

CHRISTMAS EVE

1 a.m.

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

All three were in the personnel department of Oxenford Medical. Antonia, always called Toni, was facilities director, and her main responsibility was security. Oxenford was a small pharmaceuticals outfit – a boutique company, in stock-market jargon – that did research on viruses that could kill. Security was deadly serious.

Toni had organized a spot check of supplies, and had found that two doses of an experimental drug were missing. That was bad enough: the drug, an antiviral agent, was top secret, its formula priceless. It might have been stolen for sale to a rival company. But another, more frightening possibility had brought the look of grim anxiety to Toni's freckled face, and drawn dark circles under her green eyes. A thief might have stolen the drug for personal use. And there was only one reason for that: someone had become infected by one of the lethal viruses used in Oxenford's laboratories.

The labs were located in a vast nineteenth-century

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

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

Toni and the two men were working the phones, calling everyone who had a pass to the top-security laboratory. There were four biosafety levels. At the highest, BSL4, the scientists worked in space suits, handling viruses for which there was no vaccine or antidote. Because it was the most secure location in the building, samples of the experimental drug were stored there.

Not everyone was allowed into BSL4. Biohazard training was compulsory, even for the maintenance men who went in to service air filters and repair autoclaves. Toni herself had undergone the training, so that she could enter the lab to check on security.

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

Toni got through to a resort in Barbados called Le Club Beach and, after much insistence, persuaded the assistant

manager to go looking for a young laboratory technician called Jenny Crawford.

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

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

'We've discovered a discrepancy in the BSL4 log,' Toni explained.

Jenny was a little drunk. 'That's happened before,' she said carelessly. 'But no one's ever made, like, a great big drama over it.'

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

'Tuesday, I think. Won't the computer tell you that?'

It would, but Toni wanted to know whether Jenny's story would match the computer record. 'And when was the last time you accessed the vault?' The vault was a locked refrigerator within BSL4.

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

'Do you recall the last time you used Madoba-2?' This was the virus the scientists were working on right now.

Jenny was shocked. 'Bloody hell, is that what's gone missing?'

‘No, it’s not. All the same—’

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

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

‘This is like the sodding Gestapo,’ Jenny said.

‘Be that as it may, have you—’

‘No, I have not.’

‘Just one more question. Is your temperature normal?’

‘Fuck me, are you saying I might have Madoba-2?’

‘Have you got a cold or fever?’

‘No!’

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

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

‘Shame,’ Toni said to the dead phone. She cradled the receiver and said: ‘Jenny Crawford checks out. A cow, but straight.’

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

‘I hope you’re right,’ Toni said non-comittally. She got up and went to the window. The personnel office overlooked the extension that housed the BSL4 laboratory. The new building seemed similar to the rest of the Kremlin, with barley-sugar chimneys and a clock tower, so that it would be difficult for an outsider to guess, from a distance, where in the complex the high-security lab was located. But its arched windows were opaque, the carved oak doors could not be opened, and closed-circuit television cameras gazed one-eyed from the monstrous heads of the gargoyles. It was a concrete blockhouse in Victorian disguise. The new building was on three levels. The labs were on the ground floor. As well as research space and storage, there was an intensive-care medical isolation facility for anyone who became infected with a dangerous virus. It had never been used. On the floor above was the air-handling equipment. Below, elaborate machinery sterilized all waste coming from the building. Nothing left the place alive, except human beings.

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

McAlpine grunted. As lab director he was responsible for the log, and the real reason for his mood was that he should have discovered the discrepancy himself. Toni's efficiency made him look bad.

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

James Elliot looked up from his computer screen. He dressed like a stockbroker, in a pinstriped suit and spotted tie, as if to distinguish himself from the tweedy scientists. He seemed to regard the safety rules as tiresome bureaucracy, perhaps because he never worked hands-on with viruses. Toni found him pompous and silly. 'We've spoken to all but one of the twenty-seven staff that have access to BSL4,' he said. He spoke with exaggerated precision, like a tired teacher explaining something to the dullest pupil in the class. 'All of them told the truth about when they last entered the lab and opened the vault. None has noticed a colleague behaving strangely. And no one has a fever.'

'Who's the missing one?'

'Michael Ross, a lab technician.'

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

'He's worked for the company for eight years without a blemish on his record.'

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

'What's he been doing since?'

'Holiday.'

‘For how long – three weeks?’

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

‘Did he call in sick?’

‘No.’

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

‘No answer from his home phone or his mobile.’

‘Doesn’t that strike you as odd?’

‘That a single young man should extend his vacation without forewarning his employer? About as odd as rain in Glen Coe.’

Toni turned back to McAlpine. ‘But you say Michael has a good record.’

The lab director looked worried. ‘He’s very conscientious. It’s surprising that he should take unauthorized leave.’

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

McAlpine consulted his list. ‘Dr Ansari, a biochemist.’

‘I don’t think I know him.’

‘Her. It’s a woman. Monica.’

Toni picked up the phone. ‘What’s her number?’

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

‘I’m sorry to trouble you again.’

‘Has something happened?’

‘It’s about Michael Ross. We can’t track him down.’

I believe you were in BSL4 with him two weeks ago last Sunday.'

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

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

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

That rang a bell. Toni recalled the reason she had gone to Michael Ross's house. About six months ago she had mentioned, in a casual conversation in the canteen, how much she liked Rembrandt's pictures of old women, with every crease and wrinkle lovingly detailed. You could tell, she had said, how much Rembrandt must have loved his mother. Michael had lit up with enthusiasm and revealed that he had copies of several Rembrandt etchings, cut out of magazines and auction-house catalogues. She had gone home with him after work to see the pictures, all of old women, tastefully framed and covering one wall of his small living room. She had worried that he was going to ask her for a date – she liked him, but not *that* way – but, to her relief, he genuinely wanted only to show off his collection. He was, she had concluded, a mother's boy.

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

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

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

'Totally.'

'Did you enter BSL4 together?'

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

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

‘Yes, he changed quicker than I did.’

‘Did you work alongside him?’

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

‘Did you leave together?’

‘He went a few minutes before I did.’

‘It sounds to me as if he could have accessed the vault without your knowing about it.’

‘Easily.’

‘What’s your impression of Michael?’

‘He’s all right . . . inoffensive, I suppose.’

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

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Do you find him attractive?’

‘Nice-looking, but not sexy.’

Toni smiled. ‘Exactly. Anything odd about him, in your experience?’

‘No.’

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

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

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

Toni’s curiosity was pricked by what she could hear of

Elliot's conversation. She ended her call, saying: 'Thanks again, Monica. I hope you get back to sleep all right.'

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

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

'It's an old folks' home,' Elliot said. He looked frightened. 'And Mrs Ross died last winter.'

'Oh, shit,' said Toni.

3 a.m.

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

The silence was shattered by the roar of engines as two vans drove out of the garage. Both were marked with the international biohazard symbol, four broken black circles on a vivid yellow background. The guard at the gatehouse had the barrier up already. They drove out and turned south, going dangerously fast.

Toni Gallo was at the wheel of the lead vehicle, driving as if it were her Porsche, using the full width of the road, racing the engine, powering through bends. She feared she was too late. In the van with Toni were three men trained in decontamination. The second vehicle was a mobile isolation unit with a paramedic at the wheel and a doctor, Ruth Solomons, in the passenger seat.

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

She had activated a red alert on the basis of nothing

but suspicion. The drug might have been used legitimately by a scientist who just forgot to make the appropriate entry in the log, as Howard McAlpine believed. Michael Ross might simply have extended his holiday without permission; and the story about his mother might have been no more than a misunderstanding. In that case, someone was sure to say that Toni had overreacted – like a typical hysterical woman, James Elliot would add. She might find Michael Ross safely asleep in bed with his phone turned off, and she winced to think what she would then say to her boss, Stanley Oxenford, in the morning.

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

An employee was absent without leave; he had lied about where he was going; and samples of the new drug were missing from the vault. Had Michael Ross done something that put him at risk of catching a lethal infection? The drug was still in the trial stage, and was not effective against all viruses, but he would have figured it was better than nothing. Whatever he was up to, he had wanted to make sure no one called at his house for a couple of weeks; and so he had pretended he was going to Devon, to visit a mother who was no longer alive.

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

Toni believed that intuition should never be ignored.

She could hardly bear to think of the consequences if the Madoba-2 virus had somehow escaped. It was highly infectious, spreading fast through coughs and sneezes. And it was fatal. A shudder of dread went through her, and she pushed down on the accelerator pedal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

and to the switchboard at the Kremlin over a scrambled radio channel.

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

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

‘I’ll go first,’ Toni said.

She went up to the front door, walking stiffly in the clumsy plastic suit. She rang the bell and banged the knocker. After a few moments, she went around the building to the back. There was a neat garden with a wooden shed. She found the back door unlocked, and stepped inside. She remembered standing in the kitchen while Michael made tea. She walked quickly through the house, turning on lights. The Rembrandts were still on the living-room wall. The place was clean, tidy and empty.

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

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

This was a blow. If Michael had been here, the mystery could have been solved quickly. Now there would have to be a search. He might be anywhere in the world. There was no knowing how long it would take to find him. She thought with dread of the nerve-racking days, or even weeks, of anxiety.

She went back out into the garden. To be thorough, she tried the door of the garden shed. It, too, was unlocked. When she opened it, she caught the trace of a smell,

unpleasant but vaguely familiar. It must be very strong, she realized, to penetrate the suit's filter. Blood, she thought. The shed smelled like a slaughterhouse. She murmured: 'Oh my God.'

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

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

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

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

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

There was a flicker of intelligence in his bloody eyes. He opened his mouth and mumbled something.

'What?' she shouted. She leaned closer.

'No cure,' he said. Then he vomited. A jet of black fluid exploded from his mouth, splashing Toni's faceplate. She

jerked back and cried out in alarm, even though she knew she was protected by the suit.

She was pushed aside, and Ruth Solomons bent over Michael.

‘The pulse is very weak,’ the doctor said over the headset. She opened Michael’s mouth and used her gloved fingers to clear some of the blood and vomit from his throat. ‘I need a laryngoscope – fast!’ Seconds later, a paramedic rushed in with the implement. Ruth pushed it into Michael’s mouth, clearing his throat so that he could breathe more easily. ‘Bring the isolation stretcher, quick as you can.’ She opened her medical case and took out a syringe already loaded – with morphine and a blood coagulant, Toni assumed. Ruth pushed the needle into Michael’s neck and depressed the plunger. When she pulled the syringe out, Michael bled copiously from the small hole.

Toni was swamped by a wave of grief. She thought of Michael walking around the Kremlin, sitting in his house drinking tea, talking animatedly about etchings; and the sight of this desperately damaged body became all the more painful and tragic.

‘Okay,’ Ruth said. ‘Let’s get him out of here.’

Two paramedics picked Michael up and carried him out to a gurney enclosed in a transparent plastic tent. They slid the patient through a porthole in one end of the tent, then sealed it. They wheeled the gurney across Michael’s garden.

Before getting into the ambulance, they had to decontaminate themselves and the stretcher. One of Toni’s team had already got out a shallow plastic tub like a children’s paddling pool. Now Dr Solomons and the

paramedics took it in turns to stand in the tub and be sprayed with a powerful disinfectant that destroyed any virus by oxidizing its protein.

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

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

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

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

Toni shook herself to get rid of her gloomy torpor. There was work to be done. 'Let's clean up,' she said.

One of the men took a roll of yellow tape that read 'Biohazard – do not cross line' and began to run it around the entire property, house and shed and garden, and around Michael's car. Luckily there were no other houses near enough to worry about. If Michael had lived in a

block of flats with communal air vents, it would already have been too late for decontamination.

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

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

While the men cleaned up, she looked around, searching for clues as to why this had happened. As she had feared, Michael had stolen the experimental drug because he knew or suspected he had been infected with Madoba-2. But what had he done to expose himself to the virus?

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

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

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

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

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

At the time she had been living with Frank Hackett, another detective. They had been together eight years, although they had never married. When she fell out of favour, he left her. It still hurt.

Two young officers got out of the patrol car, a man and a woman. Toni knew most local police of her own generation, and some of the older ones remembered her late father, Sergeant Antonio Gallo, inevitably called Spanish Tony. However, she did not recognize these two. Over the headset, she said: 'Jonathan, the police have

arrived. Would you please decontaminate and talk to them? Just say we have confirmed the escape of a virus from the lab. They'll call Jim Kincaid, and I'll brief him when he gets here.'

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

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

Toni sat at his desk and read his emails, operating the computer keyboard clumsily with her rubber-gloved hands. He had ordered a book called *Animal Ethics* from Amazon. He had also enquired about university courses in moral philosophy. She checked his Internet browser, and found he had recently visited animal-rights websites. Clearly, he had become troubled about the morality of his work. But it seemed no one at Oxenford Medical had realized that he was unhappy.

Toni sympathized with him. Every time she saw a beagle or a hamster lying in a cage, deliberately made ill by a disease the scientists were studying, she felt a tug of pity. But then she remembered her father's death. He had suffered a brain tumour in his fifties, and he had died

bewildered, humiliated and in pain. His condition might one day be curable thanks to research on monkey brains. Animal research was a sad necessity, in her opinion.

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

The work calmed her distress. She had always been good at detective procedures. Being forced out of the police had been a bitter blow. It felt good to use her old skills, and know that she still had the talent.

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

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

She resolved to be calm, friendly and businesslike.

He got out of the car and came towards her. She said: 'Please don't cross the line – I'll come out.' She realized right away she had made an error of tact. He was the police officer and she was the civilian – he would feel that he should be giving orders to her, not the other way around.

The frown that crossed his face showed her that he had felt the slight. Trying to be more friendly, she said: 'How are you, Frank?'

'What's going on here?'

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

'He's on holiday.'

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

'Portugal. He and his wife have a wee timeshare.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘I don’t like this protocol – it puts civilians in charge of a crime scene.’

‘What makes you think this is a crime scene?’

‘Samples of a drug were stolen.’

‘Not from here.’

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

‘The local health board must figure that out,’ Toni said, prevaricating. ‘There’s no point in speculation.’

‘Were there any animals here when you arrived?’

Toni hesitated.

That was enough for Frank, who was a good detective because he did not miss much. ‘So an animal got out of the lab and infected the technician when he wasn’t wearing a suit?’

‘I don’t know what happened, and I don’t want half-baked theories circulating. Could we concentrate for now on public safety?’

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

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

Toni said: ‘Hello?’

The doctor came on the line. 'Michael died, Toni.'

Toni closed her eyes. 'Oh, Ruth, I'm so sorry.'

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

Toni's voice was choked by grief. 'We did all we could.'

'Have you any idea how it happened?'

Toni did not want to say much in front of Frank. 'He was troubled about cruelty to animals. And I think he may have been unbalanced by the death of his mother, a year ago.'

'Poor boy.'

'Ruth, I've got the police here. I'll talk to you later.'

'Okay.' The connection was broken. Toni took off the headset.

Frank said: 'So he died.'

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

'What kind of animal was it?'

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

'Could others have become infected?'

'That's the number one question. Michael lived here alone; he had no family and few friends. Anyone who visited him before he got sick would be safe, unless they did something highly intimate, like sharing a hypodermic needle. Anyone who came here when he was showing symptoms would surely have called a doctor. So there's a good chance he has not passed the virus on.' Toni was playing it down. If she had been talking to Kincaid, she would have been more candid, for she could have trusted him not to start a scare. But Frank was different. She

finished: ‘But obviously our first priority must be to contact everyone who might have met Michael in the last sixteen days. I’ve found his address book.’

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

‘Yes – Animals Are Free.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I’ve been checking his personal stuff.’

‘That’s a job for the police.’

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

‘I could put on a suit.’

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

Frank was becoming angry again. ‘Then bring the stuff out here to me.’

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

‘I want the originals! What are you hiding in there?’

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

‘I’m going to get this protocol changed. I wonder whether the chief constable knows what Kincaid has let you get away with.’

Toni felt weary. It was the middle of the night, she had a major crisis to deal with, and she was being forced to pussyfoot around the feelings of a resentful former lover. ‘Oh, Frank, for God’s sake – you might be right, but this is

what we've got, so could we try to forget the past and work as a team?'

'Your idea of teamwork is everyone doing what you say.'

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

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

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

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

'No problem.'

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

'Good.'

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

Frank grinned. ‘You’re frightened of tabloid stories about killer hamsters roaming the Highlands.’

‘You owe me, Frank. I hope you remember.’

His face darkened. ‘I *owe* you?’

She lowered her voice, although there was no one nearby. ‘You remember Farmer Johnny Kirk.’ Kirk had been a big-time cocaine importer. Born in the rough Glasgow neighbourhood of Garscube Road, he had never seen a farm in his life, but got the nickname from the oversize green rubber boots he wore to ease the pain of the corns on his feet. Frank had put together a case against Farmer Johnny. During the trial, by accident, Toni had come across evidence that would have helped the defence. She had told Frank, but Frank had not informed the court. Johnny was as guilty as sin, and Frank had got a conviction – but, if the truth ever came out, Frank’s career would be over.

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

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

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

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

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