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**Chapter Four: 8.30am (pps42-48)**

*Miranda meets Olga*

KF: A coffee bar in Sauciehall St.

EF: I think we are missing Xmas background. Shoppers, music in café, a general holiday feeling

AZ|: This will involve us more if we can make Miranda more sympathetic.

Make her the sister who adores everyone in her family: Stanley, Kit, even Olga who from childhood has always given her a hard time. She finds things to admire and revere about all of them. And Ned is the dearest, kindest, smartest man in the world, and a great lover. Her Tom is a prince, and even difficult Sophie is exceptional and marvellous in some way. She may come off as a bit silly, but we'll then empathize so much more with her desire for Olga's help.

KF: No. Olga is a PoV character and can't be completely silly. She needs to be vulnerable, but also brave and smart. Better than she sees everyone's weaknesses but has a big heart and forgives them all—but Olga makes her worry about Ned.

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# 08:30 a.m.

Miranda Oxenford ordered a cappuccino Viennoise, with a pyramid of whipped cream on top. At the last minute she asked for a piece of carrot cake as well. She stuffed her change into the pocket of her skirt and carried her breakfast to the table where her thin sister Olga was seated with a double espresso and a cigarette.

Miranda often ran into Olga first thing in the morning at this coffee bar in the ~~business-district of Edinburgh~~. They worked nearby: Miranda was managing director of a recruitment agency specialising in IT personnel, and Olga was a barrister. They both liked to take five minutes to gather their thoughts before going into the office.

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

Miranda took off her coat and scarf. She wore a pleated skirt and a sweater embroidered with small flowers. She dressed to charm, not to intimidate.

“You’re working on Christmas Eve?” Olga said as Miranda sat down.

“Just an hour or two,” Miranda replied. “To make sure nothing’s left undone over the

holiday.”

“Same here.”

“Have you heard the news? A technician at the Fort died of a virus.”

“Oh, God, that will blight our Christmas.”

“It was on the radio. I haven’t spoken to Daddy yet, but it seems the poor boy became fond of a lab hamster and took it home.”

“What did he do, have sex with it?”

“It probably bit him. He lived alone, so nobody called for help. On the other hand, that means he probably didn’t give the virus to anyone else.”

“I wish Daddy had gone in for a less hazardous branch of science—something like atomic weapons research.”

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

“I’m deeply sensible of the honour our little brother is doing us.”

“He wasn’t going to, but I talked him round.”

“Daddy will be pleased.”

“He will, actually,” Miranda said reprovingly.

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

“No.”

"Can't you find him something? It's your field, and he's good."

"Things are quiet, and besides, people know he was sacked by his father."

"Has he stopped gambling?"

"I'm sure he has. He promised Daddy he would."

"Daddy paid his debts, didn't he?"

"I don't think we're supposed to know."

"Come on, Mandy—how much?"

"You should ask Daddy—or Kit."

"Was it ten thousand pounds?"

Miranda looked away.

"More than that? Twenty thousand?"

Miranda whispered: "Fifty."

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

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

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

This was not the response Miranda was hoping for. She wanted Olga to feel warm towards Ned. "Oh, you know what Ned's like," she said defensively. "He's lost in his own world." Ned was editor of the *Edinburgh Review of Books*, a respected cultural-political journal, but he was not practical.

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

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

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

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

“So why do you want another man?”

“Well, you know....”

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

Miranda giggled. “It’s not the same.”

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

Miranda began to feel attacked, as often happened when she talked to her sister. “Ned’s very good with Tom,” she said. Tom was her eleven-year-old son. “Jasper never used to speak to Tom, except to give him orders. Ned takes an interest in him, asks him questions and listens to the answers.”

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

“She’s coming to Steepfall too—I’m picking her up this afternoon. Tom looks at Sophie the way the Greeks regarded the gods, as supernatural beings who are dangerous unless pacified by constant sacrifices. He’s always trying to give her sweets. She’d rather

have cigarettes. She's as thin as a stick and prepared to die to stay that way." Miranda looked pointedly at Olga's pack of Marlboro Lights.

"We all have our weaknesses. Have some more carrot cake."

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

"I bet Ned lets you deal with the problem."

"I don't mind."

"Now that he's living in your flat, does he pay you rent?"

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

"I can't think why he wouldn't be comfortable. He's living rent-free, he's got you to look after his difficult adolescent daughter when he has her over, and he can have a bonk whenever he feels like it."

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

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

In fact Ned had committed to a date, but he had backed out of it, and Miranda had let him. However, she was not going to tell Olga that. "He just thinks everyone needs more time to get used to the idea of his remarriage."

"Who's 'everyone', then?"

"Well, Sophie, for a start."

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

“Olga, please don’t talk to me like a barrister.”

“Someone’s got to say these things to you.”

“You oversimplify everything. I know it’s your job, but I’m your sister, not a hostile witness.”

“I’m sorry I spoke.”

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

“I’ll do my best.”

“I want him to feel that we can build a new family together, for ourselves and our two children. I’m asking you to help me convince him we can do that.”

“All right. Okay.”

“If this holiday goes well, I think he’ll agree to a date for the wedding.”

Olga looked sceptical, but she said nothing.

Miranda decided she had made her point, so she changed the subject. “I hope things go all right between Daddy and Kit.”

“So do I, but there’s not much we can do about it.”

“He called me a few days ago. For some reason, he’s dead keen to sleep in the guest cottage at Steepfall.”

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

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

obstacle in the way."

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

"I didn't question him."

"Well, I will." Olga took her mobile phone from her briefcase and dialled.

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

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

Miranda had a dreadful feeling she knew what Kit had said. "What is it?"

Olga put the phone back into her bag. "We don't need to argue about the cottage. He's

changed his mind. He's not coming to Steepfall, after all."

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 Miranda more sympathetic. Suggest you make  
 her the sister who adores everyone in her  
 family; Stanley, Kit, even Olga who from  
 childhood has always given her a hard  
 time. She finds things to admire and rave  
 about all of them. And Ned is the dearest,  
 kindest, smartest man in the world, and  
 a great lover. Her Tom is a prince  
 and even difficult Sophie is exceptional  
 and marvellous in some way or other.  
 She may come off as a bit villy; but  
 we'll then empathize so much more  
 with her desire for Olga's help.  
 And I wonder about the impact  
 you mean to achieve with your  
 ending. Shouldn't it have more of an effect  
 on Kit who loves him?  
 I suggest too enhancing Olga's hostility  
 to him -- stealing from his own father.  
 Did he also steal as a child?