

7:45 a.m.

The pantry was cold.

The Christmas turkey, too large to fit into the kitchen refrigerator, stood in a baking tray on a marble shelf, stuffed and seasoned by Lori, ready for roasting. Miranda wondered dismally if she would live to eat it.

She stood with her father, her sister and Hugo, the four of them trussed like the turkey and crammed into a space three feet square, surrounded by food: vegetables in racks, a shelf of pasta in jars, boxes of breakfast cereals, cans of tuna and plum tomatoes and baked beans.

Hugo was in the worst state. He seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. He was leaning against the wall and Olga was pressing herself to his naked body, trying to keep him warm. ~~Stanley's face looked as if he had been hit by a truck, but he was standing erect and his expression was alert.~~

Miranda felt helpless and miserable. ~~It was heartbreaking to see her father, such a strong character, wounded and tied up. Hugo was a rotter but he hardly deserved this: he looked as if he might have suffered permanent damage. And Olga was a hero, trying so hard to comfort the husband who had betrayed her.~~

The others had tea towels stuffed into their mouths, but Daisy had not bothered to gag Miranda, presumably because there was no point in anyone shouting now that the police had

gone. Miranda realised with a spurt of hope, that she might be able to remove the gags. "Daddy, lean down," she said. He bent his tall figure over her obediently, the end of the gag trailing from his mouth. She tilted her head as if to kiss him. She was able to catch a corner of the tea towel between her teeth. She tugged, pulling part of it out; then, frustratingly, it slipped.

Miranda let out an exclamation of exasperation. Her father bent down, encouraging her to try again. They repeated the process, and this time the whole thing came out and fell to the floor.

"Thank you," he said. "By god, that was ghastly."

Miranda did the same for Olga, who said: "I kept wanting to puke, but I was afraid I would choke myself."

Olga removed Hugo's gag ~~by the same method~~ ^{says}. "Try to stay awake, ~~Hugo,~~ ^{Hugo,} she said ~~urgently~~. "Come on, keep your eyes open."

Stanley asked Miranda: "What's going on out there?"

"Toni Gallo came here with a snowplough and some policemen," she explained. "Kit went to the door as if everything was all right, and the police left, but Toni insisted on staying."

"That woman is incredible."

"I was hiding in the attic. I managed to warn Toni."

"Well done!"

~~That frightful~~ ^{Then} Daisy pushed me down the stairs, but Toni got away. I don't know where she is now."

"She can phone the police."

Miranda shook her head. "She left her phone in her coat pocket, and Kit's got it."

"She'll think of something—she's remarkably resourceful. Anyway, she's our only hope. No one else is free, except the children, and Ned, of course."

"I'm afraid Ned won't be much use," Miranda said gloomily. "In a situation like this, the last thing you need is a Shakespeare ^{an} scholar." ~~She was thinking how feeble he had been yesterday with his ex, Jennifer, when she threw Miranda out of the house. What hope was there that such a man would stand up to three professional thugs?~~

She looked out of the pantry window. ~~Dawn had broken and the snow had stopped, so she could see the cottage where Ned lay sleeping and the barn where the children were. She was horrified to see Elton crossing the courtyard. "Oh, god," she said. "He's heading for the cottage."~~ ^{to the barn and}

Her father looked out. ~~"They're rounding people up," he said. "They'll tie everyone before they leave. We can't let them get away with that virus—how can we stop them? We have to think of something."~~ ^{but}

Elton went into the cottage.

"I hope Ned's all right." Miranda was suddenly glad Ned was not the belligerent type. Elton was tough, ruthless and armed. Ned's only hope was to come quietly.

"It could be worse," Stanley said. ~~"That lad's a villain, but he's not a complete psychopath. The woman is."~~ ^{is}

"She makes mistakes because she's insane," Miranda said. "In the hall, a few minutes ago, she was punching me when she should have been catching Toni. That's why Toni got away."

^{was punching}
"Why ~~did~~ Daisy ~~want to punch~~ you?"

"I locked her in the attic."

"You locked her in the attic?"

"She went there looking for me, and I closed the cupboard door behind her and jammed it shut. That's what made her so angry."

~~Her father seemed choked up.~~ "Brave girl," he whispered.

"I'm not brave," Miranda said. The idea was absurd. "I was just so terrified that I was willing to do anything."

~~"I think you're brave." Tears came to his eyes, and he turned away.~~

Ned emerged from the cottage. Elton was close behind, holding a gun to ^{his} the back of Ned's ~~head~~. With his ^{other} left hand, Elton was ^{holding} Tom by the arm.

~~Miranda gasped with shock. She had thought Tom was in the barn. He must have woken up and gone looking for his mother. He was wearing his Spiderman pyjamas. Miranda fought back tears.~~

The three of them were heading for the house, but then there was a shout, and they stopped. A moment later Daisy came into view, crossing the courtyard ~~from the other end~~, dragging Sophie by the hair. Sophie was bent double, stumbling in the snow, crying with pain. ~~Each time she stumbled, Daisy tugged at her hair.~~

Daisy said something to Elton that Miranda could not hear. Then Tom screamed at Daisy: "Leave her alone! You're hurting her!" His voice was a childish treble, ^{was even more} ~~made more~~ high pitched ^{with} by fear and rage.

~~Miranda recalled that Tom had a pre-adolescent passion for Sophie.~~ "Be quiet, ^{Miranda} Tommy," ~~she~~ murmured fearfully, although he could not hear her. "It doesn't matter if she gets her hair pulled."

Elton laughed. ~~Daisy grinned and yanked more viciously at Sophie's hair.~~

It was probably ~~being laughed at~~ ^{head with cl} that drove Tom over the edge. ~~He suddenly went berserk.~~ He jerked his arm out of Elton's grasp and threw himself at Daisy.

Miranda shouted: "No!"

Daisy was so surprised that when Tom crashed into her she fell backwards, ^{onto the snow} letting go of Sophie's hair, ~~and sat down in the snow.~~ Tom dived on top of her, pummelling her with his small fists.

Miranda found herself shouting uselessly: "Stop! Stop!"

Daisy pushed Tom away and got to her feet. Tom jumped up, but Daisy hit him with her gloved fist on the side of the head, and he fell down again. She heaved him up off the ground and, in a fury, held him upright with her left hand while she punched him with her right, ~~hitting his face and body.~~

~~Miranda screamed.~~

Suddenly Ned moved.

Ignoring the gun that Elton was pointing at him, he stepped between Daisy and Tom. He said something that Miranda could not hear, and put a restraining hand on Daisy's arm.

Miranda was astonished: ~~weak Ned standing up to thugs!~~

Without letting go of Tom, Daisy punched Ned in the stomach.

He doubled over, his face screwed up in a grimace of agony. But, when Daisy drew back her arm to punch Tom again, Ned straightened up and stood in her way. Changing her mind at the last instant, she punched Ned instead of Tom, hitting him in the mouth. Ned cried out, and his hands flew to his face, but he did not move.

Miranda was profoundly grateful that Ned had distracted Daisy from Tom—but how

long could he ^{with the} stand ~~this~~ beating?

~~He continued to remonstrate with Daisy. When he took his hands away from his face,~~
~~blood poured out of his mouth.~~ ^{from} ~~As~~ ^{and} Miranda watched, Daisy punched him a third time. ~~But Ned~~

~~Miranda was awestruck. Ned was like a wall. He simply~~ ^{firm} stood there and took the
 blows. And he was doing it, not for his own child, but for Tom. ~~Miranda felt ashamed of~~
~~thinking he was weak.~~

At that moment ~~Ned's own child~~, Sophie, acted. She had been standing still, ~~watching~~
~~in a stunned way~~, since Daisy let go of her hair. Now she turned around and moved away.

Elton ~~made a grab for her~~ ^{reached out}, but she slipped through his grasp. For a moment, he lost
 balance, and Sophie broke into a run ~~crossing the deep snow with balletic leaps.~~

Hastily, Elton righted himself; but Sophie had disappeared.

Elton grabbed Tom and shouted at Daisy: "Don't let that girl get away!" Daisy looked
 disposed to argue. Elton yelled: "I've got these two. Go, go!"

With a malevolent look at Ned and Tom, Daisy turned and went after Sophie.

8 a.m.

Craig turned the key in the ignition of the Ferrari. Behind him, the huge rear-mounted V12 engine started, then died.

Craig closed his eyes. "Not now," he said aloud. "Don't let me down now."

He turned the key again. The engine fired, faltered, then roared like an angry bull. Craig pumped the throttle, just to be sure, and the roar turned into a howl.

He looked at the phone ~~screen~~. It said: "Searching..." He jabbed at the number pad, dialling 999, even though he knew it was useless before the phone had connected to the network. "Come on," he urged. "~~I don't have much time—~~"

The side door of the garage flew open, and Sophie stumbled in.

Craig was taken by surprise. He thought Sophie was ^{• fill with} ~~in the hands of~~ the dreadful Daisy. ~~He had watched as Daisy dragged her out of the garage.~~ He had wanted desperately to rescue her, but he did not think he could beat Daisy in a fight even if she had not got a gun. ~~He had struggled to remain calm as he watched Daisy maliciously dragging Sophie along by the hair.~~ He kept telling himself that the best thing he could do for Sophie was to stay free and phone the police.

Now she seemed to have escaped unaided. She was sobbing and panicky, ~~he saw,~~ and he guessed that Daisy must be on her tail.

The passenger side of the car was so close to the wall that the door could not be opened. Craig threw open the driver's door and said: "Get in quick--climb over me!"

She staggered over to the car and fell in.

Craig slammed the door.

~~He did not know how to lock it, and he was too rushed to find out.~~ Daisy could not be more than a few seconds away ~~she figured as Sophie scrambled over him.~~ There was no time to phone—they had to get out of there. As Sophie collapsed into the passenger seat, he fumbled under the dashboard and found the remote ~~control device~~ that opened the garage door. He pressed it, and heard behind him a squeak of unlubricated metal as the mechanism operated. ~~He looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the up-and-over door begin to move slowly.~~

Then Daisy came in.

Her face was red with exertion and her eyes ~~were~~ wide with rage. ~~There was snow in the creases of her black leather clothes. She hesitated in the doorway, peering into the gloom of the garage, then her staring eyes~~ locked on to Craig in the driving seat of the car.

He depressed the clutch and shoved the gearshift into reverse. It was never easy, with the Ferrari's six-speed box. ~~The stick resisted his push, and there was a grinding of cogs, then something slipped into place.~~

Daisy ran ~~across the front of the car and came to the driver's side,~~ ^{of the car.} Her tan glove closed on the door handle.

The garage door was not yet fully open, but Craig could wait no longer. Just as Daisy opened the ~~car~~ door, he released the clutch and trod on the accelerator ~~pedal.~~

The car leaped backwards as if fired from a catapult. Its roof struck the lower edge of

the aluminium ~~garage~~ door with a clang. ~~Sophie gave a yell of fear.~~

~~The car flew out of the garage like a champagne cork.~~ Craig stamped on the brake. The snowplough had cleared the thick overnight layer of snow from in front of the garage, but more had fallen since, and the concrete apron was slippery. The Ferrari went into a backwards skid and stopped ^{was} with a bump ^{by} against a bank of snow.

Daisy came out of the garage. Craig could see her clearly in the grey dawn light. She hesitated.

The car phone suddenly spoke in a female voice. "You have one new message."

Craig pushed the gearshift into what he hoped was first. He eased the clutch out and, to his relief, the tyres found purchase and the car moved forward. He turned the wheel, heading for the way out. ~~If only he could make it on to the drive, he could get away from here with Sophie and summon help~~

Daisy ~~must have had the same thought, for she~~ fumbled in the pocket of her jacket and brought out a gun.

"Get down!" Craig yelled at Sophie. "She's going to shoot!"

As Daisy levelled the gun, he stamped on the accelerator and swung the steering wheel, ~~desperate to get away.~~

The car went into a skid, ~~slipping across the icy concrete. Alongside his fear and panic,~~ Craig had the feeling of déjà vu: he had skidded ~~this car,~~ in this place, only yesterday, a lifetime ago. ^{Now} He struggled to control the vehicle, but the ground was even more slippery after a night of steady snow and freezing temperatures.

He turned into the skid, and for a moment the tyres gripped again, but he overdid it, and ~~the car skidded in the opposite direction and~~ spun around in a half-circle. Sophie was

flung from side to side in the passenger seat. He kept waiting for the ~~bang of a~~ gunshot, but none came yet. The only good thing, a part of Craig's terrified mind told him, was that it was impossible for Daisy to take steady aim at a vehicle that was being driven so erratically.

The car stopped, with great good luck, in the middle of the drive, facing directly away from the house and towards the lane. The path in front of Craig had obviously been swept by the snowplough. He had a clear road to freedom.

~~He pressed on the accelerator pedal, but nothing happened. The engine had stalled.~~

~~Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daisy raise the gun and take careful aim at him.~~

~~He turned the key, and the car jerked forward: he had forgotten to take it out of gear.~~

The mistake saved his life for, in the same instant, ~~he heard the unmistakable firecracker bang of a gun, only slightly deadened by the soft snow covering everything; then~~ ^{there was a bang and} the side window of the car shattered. Sophie screamed.

Craig knocked the stick into neutral and turned the key again. ~~The throaty roar filled his ears.~~ He could see Daisy taking aim again as he pressed the clutch and found first gear. He ducked involuntarily as he pulled away, and it was lucky that he did, for this time his side window smashed.

The bullet ~~also~~ went through the windscreen, making a small round hole and causing ~~the entire screen to craze over. Now he could see nothing ahead but blurred shapes of darkness and light.~~ ^{crack into a spiderweb. Now he could barely see, but} Nevertheless, he kept the accelerator depressed, doing his best to stay on the driveway, knowing he would die if he did not get away from Daisy and her gun. Beside him, Sophie was curled up in a ball on the passenger seat, hands covering her head.

~~On the periphery of his vision, he saw Daisy running after the car. Another shot~~ ^{was} ~~banged.~~ ^{she fired again as} The car phone said: "Stanley, this is Toni. Bad news—a break-in at the lab. Please

call my mobile as soon as you can.”

Craig guessed that the people with guns must be connected to the break-in, but he could not think about that now. He tried to ^{keep to the drive} ~~steer by reference to what he could see out of the smashed side window~~, but it was no good. After a few seconds, the car went off the cleared path, and he felt the sudden drag as it slowed. The shape of a tree appeared in the crazed glass of the windscreen, and Craig slammed on the brakes, but he was too late, and the car hit ~~the~~ ~~tree~~ with a terrific crash.

Craig was thrown forward. His head hit the broken windscreen, knocking out shards of glass, cutting the skin of his forehead. ~~The steering wheel bruised his chest.~~ Sophie was flung against the dashboard and fell ^{to} ~~with her bottom on the floor and her feet up on the seat,~~ but she swore and tried to right herself, so he knew she was all right.

The engine had stalled again.

Craig looked in the rear-view mirror. Daisy was ten yards behind him, walking steadily across the snow ~~towards the car~~, holding the gun in her suede-gloved hand. He knew ~~instinctively that she was coming closer just to get a clear shot.~~ She was going to kill him and Sophie.

He had only one chance left. ~~He had to kill her.~~

He started the engine again. Daisy, five yards away now and directly behind the car, raised her gun arm. Craig put the gearshift into reverse and closed his eyes.

He heard a bang just as he stamped on the throttle. The rear window shattered. The car leaped backwards, straight at Daisy. There was a heavy thump, as though someone had dropped a sack of potatoes on the boot.

Craig took his foot off the throttle and the car rolled to a stop. Where was Daisy? He

pushed broken glass out of the windscreen and saw her. She had been thrown sideways by the impact, and was lying on the ground with one leg at an odd angle. He stared, horrified at what he had done.

Then she moved.

"Oh, no!" he cried. "Why won't you die?"

She reached out with one arm and picked up her gun, lying on the snow nearby.

Craig put the car into first gear.

The car phone said: "To erase this message, press three."

Daisy looked into his eyes and pointed the gun at him.

He let out the clutch and stamped on the throttle.

He heard the bang of the gun over the ^{beat} ~~bellow~~ of the Ferrari engine. He kept his foot ~~down~~. Daisy tried to drag herself out of the way, and Craig deliberately turned the wheel in her direction. An instant before the impact he saw her face, staring in terror, her mouth open in an ^{silent} ~~incredible~~ scream. Then the car hit her with a thud. She disappeared beneath its curved front. ~~The low-slung chassis scraped over something lumpy.~~ Craig saw that he was headed straight for the tree he had hit before. He braked, ^{but} ~~too late~~. Once again, the car crashed, ~~into the tree.~~

The car phone, which had been telling him how to save messages, stopped in mid-sentence. He tried to start the engine, but nothing happened. ~~There was not even the click of a broken starter motor.~~ He saw that none of the dials was working, and there were no lights on the dashboard. The electrical system had failed. It was hardly surprising, after the number of ~~times he had crashed the car.~~ ^{had but but}

But that meant he could not use the phone.

~~And where was Daisy?~~

He got out of the car.)

In the driveway behind him was a pile of ripped black leather, white flesh and gleaming red blood.)

Damn

~~She~~ was not moving.

Sophie got out and stood beside him. "Oh, god, is that her?"

Craig felt sick. ~~He could not speak, so~~ he nodded.

Sophie whispered: "Do you think she's dead?"

Craig nodded again, then nausea overwhelmed him. He turned aside and vomited into the snow.

8:15 a.m.

Kit had a terrifying feeling that everything was coming unglued.

It should have been a simple thing for three ^{like} tough ~~crims~~ such as Nigel, Elton and Daisy to round up stray members ^{his} of a law-abiding family. Yet things kept going wrong. Little Tom had made a suicide attack on Daisy; Ned had stunned everyone by protecting Tom from Daisy's ~~revenge~~; and Sophie had escaped in the confusion. ~~And~~ ^{Even more alarming} Toni Gallo was nowhere to be seen.

Elton brought Ned and Tom into the kitchen at gunpoint. Ned was bleeding from several places on his face, and Tom was bruised and crying, but they were walking steadily, Ned holding Tom's hand.

~~Kit reckoned up who was still at large. Sophie had run away, and Craig would not be far from her. Caroline was probably still asleep in the barn. Then there was Toni Gallo. Four people, three of them children, surely it could not take long to capture them? But time was running out, for Kit and the gang. They had less than two hours to get to the airfield with the virus. Their customer would not wait very long, Kit guessed. If ~~something seemed~~ ^{he thought had gone} wrong he would probably ~~face a trap and~~ leave.~~

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

~~spray. Kit longed for the moment when the bottle would be handed over, never to be seen again, and he would get his money.~~

^{Kit}
~~He~~ was hoping that the major roads would be cleared of snow by the end of today. He planned to drive to London and check into a small hotel, paying cash. He would lie low for a couple of weeks, then catch a train to Paris with fifty thousand pounds in his pocket. From there he would make his leisurely way across Europe, changing small amounts of money as he needed it, and end up in Lucca.

But first, the ^{they} gang had to account for everyone here at Steepfall, in order to delay pursuit. ~~And it was proving absurdly difficult.~~

Elton made Ned lie on the floor, then tied him up. Ned was quiet but watchful. Nigel tied Tom, who was still snivelling. When Elton opened the pantry door to ^{shove} put them inside, Kit saw to his surprise that the prisoners had managed to remove their gags.

^{Olga}
~~Olga spoke first.~~ "Please, let Hugo out of here," ~~she~~ said, "He's badly injured and he's so cold. I'm afraid he'll die. Just let him lie on the floor in the kitchen, where it's warm."

Kit shook his head in amazement. Olga's loyalty to her unfaithful husband was incomprehensible.

Nigel said: "He shouldn't have punched me in the face."

~~Elton pushed Ned and Tom into the pantry with the others.~~

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

^{But Elton just}
~~Elton~~ closed the door. ^{behind Ned and Tom.}

[^]
~~Kit put Hugo out of his mind.~~ "We've got to find Toni Gallo, she's the dangerous one," ^{said Kit,}

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

"Well, she's not in the house, not in the cottage because Elton's just searched it, and not in the garage because Daisy's just been there. So either she's out ~~of~~ doors, where she won't last long without a coat, or she's in the barn."

"All right," Elton said. "I'll go ^{check} to the barn."

Toni was looking out of the barn window.

She had now identified three of the four people who had raided the Kremlin. One was Kit, of course. He would have been ~~the planner,~~ ^{the} the one who told them how to defeat the security system. There was the woman whom Kit had called Daisy ~~—an ironic nickname, presumably, for someone whose appearance would give a vampire a fright. A few minutes ago, in the prelude to the fracas in the courtyard, Daisy had addressed the young black man as~~ ^{and a} Elton, ~~which might be a first name or a surname.~~ ^{named.} Toni had not yet seen the fourth, but she knew that his name was Nigel, for Kit had shouted to him in the hall.

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

But how? The best plan would be to get help, but she had no phone and no car. The house phones had been cut off, presumably by the gang. No doubt they had also grabbed any mobile phones lying around. What about cars? Toni had seen two parked in front of the house, and there must be at least one more in the garage, but she had no idea where the keys were.

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

She thought about the scene she had witnessed in the courtyard. Daisy and Elton were rounding up the family. ~~Presumably they had already dealt with these in the main house, including Stanley—tied them up, or locked them in a cellar, or both. They had just netted the little boy, Tom, and the tweedy professor, Ned. But Sophie, the tart kid, had escaped, and Daisy had gone after her. Toni had heard distance noises from beyond the garage—a car engine, breaking glass, and gunfire—but she could not see what was going on, and she hesitated to expose herself by going to investigate. If she let herself get captured, all hope was lost.~~

She wondered if anyone else was at liberty. The gang must be in a hurry to get going, for their rendezvous was at ten o'clock, but they would want to account for everyone before leaving, so that no one could call the police. Perhaps they would begin to panic and make mistakes.

Toni fervently hoped so. The odds against her were fearsome. She could not cope with all four villains at once. Three of them were armed—with thirteen-shot Browning automatic pistols, according to Steve. Her only chance would be to pick them off one by one.

~~Where should she start? At some point she had to enter the main house. At least she knew the layout—fortuitously, she had been shown around yesterday. But she did not know where in the house everyone was, and she was reluctant to jump into the dark. She was desperate for more information.~~

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

He was younger than Toni, probably twenty-five. ~~He was tall and looked fit. In his right hand he carried a pistol, pointed down at the ground. Although Toni was trained in~~

~~combat, she knew he would be a fearsome adversary even without the gun. If possible, she had to avoid getting into a hand-to-hand fight with him.~~

She wondered fearfully if she could hide. She looked around the barn. No hiding-place suggested itself. Besides, there was no point. She had to confront the gang, she thought grimly, and the sooner the better. This one was coming for her on his own, apparently confident he would not need help dealing with a mere woman. Perhaps that would turn out to be his crucial mistake.

~~Unfortunately, Toni had no weapons.~~ ^{she}

~~She had a few seconds to find some.~~ She looked hurriedly at the things around her. She considered a billiard cue, but it was too light. A blow from one would hurt like hell, but would not render a man unconscious, ~~or even knock him down.~~

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

~~She wished she had a gun.~~

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

The barn door opened, and Toni dropped to the floor and lay flat. ~~There was a fumbling sound, then the main lights came on. Toni could not see the ground floor from her prone position, so she did not know exactly where Elton was, but he could not see her, either, and she had the advantage of knowing he was there.~~

She listened hard, trying to hear his footsteps over the ^{beating} thunder of her heart. There was an odd noise that she ^{bravely guessed was} interpreted, after a few moments' puzzlement, as Elton overturning the

^{never}
 camp beds in case a child was hiding underneath. Then he opened the bathroom door. There was no one inside—Toni had already checked.

There was nowhere left to look but the hayloft. He would be coming up the ladder any second now. ~~What could she do?~~

Toni heard the unpleasant squeak of rats, and was struck by inspiration. Still lying flat, she took the shopping bag from the open suitcase and removed its contents, a gift-wrapped package labelled: "To Daddy, Happy Xmas from Sophie with love." She dropped the package back in the suitcase. Then she opened the rats' cage.

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

~~She felt an ominous vibration in the floor that told her Elton had started to climb the ladder.~~

It was now or never. She reached forward with both arms and emptied the bag of rats over the top of the ladder.

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

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

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

Toni sprang to her feet and looked down. Elton had fallen on his back. He not seem seriously hurt, but he was yelling in panic and frantically trying to brush ^{off} rats off his ~~clothing~~. They were as frightened as he, and trying desperately to cling to ^{his clothes} ~~something~~.

Toni could not see his gun.

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

~~She came down with both feet on Elton's chest. He gave an agonised grunt as the air~~

was knocked out of him. Toni landed like a gymnast, rolling forward, but still the impact hurt her legs.

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

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

Where was the gun? He must have dropped it.

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

But the momentary delay had allowed Elton to recover, ~~from the shock of the rats.~~ As Toni raised her right hand above her head, he rolled away from her. Instead of ~~bringing~~ ^{being able to bring} the heavy ball down on his head ~~in the hope of knocking him senseless,~~ she was forced to ~~change her mind at the last instant and~~ throw it at him. ~~She didn't put much force behind it.~~ ^{She didn't put much force behind it}

~~It was not a forceful throw,~~ and in some part of her brain she heard her ex, Frank, say scornfully: "You couldn't throw a ball if your life depended on it." Now her life did depend on it, and Frank was right ~~the throw was too weak.~~ She hit ^{her} the target, ~~and there was an audible thud as the billiard ball connected with Elton's skull, causing him to roar in pain,~~ but ~~Elton~~ he did not slump unconscious. Instead he got to his knees, holding his bruised head with one

hand, then struggled to his feet.

Toni took out the second ball ^{an}

Elton looked at the floor all ^{around} around him, searching in a dazed way for his gun.

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

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

Elton saw it at the same time. He dropped to his knees.

Toni got the second billiard ball out of her pocket.

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

Toni fell to her knees, ~~physically exhausted and emotionally drained.~~ She closed her ~~eyes for a moment, but there was too much to do for her to rest long.~~ ^{and} She picked up the gun. Steve had been right, it was a Browning automatic, ~~pistol~~ of the kind issued by the British army to "special" forces, ~~for clandestine work.~~ The safety catch was on the left side, behind the ~~pistol~~ grip. She turned it to the locked position, then stuffed the gun in the waist of her jeans.

She unplugged the television and ripped the cable out of the back of the set, then used

it to tie Elton's hands behind his back.

~~Then~~ she searched him, looking for a phone; but, to her intense disappointment, he did not have one.

8:30 a.m.

It took Craig a long time to work up the courage to look again at ^{Daisy} ~~the~~ motionless form, of ~~Daisy.~~

~~The sight of her mangled body, even viewed from a distance, had made him throw up. When there was nothing left in him to come out, he had tried to clean his mouth with handfuls of fresh snow. Then Sophie came to him and put her arms around his waist, and he hugged her, keeping his back to Daisy. They had stood like that until at last ^{Craig} ~~the~~ nausea passed, and he felt able to turn and see what he had done.~~

Sophie said: "What are we going to do now?"

Craig swallowed. It was not over yet. Daisy was only one of three thugs—and then there was Uncle Kit. "We'd better take her gun," he said.

~~Her expression told him she hated that idea.~~ She said: "Do you know how to use it?"

"How hard can it be?"

She looked unhappy, but just said: "Whatever."

Craig hesitated a moment longer; then he took her hand and they walked towards the body.

Daisy was lying face down, her arms beneath her. ^{Craig tried not to look} ~~Although she had tried to kill~~
~~Craig, he still found it horrible to look at a human being so mangled. The legs were the worst.~~

Her leather trousers had been ripped to shreds. One leg was twisted unnaturally, and the other, ~~was~~ gashed and bloody. The leather jacket seemed to have protected her arms and body, but her shaved head was covered with blood. ~~Her face was hidden, buried in the snow.~~

They stopped six feet away. "I can't see the gun," Craig said. "It must be underneath her."

They stepped closer. Sophie said: "I've never seen a dead person."

"I saw Mamma Marta in the funeral parlour."

"I want to see her face." Letting go of Craig's hand, Sophie went down on one knee and reached out to the bloodstained body.

Quick as a snake Daisy lifted her head, grabbed Sophie's wrist, and brought her right hand out from under her with the gun in it.

Sophie screamed in terror.

Craig felt as if he had been struck by lightning. ~~He~~ shouted: "Christ!" and jumped back.

Daisy jammed the snout of the little grey pistol into the soft skin of Sophie's throat. "Stand still, laddie!" she yelled.

Craig froze.

~~Daisy wore a cap of blood. One ear was almost completely ripped from her head, and hung grotesquely by a narrow strip of skin.~~ But her face was unmarked, and now showed an expression of pure hatred. "For what you've done to me, I should shoot her in the belly, and let you watch her bleed to death, ^u screaming in agony."

Craig shook with horror.

"But I need your help," Daisy went on. "If you want to save your little girlfriend's

life, just do everything I tell you, instantly. Hesitate, and she dies.”

^{knows}
Craig ~~felt~~ she really meant it.

“Get over here,” she said.

He had no choice. He stepped closer.

“Kneel down.”

~~Craig knelt beside her.~~

She turned her hateful eyes on Sophie. “Now, you little whore, I’m going to let go of your arm, but don’t you try to move away, or I’ll shoot you, and enjoy it.” She took her left hand off Sophie’s arm, but kept the gun pushed into ~~the flesh of~~ Sophie’s neck. Then she put her left arm around Craig’s shoulders. “Hold my wrist, ~~lad,~~” she said.

With his left hand, Craig grasped Daisy’s wrist as it dangled over his ~~left~~ shoulder.

“You, lassie, get under my right arm.”

Sophie changed her position slowly, and Daisy put her right arm over Sophie’s shoulder, managing all the time to keep the gun pointed at ^{the girl’s} ~~Sophie’s~~ head.

“Now, you’re going to lift me up and carry me to the house. But do it gently. I think I’ve got a broken leg. If you jog ~~me it might hurt,~~ and if I flinch I might accidentally pull the trigger. [“] ~~So, easy does it and lift.”~~ _”

Craig tightened his grip on Daisy’s wrist and raised himself from the kneeling position. To ease the burden on Sophie, he put his right arm around Daisy’s waist and took some of her weight. The three of them slowly stood upright.

Daisy was gasping with pain, and as pale as the snow on the ground all around them; but, when Craig looked sideways and caught her eye, he saw that she was watching him intently.

~~When they were upright, Daisy said, "Forward, slowly."~~

↳ — They walked forward, Daisy dragging her legs.

"I bet you two were hidden away somewhere all night," she said. "What were you up to, eh?"

Craig said nothing. He could hardly believe that she had breath ~~and malice~~ enough in ~~her~~ ^{left} to rail at them.

"Tell me, laddie," she jeered. "Did you put your finger in her little pussy, eh? You dirty little bastard, I bet you did."

Craig *felt* dirty when she talked like that. She was able to sully an experience that had been carefree. He hated her for spoiling his memory. He longed to drop her on the ground, but he felt sure she would pull the trigger.

after a few more steps, she said,
 "Wait," she said. ~~"Stop."~~ They halted, and she put some of her weight on her left leg, ~~the one that was not twisted.~~

Craig looked at her terrible face. Her black-lined eyes were closed in pain. ~~She said:~~
 "We'll just rest here for a minute, then we'll go on," *she said.*

Toni stepped out of the barn. ~~Now she could be seen.~~ By her calculations, ~~there were two of~~ *were in the barn*
~~the gang in the house~~ — Nigel and Kit — and either of them might look out of a window, at any ~~moment.~~
 But she had to take the risk. Listening for the shot that would kill her, she walked as fast as she could, ~~pushing through the snow,~~ to the guest cottage. She reached it without incident and dodged around the corner of the building out of sight.

She had left Caroline searching tearfully for her pet rats. Elton was trussed up under the billiard table, blindfolded and gagged, ~~to make sure that when he came round he could not~~

~~talk dopey Caroline into untying him.~~

Toni circled the cottage and approached the main house from the side. The back door stood open, but she did not go in. She needed to reconnoitre. ~~She crept along the back of the building and peeped in at the first window.~~

~~She was looking into the pantry. Six people were crammed into it, bound hand and foot but standing: Stanley, Miranda, Ned, Olga, Hugo who was naked and little Tom.~~ *through window she saw* *crammed into*
~~Toni caught her breath when she saw Stanley's face, bruised and bloody. Then he spotted her, and his eyes widened with surprise and pleasure. He did not appear to be seriously wounded, she saw with relief. He opened his mouth to speak. Quickly, Toni raised a finger to her lips for silence. Stanley closed his mouth and nodded understanding.~~ *face*

Toni moved to the next window and looked into the kitchen. ~~Two men sat with their backs to the window. One was Kit.~~ *Kit and one the man called Nigel* Toni felt a surge of pity for Stanley, having a son who would do something like this, ~~to his family. The other man wore a pink sweater. He must be the one Kit had called Nigel.~~ They were looking at a small television set, watching the news. The screen showed a snowplough clearing a motorway in the light of early morning.

Toni chewed her lip, ~~thinking~~ *used* She had a gun ~~now~~ but, even so, it ~~could~~ be difficult to control the two of them. ~~But she had no choice.~~

As she hesitated, Kit stood up, and she quickly ducked back out of sight.

8:45 a.m.

Nigel said: "That's it. They're clearing the roads. We have to go now."

"I'm worried about Toni ~~Galle~~," Kit said.

"Too bad. If we wait any longer, we'll miss the rendezvous."

Kit looked at his watch. Nigel was right. "~~Shit,~~ he said

"We'll take that Mercedes outside. Go and find the keys."

Kit ~~left the kitchen and ran upstairs. In Olga's bedroom, he pulled out the drawers of~~
~~both bedside tables without finding any keys.~~ ^{in Olga's room. No keys.} He picked up Nigel's suitcase and emptied the contents on to the floor, but nothing jingled. Breathing hard, he did the same with Olga's case. Then he spotted Hugo's blazer draped over the back of a chair. ~~He found the Mercedes~~ ^{was} keys in the pocket.

^{When he got back}
~~He ran down~~ to the kitchen, Nigel was looking out of the window. "Why is Elton taking so long?" Kit said, ^{his voice rising miserably.} ~~He could hear a note of hysteria in his own voice.~~

"I don't know," said Nigel. "Try to stay calm."

"And what the hell's happened to Daisy?"

"Go and start the engine," Nigel said. "Brush the snow off the windscreen."

"Right."

As Kit turned away, ^{he saw} ~~his eye was caught~~ by the perfume spray, in its double bag, lying

on the kitchen table. On impulse, he picked it up and stuffed it into his jacket pocket.

Then he went out.

Toni was ~~peeping around the corner of the house, and~~ saw Kit emerge from the back door. ~~He~~
~~went in the opposite direction,~~ ^{go to} to the front of the building, ^{and} ~~She followed him and saw him~~
 unlock the ~~green Mercedes estate car~~

This was her chance.

She took Elton's pistol from the waist of her jeans and ^{released} ~~moved~~ the safety catch ~~to the~~
~~unlocked position~~. There was a full magazine in the grip—she had checked. She held the gun
 pointing skywards, in accordance with her ~~police~~ training.)

~~She breathed slowly and calmly. She knew how to do this kind of thing: she had been~~
~~trained.~~ (Her heart was pounding like a bass drum, but her hands were steady. Just do it, she
 thought.)

Then she ran into the house.

~~The back door gave on to a small lobby. A second door led to the kitchen proper. She~~
~~threw it open and ran in.~~ Nigel was at the window, ^{Kitchen} looking out. "Freeze!" she screamed.

He spun around.

She levelled the gun at him. "Hands in the air!"

He hesitated.

His pistol was in the pocket of his trousers—she could see ^{its} ~~the~~ lumpy bulge. ~~it made,~~
~~the right size and shape for an automatic just like the one she was holding.~~ "Don't even think
 about reaching for your gun," she said.

Slowly, he raised his hands.

"On the floor! Face down! Now!"

He went down on his knees, hands still held high. Then he lay face down, his arms spread.

Toni had to get his gun. ~~She stood over him,~~ ^{She} transferred her pistol to her left hand, and thrust its nose into the back of his neck. "The safety catch is off, and I'm feeling jumpy," she said. ~~She went down on one knee and reached into his trousers pocket.~~ ^{going down}

He moved very fast.

~~He rolled over,~~ swinging his right arm ~~at her.~~ For a split-second she hesitated to pull the trigger, then it was too late. He knocked her off balance and she fell sideways. To break her fall, she put her left hand flat on the floor—dropping her gun.

~~He kicked out at her wildly, his shoe connecting with her hip.~~ She regained her balance and scrambled to her feet, ~~coming upright before he did.~~ As he got to his knees, she kicked him in the face. He fell back, ~~his hand flying to his cheek,~~ but he recovered fast. He looked at her with an expression of fury ~~and hatred,~~ as if outraged that she should fight back.

She snatched up the gun and pointed it at him, ~~and he froze.~~

"Let's try again," she said. "This time, *you* take the gun out. Slowly."

He reached into his pocket.

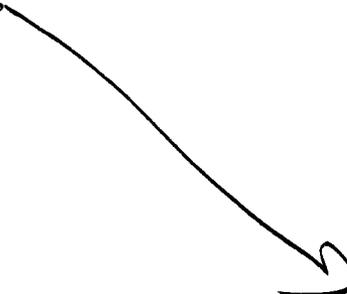
Toni stretched her arm out in front of her. "And please—give me an excuse to blow your head off."

He took the gun out.

"Drop it on the floor."

He smiled. "Have you ever actually shot a man?"

~~"Drop it now."~~



“I don’t think you have.”

He had guessed right. She had been trained to use firearms, and she had carried a gun ~~on operations~~, but she had never shot ~~at~~ anything other than a target. ~~The idea of actually making a hole in another human being revolted her.~~

“You’re not going to shoot me,” he said.

“You’re a second away from finding out.”

Her mother walked in, carrying the puppy. She said: “This poor dog hasn’t had any breakfast.”

Nigel raised his gun.

Toni shot him in the ^{twice} right shoulder.

~~She was only six feet away, and she was a good shot, so it was not difficult to wound him in exactly the right place. She pulled the trigger twice, as she had been taught. The double bang was deafening in the kitchen. Two round holes appeared in the pink sweater, side by side where the arm met the shoulder. The gun fell from Nigel’s hand, ^{as} he cried out in ~~as~~ pain and staggered back against the refrigerator.~~

~~Toni felt shocked. (She had not really believed she could do it. The act was revolting. She was a monster. She felt sick.)~~

Nigel screamed: “You fucking bitch!”

Like magic, his words restored her nerve. “Be glad I didn’t shoot you in the belly,” she said. “Now lie down.”

He slumped to the floor and rolled over on his face, ~~still clutching his wound.~~

Mother said: “I’ll put the kettle on.”

Toni picked up his ~~dropped~~ gun and locked the safety catch. She stuffed both ~~guns~~ ^{weapons}

^{belt}
into her ~~jeans~~ and opened the pantry door.

Stanley said: "What happened? Was someone shot?"

"Nigel," she said calmly. She took a pair of kitchen scissors from the knife block and cut the washing line that bound Stanley's hands and feet. When he was free, he put his arms around her, ~~and squeezed her hand.~~ "Thank you," ~~he murmured in her ear.~~

She closed her eyes. He still loved her. ~~The nightmare of the last few hours had not changed that. She hugged him hard for a precious second then broke the clasp.~~ Handing him the scissors, she ^{only} said: "You free the rest." She drew one of the pistols from her waistband. "Kit's not far away. He must have heard the shots. Does he have a gun?"

"I don't think so," Stanley replied.

Toni was relieved. That would make it easier.

Olga said: "Get us out of this ~~old~~ room, please!"

Stanley turned to cut her bonds.

Kit's voice rang out: "Nobody move!"

Toni spun around, levelling the gun. Kit stood in the doorway. He had no gun, but he was holding a simple glass perfume spray in his hand as if it were a weapon. Toni recognised the bottle that she had seen, ~~on the security video, being~~ filled with Madoba-2.

~~Kit said: "This contains the virus. One squirt will kill you."~~

~~Everyone stood still.~~

~~Kit stared at Toni. She was pointing the gun at him, and he was pointing the spray at her. He said: "If you shoot me, I'll drop the bottle, and the glass will break on these tiles."~~

She said: "If you spray us with that stuff, you'll kill yourself as well."

"I'll die, then," he said. "I don't care. I've put everything into this. ~~I made the plan, I~~
^{conspired} ~~I~~ betrayed my family, and ~~I became a party to a conspiracy to murder hundreds of people,~~
~~maybe thousands.~~ After all that, how can I fail? I'd rather die." As he said it, he realised it
 was true. ~~Even the money had diminished in importance, now. All he really wanted was to~~
~~win.~~

Stanley said: "How did we come to this, Kit?"

Kit met his father's gaze. He saw anger there, as he expected, but also grief. ~~Stanley~~
~~looked the way he had when Mamma Marta died.~~ Too bad, Kit thought angrily; he brought
 this on himself. ~~"Too late now for apologies," he said harshly.~~

~~"I wasn't going to apologise," Stanley said sadly.~~

Kit looked at Nigel, ^{who struggled up from the floor,} ~~sitting on the floor,~~ holding his ~~bleeding~~ right shoulder, ~~with his~~
~~left hand.~~ That explained the ~~two~~ gunshots that had caused Kit to ~~arm himself with the spray~~
~~before coming back into the kitchen.~~

~~Nigel struggled to his feet. "Ah, bollocks, it hurts," he said.~~

Kit said: "Hand over the guns, Toni. Quick, or I'll press ^{the} ~~this~~ nozzle."

Toni hesitated.

Stanley said: "I think Kit means what he says."

"On the table," Kit said.

She put the guns on the kitchen table, beside the briefcase that had contained the
 perfume bottle.

~~Kit said: "Nigel, pick them up."~~

With his left hand, Nigel picked up a gun and stuffed it into his pocket. He took the
 second, hefted it, then, with sudden speed, smashed it across Toni's face. She cried out and

fell back.

Kit was furious with him. "What do you think you're doing?" he cried. "There's no time for that! We have to get going."

"Don't you give me orders," Nigel said harshly. "This cow shot me."

Kit could tell ~~from Toni's face that she~~ ^{Toni} thought she was about to die. ~~But there was no time to enjoy revenge.~~ "That cow ruined my life, but I'm not hanging around to punish her," Kit said. "Knock it off!"

~~Nigel hesitated, staring malevolently at Toni.~~

~~Kit said:~~ "Let's go!"

At last Nigel turned away, ~~from Toni.~~ "What about Elton and Daisy?"

~~"To hell with them."~~

~~"I wish there was time to tie up your old man and his tart."~~

"You stupid fool, don't you realise we're out of time?"

The stare Nigel gave Kit was sulphuric. "What did you call me?" Nigel wanted to kill someone, ~~Kit realised~~ and right now he was thinking of shooting Kit. It was a terrifying moment. Kit raised the perfume spray high in the air ~~and stared back~~, waiting for his life to end.

Then Nigel looked away and said: "All right, let's get out of here."

9 a.m.

Kit ran outside. The engine of the Mercedes was throbbing ~~low~~, and the snow on its bonnet was already melting from the heat. ~~The windscreen and side windows were partly clear where he had hastily swept them with his hands.~~ He jumped in, stuffing the perfume spray into his jacket pocket. Nigel clambered into the passenger seat, grunting with ~~the pain of his gunshot wound.~~

Kit ^{shifted} ~~put the automatic gearshift~~ into Drive and touched the accelerator pedal. ~~The car seemed to strain forward,~~ ^{the car did} but ~~did~~ not move. The plough had stopped a couple of feet away, and snow was piled two feet high in front of the bumper. ~~Kit increased pressure on the pedal as the car laboured to move the snow out of the way.~~ "Come on!" Kit said. "This is a Mercedes, it ought to be able to shift a few pounds of snow! [!] ~~How big is the damn engine, anyway?~~" He pressed a little harder, ~~but he did not want the wheels to lose traction and begin to spin.~~ ^{and} The car eased forward a few inches, ~~and the piled-up snow seemed to crack and shift.~~ ~~Kit looked back.~~ His father and Toni stood outside the house, watching. They would come no closer. ~~Kit guessed, because they knew Nigel had the guns.~~

The car suddenly sprang forward as the snow gave way.

Kit felt a soaring elation as he accelerated along the cleared driveway. Steepfall had seemed like a jail from which he would never escape, ~~but he had.~~ He passed the garage—

and saw Daisy.

He braked reflexively.

~~Nigel said "What the hell?"~~

Daisy was walking towards them, ~~being~~ supported by Craig ~~on one side and by Ned's~~
~~sulky daughter, Sophie, on the other.~~ ^{and} Daisy's legs dragged uselessly behind her, and her head ^{was}
~~covered with~~ ^{covered with} ~~was a mass of blood.~~ Beyond them was Stanley's Ferrari, its ~~sensuous curves battered and~~
~~deformed,~~ its gleaming blue paintwork scraped and scratched. What the hell had happened
 there?

"Stop and pick her up!" Nigel said.

Kit remembered how Daisy had humiliated him ~~and almost drowned him in her~~
~~father's pool~~ only yesterday. "Fuck her," he said. ~~He was at the wheel, and he was not going~~
~~to delay his escape for her.~~ ^{Pressed} He ~~put~~ his foot down ~~on the accelerator,~~

The long green bonnet of the Mercedes seemed to ~~lift like the head of an eager horse, and it~~
 leaped forward. Craig had only a second to act. He grabbed the hood of Sophie's anorak with
 his right hand and pulled her to the side of the drive, ^{still entwined with her} ~~moving the same way himself. Because~~
~~they were tangled up with Daisy, she moved with them, and all three fell into the soft snow~~
^{Daisy, all three}
 beside the track, ~~Daisy screaming in pain and rage.~~

The car shot past, missing them by inches, and Craig glimpsed his Uncle Kit at the
 wheel. ~~He was flabbergasted. Kit had nearly killed him. Was it intentional, or had Kit known~~
~~that Craig had time to get out of the way?~~

"You bastard!" Daisy screamed after the car, and she levelled her pistol.

Kit accelerated ^{down the} ~~past the crashed Ferrari and along the curving~~ driveway that ran

beside the cliff, ~~top~~. Craig watched, frozen, as Daisy took aim. Her hand was steady, despite the pain she was in. She squeezed off a shot, and Craig saw a rear side window shatter. ~~She~~

~~Daisy tracked the speeding car with her arm and fired again, repeatedly, cartridge cases spewing from the ejection slot of the gun.~~ ~~A line of bullet holes appeared in the car's side,~~ then there was a different kind of bang. ~~A front tyre blew out, and a strip of rubber flew through the air.~~

The car continued in a straight line for a second. Then it slewed sideways, its bonnet ploughing into the piled snow at the side of the drive, sending up a fantail of white. The back swung out and crashed into the low wall that ran along the cliff ~~edge~~. ^{Edge of the} Craig heard ~~the metallic~~ scream of tortured steel. ^a

~~The car skidded sideways. Daisy kept firing, and the windscreen shattered.~~ The car went into a slow roll, tilting sideways, seeming to hesitate, then toppling over on to its roof. It slid a few feet ~~upside down then~~ ^{and} came to a stop.

Daisy stopped shooting and fell backwards, her eyes closed.

~~Craig stared at her.~~ The gun fell from her hand. ^{It} Sophie started to cry.

Craig reached across Daisy. ~~He watched her eyes, terrified that they would open at any moment. His hand closed over the warm gun. He picked it up.~~ ^{the gun}

He held it in his right hand and put his finger into the trigger guard. He pointed it at a spot exactly between Daisy's eyes. ~~All he cared about was that~~ ^{his} this monster should never threaten ~~him and~~ ^{his} Sophie and ~~his~~ ^{his} family ~~over~~ again. Slowly, he squeezed the trigger.

The gun clicked on an empty magazine.

Kit was lying ~~flat on~~ ^{up against} the ~~inside~~ ^{was} roof of the ~~overturned~~ ^{but} car. He ~~felt~~ bruised all over, ~~and his~~

~~neck hurt as if he had twisted it, but he could move all his limbs. He managed to right himself, Nigel lay beside him, unconscious, possibly dead.~~
glance at Nigel who

~~Kit had to get out. He tried to open the car door. He pulled the handle and pushed at the door, but it would not move. Something had buckled in the crash, and the door was stuck. He hammered madly at it with his fists, with no result. He jabbed at the button of the electric window, but nothing happened. He thought frantically that he might be imprisoned in the crashed car until the fire brigade arrived to cut him out, and he suffered a moment of panic and despair.~~
He
~~Then he saw that the windscreen was crazed.~~
cracked
~~He shoved at it with his hand and easily pushed out a big section of broken glass.~~
Crawling out

~~He crawled through the windscreen. He was careless of the broken glass, and a shard cut the palm of his hand painfully. He cried out and sucked the wound, but he could not pause. He slithered out from under the bonnet of the car and scrambled to his feet. The wind off the sea blew madly in his face. He looked around.~~
painfully
~~The wind~~
he and

His father and Toni Gallo were running along the drive towards him.

Tony stopped to look at Daisy. She seemed to be out cold. ~~Craig and Sophie appeared scared but unhurt.~~
asked Craig + Sophie who appeared scared but unhurt.

"She was shooting at us," Craig replied. "I ran over her."

Toni followed Craig's gaze and saw Stanley's Ferrari, ~~dented at both ends and with all its windows smashed.~~
battered

~~Stanley said: "Good god!"~~

Toni felt for a pulse in Daisy's neck. It was there, but weak. "She's still alive—just."

Craig said: "I've got her gun. It's empty, anyway."

They were all right, Toni decided. She looked ^{up and saw Kit beside} ~~ahead to~~ the crashed Mercedes. ~~Kit had~~
~~climbed out. She ran towards him. Stanley followed close behind.~~

Kit started to run ~~away~~ along the drive, heading for the woods and, ~~ultimately, the~~
~~main road~~; but he was ^{badly} battered and shaken ~~by the crash~~, and he ran erratically. He was never
going to make it, ~~Toni could see~~. After a few paces ~~he staggered and fell.~~ ^{Toni could see that he}

He seemed to realise that he could not escape ^{in that direction} ~~that way~~. Scrambling ~~to his feet~~, he
~~changed direction~~, and turned towards the cliff.

Toni glanced into the Mercedes as she passed it. Nigel lay in a crumpled heap ~~eyes~~
~~open with the blank stare of the dead~~. That accounted for the three thugs, Toni thought: one
tied up, one unconscious, and one dead. Only Kit was left to deal with.

^{As if reading her thoughts Kit}
~~Kit slipped on the icy drive, staggered, regained his balance, and turned around. He~~ ^{and}
took the perfume spray from his pocket, ^{holding} ~~and held~~ it out like a gun. "Stop, or I'll kill us all," he
said.

Toni and Stanley stopped.

Kit's face was ^{filled with} ~~all~~ pain and rage. Toni saw a man who had lost his soul. ~~He might do~~
~~anything: kill his family, kill himself, destroy the world.~~

Stanley said: "It won't work out here, Kit."

Toni wondered if that was true. Kit had the same thought, and said: "Why not?"

"Feel this wind," Stanley said. "The ^{spray} ~~droplets~~ will disperse before ^{it does} ~~they can do~~ any
harm."

"To hell with it all," Kit said, and he threw the bottle high in the air. Then he turned
around, jumped over the low wall, and ran full tilt at the cliff edge a few feet away.

~~Stanley jumped after him.~~

Toni caught the perfume bottle before it hit the ground.

~~Stanley leaped through the air, hands stretched out in front of him. He almost got Kit~~ ^{ran after Kit} ~~by the shoulders, but his hands slipped. He hit the ground, but managed to grab one leg and~~ ^{at the cliff} ~~grip it tight. Kit fell to the ground with his head and shoulders jutting out over the edge of the~~ ^{he stumbled} ~~cliff. Stanley jumped on top of him, holding him down with his weight.~~ ^{of his son's legs}
~~Toni looked over the edge, down a hundred-foot drop to where the sea boiled among~~
 jagged rocks.

~~Kit struggled, but his father held him down, and eventually he became still.~~

~~Stanley got slowly to his feet and pulled Kit up. Kit's eyes were shut. He was shaking~~ ^{and helpfully} ~~with emotion, like someone in a fit. "It's over," Stanley said.~~ ^{He put his arms around his son} ~~and held him. "It's all over now."~~ ^{up his son.} They stood like that on the edge, with the wind blowing their hair, until Kit stopped shaking. Then, gently, Stanley turned him around and led him back towards the house.

The family were in the living room, stunned and silent, still not sure that the nightmare was over. Stanley was talking to the Inverburn ambulance service on Kit's mobile phone, ~~while Nellie tried to lick his hands. Hugo lay on the couch, covered in blankets, while Olga bathed his wounds. Miranda was doing the same for Tom and Ned. Kit lay on his back on the floor, eyes closed. Craig and Sophie talked in low voices in a corner. Caroline had found all her rats and sat with their cage on her knees. Toni's mother sat next to Caroline with the puppy in her lap. The Christmas tree twinkled in the corner.~~

Toni called Odette. "How far away did you say those helicopters were?"

^{when you first asked} "An hour," Odette replied. ^{But} ~~But that was then. As soon as the snow stopped I moved~~

to where they are
 them. Now they're at Inverburn, waiting for instructions. Why?"

"I've caught the gang and I've got the virus back, but—"

"What, on your own?" *Odette was amazed.*

"Never mind that. The man we really want is the customer, the one who's trying to buy this stuff and use it to kill people."

"I wish."

Can
 "I think we could do it, if we act fast. Can you send a helicopter to me?"

"Where are you?"

"At ~~Stanley~~ Oxenford's house, Steepfall. It's right on the cliff exactly fifteen miles north of Inverburn. There are four buildings in a square, and the pilot will see two crashed cars in the garden."

"My god, you have been busy."

"I need the chopper to bring me a radio beacon small enough to fit into a bottle cap."

"How long does ~~the beacon~~ need to operate?"

"Forty-eight hours."

Police
 "No problem. They should have that at ~~police headquarters in~~ Inverburn."

~~"One more thing. I need a bottle of perfume—Diablerie."~~

~~"They won't have that at police headquarters. They'll have to break into Boots in the High Street."~~

~~"We don't have much time—Wait." Olga was saying something. Toni looked at her and said: "What is it?"~~

~~"I can give you a bottle of Diablerie, just like the one that was on the table. It's the perfume I use."~~

the top of a perfume bottle.

"Thanks." Toni spoke into the phone. "~~Forget the perfume, I've got a bottle.~~ How soon can you get the chopper here?"

"Ten minutes."

Toni looked at her watch. "That might not be fast enough."

"Where's the helicopter going after it picks you up?"

"I'll get back to you on that," Toni ^{said} ~~said~~ ^{ing} ~~and she ended~~ the call.

She knelt on the floor beside Kit. ~~He was pale. His eyes were closed, but he was not asleep:~~ ^{but he was conscious} His breathing was shallow ~~and he trembled intermittently.~~ "Kit," she said. ~~He did not respond.~~ "Kit, I need to ask you a question. It's very important."

He opened his eyes.

"You were going to meet the customer at ten o'clock, weren't you?"

A tense hush fell on the room as the others turned and listened.

~~Kit looked at Toni but said nothing.~~

~~She said:~~ "I need to know where you were going to meet them."

^{Kit} He looked away.

"Kit, please."

His lips parted. Toni leaned closer. He whispered: "No."

"Think about it," she urged. "You might earn forgiveness, ^{after all,} ~~in time.~~"

"Never."

~~On the contrary.~~ Little harm has been done, though much was intended. The virus has been recovered."

His eyes moved ^{from one family member to the next-} ~~from side to side as he looked at the family all around him.~~

Reading his mind, Toni said: "You've done a great wrong ^{to them} ~~to your family,~~ but they

1
 don't yet seem ready to abandon you. ~~They're all around you.~~

He closed his eyes.

Toni leaned closer. "You could ~~begin to redeem yourself, right now~~"

Miranda suddenly interrupted.
~~Stanley opened his mouth to speak, but Miranda stopped him with a raised hand. She~~

~~spoke instead.~~ "Kit, please," she said. "Do one good thing, after all this rottenness. Do it for yourself, so that you'll know you're not all bad. Tell her what she needs to know."

ran down his cheeks
~~Kit closed his eyelids tight, and tears appeared.~~ At last he said: "Inverburn Flying

~~School.~~"

~~"Thank you," Toni whispered.~~

10 a.m.

Toni sat in the control tower at the ~~Liverburn~~ Flying School. With her ~~in the little room~~ were Frank Hackett, Kit Oxenford, and a local police detective. In the hangar alongside ~~the control tower~~, parked out of sight, was the military helicopter that had brought ~~the three~~ of them here. It had been close, but they had made it with a minute to spare.

Kit clutched the burgundy ~~leather~~ briefcase. He was pale, his face expressionless, ~~as he acting like an automaton, but obeying~~ ^{ed} instructions.

They ~~all~~ looked out through the big windows. The clouds were breaking up, and the sun shone ~~over the snow-covered~~ ^{on} airstrip, ~~There~~ ^{just} was no sign of a helicopter.

Toni held Nigel ~~Buchanan's~~ ^{is} mobile phone, waiting for it to ring. The batteries had run out at some point during the night, but ~~it was the same kind as Hugo's, so she had borrowed~~ ^{she} ~~his charger~~, which was now plugged in to the wall. ~~she had borrowed~~ ^{Hugo's}

~~"The pilot should have called in," she said. She~~
~~"I had expected the pilot to call before now," she said.~~

~~Frank said: "He may be a few minutes late."~~

She pressed ^{some} buttons and discovered the last number ~~Frank~~ ^{made on the phone} had called. It ~~looked like a~~ ^{mobile number}, and it was ~~timed~~ ^{made} at eleven forty-five p.m. yesterday. "Kit," she said. "Did

Nigel call the customer just before midnight?"

"His pilot."

She turned to Frank. "This will be the number. I think we should call it."

"Okay."

She pressed Send, and handed the mobile to the local police detective. ~~He put it to his ear.~~ After a few moments, he said: "Yeah, this is me, where are you?" He spoke with a London accent similar to Nigel's, which was why Frank had brought him along. "That close?" he said, looking through the window up at the sky. "We can't see you—"

As he spoke, a helicopter came down through the clouds.

~~Toni tensed.~~

The police officer hung up. Toni took out her own mobile and called Odette, who was now in the operations room at Scotland Yard. "Customer in sight."

~~Odette could not repress the excitement in her voice.~~ "Give me the tail number."

"Just a minute..." Toni peered at the helicopter until she could make out the registration mark, then read the letters and numbers ^{out} to Odette. ~~Odette read them back then hung up.~~

The helicopter descended ^{and} ~~its rotors blew the snow on the ground into a storm. It~~ landed a hundred yards from the control tower *in a cloud of snow.*

Frank looked at Kit and nodded. "Off you go."

Kit hesitated.

Toni said: "Just do everything as planned. Say: 'We had some problems with the weather, but everything worked out okay in the end.' You'll be fine."

Kit went down the stairs, carrying the briefcase.

Toni had no idea whether he ^{would carry it off.} ~~would perform as instructed.~~ He had been up for more than twenty-four hours, he had been in a car crash, and he was emotionally wrecked. ~~He~~

~~might do anything.~~

There were two men in the front seats of the helicopter. One of them, presumably the co-pilot, opened a door and got out, carrying a large suitcase. He was a stocky man of medium height, wearing sunglasses. Ducking his head, he moved away from the aircraft.

A moment later, Kit appeared outside the tower, ~~and walked across the snow towards the helicopter.~~

~~"Stay calm, Kit," Toni said aloud. Frank grunted.~~

The two men met half way. There was some conversation. Was the co-pilot asking where Nigel was? Kit pointed to the control tower. What was he saying? *Nigel sent me to make the delivery*, perhaps. But it could just as easily be *The police are up there in the control tower*. There were more questions, and Kit shrugged.

Toni's mobile rang. It was Odette. "The helicopter is registered to Adam Hallan, a London banker," she said. "But he's not on board."

"Shame."

"Don't worry, I wasn't expecting him. The pilot and co-pilot are employees of his. They filed a flight plan to Battersea Heliport—just across the river from Mr Hallan's house in Cheyne Walk."

"He's Mister Big, then?"

"Trust me. We've been after him for a long time."

The co-pilot pointed at the burgundy briefcase. Kit opened it and showed him a *Diablerie* bottle in a nest of polystyrene packing chips. The co-pilot put his suitcase on the ground and opened it to reveal stacks of banded fifty-pound notes, ~~closely packed together~~, at least a million pounds, Toni thought, ~~perhaps two million~~. As he had been instructed, Kit

took out one of the stacks and riffled it.

Toni told Odette: "They've made the exchange. Kit's checking the money."

The two men on the airfield looked at one another, ~~noded,~~ and shook hands. Kit handed over the burgundy briefcase, then picked up the suitcase. ~~It seemed heavy.~~ The co-pilot walked back to the helicopter, and Kit returned to the control tower.

As soon as the co-pilot got back into the aircraft, it took off.

Toni was still on the line to Odette. "Are you picking up the signal from the transmitter in the bottle?"

"Loud and clear," Odette said. "We've got the bastards."

Day Four

Boxing Day

8 p.m.

The man with many names took his seat in the theatre. He was trembling with tension. Just ~~by~~ being here, he was committing suicide. But most of the people in the rows of red plush seats would die too, ~~and~~ all because of him. So would their families and friends and neighbours. That made him very proud.

Everything was going just as it had during the rehearsal three days ago. The theatre was full. The woman with long, dark hair walked down the aisle and passed him without giving a sign of recognition.

She ~~could~~ ^{might} have done this on her own, ~~perhaps~~; but, without him, she ~~might~~ ^{could} have lost her nerve. Besides, it was his plan. He could not ask someone else to die unless he, too, was willing to make the sacrifice.

Two young people sat beside him, ^a the bearded boy carrying a backpack, which he placed at his feet, ^{and a} the blonde girl holding a glossy ~~souvenir~~ brochure ~~all~~ about the show. The boy said: "Lemme see that," and the girl said: "Sure," and handed it over. Americans.

The woman with dark hair took her seat three rows in front.

Earlier in the day, they had gone to a coffee bar in Chelsea and met with a man they knew only as Adam. He wore a sweater and jeans, but ~~all the same~~ he looked rich. He had taken the woman's bottle of *Diablerie* and given her a replacement that looked identical. ~~He~~

~~had embraced them and kissed each of them on both cheeks. He had said.~~ "Next time I see you, we will all be in heaven." Then he had walked out of the café.

The lights went down and ~~the theatre went quiet.~~ The woman with dark hair took a perfume bottle from her bag.

This is the end, thought the man with many names. We die together.

She sprayed herself with perfume.

A tall man in a blue suit came to the end of her row, leaned across two people, and tapped her on the shoulder.

The man with many names stood up. What was this?

~~The man in the blue suit beckoned to the woman with dark hair.~~ "Please come with me," ~~he said.~~ *the man in the blue suit said, beckoning,* ~~Because the theatre had gone quiet, waiting for the curtain to rise, his words were clearly audible.~~

She sprayed herself again, then directed the jet into the air.

"Don't bother," said the man in the blue suit. "It's only water."

~~Betrayed!~~ They had been betrayed! The man with many names looked around ~~him~~ in desperation. There were nine hundred and eighty people in the theatre, and every one of them was looking at him.

At the end of his row ~~was~~ *appeared* another man ~~in a suit.~~ Their eyes met, and ~~the other man~~ beckoned and said: "Please come with me, sir."

There was nowhere to run.

In front of him, he saw the girl with dark hair turn, shoulders slumped, and move, pushing past the people in their seats, to the end of the row.

He did the same.

He was taken firmly by the arm and walked up the sloping aisle and through the swing doors into the brightly-lit foyer of the theatre. Waiting there was a blonde woman of about forty, ~~in a dark suit. She looked at the two men in suits.~~ "All right?"

"No trouble, ma'am."

She turned to the man with many names and said: "I am detective-inspector Odette Cressy and you are under arrest."

Behind her was an attractive redhead of about the same age. "Well done," she said.

~~"Perfect."~~

The inspector said, "I only made the arrest. ~~You did it, Toni.~~"

*are responsible
for their
capture.*

~~The redhead smiled broadly.~~ "Yeah," she said. "I did, didn't I."

The man with many names realised he could warn the others. With his free hand, he reached into his pocket for his phone.

"Don't bother," said Toni. "They've all been arrested—even your friend Adam."

Inspector Cressy took the perfume bottle, handling it with her fingertips. "And, with any luck, his fingerprints will be all over this," she said; and she dropped it into an evidence bag.

A Year Later
Christmas Day

7:55 p.m.

Toni came out of the bathroom naked and walked across the hotel room to answer the phone.

From the bed, Stanley said: "My god, you look good."

She grinned at him. ~~He was wearing a blue towelling bathrobe that was too small for him, and it showed his long, muscular legs.~~ "You're not so bad yourself," she said, and she picked up the phone. It was her mother. "Happy Christmas," she said.

"Your old boyfriend is on the television," Mother said.

"What's he doing, singing carols in the police choir?"

"He's being interviewed by that Carl Osborne. He's ^{describing} telling how he caught those terrorists last Christmas."

"He caught them?" Toni was momentarily indignant, then she thought: What the hell.

"Well, he needs the publicity—he's after a promotion. How's my sister?"

"She's just getting ~~the~~ Christmas lunch ready."

Toni looked at her watch. Here in the Caribbean it was a few minutes before eight o'clock in the evening. For Mother, in England, it was coming up to three in the afternoon. But meals were always late at Bella's. "What did she give you for Christmas?"

"We're going to get something in the January sales, it's cheaper."

"Did you like my present?" Toni had given Mother a cashmere cardigan ^{pink} in ~~salmon~~

pink.

"Lovely, thank you, dear."

"Is Osborne okay?" Mother had taken the puppy to live with her, and he was now full grown, a big shaggy black-and-white dog with hair that covered his eyes.

"He's behaving very well and hasn't had any accidents since yesterday."

"And the grandchildren?"

"Running around breaking their presents. I must go now, the Queen's on the telly."

"Bye, Mother. Thank you for calling." ~~Toni hung up.~~

Stanley said: "I don't suppose there's time for a bit of, you know, before dinner." *But*

~~She pretended to be shocked. "We just had a bit of you know!"~~

~~"That was hours ago! But if you're tired...I realise that when a woman gets to a certain age—"~~

~~"A certain age?" She leaped on to the bed and knelt astride him. "A certain age?" She~~
picked up the pillow and beat him with it.

~~He laughed helplessly and begged for mercy, and she relented and kissed him.~~

~~She had expected Stanley to be fairly good in bed, but it had come as a surprise to her that he was such a pistol. She would never forget their first holiday together. In a suite at the Ritz in Paris, he had blindfolded her and tied her hands to the bedhead. As she lay there, naked and helpless, he had stroked her lips with a feather, then with a silver teaspoon, then with a strawberry. She had never before concentrated so intensely on her bodily sensations. He caressed her breasts with a silk handkerchief, with a cashmere scarf, and with leather gloves. She had felt as if she were floating in the sea, rocked gently by waves of pleasure. He kissed the backs of her knees, the insides of her thighs, the soft undersides of her upper arms,~~

and her throat. He did everything slowly and lingeringly, until she was bursting with desire. He touched her nipples with ice cubes, and put warm oil inside her. He carried on until she begged him to enter her, then he made her wait a little longer. Afterwards, she had said: "I didn't know this, but all my life I've wanted a man to do that."

"I know," he had said.

Now he was in a playful mood. "Come on, just a quickie," he said. "I'll let you be on top."

"Oh, all right." She sighed, pretending to feel put upon, as she adjusted her position over him. "The things a girl has to do, nowadays—"

She was just leaning closer to him when she heard
~~There was a knock at the door.~~

Stanley called out: "Who is it?"

"Olga. Toni was going to lend me a necklace."

Toni could see that Stanley was about to tell his daughter to go away, but she put a hand on his mouth. "Just a minute, Olga," she called.

~~She detached herself from Stanley.~~ Olga and Miranda were coping well with having a stepmother their own age, but Toni did not want to push her luck. Best if they were not reminded that their father was having hot sex.

She pulled on a green silk robe and went to the door. ~~Before she opened it, she looked at her husband.~~ "Cover up that tent pole," she whispered. He did so, and she opened the door.

Olga strode in, dressed for dinner in a black cotton dress with a low neckline. "You said you'd lend me that jet necklace."

"Of course. Let me dig it out."

Stanley got off the bed and went into the bathroom, and a moment later Toni heard

the shower running.

Olga lowered her voice, an unusual event. "I wanted to ask you—has he seen Kit?"

"Yes. He visited the prison the day before we flew out here."

"How is my brother?"

"Uncomfortable, frustrated and bored, as you would expect, but he has been beaten up or raped, ~~and he hasn't started taking heroin.~~" Toni found the necklace ^{around his neck} and put it on Olga. "It looks better on you than me—black really isn't my colour. Why don't you ask your father directly about Kit?"

"He's so happy, I don't want to spoil his mood. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not in the least." On the contrary, Toni was flattered. ~~Olga was using her the way a daughter would use a mother, to check on her father without bothering him, with the kind of questions men did not like. Toni said:~~ ^{act as a} "Did you realise that Elton and Hamish are in the same jail?" ^{she asked}

"No—how awful!"

"Not really. Kit's helping Elton learn to read."

"Elton can't read?"

"Barely. He ^{just} knows a few words from road signs—motorway, London, town centre, airport. ~~Kit is teaching him. The cat sat on the mat.~~"

"My god, how things work out. Did you hear about Daisy?"

"No."

"She killed ^{an} ~~another~~ ⁱⁿ inmate ~~of~~ the women's prison, and she was tried for murder. A young colleague of mine defended her, but she was convicted. She got a life sentence added to her existing term. ~~She'll be in jail until she's seventy.~~ I wish we still had the death

penalty."

Toni understood Olga's hatred. Hugo had never completely recovered from the beating ^{Daisy} ~~Daisy gave him with the cask~~. He had lost the sight in one eye, ^{and} ~~Worse,~~ ~~he~~ had never regained his old ebullience. He was quieter, and less of a rake, but he was not so funny, and the wicked grin was ^{rarely seen} ~~no seen so often~~.

"A pity her father is still at large," Toni said. Harry Mac had been prosecuted as an accomplice, but Kit's testimony had not been enough to convict him, and the jury had found him not guilty. ~~He had gone straight back to his life of crime.~~

Olga said: "There's news of him, too. He's got cancer. Started in his lungs, but now it's everywhere. ^{ll} ~~He's been given three months to live.~~"

"Well, well," said Toni. "There is justice, after all."

Miranda put out Ned's clothes for the evening, black linen trousers and a check shirt. He did not expect her to do it but, if she did not, he might absent-mindedly go down to dinner in shorts and a T-shirt. He was not helpless, just careless. She had accepted that.

She had accepted a lot about him. She understood that he would never be quick to enter a conflict, even to protect her; but, to compensate for that, she knew that in a real crisis he was a rock. The way he had ~~stood in front of Tom~~ and taken punch after punch from Daisy ^{to protect}

^{Tom}proved that.

She was dressed ^{already} in a pink cotton frock with a pleated skirt. It made her look a bit wide across the hips, but then, she was a bit wide across the hips. Ned said he liked her that way.

She went into the bathroom. He was sitting in the tub, reading a biography of Moliere

in French. She took the book from him. "The butler did it."

"Now you've spoiled the suspense." He stood up.

She handed him a towel. "I'm going to check on the kids."

~~"Thanks."~~

Before she left the room, she took a small package from her bedside table and tucked it into her evening bag.

The hotel rooms were individual huts along a beach. A warm breeze stroked Miranda's bare arms as she walked to the cabin her son Tom was sharing with Craig.

Craig was putting gel in his hair while Tom tied his shoelaces. "Are you boys okay?" Miranda asked. The question was superfluous. They were both tanned and happy after a day ~~of spent windsurfing and waterskiing.~~

Tom was not really a little boy any more. He had grown two inches in the last six months, and he had stopped telling his mother everything. It made her sad. For twelve years she had been ~~all-in-all~~ ^{Every thing} to him. He would continue to be dependent on her for a few more years, but the separation was beginning.

She left the boys and went to the next hut ^{which} Sophie was sharing with Caroline ~~but~~ Caroline had already left and Sophie was alone. She stood at her wardrobe in her underwear, choosing a dress. Miranda saw with disapproval that she was wearing a sexy black half-bra and matching thong panties. ^{Has} ~~Does~~ your mother know you've ^{seen} ~~got~~ that outfit?" Miranda said.

"She lets me wear what I like," Sophie said sulkily.

Miranda sat on a chair. "Come here, I want to talk to you."

Reluctantly, Sophie sat on the bed. She crossed her legs and looked away.

"I'd really prefer your mother to say this but, as she's not here, I'll have to."

"Say what?"

"I think you're too young to have sexual intercourse. You're fifteen. Craig is only sixteen."

"He's nearly seventeen."

"Nevertheless, what you're doing is actually illegal."

"Not in this country."

Miranda had forgotten they were not in the U.K. "Well, anyway, you're too young."

Sophie made a disgusted face and rolled up her eyes. "Oh, god."

~~"I knew you'd be ungracious, but it had to be said," Miranda persisted.~~

~~"Well, now you've said it," Sophie rejoined rudely.~~

^{Look}
"However, I also know that I can't force you to do what I say."

Sophie looked surprised. She had not been expecting concessions.

Miranda took the package out of her evening bag. "So, if you decide to disobey me, I want you to use these condoms." She handed them over.

Sophie took them wordlessly. Her face was a picture of astonishment.

Miranda stood up. "I don't want you getting pregnant when you're in my care." She went to the door.

As she went out, she heard Sophie say: "Thanks."

Grandpa had reserved a private room in the hotel restaurant for the ten members of the ~~the~~ ^{Wes} Oxenford family. A waiter went around pouring champagne. Sophie was the last to arrive. Craig stared at her as she came into the room. She looked wonderful. She had put her hair up and wore small dangling earrings. ~~She looked so mature, at least twenty.~~ His mouth went dry

at the thought that she was his girl

As she passed his chair, she stooped and whispered in his ear: "Miranda gave me some condoms."

He was so surprised that he spilled his champagne. "What?"

"You heard," she said, and she took her seat.

He grinned happily at her. He had his own supply, of course. Funny old Aunt Miranda.

stopped chatting.

Grandpa stood up, and they all ~~went quiet~~. "There's steak for dinner," he said. "I ordered a turkey, but apparently it escaped."

They ~~all~~ laughed.

He went on in a more sombre tone. "We didn't really have a Christmas last year, so I thought this one should be special."

Miranda said: "And thank you for bringing us, Daddy."

"The last twelve months have been the worst year of my life, and the best," he went on. "None of us will ever completely get over what happened at Steepfall ~~one year ago~~ *last Christmas.*"

Craig looked at his father. He certainly would never recover. One eye was permanently half-closed, and the expression on his face was amiably blank. He often seemed just to tune out, nowadays.

Grandpa went on: "Had it not been for Toni, God alone knows how it would have ended."

Craig glanced at Toni. She looked terrific, wearing a chestnut-brown silk dress that showed off her red hair. Grandpa was nuts about her. He must feel almost the same way I do

about Sophie, Craig thought.

"Then we had to relive the nightmare ~~twice more~~," Grandpa said. "First with the police. By the way, Olga, why do they take statements that way? They ask you questions, and take down your answers; then they write out something that isn't what you said, and is full of mistakes, and ~~doesn't sound like a human being at all, and~~ they call it your statement."

Olga said: "The prosecution likes things phrased a certain way."

~~"I was proceeding in a westerly direction, and so on?"~~

~~"Yes."~~

Grandpa shrugged. "Well, then we had to live it all over *again* during the trial, and we had to sit and listen to suggestions that somehow *we* were at fault for injuring people who had come into our house and attacked us ~~and tied us up. Then we had to read the same stupid innuendoes in the newspapers.~~"

Craig would never forget it. Daisy's barrister had tried to say that Craig had attempted to murder her, because he had ~~run over her~~ ^{hit her with a car} while she was shooting at him. It was ludicrous, but for a few moments in court it had sounded almost plausible.

Grandpa went on: "The ~~whole~~ nightmare reminded me that life is short, and I realised that I should tell you all how I felt about Toni and waste no more time. I need hardly say how happy we are. Then my new drug was passed for testing on humans, the ~~future of the~~ ^{the} company was secured, and I was able to buy another Ferrari—and driving lessons for Craig."

They laughed, and Craig flushed. He had never told anyone about the *first* time he had dented the car. Only Sophie knew. ~~He was still embarrassed and guilty about it.~~ He thought he might confess when he was really old, like thirty or something.

"Enough of the past," said Grandpa. "Let's drink a toast."

They all stood up.

"Merry Christmas, everybody."

~~They all said: "Merry Christmas."~~

THE END

Acknowledgments

To come