of her as a woman of forty, with a fuller figure and a softness around her
 jawline. It was a warm, pleasant room, but nobody was in it, and Toni guessed the real heart
 of the house was the kitchen.

The layout was simple: drawing room and dining room at the front, kitchen and study
 at the back. "There's not much to see upstairs," Stanley said, but he went up anyway, and

^{out}
 which looked like a new
 extension
 to the old
 farmhouse

~~Toni followed. Was she being shown around her future home, she asked herself? It was a stupid fantasy, and she pushed it aside quickly. He was just being nice.~~

~~But he had hugged her.~~

In the older part of the house, over the study and drawing room, were three small bedrooms and a bathroom. They still bore traces of the children who had grown up in them, ~~Olga, Miranda and Kit.~~ There was a poster of the Clash on one wall, an old cricket bat with its grip unravelling in a corner, a complete set of *The Chronicles of Narnia* on a shelf..

In the new extension was a master bedroom suite with a dressing room and a bathroom. ~~The king size bed was made and the rooms were tidy. Toni felt both excited and uncomfortable to be in Stanley's bedroom.~~ Yet another picture of Marta stood on the bedside table, this one a colour photograph taken in her fifties. Her hair was a ~~wispy~~ grey and her face was thin, no doubt by reason of the cancer that had killed her. It was an unflattering photo. Toni thought how much Stanley must still love her, to cherish even this unhappy memento.

~~She did not know what to expect next. Would he make a move, with his wife watching from the bedside table and his children downstairs? She felt it was not his style. He might be thinking of it, but he would not jump a woman so suddenly. He would feel that etiquette demanded he woo her in the normal way. To hell with dinner and a movie, she wanted to say; just grab me, for god's sake. But she kept silent, and after showing her the marble bathroom he led the way back downstairs.~~

The tour was a privilege, of course, and should have drawn her closer to Stanley; but in fact she felt excluded, as if she had looked in through a window at a family sitting at table, absorbed in one another and self-sufficient. She felt a sense of anticlimax.

A hand
 In the hall, the big poodle nudged Stanley ~~with her nose~~. "Nellie wants to go outside," he said. He looked out of the little window beside the door. "The snow has stopped—shall we get a breath of air?"

"Sure."

Toni put on her parka *and boots* and Stanley picked up an old blue anorak. They stepped outside to find the world painted white. Toni's Porsche Boxster stood beside Stanley's Ferrari and two other cars, each topped with snow, like iced cakes. The dog headed for the cliff, evidently taking an habitual route. Stanley and Toni followed. ~~Toni wondered if Stanley would kiss her out here.~~

Their feet displaced the powdery snow to reveal tough seaside grass beneath. They crossed a long lawn. A few stunted trees grew at angles, blown slantwise by the tireless wind. They met two of the children coming back from the cliff: the older boy with the attractive grin, and the sulky girl with the pierced navel. Toni remembered their names: Craig and Sophie. ~~When Stanley had introduced everyone, in the kitchen, she had memorised every detail eagerly.~~ *Toni could see that* ~~the girl~~ *Sophie* ~~Toni could see,~~ but ~~the girl~~ walked along with her arms crossed, looking at the ground. Toni envied the simplicity of the choices they faced. They were young ~~and single, at the beginning of adulthood,~~ with nothing to do but embrace the adventure of life. ~~She wanted to tell Sophie not to play hard to get. Take love while you can, she thought; it may not always come to you so easily.~~

"What are your Christmas plans?" Stanley asked. *internally they have these lists*

"About as different from yours as could be. I'm going to a health spa with some friends, all singles or childless couples, for a grown-up Christmas. No turkey, no crackers, no stockings, no Santa. Just gentle pampering and adult conversation."

"It sounds wonderful. I thought you usually had your mother."

"I have done for the past few years. But this Christmas my sister Bella ~~is having~~ ^{has} her—
somewhat to my surprise."

"Surprise?"

Toni made a wry face. "Bella has three children, and she feels that excuses her from other responsibilities. I'm not sure that's fair, but I love my sister, so I accept it."

"Do you want to have children, one day?"

She caught her breath. ~~It was a deeply intimate question. She wondered~~ ^{ins} what answer he would prefer to hear. She did not know, so she told the truth. "Maybe. It was the one thing my sister always wanted. The desire for babies dominated her life. I'm not like that. I envy you your family—they obviously love and respect you and like being with you. But I don't necessarily want to sacrifice everything else in life in order to become a parent."

"I'm not sure you have to sacrifice everything," Stanley said.

You didn't, Toni thought, but what about Marta's chance at Wimbledon? But she said ~~something else~~ ^{just}. "And you? You could start another family."

"Oh, no," he said quickly. "My children would be most put out."

~~Toni felt a little disappointed that he was so decisive about that.~~

They reached the cliff. To the left, the headland sloped down to a beach, now carpeted with snow. To the right, ~~the ground dropped~~ ^{there was a steep} sheer ~~into~~ ^{cliff} the sea. On that side, the ~~edge~~ ^{edge} was ~~barred~~ ^{protected} by a stout wooden fence four feet high, big enough to deter small children without obstructing the view. They both leaned on the fence and looked at the waves a hundred feet below. ~~There was a long, deep swell, rising and falling like the chest of a sleeping giant.~~

"What a lovely spot," Toni said.

“Four hours ago I thought I was going to lose it.”

“Your home?”

He nodded. “I had to pledge the place as security for my overdraft. If I go bust, the bank takes the house.”

“But your family...”

“They would be heartbroken. And now, since Marta went, they’re all I really care about.”

“All?” she said.

He shrugged. “In the end, yes.”

She looked at him. His expression was serious but unsentimental. Why was he telling her this? As a message, Toni assumed. It was not true that his children were all he cared about—he was profoundly involved in his work. But he wanted her to understand how important the family’s unity was to him. Having seen them together in the kitchen, she could understand it. But why had he chosen this ~~other mind-boggling~~ moment to say so? Perhaps he was afraid he might have given her a wrong impression.

~~She needed to know the truth. An awful lot had happened in the last few hours, but all of it was ambiguous. He had touched her, hugged her, shown her his house, and asked her if she wanted children. Did it mean anything, or not? She had to know. She said: “You’re telling me you’d never do anything to jeopardise what I saw in your kitchen, the togetherness of your family.”~~

~~“Yes. They all draw their strength from it, whether they realise it or not.”~~

~~She faced him and looked directly into his eyes. “And that’s so important to you that you would never start another family.”~~

~~"Yes."~~

The message was clear, Toni thought. He liked her, but he was not going to take it any farther. The hug in the study had been a spontaneous expression of triumph; the tour of the house an unguarded moment of intimacy; and now he was pulling back. Reason had prevailed. She felt tears come to her eyes. ~~Reason had prevailed.~~ ^{Horrified that Stanley might notice} ~~Horried that she might be showing her emotions,~~ she turned away, saying: "This wind..."

She was saved by ~~young~~ Tom, who came running through the snow, calling: "Grandpa! Grandpa! Uncle Kit's here!"

^{all worked in silence} They went ~~with the boy~~ back to the house, ~~not speaking, both embarrassed.~~

A fresh double row of tire tracks led to a black Peugeot coupe. It was not much of a car, but it looked stylish—so it was just right for Kit, Toni thought sourly. She did not want to ~~meet~~ ^{she} him. ~~She would not have relished the prospect at the best of times, and right now she was too bruised to face an abrasive encounter.~~ But her shoulder bag was in the house, so she was obliged to follow Stanley inside.

Kit was in the kitchen, being welcomed by his family—like the prodigal son, Toni thought. Miranda hugged him, Olga kissed him, Luke and Lori beamed, and Nellie barked for ~~his attention.~~ Toni stood at the ~~kitchen~~ door and watched Stanley greet his son. Kit looked wary. Stanley seemed both pleased and grieved, in the way he did when he spoke of Marta. Kit held out a hand to shake, but his father embraced him. "I'm very glad you came, my boy," Stanley said. "Very glad indeed."

Kit said: "I'd better get my bag from the car. I'm in the cottage, yeah?"

Miranda looked nervous and said: "No, you're upstairs."

"But—"

~~"Yes."~~

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"But—"

Olga overrode him. "Don't make a fuss—Daddy has decided, and it's his house."

Toni saw a flash of pure rage in Kit's eyes, but he covered up quickly. "Whatever," he said. He was trying to give the impression that it was no big deal, but that flash said otherwise, and Toni wondered what secret project he had that made him so keen to sleep outside the main house, ~~tonight.~~

She slipped into Stanley's study. ~~The memory of that hug came back to her in force, overwhelming her. That was the closest she was going to get to making love to him, she thought. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve.~~

Her notebook and bag lay on his antique desk where she had left them. She ~~slid the~~ ^{collected} ~~notebook into the bag, slung the bag over her shoulder,~~ ^{her things} and returned to the hall.

Looking into the kitchen, she saw Stanley saying something to the cook. She waved to him. He interrupted his conversation and came over. "Toni, thanks for everything."

"Happy Christmas."

"To you, too." She went out quickly.

Kit was outside, opening the boot of his car. Glancing into it, Toni saw a couple of grey boxes, computer equipment of some kind. Kit was an IT specialist, but what did he need to bring with him for Christmas at his father's house?

She hoped to pass ~~him~~ without speaking but, as she was opening her car door, he looked up and caught her eye. "Happy Christmas, Kit," she said politely.

He lifted a small suitcase from the boot and slammed the lid. "Get lost, bitch," he said, and he walked into the house.

2 p.m.

Craig was thrilled to see Sophie again. He had been captivated by her at his mother's birthday party. She was pretty in a dark-eyed, dark-haired way and, although she was small and slight, her body was softly rounded—but it was not her looks that had bewitched him, it was her attitude. She did not give a damn, and that fascinated him. Nothing impressed her: not Grandpa's Ferrari F50, nor Craig's football skills—he played for Scotland in the under-sixteens—nor the fact that his mother was a QC. Sophie wore what she liked, she ignored “No Smoking” signs, and if someone was boring her she would walk away in mid-sentence. At the party, she had been fighting with her father about getting her navel pierced—which he flatly forbade—and here she was with a stud in it.

It made her difficult to get on with. Showing her around Steepfall, Craig found that nothing pleased her. It seemed that silence was as near as she got to praise. Otherwise, she would utter an abbreviated put-down: “Gross,” or “Dumb,” or “So weird.” But she did not walk away, so he knew he was not boring her.

He took her to the barn. It was the oldest building on the property, built in the eighteenth century. Grandpa had put in heating, lighting, and plumbing, but you could still see the timber ^{old frame} ~~framing~~. The ground floor was a playroom with a billiards table, a bar football game, and a big TV. “This is an okay place to hang out,” he said.

"Quite cool," she said—the most enthusiasm she had yet shown. She pointed to a raised platform. "What's that?"

"A stage."

"Why do you need a stage?"

"My mother and Aunt Miranda used to do plays when they were girls. They once produced *Anthony and Cleopatra* with a cast of four in this barn."

"Strange."

Craig pointed to two camp beds. "Tom and I are sleeping here," he said. "Come upstairs, I'll show you your bedroom."

A ladder led to the hayloft. There was no wall, just a handrail for safety. Two single beds were neatly made up. The only furniture was a coat rail for hanging clothes and a cheval mirror. Caroline's suitcase was on the floor, open.

"It's not very private," Sophie said.

Craig had noticed that. The sleeping arrangements seemed to him to be full of promise. His older sister, Caroline, and his young cousin, Tom, would be around, of course, but nevertheless he was enjoying a vague but ~~exciting~~ feeling that all kinds of things might happen. "Here." He unfolded an old concertina screen. "You can undress behind this if you're shy."

Her dark eyes sparked resentment. "I'm not *shy*," she said, as if the suggestion were insulting.

He found her flash of anger strangely exciting. "Just asking," he said. He sat on one of the beds. "It's quite comfortable—better than our camp beds."

She shrugged.

In his fantasy, she would now sit on the bed beside him. In one version, she pushed him backwards, pretending to fight with him, and having started out wrestling they ended up kissing. In another scenario, she would take his hand, and tell him how much his friendship meant to her, and then she would kiss him. But now, in real life, she was neither playful nor sentimental. She turned away and looked around the bare hayloft with an expression of distaste, and he knew that kissing was not on her mind. She sang quietly: "I'm dreaming of a ~~white~~ ^{black} Christmas."

"The bathroom's underneath here, at the back of the stage. There's no bath, but the shower works all right."

"How luxurious." She got up from the bed and went down the ladder, ~~still singing her obscene adaptation of Bing Crosby's Christmas classic.~~

Well, he thought, we've only been here a couple of hours, and I've got five whole days to win her around.

He followed her down. There was one more thing that might get her excited. "I've got something else to show you." He led the way outside.

They stepped into a big square yard with one building on each of its four sides: the main house, the guest cottage, the barn they had just left, and the three-car garage. Craig led Sophie around the house to the front door, avoiding the kitchen where they might be given chores. When they stepped inside, he saw that there were snowflakes caught in her gleaming ~~dark~~ hair. He stopped and stared, transfixed.

She said: "What?"

"Snow in your hair," he said. "It looks beautiful."

She shook her head impatiently, and the flakes disappeared. "You're bizarre," she

said.

Okay, he thought, so you don't like compliments.

He led her up the stairs. ~~In the old part of the house were three small bedrooms and an~~^{to}
~~old-fashioned bathroom.~~ Grandpa's suite was in the new extension. Craig tapped on the door,
in case Grandpa was inside. There was no reply, and he went in.

He walked quickly through the bedroom, past the big double bed, into the dressing
room beyond. He opened a closet door and pushed aside a row of suits, pinstripes and tweeds,
~~and checks, mostly gray and blue.~~^{Then} He got down on his knees, reached into the closet, and
shoved at the back wall. A panel two feet square swung open on a hinge. Craig crawled
through it.

Sophie followed.

Craig reached back through the gap, pulled the closet door shut, ~~then~~^{and} closed the panel.
Fumbling in the dark, he found a switch and turned on the light, a single unshaded bulb
hanging from a roof beam.

They were in an attic. There was a big old sofa with stuffing bursting out of holes in
the upholstery. Beside it a stack of mouldering photograph albums stood on the floorboards.
There were several cardboard boxes and tea chests, which Craig had found, on earlier visits,
to contain his mother's school reports, novels by Enid Blyton inscribed in a childish hand
This book belongs to Miranda Oxenford age 9½, and a collection of ugly ashtrays, bowls and
vases that must have been either unwanted gifts or ill-judged purchases. Sophie ran her
fingers over the strings of a dusty guitar: it was out of tune.

"You can smoke up here," Craig said. Empty cigarette packets of forgotten brands—
Woodbines, Players, Senior Service—made him think this might have been where his mother

began her addiction. There were also wrappers from chocolate bars: perhaps plump Aunt Miranda was responsible for those. And he presumed Uncle Kit had amassed the collection of magazines with titles such as *Men Only*, ~~*Panty Play*~~, and *Barely Legal*.

Craig hoped Sophie would not notice the magazines, but they caught her eye immediately. She picked one up. "Wow, get this, porn!" she said, suddenly more animated than she had been all morning. She sat on the sofa and began to leaf through it.

Craig ~~did not know where to look~~ ^{ed away}. He had been through all the magazines, though he was ready to deny it. Porn was a boy thing, and strictly private. But Sophie was reading *Hustler* right in front of him, scrutinizing the pages as if she had to take an exam on it.

To distract her, he said: "This whole part of the house used to be the dairy, when the place was a farm. Grandpa turned the dairy into the kitchen, but the roof was too high, so he just put a ceiling in and used this space for storage."

She did not even look up from the magazine. "Every one of these women is shaved!" she said, embarrassing him further. "So creepy."

"You can see ~~into the kitchen~~ ^{downstairs}," he persisted. "Over here, where the flue from the Aga comes up through the ceiling." He lay flat and looked through a wide gap between the boards and a metal shaft. He could see the entire kitchen: the hall door at the far end, the long scrubbed-pine table, ~~the cupboards on both sides~~, the side doors into the dining room and the laundry, the cooking range ~~at this end~~ ^{stone}, and two doors on either side of the ~~range~~ ^{stone}, one leading to a big walk-in larder and the other leading to the boot lobby and the ~~side entrance~~ ^{Kitchen door}. Most of the family were ^{sitting} around the table. Craig's sister, Caroline, was feeding her rats, Miranda was pouring wine, Ned was reading the *Guardian*, Lori was poaching a whole salmon in a long fish-kettle. "I think Aunt Miranda's getting drunk," Craig said.

That caught Sophie's interest. She dropped the magazine and lay beside Craig to look. "Can't they see us?" she said quietly.

He studied her as she stared through the gap. Her hair was pushed behind her ears. The skin of her cheek looked unbearably soft. "Have a look, next time you're in the kitchen," he said. "You'll see that there's a ceiling light right behind the gap which makes it difficult to make out, even when you know it's there."

"So, like, nobody knows you're here?"

"Well, everyone knows there's an attic. And watch out for Nellie. She'll look up and cock her head, listening, as soon as you move. She knows you're here—and anyone watching her may catch on."

"Still, this is pretty cool. Look at my father. He's pretending to read the paper, but he keeps making eyes at Miranda. Yech." She rolled on her side, propped herself on her elbow, and fished a packet of cigarettes out of her jeans pocket. "Want one?"

Craig shook his head. "You can't smoke if you're serious about football."

"How can you be serious about football? It's a game!"

"Sports are more fun if you're good at them."

"Yeah, you're right." She blew out smoke. He watched her lips. "That's probably why I don't like sports. I'm such a ^{spaz} ~~spastic~~."

Craig realised he had broken through some kind of barrier. She was talking to him at last. ~~And what she said was quite intelligent~~ "What are you good at?" he asked.

"Not much."

He hesitated, then blurted out: "Once, at a party, a girl told me I was a good kisser." He held his breath. He needed to break the ice with her somehow—but was this too soon?

"Oh?" She seemed interested in an academic way. "What do you do?"

"I could show you."

A look of panic crossed her face. "No way!" She held up a hand, as if to ward him off, although he had not moved.

He realised he had been too impetuous. ~~He could have kicked himself.~~ "Don't worry," he said, smiling to hide his disappointment. "I won't do anything you don't want, I promise."

"It's just that I've got this boyfriend."

"Oh, I see."

"Yeah. But don't tell anyone."

"What's he like?"

"My boyfriend? He's a student." She looked away, screwing up her eyes against the smoke from her cigarette.

"At Glasgow University?"

"Yes. He's nineteen. He thinks I'm seventeen."

Craig was not sure whether to believe her. "What's he studying?"

"Who cares? Something boring. Law, I think."

Craig looked through the gap again. Lori was sprinkling chopped parsley over a steaming bowl of potatoes. Suddenly he felt hungry. "Lunch is ready," he said. "I'll show you the other way out."

He went to the end of the attic and opened a large door. A narrow ledge overhung a drop of fifteen feet to the yard. Above the door, on the outside of the building, was a pulley: that was how the sofa and tea chests had been brought up. ~~Beside Craig,~~ Sophie said: "I can't jump from here."

"No need." Craig brushed snow off the ledge with his hands, then walked along it to the end and stepped two feet down on to a lean-to roof over the ~~boot lobby~~ ^{kitchen lower}. "Easy."

Looking anxious, Sophie followed ~~in his footsteps~~. When she reached the end of the ledge, he offered ~~her~~ his hand. She took it, gripping unnecessarily hard. ~~He handed~~ ^{as he helped} her down ~~to~~ to the lean-to roof.

He stepped back up on the ledge to close the big door, then returned to Sophie's side.

They went cautiously down the slippery ~~slope of the snowy roof, to its edge~~. Craig lay on his ~~front and slid over the edge~~ ^{stomach}, then dropped the short distance to the ground.

~~Sophie followed suit. When she was lying~~ ^{Sophie followed lying} on the roof with her legs dangling over the edge, Craig reached up ~~with both hands~~, held her by the waist, and lifted her down. She was light.

"Thanks," she said. She looked triumphant, as if she had come successfully through a trying experienced.

It wasn't that difficult, Craig thought as they went into the house for lunch. Perhaps she's not as confident and she pretends.

3 p.m.

The Kremlin looked pretty. Snow clung to its gargoyles and crochets, doorcases and windowledges, outlining the Victorian ornamentation in white. Toni parked and went inside. The place was quiet. Most people had gone home, for fear of getting caught in the snow—not that people needed much of an excuse to leave early on Christmas Eve.

~~She felt hurt and sensitive. She had been in an emotional car crash. But she had to put thoughts of love firmly out of her mind. Later, perhaps, when she lay alone in bed tonight, she would brood over the things Stanley had said and done; and perhaps she would cry herself to sleep. But now she had work to do. She had scored a triumphant success—that was why Stanley had hugged her—but all the same a worry nagged at her. Stanley's words repeated in her brain: *If we lost another rabbit, we'd be right back in trouble.* It was true. Another incident of the same kind would bring the story back to life but ten times worse. No amount of public relations work could keep the lid it.~~

~~"There will be no more security incidents at the lab," she had told ^{Stanley}him. "I'll make sure ~~of that~~ ^{sure there were not,} her words come true."~~ Now she had to make her words come true.

She went to her office. The only threat that she could imagine was from the animal rights activists. The death of Mark Ross might inspire others to attempt to "liberate" laboratory animals. Alternatively, Mark might have been working ~~in cooperation~~ with

activists who had another plan. ~~He might even have given them the kind of inside information that might help them defeat the Kremlin's security.~~

She dialled regional police headquarters in Inverburn and asked for Detective-Superintendent Frank Baxter, ~~her ex~~. "Got away with it, didn't you?" he said. "Luck of the devil. You should have been crucified."

"We told the truth, Frank. Honesty is the best policy, you know that."

"You didn't tell me the truth. A hamster called Fluffy! You made me look a ~~bit of a~~ fool."

"It was mean of me, I admit. But you shouldn't have leaked the story to Carl. Shall we call it quits?"

"What do you want?"

"Do you think anyone else was involved with Mark Ross in stealing the rabbit?"

"No opinion."

"I gave you his address book. I presume you've been checking his contacts, ~~for~~ ~~suspicious connections~~. What about the people in Animals Are Free, for example—are they peaceful protestors, or might they do something more dangerous?"

"My investigation is not yet complete."

"Come on, Frank, I'm just looking for a little guidance. How worried should I be about the possibility of another incident?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Frank, we loved one another once. We were partners for eight years. Does it have to be like this?"

"Are you using our past relationship to persuade me to give you confidential

information?"

"No. To hell with the information. I can get it elsewhere. I just don't want to be treated as an enemy by someone I used to love. Is there a law that says we can't be nice to one another?"

There was a click, then a dialling tone. He had hung up.

She sighed. ~~Would he ever come around? She wished~~¹⁷⁹ he would get another girlfriend. That might calm him down.

She dialled Odette Cressy, her friend at Scotland Yard. "I saw you on the news," Odette said.

"How did I look?"

"Authoritative." Odette giggled. ~~"Like you would never go to a nightclub in a see-through dress. But I know better."~~

~~"Just don't tell anyone the truth."~~

"Anyway, your Madoba-2 incident appears to have no connections with...my kind of interest."

She meant terrorism. "Good," Toni said. "But tell me something—speaking purely theoretically."

"Of course."

"Terrorists could get samples of a virus such as Ebola relatively easily by going to a hospital somewhere in central Africa where the only security is a nineteen-year-old cop slouching in the lobby smoking cigarettes. So why would they ~~attempt the extraordinarily difficult task of robbing~~ a high-security laboratory?"

"Two reasons. One, they simply don't know how easy it is to get Ebola in Africa.

Two, Madoba-2 is not the same as Ebola. It's worse."

Toni remembered what Stanley had told her, and shuddered. "Zero survival rate."

"Exactly.

"What about Animals Are Free? Did you check them out?"

"Of course. They're harmless. The worst they're likely to do is block a road."

"That's great news. I just want to make sure there's not another incident of the same kind."

"It looks unlikely from my end."

"Thanks, Odette. You're a friend, and that's a rare thing."

"You sound a bit low."

"Oh, my ex is being difficult."

"Is that all? You're used to him. Did something happen with the professor?"

Toni could never fool Odette, even over the phone. "He told me his family is the most important thing in the world to him, and he would never do anything to upset them."

"Bastard."

"When you find a man who isn't a bastard, ask him if he's got a brother."

"What are you doing for Christmas?"

"Going to a spa. Massage, facials, manicures, long walks."

"On your own?"

Toni smiled. "It's nice of you to worry about me, but ^{I'll be mostly} ~~I'm not that sad.~~"

~~"Who are you going with?"~~

"A whole crowd. Bonnie Grant, an old friend—we were at university together, the only two girls in the engineering faculty. She's recently divorced. Charles and Damien, you

know them. And two couples you haven't met."

"The gay boys will cheer you up."

"You're right." When Charlie and Damien let their hair down, they could make Toni laugh until she cried. "What about you?"

"Not sure. You know how I hate to plan ahead."

"Well, enjoy spontaneity."

"Happy Christmas."

They hung up, and Toni summoned Steve Tremlett, the ^{security chief,} ~~guard supervisor.~~

She had taken a chance with Steve. He had been a pal of Ronnie Sutherland, the former head of security who had conspired with Kit Oxenford. There was no evidence Steve had known about the fraud. But Toni had feared he might resent her for firing his friend. She had decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, and had made him supervisor. He had rewarded her trust with loyalty and efficiency.

He arrived within a minute. He was a small, neat man of thirty-five with receding fair hair cut ~~in the brutally short, style that was fashionable,~~ ^{security chief,} He carried a cardboard folder. Toni pointed to a chair and he sat down.

"The police don't think Mark Ross was working with others," she said.

"I had him down as a loner."

"All the same, we have to have this place buttoned up tight tonight."

"No problem."

"Let's make doubly sure of that. You have the duty roster there?"

Steve handed over a sheet of paper. Normally there were three security guards on duty overnight and on weekends and holidays. One sat in the gatehouse, one in reception, and one

in the control room, watching the monitors. In case they needed to step away from their stations, they carried phones that were ~~cordless~~^{wireless} extensions to the house network. Every hour, the guard from reception made a tour of the main building, and the guard from the gatehouse walked around the outside ^{perimeter}. At first, Toni had thought three was too few for such a high-security operation, but the sophisticated technology was the real security, and the human beings merely backup. All the same, she had doubled the guard for this Christmas holiday, so that there would be two people at each of the three stations, and they would patrol every half hour.

"I see you're working tonight."

"I need the overtime."

"All right." Security guards regularly worked twelve-hour shifts, and it was not very unusual for them to do twenty-four hours, when staff were short or, as tonight, in ~~an~~^a ~~emergency~~^{crisis}. "Let me check your emergency call list."

Steve passed her a laminated sheet from the folder. It listed the agencies he was to phone in case of fire, flood, power cut, computer crash, phone system faults, and other problems.

Toni said: "I want you to ring each of these in the next hour. Just ask them if the number will be operational over Christmas."

"Very good."

She handed back the sheet. "Don't hesitate to call the police at Inverburn if you're the least worried about anything."

He nodded. "My brother-in-law Jack is on duty tonight, as it happens. My missus has taken the children over to their place for Christmas."

"How many people will there be at headquarters tonight, do you know?"

"On the night shift? An inspector, two sergeants and six constables. And there'll be a duty superintendent on call."

It was a small complement, but there would be nothing much to do once the pubs had closed, and the drunks had gone home. "You don't happen to know who the duty super is?"

"Yes. It's your Frank."

Toni did not comment. "I'll have my mobile phone with me day and night, and I don't expect to be anywhere out of range. I want you to call me the minute anything unusual happens, regardless of the time, okay?"

"Of course."

~~"I don't mind being woken up in the middle of the night." She would be sleeping alone, but she did not say that to Steve, who might have considered it an embarrassing confidence.~~

~~"I understand," he said, and perhaps he did.~~

"That's all. I'll be leaving in a few minutes." She checked her watch it was almost four. "Happy Christmas, Steve."

"To you, too."

Steve left. Twilight was falling, and Toni could see her own reflection in the window. She looked ruffled and weary. She closed down her computer and locked her filing cabinet.

She needed to get going. She had to return home and change, then drive to the spa, which was fifty miles away. The sooner she hit the road, the better: the forecast said the weather would not get worse, but forecasts could be wrong.

~~She was reluctant to leave the Kremlin. Its security was her job. She had taken every~~

precaution she could think of, but she hated to hand over responsibility.

She forced herself to stand up. Her job was facilities director, not security guard. If she had done everything possible to safeguard the place, she could leave. If not, she was incompetent and should resign.

Besides, she knew the real reason she wanted to stay. As soon as she turned her back on the job, she would have to think about Stanley.

She shouldered her bag and left the building.

The snow was falling more heavily.

4 p.m.

Kit was furious about the sleeping arrangements.

He sat in the living room, with his father, his nephew Tom, his brother-in-law Hugo, and Miranda's fiancé, Ned. Mamma Marta looked down on them from her portrait on the wall. Kit always felt she looked impatient in that picture, as if she could hardly wait to get out of her ball gown, put on an apron, and start making lasagne.

The women of the family had found jobs to do, and the older children were in the barn. The men were watching a movie on TV. ~~The hero, played by John Wayne, reminded Kit of Harry Mae.~~ Kit found it hard to follow the plot. He was too tense.

He had *specifically* told Miranda he needed to be in the cottage. She had been so sentimental about his joining the family for Christmas, she had practically gone down on her knees to plead with him to come. But, after he had agreed to do what she wanted, she had failed to fulfil the one condition he had made. Typical woman.

The old man was not sentimental, though. He was about as soft-hearted as a Glasgow policeman on a Saturday night. He had obviously overruled Miranda, with Olga's encouragement. ~~Kit thought his sisters ought to have been called Goneril and Regan, after the predatory daughters of King Lear.~~

Kit had to leave Steepfall tonight and come back tomorrow morning without anyone

knowing he had been away. If he had been sleeping in the cottage, it would have been ~~easy~~ ^{easy}.
 He could have pretended to go to bed, turned off the lights, then ~~sneaked away~~ ^{left} quietly. He
 had already moved his car to the garage forecourt, away from the house, so that no one would
 hear the engine starting. He would be back ~~by mid-morning~~, before anyone would expect him
 to be ~~up~~ ^{awake}, and could have slipped quietly back into the cottage and gone innocently to bed.

Now it would be much more difficult. His room was in the creaky old part of the ~~main~~
 house, next to Olga and Hugo. He would have to wait until everyone had retired. ~~When the~~
~~house was quiet he would have to creep out of his room, tiptoe down the stairs, and leave the~~
~~house in total silence.~~ ^{when he uses tip toe} If someone should open a door ^{downstairs}—Olga, for instance, crossing the
 landing to go to the bathroom—what would he say? “I’m just going to get some fresh air.” In
 the middle of the night, in the snow? And what would he do in the morning? It was almost
 certain that someone would see him coming in. He would have to say he had been for a walk,
 or a drive. And then, later, when the police were asking questions, would anyone remember
 his uncharacteristic early-morning stroll?

He tried to put that worry out of his mind. He had a more immediate problem. He had
 to steal the smart card his father used to enter BSL4.)

He could have bought any number of such cards from a security supplier, but smart
 cards came from the manufacturer embedded with a site code that ensured they would work
 at only one location. Cards bought from a supplier would have the wrong code for the
 Kremlin.

Nigel Buchanan had questioned him persistently about stealing the card. “Where does
 your father keep it?”

“In his jacket pocket, usually.”

“And if it’s not there?”

“In his wallet, or his briefcase, I expect.”

“How can you take it without being seen?”

“It’s a big house. I’ll do it when he’s in the bath, or out for a walk.”

“Won’t he notice it’s gone?”

“Not until he needs to use it, which won’t be until Friday at the earliest. By then I’ll have put it back.”

“Can you be sure?”

At that point Elton had interrupted. In his broad south London accent he had said: “Bloody hell, Nige! We’re counting on Kit to get us into a heavily guarded high-security laboratory. We’re in trouble if he can’t nick something off his own fuckin’ father.”

Stanley’s card would have the right site code, but the chip in it would contain Stanley’s fingerprint data, not Kit’s. However, he had thought of a way around that.

The movie was building to a climax. John Wayne was about to start shooting people. This was a good moment for Kit to make a clandestine move.

He got up, grunted something about the bathroom, and went out. From the hall, he glanced into the kitchen. Lori was stuffing a huge turkey while Luke cleaned brussels sprouts. ~~Along one wall were two doors, one to the laundry and the other to the dining room.~~ As he looked, Olga came out of the laundry carrying a folded tablecloth and took it into the dining room.

Kit stepped into his father’s study and closed the door.

The likeliest place for the smart card was in one of the pockets of his father’s suit ~~coat~~ as he had told Nigel. He had expected to find the jacket either on the hook behind the

door or draped over the back of the desk chair; but he saw immediately that it was not in the room.

He decided to check some other possibilities while he was here. It was risky—anyone might come in, and what would he say? But he had to take chances. The alternative was no robbery, no three hundred thousand pounds, no ticket to Lucca—and, worst of all, the debt to Harry Mac unpaid. He remembered what Daisy had done to him ~~this morning~~, and shuddered.

The old man's briefcase was on the floor beside the desk, ~~as always~~. Kit picked it up and went through it quickly. It contained a file of scatter graphs, all meaningless to Kit; today's *Times* with the crossword not quite finished; half a bar of chocolate; and the small leather notebook in which his father made lists of things he had to do. Old people always had lists, Kit had noticed. Why were they so terrified of forgetting something?

The top of the pedestal desk was tidy, and Kit could not see a card or anything that might contain one: just a small stack of files, a pencil jar, and a book entitled *Seventh Report of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses*.

He started opening the drawers. His breath came fast and he felt his heartbeat speed up. But if he were caught, what would they do—call the police? He told himself he had nothing to lose, and carried on; but his hands were unsteady.

His father had been using this desk for thirty years, and the accumulation of useless objects was staggering: souvenir key rings, dried up pens, an old-fashioned printing calculator, stationery with out-of-date phone codes, ink bottles, manuals for obsolete software—how long was it since anyone had used PlanPerfect? But there was no smart card.

Kit left the room. No one had seen him go in, and no one saw him go out.

He went quietly up the stairs. His father was not an untidy man, and rarely lost things: he would not have carelessly left his wallet in some unlikely place such as the boot cupboard. The only remaining possibility was the bedroom.

Kit went inside and closed the door.

His mother's presence was gradually disappearing, ~~from the room, he saw~~. Last time he was here, her possessions were still scattered around: a leather writing-case, a silver brush set that had belonged to her mother, a photograph of Stanley in an antique frame. Those had gone. But the curtains and the upholstery were the same, done in a bold blue-and-white fabric that was typical of his mother's dramatic taste.

On either side of the bed were a pair of Victorian commode ~~chests~~ made of heavy mahogany, used as bedside tables. His father had always slept on the right of the big double bed. Kit opened the drawers on that side. He found a flashlight, presumably for power cuts, and a volume of Proust, presumably for insomnia. He checked the drawers on his mother's side of the bed, but they were empty.

The suite was arranged as three rooms: first the bedroom, then the dressing room, then the bathroom. Kit went into the dressing room, a square space lined with closets, some painted white, some with mirrored doors. Outside it was twilight, but he could see well enough for what he needed to do, so he did not switch on the lights.

He opened the door of his father's suit cupboard. There on a hanger was the jacket of the suit Stanley was wearing today. Kit reached into the inside pocket and drew out a large black leather wallet, old and worn. It contained a small wad of banknotes and a row of plastic cards. One was a smart card for the Kremlin.

"Bingo," Kit said softly.

The bedroom door opened.

Kit had not closed the door to the dressing room, and he was able to look through the doorway and see his sister Miranda step into the bedroom, carrying an orange plastic laundry basket.

Kit was in her line of sight, standing at the open door of the suit closet, but she did not immediately spot him in the twilight, and he quickly moved behind the dressing-room door. ~~If he peeked around the side of the door,~~ he could see her reflected in the big mirror on the bedroom wall.

She switched the lights on and began to strip the bed. She and Olga were obviously doing some of Lori's chores while Lori prepared the meals for the large family group. Kit decided he would just have to wait.

He suffered a moment of self-~~dislike~~^{loathing}. Here he was, acting like an intruder in ~~the~~^{own} house ~~of his family~~. He was stealing from his father and hiding from his sister. How had it ~~got like~~^{got them to} this?

He knew the answer. His father had let him down. Just when he needed help, Stanley had said no. That was the cause of everything.

Well, he would leave them all behind. He would not even tell them where he was going. He would make a new life in a different country. He would disappear into the small-town routine of Lucca, eating ~~tomatoes~~ and pasta, drinking Tuscan wine, playing pinochle for low stakes in the evenings. ~~He would be like a background figure in a big painting, the passer-by who does not look at the dying martyr.~~ He would be at peace.

Miranda began to make up the bed with fresh sheets, and at that moment Hugo came in.

He had changed into a red pullover and green corduroy trousers, and he looked like a Christmas elf. He closed the door behind him. Kit frowned. ~~Did Hugo have secrets to discuss with his wife's sister?~~

Miranda

~~Miranda said:~~ "Hugo, what do you want?" ~~She~~ sounded wary.

Hugo gave her a conspiratorial grin, ~~but he said:~~ "I just thought I'd give you a hand." He went to the opposite side of the bed and started tucking in the sheet.

Kit was standing behind the dressing-room door with his father's wallet in one hand and a smart card for the Kremlin in the other, but he could not move without risking discovery.

Miranda tossed a clean pillowcase across the bed. "Here," she said.

Hugo stuffed a pillow into it. Together they arranged the bed cover. "It seems ages since we've seen you," Hugo said. "I miss you."

"Don't talk rubbish," Miranda said coolly.

Kit was puzzled but fascinated. What was going on here?

Miranda smoothed the cover. Hugo came around the end of the bed. She picked up her laundry basket and held it in front of her like a shield. Hugo gave his impish grin and said: "How about a kiss, for old times' sake?"

Kit was mystified. What old times was Hugo talking about? He had been married to Olga for nearly twenty years. Had he kissed Miranda when she was fourteen?

"Stop that, right now," Miranda said firmly.

Hugo grasped the laundry basket and pushed. The backs of Miranda's legs came up against the edge of the bed. Involuntarily, she sat down. She released the basket and used her hands to balance herself. Hugo tossed the basket aside, bent over her, and pushed her back,

kneeling on the bed with his legs either side of her. Kit was flabbergasted. He had guessed that Hugo might be something of a Lothario, ~~just from his generally flirtatious manner with attractive women~~; but he had never imagined him with Miranda.

Hugo pushed up her loose, pleated skirt. She had heavy hips and thighs. She was wearing lacy black ~~knickers~~ ^{panties} and a garter belt, and for Kit this was the most astonishing revelation yet.

"Get off me now," she said.

Kit did not know what to do. This was none of his business, ~~he felt~~, so he was not inclined to interfere; but he could hardly stand here and watch. Even if he turned away, he could not help hearing what was going on. Could he sneak past them while they were wrestling? No, the room was too small. He remembered the panel at the back of the closet that led to the attic, but he could not get to the closet without risking being seen. In the end he just stood paralysed, looking on.

"Just a quickie," Hugo said. "No one will know."

Miranda drew back her right arm and swung at Hugo's face, hitting him square on the cheek with a mighty slap. Then she lifted her knee sharply, making contact somewhere in the area of his groin. She twisted, threw him off, and jumped to her feet.

Hugo remained lying on the bed. "That hurt!" he protested.

"Good," she said. "Now listen to me. Never do anything like that again."

~~He zipped his fly and~~ ^{He} stood up. "Why not? What will you do—tell Ned?"

"I ought to tell him, but I haven't got the courage. I slept with you once, when I was lonely and depressed, and I've regretted it bitterly ever since."

So that was it, Kit thought—Miranda slept with Olga's husband. He was shocked. He

was not surprised by Hugo's behaviour—shagging the wife's sister on the side was the kind of cosy set-up many men would like. But Miranda was prissily moral about such things. Kit would have said that she would not sleep with *anyone's* husband, let alone her sister's.

Miranda went on: "It was the most shameful thing I've ever done in my life, and I don't want Ned to find out about it, ever."

"So what are you threatening to do? Tell Olga?"

"She would divorce you and never speak to me again. It would explode this family."

It might not be that bad, Kit thought; but Miranda was always anxious about keeping the family together.

"That leaves you a bit helpless, doesn't it?" Hugo said, looking pleased, ~~with his deduction.~~ "Since we can't be enemies, why don't you just kiss me nicely and be friends?"

Miranda's voice went cold. "Because you disgust me."

"Ah well." Hugo sounded resigned, but unashamed. "Hate me, then. I still adore you."

He gave his most charming smile and left the room, ~~limping slightly~~

As the door slammed, Miranda said: "You fucking bastard."

Kit had never heard her swear like that.

She picked up her laundry basket then, instead of going out as he expected, she turned towards him. She must have fresh towels for the bathroom, he realised. There was no time to move. In three steps she reached the entrance to the dressing room and turned on the lights.

Kit was just able to slip the smart card into his trousers pocket. An instant later she saw him. She gave a squeal of shock. "Kit! What are you doing there? You gave me a fright!" She went white, and added: "You must have heard everything."

"Sorry." He shrugged. "I didn't want to."

~~Her complexion changed from pale to flushed.~~ "You won't tell, will you?" *She said, flushing.*

"Of course not."

"I'm serious, Kit. You must never tell. It would be awful. It could ruin two marriages."

"I know, I know."

She saw the wallet in his hand. "What are you up to?"

~~He hesitated, then he was inspired. "I needed money." He showed her the banknotes~~
~~in the wallet.~~ *, he said inspired.*

"Oh, Kit!" She was distressed, not judgemental. "You mustn't pilfer from Daddy's wallet—it's awful!"

"I'm a bit desperate."

"I'll give you money!" She put down the laundry basket. There were two pockets in the front of her skirt. She reached into one and pulled out a crumple of notes. She extracted two fifties, smoothed them out, and gave them to Kit. "Just ask me—I'll never turn you down."

"Thanks, Mandy," he said, using her childhood name.

"But you must never steal from Daddy."

"Okay."

"And, for pity's sake, don't ever tell anyone about me and Hugo.

"I promise," he said.

5 p.m.

Toni had been sleeping heavily for an hour when her alarm clock woke her.

She found that she was lying on the bed fully dressed. She had been too tired even to take off her jacket and shoes. But the nap had refreshed her. She was used to odd hours, from working night shifts in the police force, and she could fall asleep anywhere and wake up instantly.

She lived on one floor of a subdivided Victorian house. She had a bedroom, a living room, a small kitchen and a bathroom. Inverburn was a ferry port, but she could not see the sea. She was not very fond of her home: it was the place to which she had fled when she broke up with Frank, and it had no happy memories. She had been here two years, but she still regarded it as temporary.

She got up. She stripped off the business suit she had been wearing for two days and a night, and dumped it in the dry-cleaning hamper. With a robe on over her underwear, she moved rapidly around the flat, packing a case for five nights at a health spa. She had planned to pack last night and leave at midday today, so she had some catching up to do.

She could hardly wait to get to the spa. It was just what she needed. Her woes would be massaged away; she would sweat out toxins in the sauna; she would have her nails painted and her hair cut and her ^{make up done} ~~eyelashes curled~~. Best of all, she would play games and tell stories

with a group of old friends, and forget her troubles.

Her mother should be at Bella's place by now. Mother was an intelligent woman who was losing her mind. She had been a high school maths teacher, and had always been able to help Toni with her studies, even when Toni was in the final year of her engineering degree. Now she could not check her change in a shop. Toni loved her intensely, and was deeply saddened by her decline.

Bella was a bit slapdash. She cleaned the house when the mood took her, cooked when she felt hungry, and sometimes forgot to send her children to school. Her husband, Bernie, was a hairdresser, but worked infrequently because of some vague chest ailment. "The doctor's signed me off for another four weeks," he would usually say in response to the routine inquiry "How are you?"

Toni hoped ~~Mother would be all right at Bella's place. Bella was an amiable slattern,~~ ^{everything seemed so well and her} ~~and Mother never seemed to mind her ways.~~ ^{neatly house} Mother had always been happy to visit ~~the~~ ^{Bella's} ~~windy Glasgow council estate~~ and eat undercooked chips with her grandchildren. But ~~she was~~ now, in the early stages of senility, ^{but} Would she be as philosophical ~~as ever~~ about Bella's haphazard housekeeping? ~~Would Bella be able to cope with Mother's increasing waywardness?~~

When once Toni had let slip an irritated remark about Bella, Mother had said crisply: "She doesn't try as hard as you, that's why she's happier." Mother's conversation had become tactless, but her remarks could be painfully accurate.

After Toni had packed, she washed her hair then took a bath to wash away two days of tension. She fell asleep in the tub ^{but} She woke with a start, ~~but only~~ ^{later and} a minute ~~or so had~~ ~~passed~~ ~~the water was still hot.~~ She got out and dried herself vigorously.

Looking in the full-length mirror, she thought: I've got everything I had twenty years ago—it's all just three inches lower. One of the good things about Frank, at least in the early days, had been the pleasure he took in her body. "~~You've got great tits,~~" he would say. She thought they were too large for her frame, but he worshipped them. "I've never seen a pussy this colour," he once told her ~~as he lay~~ between her legs. "It's like a ginger biscuit." She wondered how long it would be before someone else marvelled at the colour of her pubic hair.

^{Now} She dressed in tan jeans and a dark green sweater. As she was closing her suitcase, the phone rang. It was her sister. "Hi, Bella," said Toni. "How's mother?"

"She's not here."

"What? You were supposed to pick her up at one o'clock!"

"I know, but Bernie had the car and I couldn't get away."

"And you still haven't left?" Toni looked at her watch. It was half past five. She pictured Mother at the home, sitting in the lobby in her coat and hat, with her suitcase beside the chair, ~~hour after hour~~ and she felt cross. "What are you thinking of?"

"The thing is, the weather's turned bad."

"It's snowing all over Scotland, but not heavily."

"Well, Bernie doesn't want me to drive sixty miles in the dark."

"You wouldn't have had to drive in the dark if you'd picked her up when you promised!"

"Oh, dear, you're getting angry, I knew this would happen."

"I'm not angry—" Toni paused. Her sister had caught her before with this trick. In a moment they would be talking about Toni managing her anger, instead of Bella breaking a

promise. "Never mind how I feel," Toni said. "What about Mother? Don't you think she must be disappointed?"

"Of course, but I can't help the weather."

"What are you going to do?"

"There isn't anything I can do."

"So you're going to leave her in the home over Christmas?"

"Unless you have her. You're only ten miles away."

"Bella, I'm booked into a spa! Seven friends are expecting me to join them for five days. I've paid four hundred pounds deposit and I'm looking forward to a rest."

"That sounds a bit selfish."

"Just a minute. I've had Mother the last three Christmases, but I'm selfish?"

"You don't know how hard it is with three children and a husband too ill to work. You've got plenty of money and only yourself to worry about."

And I'm not stupid enough to marry a layabout and have three children by him, Toni thought, but she did not say it. There was no point in arguing with Bella. ~~She believed everything she said.~~ Her way of life was its own punishment. "So you're asking me to cancel my holiday, drive to the home, pick up Mother, and look after her over Christmas."

"It's up to you," Bella said in a tone of elevated piety. "You must do what your conscience tells you."

"Thanks for that helpful advice." Toni's conscience would say she should be with their mother, and Bella knew that. Toni could not let Mother spend Christmas in an institution, ~~alone in her room,~~ or eating tasteless turkey and lukewarm sprouts in the canteen, or receiving a cheap present in gaudy wrapping from the home's caretaker dressed as Santa

Claus. Toni did not even need to think about it. "All right, I'll go and fetch her now."

"I'm just sorry you couldn't do it more graciously," said her sister.

"Oh, fuck off, Bella," said Toni, and she hung up the phone.

Feeling depressed, she called the spa and cancelled her reservation. Then she asked to speak to one of her party. After a delay, it was Charlie who came to the phone. ~~He had a Lancashire accent.~~ "Where are you?" he said. "We're all in the jacuzzi—you're missing the fun!"

"I can't come," she said miserably, and she explained.

Charlie was outraged. "It's not fair on you," he said. "You need a break."

"I know, but I can't bear to think of her on her own in that place, ~~when others are with their families.~~"

"Plus you've had a few problems at work today."

"Yes, ~~it's very sad,~~ but I think Oxenford Medical has come through it all right—provided nothing else happens."

"I saw you on the telly."

"How did I look?"

"Gorgeous—but I fancied your boss."

"Me, too, but he's got three grown-up children he doesn't want to upset, so I think he's a lost cause."

~~"By heck,~~ you have had a bad day," ~~and~~

~~"I'm sorry to let you all down."~~

~~"It won't be the same without you."~~

~~Tears came to Toni's eyes,~~ ^{billed with tears} Embarrassed, she said: "I'll have to hang up, Charlie—I'd

better fetch Mother as soon as possible. Happy Christmas." She ~~cradled the handset and~~ sat staring at the phone. "What a miserable life," she said aloud. "What a miserable bloody life."

6 p.m.

Craig's relationship with Sophie was moving very slowly.

He had spent all afternoon with her. He had beaten her at table tennis and lost at pool. They had agreed about music—they both liked guitars bands better than drum-and-bass. They both read horror fiction, though she loved Stephen King and he preferred Anne Rice. He told her about his parents' marriage, which was stormy but passionate, and she told him about Ned and Jennifer's divorce, which was rancorous.

But she gave him no encouragement. She did not casually touch his arm, or look ~~intently~~ at his face when he talked to her, or ~~bring into the conversation romantic topics such as dating and snogging.~~ Instead, she talked of a world that excluded him, a world of nightclubs—how did she get in, at fourteen?—and friends who took drugs and boys who had motorcycles.

As dinner approached, he began to feel desperate. He did not want to spend five days pursuing her for the sake of one kiss at the end. His idea was to win her over on the first day, and spend the holiday *really* getting to know her. Clearly this was not her timetable. He needed a short cut, ^{to find} ~~to her heart~~

She seemed to consider him beneath her romantic notice. All this talk of older people implied that he was just a kid, even though he was older than Sophie by a year and seven

months. He had to find some way to prove he was as mature and sophisticated as she.

Sophie would not be the first girl he had kissed. He had dated Caroline Stratton from Year 10 at his school for six weeks, but although she was pretty he had been bored. Lindy Riley, the plump sister of a footballing friend, had been more exciting, and had let him do several things he had never done before, but then she had switched her affections to the keyboard player in a Glasgow rock band. And there were several other girls he had kissed once or twice.

But this felt different. After meeting Sophie ~~only once~~, at his mother's birthday party, he had thought about her every day for four months. He had downloaded one of the photographs his father had taken at the party, showing Craig gesturing with his hands and Sophie laughing. He used it as the screen saver on his computer. He still looked at other girls, but always comparing them with Sophie, ~~thinking that by comparison this one was too pale, that one too fat, another simply plain looking, and all of them tediously conventional.~~ He did not mind that she was difficult—he was used to difficult women, his mother was one. There was just something about Sophie that ~~stabbed him in the~~ ^{touches his} heart.

At six o'clock, slumped on the couch in the barn, he decided he had watched as much MTV as he needed for one day. "Want to go over to the house?" he asked her.

"What for?"

"They'll all be sitting around the kitchen table."

"So?"

Well, Craig thought, it's sort of nice. The kitchen is warm, and you can smell dinner cooking, and my Dad tells funny stories, and Aunt Miranda pours wine, and it just feels good. But he knew that would not impress Sophie, so he said: "There might be drinks."

She stood up. "Good. I want a cocktail."

Dream on, Craig thought. Grandpa was not going to serve hard liquor to a fourteen-year-old. If they were having champagne, she might get half a glass. But Craig did not disillusion her. They put on coats and went out.

It was now full dark, but the yard was brightly lit by lamps mounted on the walls of the surrounding buildings. Snow swirled thickly in the air, and the ground was slippery underfoot. They crossed to the main house and approached the ~~back~~^{Kitchen} door. Just before they went in, Craig glanced around the corner of the house and saw Grandpa's Ferrari, still parked at the front, the snow now two inches thick on the sweeping arc of its rear spoiler. Luke must have been too busy to put it away.

humped?

Craig said: "Last time I was here, Grandpa let me drive his car into the garage."

"You can't drive," Sophie said sceptically.

"I haven't got a licence, but that doesn't mean I can't handle a car." He knew as he spoke that he was exaggerating. He had driven his father's Mercedes ~~estate~~ a couple of times, once on a beach and once on a ~~disused~~^{empty} airstrip, but never on a regular road.

"All right, then, park it now," Sophie said.

Craig knew he should ask permission. But if he said so, it would sound as if he were trying to back out. Anyway, Grandpa might say no, then Craig would have lost the chance to ~~prove his point to~~^{impress} Sophie. So he said: "All right, then."

The car was unlocked, and the key was in the ignition.

Sophie leaned against the wall of the house by the back door, arms folded, her stance saying: Okay, show me.

Craig was not going to let her get away with that. "Why don't you come with me?" he

said. "Or are you scared?"

They both got into the car.

It was not easy. The seats were low-slung, ~~almost on a level with the door sills~~, and Craig had to put one leg in then slide his backside across the flat armrest. He slammed the door.

The gearstick was severely utilitarian, just an upright aluminium rod with a knob on the end. Craig checked that it was in neutral, then turned the ignition key. The car started with a roar like a 747.

Craig half hoped the noise would bring Luke running out of the house, arms raised in protest. However, the Ferrari was at the front door, and the family ~~were in the kitchen~~ at the back of the house, ~~overlooking the yard~~. The thunder of the car did not penetrate the thick stone walls, ~~of the old farmhouse.~~

The whole car seemed to tremble, ~~as if in an earthquake~~, as the big engine turned over with lazy potency. Craig's body felt the vibrations through the black leather seat. "This is cool!" Sophie said excitedly.

Craig switched on the headlamps. Two cones of light reached out from the front of the car, stretching across the garden, filled with snowflakes. He rested his hand on the knob of the gearstick, touched the clutch ~~pedal~~ with his foot, then looked behind. The driveway went back in a straight line to the garage before turning to curve around the cliff top.

"Come on, then," said Sophie. "Drive it."

~~Craig put on a casual air to conceal his reluctance.~~ "Relax," ^{Craig} he said. ~~He released the~~ ^{released the brake,} ~~handbrake.~~ "Enjoy the ride." He depressed the clutch, then moved the stick through the open-gate Ferrari gearshift into reverse. He touched the accelerator pedal as gently as he could. The

*with a casualness
he did not
feel*

engine snarled menacingly. He released the clutch a millimetre at a time. The car began to creep backwards.

He held the steering wheel lightly, not moving it to either side, and the car went in a straight line. With the clutch fully out, he touched the throttle again. The car shot backwards, passing the garage. Sophie let out a scream of fear. Craig transferred his foot from the accelerator to the brake. The car skidded on the snow but, to Craig's relief, it did not ~~waver~~ *swerve* ~~from its straight line~~. As it came to a halt he remembered, at the last minute, to engage the clutch and prevent a stall.

He felt pleased with himself. He had kept control, ~~just~~. Better yet, Sophie had been scared, while he appeared calm. Maybe she would stop acting so superior.

The garage stood at a right angle to the house, and now its doors were ahead and to the left of the Ferrari. Kit's car, a black Peugeot coupé, was parked in front, ~~of the garage~~ ~~block at its far end~~. Craig found a remote control under the Ferrari's dashboard and clicked. The farthest of three garage doors swung up, ~~and over~~.

The concrete apron in front of the garage was covered with a smooth layer of snow. There was a clump of bushes at the near corner of the building, and a large tree on the far side of the apron. Craig simply had to avoid those and slot the car into its bay.

More confident now, he moved the gear stick into the notch for first gear, touched the accelerator ~~pedal~~, then released the clutch. The car moved forward. He turned the steering wheel, which was heavy at low speed, not being power-assisted. The car obediently turned left. He depressed the throttle another millimetre, and it picked up speed, just enough to feel exciting. He swung right, aiming for the open door, but he was going too fast. He touched the brake.

That was his mistake.

The car was moving quickly on snow with its front wheels turning right. As soon as the brakes bit, the rear wheels lost traction. Instead of continuing to turn right into the open garage door, the car slid sideways across the snow. Craig knew what was happening, but had no idea what to do about it. He spun the steering wheel farther to the right, but that made the skid worse, and the car drifted inexorably over the slippery surface, like a boat blown by a gale. Craig stamped on the brake and the clutch at the same time, but it made no difference.

The garage building slid away to the right of the windscreen. Craig thought he would crash into Kit's Peugeot, but to his blissful relief the Ferrari missed the other car by several inches. Losing momentum, it slowed down. For a moment he thought he had got away with it. But, just before the car came to a complete stop, ^{its} ~~the~~ front ~~nearside wing~~ touched the big tree.

"That was great!" Sophie said.

"No it bloody was not." Craig put the stick in neutral and released the clutch, then sprang out of the car. He walked around to the front. The impact had felt gentle but, to his dismay, he saw ~~by the light of the lamps on the garage wall~~ a large, unmistakable dimple in the gleaming blue wing. "Shit," he said miserably.

Sophie got out and looked. "It's not a very big dent," she said.

"Don't talk bollocks." The size did not matter. The bodywork was damaged and Craig was responsible. ~~He felt a sensation of nausea deep in his stomach.~~ What a Christmas present for Grandpa.

"They might not notice it," Sophie said.

"Of course they'll bloody notice it," he said angrily. "Grandpa will see it as soon as he

looks at the car.”

“Well, that might not be for a while. He’s not likely to go out in this weather.”

“What difference does that make?” Craig said impatiently. He knew he was sounding petulant, but he hardly cared. “I’ll have to own up.”

“Better if you’re not here when the shit hits the fan.”

“I don’t see—“ He paused. He did see. If he confessed now, Christmas would be *ruined*, ~~blighted. Mamma Marta would have said: “There will be a bordello,” by which she meant~~ ~~apoor~~. If he said nothing, but confessed later, perhaps there would be less fuss. Anyway, the prospect of postponing discovery for a few days was tempting.

“I’ll have to put it in the garage,” he said, thinking aloud.

“Park it with the dented side right up against the wall,” Sophie suggested. “That way, it won’t be noticed by anyone ~~just~~ walking past.”

Sophie’s idea was beginning to make sense, Craig thought. There were two other cars in the garage: a massive Toyota Land Cruiser ~~Amazon off-road car with~~ four-wheel drive, which Stanley used in weather like this; and Luke’s old Ford Mondeo, in which he drove himself and Lori between this house and ^{their} ~~the~~ cottage ~~they lived in~~ a mile away. Luke would certainly enter the garage this evening to get his car and drive home. If the weather got worse, he might borrow the big Land Cruiser and leave his Ford here. Either way, he had to enter the garage. But, if the Ferrari were hard up against the wall, the dent would not be visible.

The engine was still running. Craig sat in the driver’s seat. He engaged first gear and drove slowly forward. Sophie ran into the garage and stood in the car’s headlights. As it entered the garage, she used her hands to show Craig how close he was to the wall.

~~On his first attempt he was no closer than~~ ^{left the car} ~~eighteen inches from the wall.~~ That was not

good enough. He had to try again. He looked nervously in the rear-view mirror, but no one ~~else~~ was around. ~~He was grateful for the cold weather that kept everyone indoors in the~~

~~car.~~

On his third attempt he managed to position the car four or five inches off the wall.

He got out and looked. It was impossible to see the dent from any angle.

He closed the ~~up-and-over~~ ^{garage} door, ~~then~~ ^{and} he and Sophie ~~left the garage by the small side~~ door. ~~They~~ headed for the kitchen. Craig felt jangled and guilty, but Sophie was in high spirits. "That was awesome," she said.

Craig realised he had impressed her at last.

7 p.m.

Kit set up his computer in the box room, a small space that could be reached only by going through his bedroom. He plugged in his laptop, a fingerprint scanner, and a smartcard reader.

~~writer~~ he had bought second-hand for £270 on eBay.

This room had always been his lair. When he was small, they had had only the three bedrooms: Mamma and Daddy in the main room, Olga and Miranda in the second room, and Kit in a cot in this box room ~~off the girls' room~~. After the extension was built, and Olga went off to university, Kit had the bedroom as well as the box room, but this had remained his den.

It was still furnished as a schoolboy's study, with a cheap desk, a bookshelf, a small TV set, and a seat known as the sleepchair, which unfolded into a small single bed, and had often been used by school friends coming to stay. Sitting at the desk, he thought wistfully of the tedious hours of homework he had done here, ~~geography and biology, medieval kings and irregular verbs, Hail, Caesar!~~ He had learned so much, and forgotten it all.

He took ~~from his pocket~~ ^{out} the pass he had stolen from his father and slid it into the ~~reader/writer~~ ^{day's top}. Its top stuck out of the slot, clearly showing the printed words: "~~Oxford~~ ~~Medical~~". He hoped no one would come into the room. They were all in the kitchen. Lori was making *osso bucco* according to Mamma Marta's famous recipe—Kit could smell the oregano. Daddy had opened a bottle of champagne. By now they would be telling stories that

began: "Do you remember when...?"

The chip in the card contained details of his father's fingerprint. It was not a simple image, for that was too easy to fake ~~Q a photograph of the finger could fool a normal scanner.~~ Rather, Kit had built a device that measured twenty-five points of the fingerprint, using minute electrical differences between ridges and valleys. He had also written a program that stored these details in code. At his apartment he had several prototypes of the ~~fingerprint~~ scanner and he had, naturally, kept a copy of the software he had created.

Now he set his laptop to read the smart card. He was almost sure it would work. The only danger was that someone at Oxenford Medical—Toni Gallo, perhaps—might have modified the software so that Kit's program would ~~no~~ longer work; for example, by requiring an access code before the card could be read. It was unlikely that anyone would have gone to such trouble and expense to guard against a possibility that must have seemed fanciful—but it was conceivable. And he had not told Nigel about this potential snag.

He waited a few anxious seconds, watching the screen.

At last it shimmered and displayed a page of code: Stanley's fingerprint details. Kit sighed with relief and saved the file.

His niece Caroline walked in, carrying a rat.

She was dressed ^{as if she were} younger than her age, in a flower-patterned dress and white stockings. The rat had white fur and pink eyes. Caroline sat on the sleepchair, stroking her pet.

Kit suppressed a curse. He could hardly tell her that he was doing something secret and would prefer to be alone. But he could not continue while she sat there.

She had always been a nuisance. From an early age she had hero-worshipped her

young Uncle Kit. As a boy he had quickly wearied of this and become fed up with the way she followed him around. But she was hard to shake off.

He tried to be nice. "How's the rat?" he said.

"His name is Leonard," she replied in a tone of mild reproof.

"Leonard. Where did you get him?"

"Paradise Pets in Sauchiehall Street." She let the rat go, and it ran up her arm and perched on her shoulder.

~~"Is he good?"~~

~~"He's terribly sweet."~~

Kit thought the girl was insane, carrying a rat around as if it were a baby. Caroline looked like her mother, Olga, with long dark hair and heavy black eyebrows, but where Olga was dryly severe, Caroline was as wet as a rainy February. ^{still} She was only seventeen, she might grow out of it.

~~He hoped she was too wrapped up in herself and her pet to notice the card sticking up out of the reader and the words "Oxenford Medical" printed along its top. Even she would realise he was not supposed to have a pass for the Kremlin nine months after he was fired.~~

"What are you doing?" she asked him.

"Work. I need to finish this today." He ^{hoped she couldn't see his screen.} longed to snatch ~~the tell-tale card out of the~~ reader, ~~but he feared that would only call her attention to it.~~

"I won't bother you, just carry on."

"Nothing happening downstairs?"

"Mummy and Aunt Miranda are stuffing the stockings in the drawing room, so I've been chucked out."

"Ah." He turned back to the ~~screen~~^{computer} and switched the software into Read mode. His next step should be to scan his own fingerprint, but he could not let her see that. She might not grasp the significance herself, but she could easily mention it to someone who would. He ~~pretended to study the screen,~~^{ed} racking his brains for a way to get rid of her. After a minute he was inspired. He faked a sneeze.

"Bless you," she said.

"Thanks." He sneezed again. "You know, I think poor dear Leonard is doing this to me."

"How could he?" she said indignantly.

"I'm slightly allergic, and this room is so small."

She stood up. "We don't want to make people sneeze, do we, Lennie?" She went out.

Kit closed the door gratefully behind her, then sat down and pressed the forefinger of his right hand to the glass of the scanner. The program scrutinized his fingerprint and encoded the details. Kit saved the file.

Finally, he uploaded his own fingerprint ~~details~~ to the smartcard, ~~chip~~, overwriting his father's. No one else could have done this, unless they had copies of Kit's own software, plus ^{the} A stolen smart card with the correct site code. If he were devising the system anew he still would not bother make the cards ~~non-rewritable~~^{immune to rewrite}. Nevertheless, Toni Gallo might have. He looked anxiously at the screen, half-expecting ~~an error message saying~~ YOU DO NOT HAVE ACCESS.

No such message appeared. Toni had not outsmarted him this time. He re-read the data from the chip, to make sure the procedure had been successful. It had: the card now carried Kit's fingerprint details, not Stanley's. "Yes!" he said aloud, mutedly triumphant.

He removed the card from the machine and put it in his pocket. It would now give him access to BSL4. When he waved the card at the reader, and pressed his finger to the touch screen, the computer would read the data on the card and compare it with the fingerprint, find they matched, and unlock the door.

After he returned from the lab he would reverse the process, erasing his own fingerprint data from the chip and reinstating his Stanley's, before he replaced the card in his father's wallet some time tomorrow. The computer at the Kremlin would record that Stanley Oxenford had entered BSL4 in the early hours of 25 December. Stanley would protest that he had been at home in bed, and Toni Gallo would tell the police that an no one else could have used Stanley's card because of the fingerprint check. "Sweet," he said aloud. It pleased him to think how baffled they would all be.

Some biometric security systems matched the fingerprint with data stored on a central computer. If the Kremlin had used that configuration, Kit would have needed access to the database. But employees had an irrational aversion to the thought of their personal details beings stored on company computers. Scientists in particular often read *The Guardian* and became finicky about their civil rights. Kit had chosen to store the fingerprint record on the smart card, rather than the central database, to make the new security set-up more acceptable to the staff. He had not anticipated that one day he would be ~~trying to~~ ^{ing} defeat his own scheme.

He felt satisfied. Stage One was complete. He had a working pass for BSL4. But, before he could use it, he had to get inside the Kremlin.

He took his mobile phone from his pocket. The number he dialled was the ~~mobile~~ ^{is} ~~phone~~ of Hamish McKinnon, one of the security guards on duty at the Kremlin, ~~tonight.~~
Hamish was the company dope dealer, supplying marijuana to the younger scientists and

Ecstasy to the secretaries for their weekends. He did not deal in heroin or crack, knowing that a serious addict was sure to betray him sooner or later. Kit had asked Hamish to be his inside man tonight, confident that Hamish would not dare to spill the beans, having his own secrets to conceal.

"It's me," Kit said when Hamish answered. "Can you talk?"

"And a happy Christmas to you too, Ian, you old bugger," Hamish said cheerily. "Just a tick, I'm going to step outside...that's better."

"Everything all right?"

Hamish's voice became serious. "Aye, but she's doubled the guard, so I've got Willie Crawford with me."

"Where are you stationed?"

"In the gate house."

"Perfect. Is everything quiet?"

"Like a graveyard."

"How many guards in total?"

"Six. Two here, two at Reception, and two in the Control Room."

"Okay. We can cope with that. Let me know if anything unusual happens."

"Okay."

Kit ended the call and dialled a number that gave him access to the phone system at the Kremlin. The number was used by Hibernian Telecom, the company that had installed the phone system, for remote diagnosis of faults. Kit had worked closely with Hibernian, because the alarms he had installed used phone lines. He knew the number and the access code. Once again, he had a moment of tension, worrying that the number or the code might have been

changed in the nine months since he had left. But they had not.

His mobile phone was linked to his laptop by a wireless connection that worked over distances of fifty feet or so—even through walls, which might be useful later. Now he used the laptop to access the central processing unit of the Kremlin's phone system. The system had tamper detectors—but they did not register an alarm if the company's own phone line and code were used for access.

First he closed down every phone on the site except the one on the desk in Reception, where the guard supervisor normally sat.

Next, he diverted all calls into and out of the Kremlin to his mobile. He had already programmed his laptop to recognise the numbers likeliest to come up, such as Toni Gallo's. He would be able to answer the calls himself, or play recorded messages to the callers, or even redirect calls and eavesdrop on the conversations.

Finally, he caused every phone in the building to ring for five seconds. That was just to get the attention of the security guards.

Then he disconnected and sat on the edge of his chair, waiting.

He was fairly sure what would happen next. The ~~security~~ guards had a list of people to call in the event of different emergencies. Their first action now should be to call the phone company.

He did not have to wait long. His mobile rang. He left it, watching his laptop. After a moment, a message appeared on the screen saying: "Kremlin calls Toni."

That was not what he had expected. They should have called Hibernian first. Nevertheless, he was prepared. Quickly, he activated a recorded message. The security guard who was trying to reach Toni Gallo heard a female voice saying that the mobile he was

Isn't he
further away?

calling might be switched off or out of range, and advising him to try later. The guard hung up.

The mobile rang again almost immediately. Kit hoped the guards would now call the phone company, but once again he was disappointed. The screen said: "Kremlin calls RPHQ." The guards were ringing regional police headquarters at Inverburn. Kit was happy for the police to be informed. He redirected the call to the correct number and listened in.

"This is Steven Tremlett, security guard supervisor at Oxenford Medical, calling to report an unusual incident."

"What's the incident, Mr Tremlett?"

"No big emergency, but we have a problem with our phone lines, and I'm not sure the alarms will work."

"I'll log it. Can you get your phones fixed?"

"I'll call out a repair crew, but god knows when they'll get here, being Christmas Eve."

"Do you want a patrol to call?"

"It wouldn't do any harm, if they've not much on."

Kit hoped the police would pay a visit to the Kremlin. It would add conviction to his cover.

The policeman said: "They'll be busy later, when the pubs chuck out, but it's quiet the noo."

"Right. Tell them I'll give them a cup of tea."

They ~~said goodbye and~~ hung up. Kit's mobile rang a third time and the screen said: "Kremlin calls Hibernian." At last, he thought with relief. This was the one he had been

waiting for. He touched a button and said into his phone: "Hibernian Telecom, can I help you?"

Steve's voice said: "This is Oxenford Medical, we have a problem with our phone system."

Kit exaggerated his Scots accent to disguise his voice. "Would that be Greenmantle Road, Inverburn?"

"Aye."

"What's the problem?"

"All the phones are out except this one. The place is empty, of course, but the thing is, the alarm system uses the phone lines, and we need to be sure that's working properly."

At that point, Kit's father walked into the room.

Kit froze, paralysed with fear and terror, ~~as if he were a child again.~~

Stanley looked at the computer and the mobile phone and raised his eyebrows.

Kit pulled himself together. He was no longer a kid frightened of a reprimand. Trying to make himself calm, he said into the phone: "Let me call you back in two minutes." He touched the keyboard of his laptop, and the screen went dark.

"Working?" his father said.

"Something I have to finish."

"At Christmas?"

"I said I would deliver this piece of software by ~~December~~ the twenty-fourth."

"By now your customer will have gone home, like all sensible folk."

"But his computer will show that I emailed the program to him before midnight on Christmas Eve, so he won't be able to say I was late."

Stanley smiled and nodded. "Well, I'm glad you're being conscientious." He stood silent for several seconds, obviously having something else to say. A typical scientist, he thought nothing of long pauses in conversation. The important thing was precision.

Kit waited, trying to hide his frantic impatience. Then his mobile rang.

"Shit," he said. "Sorry," he said to his father. He checked his screen. This was not a diverted Kremlin call, but one directly to his mobile from Hamish McKinnon, the security guard. He could not ignore it. He pressed the phone hard to his ear, so that the voice of the caller would not leak out to be heard by his father. "Yes?"

Hamish said excitedly: "All the phones here have gone kaput!"

"Okay, that's expected, it's part of the program."

"You said to tell you if anything unusual—"

"Yes, and you were right to ring me, but I have to hang up now. Thank you." He ended the call.

His father spoke. "Is our quarrel really behind us now?"

Kit resented this kind of talk. It suggested that the two disputants must be equally guilty. But he was desperate to get back on the phone, so he said: "I think so, yes."

"I know you think you've been unjustly treated," his father said, reading his mind. "I don't see your logic, but I accept that you believe it. And I, too, feel that I was unfairly done by. ^{so why don't} But we ~~have to~~ ^{all} try to forget that, and be friends again."

~~"So says Miranda."~~

~~"And I'm just not sure you have put it behind you. I sense you holding something back."~~

^{expressions,}
Kit tried to keep his face ~~wooden so that his guilt would not show~~. "I'm doing my

best," he said. "It's not easy."

Stanley seemed satisfied. "Well, I can't ask any more of you than that," he said. He put his hand on Kit's shoulder, bent down, and kissed the top of his head. "I came to tell you supper's almost ready."

"I'm nearly done. I'll come down in five minutes."

"Good." Stanley went out.

Kit slumped in his chair. He was shaking with a mixture of shame and relief. ~~He had almost been caught red-handed.~~ His father was shrewd, and suffered no illusions about Kit—
~~but~~
~~yet Kit had survived the interrogation. But it had been ghastly while it lasted.~~

When his hands were steady enough, he dialled the Kremlin again.

The phone was picked up immediately. Steve Tremlett's voice said: "Oxford Medical."

"Hibernian Telecom here." Kit remembered to change his voice. He had not known Tremlett well, and nine months had passed since he had left Oxford Medical, so it was unlikely Steve would remember his voice; but he was not going to take the chance. "I can't access your central processing unit."

"I'm not surprised. That line must be down also. You'll have to send someone."

This was what Kit wanted, but he was careful not to sound eager. "It's going to be difficult to get a repair crew out to you at Christmas."

"Don't give me that." Steve's voice betrayed a touch of anger. "You guarantee to attend to any fault within four hours, every day of the year. That's the service we pay you for. It's now seven-fifty-five p.m., and I'm logging this call."

"All right, keep your shirt on. I'll get a crew to you as soon as possible."

“Give me a time estimate, please.”

“I’ll do my best to get them to you by midnight.”

“Thank you, we’ll be waiting for you.” Steve hung up.

Kit put down his mobile. He was perspiring. He wiped his face with his sleeve. So far, it had all gone perfectly.

8:30 p.m.

Stanley dropped his bombshell during dinner.

Miranda felt mellow. The *osso bucco* was hearty and satisfying, and her father had opened two bottles of Brunello di Montepulciano to go with it. Kit was restless, dashing upstairs every time his mobile rang, but everyone else was relaxed. The four kids ate quickly then retired to the barn to watch a DVD ~~movie called *Scream II*~~ leaving six adults around the table in the dining room: Miranda and Ned, Olga and Hugo, Daddy ~~at the head~~ and Kit, ~~at the~~ ~~foot~~. Lori served coffee while Luke loaded the dishwasher in the kitchen.

Then Stanley said: "How would you all feel if I started dating again?"

was silent,

Everyone ~~went quiet~~. Even Lori reacted: she stopped pouring coffee and stood still, staring at him in shock.

Miranda had guessed, but all the same it was disquieting to hear him come right out and say it. She said: "I suppose we're talking about Toni Gallo."

He looked startled and said: "No."

Olga said: "~~Oh, poo.~~"

Miranda did not believe him, either, but she ~~refrained from contradicting him~~.

didn't contradict him.

"~~Anyway,~~ I'm not talking about anyone in particular, I'm discussing ~~a~~ ^{the} general ~~idea~~ ^{idea} principle," he went on. "Mamma Marta has been dead for a year and a half, may she rest in

peace. For almost four decades she was the only woman in my life. But I'm sixty, and I probably have another twenty or thirty years to live. I may not want to spend them alone."

Lori shot him a hurt look. He was not alone, she wanted to say; he had her and Luke.

Olga said bad-temperedly: "So why consult us? You don't need our permission to sleep with your secretary or anyone else."

"I'm not asking permission. I want to know how you would feel ~~about it~~ if it happened. And it won't be my secretary, by the way. Dorothy is very happily married."

Miranda spoke, mainly to prevent Olga saying something harsh. "I think we'd find it hard, Daddy, to see you with another woman in this house. But we want you to be happy, and I believe we'd do our best to welcome someone you loved."

He gave her a wry look. "Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but thank you for trying to be positive."

Olga said: "You won't get that much from me. For god's sake, what are we supposed to say to you? Are you thinking of marrying this woman? Would you have more children?"

"I'm not thinking of marrying anyone," he said, ~~tetchily~~ ^{irritated}. Olga was ~~irritating~~ him by refusing to argue on his terms. Mamma had always been able to get under his skin in exactly the same way. He added: "But I'm not ruling anything out."

"It's outrageous," Olga stormed. "When I was a child I hardly saw you. You were always at the lab. Mamma and I were at home with baby Mandy from seven-thirty in the morning until nine at night. We were a one-parent family, and it was all ~~for you~~, for the sake of your career, ~~so that you could invent narrow-spectrum antibiotics and an ulcer drug and an anti-cholesterol pill, and become famous and rich.~~ Well, I want a reward for my sacrifice. I want my children to inherit the money you made, and I don't want them to share it with a

litter of brats ~~beet~~ by some tart who knows nothing except how to take advantage of a widower.”

Miranda let out a cry of protest.

Hugo, embarrassed, said: “Don’t beat about the bush, Olga dear, say what’s on your mind.”

Stanley’s expression darkened, and he said: “I wasn’t planning to date *some tart*.”

Olga said: “I didn’t mean that last part.” For her, that amounted to an apology.

Kit said flippantly: “It won’t be much different. Mamma was tall, athletic, non-intellectual, and Italian. Toni Gallo is tall, athletic, non-intellectual, and Spanish. I wonder if she cooks?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Olga told him. “The difference is that for the last forty years Toni hasn’t been part of this family, so she’s not one of us, she’s an outsider.”

Kit bridled. “Don’t call me stupid, Olga. At least I can see what’s under my nose.”

Miranda’s heart missed a beat. What was he talking about?

The same question occurred to Olga. “What’s under my nose that I can’t see?”

Miranda glanced surreptitiously at Ned. She feared that later he might ask her what Kit meant. He often picked up such subtleties.

Kit backed off. “Oh, stop cross-examining me, you’re a pain in the arse.”

“Aren’t you concerned about your financial future?” Olga said to Kit. “Your inheritance is threatened as much as mine. Have you got so much money that you don’t care?”

Kit laughed humourlessly. “Yeah, right.”

Miranda said to Olga: “Aren’t you being a bit mercenary?”

"Well, Daddy did ask."

Stanley said: "I thought you might feel badly about your mother's being displaced by someone new. It never occurred to me that your main concern would be my will."

Miranda felt hurt for her father. But she was more worried about Kit and what he might say. As a child, he had never been good at keeping secrets. She and Olga had been obliged to keep everything from him. If they trusted him with a confidence, he would blurt it out to Mamma in five minutes. Now he knew Miranda's darkest secret. He was no longer a child, but on the other hand he had never really grown up. This was dangerous. ~~Her heart beat like a tom-tom.~~ Perhaps if she took part in the conversation she had a chance of controlling it. She addressed Olga. "The important thing is to keep the family together. Whatever Daddy decides, we mustn't let it break us up."

"Don't lecture me about the family," Olga said angrily. "Talk to your brother."

Kit said: "Get off my case!"

Stanley said: "I don't want to rake all that up again."

Olga persisted. "But he's the one who has come closest to destroying the family."

"Fuck you, Olga," Kit said.

"Easy," Stanley said firmly. "We can have a passionate discussion without descending to insults and obscenity."

"Come on, Daddy," Olga said. She was furious, because she had been called mercenary, and she needed to counterattack. "What could be more threatening to the family than one of us who steals from another?"

Kit was red with shame and fury. "I'll tell you," he said.

Miranda knew what was coming. Terrified, she stretched out her arm towards ~~Kit~~ him, saying

~~with her hand upright in a "Halt" sign. "Kit, calm down, please," she said frantically.~~

He was not listening. "I'll tell you what could be more threatening to the family."

Miranda shouted at him: "Just shut up!"

Stanley realised there was a subtext of which he was ignorant, and he frowned with puzzlement. "What are you two talking about?"

Kit said: "I'm talking about someone—"

Miranda stood up. "No!"

"—someone who sleeps—"

Miranda snatched up a glass of water and threw it in Kit's face.

There was a sudden hush.

Kit wiped his face with his napkin. With everyone watching him in shocked silence, he said: "...sleeps with her sister's husband."

Olga was bewildered. "This makes no sense. I never slept with Jasper—or Ned."

Miranda held her head in her hands.

"I didn't mean you," Kit said.

Olga looked at Miranda. Miranda looked away.

Lori, still standing there with the coffee pot, gave a gasp of sudden, shocked comprehension.

~~Stanley said: "Good god! I never imagined that."~~

Miranda looked at Ned. He was horrified. He said: "Did you?"

She did not reply.

Olga turned to Hugo. "You and my sister?"

He tried his bad-boy grin. Olga swung her arm and slapped his face. The blow had a

solid sound, ~~more~~ like a punch. "~~Ow!~~" he cried, and ~~rocked back in his chair.~~

~~Olga said:~~ "You lousy, lying..." ^{Olga} She searched for words. "~~You worm. You pig. You~~
bloody bastard, you rotten sod." She turned to Miranda. "And you!"

Miranda could not meet her eye. She looked down at the table. A small cup of coffee was in front of her. The cup was fine white china with a blue stripe, Mamma's favourite set.

"How could you?" Olga said to her. "How could you?"

Miranda would try to explain, one day; but anything she said now would sound like an excuse. So she just shook her head, ~~mutely.~~

Olga stood up and walked out of the room.

Hugo looked sheepish. "I'd better..." He followed her.

Stanley suddenly realised that Lori was standing there listening to every word. Belatedly, he said: "Lori, you'd better help Luke in the kitchen."

She started as if awakened. "Yes, Professor Oxenford."

Stanley looked at Kit. "That was brutal."

"Oh, that's right, blame me," Kit said petulantly. "I didn't sleep with Hugo, ~~though,~~
did I?" He threw down his napkin and left.

Ned was mortified. "Um, excuse me," he said, and he went out.

Only Miranda and her father were left in the room. Stanley got up and came to her side. He put his hand on her shoulder. "They'll all calm down about it, eventually," he said. "This is bad, but it will pass."

She turned to him and pressed her face into the soft tweed of his waistcoat. "Oh, Daddy, I'm sorry," she said, and she began to cry.