

P63

Chapter Seven: 10am (pps63-70)

Miranda and Ned at Jennifer's house

KF: Miranda's flat in a Georgian terrace off the Great Western Road.

AZ: Miranda could have a secret ambition for Tom, imagines him stepping into Stanley's shoes. She struggles to tutor him extensively in science and math. But Tom's passion is for drawing. She might consult Kit about how to awaken Tom's scientific interests and wonder at what age her father started showing this bent.

10 a.m.

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

A light snowfall began as they left the Edinburgh suburbs. There was a blizzard over the sea to the north-east, but the weather forecasters said it was going to bypass Scotland. Miranda hoped they were right.

She headed for the village [?] where Ned's ex-wife lived. They were to pick up his daughter, Sophie, and drive on to Steepfall.

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

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

"Sounds expensive," said Miranda.

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

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

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

Suggest we emphasize Mir's contentment at having both the males in her life together with her in this car for route to a reunion with her entire family. Maybe a memory of ~~some~~ some past Xmas at Steepfall which for her was magical.

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

"Okay, great! And if you can't afford it I'll ask Grandpa."

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

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

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

"Haydn—perfect."

Ned was curmudgeonly about popular culture. It was part of his egghead act, like not knowing how to drive. Miranda did not mind she, too, disliked pop music, soap operas, and cheap reproductions of famous paintings. But she liked carols.

She was feeling disappointed about Kit. She had worked hard to persuade him to join the family at Steepfall this year. At first he had refused, then he had relented, and she could hardly be surprised that he had changed his mind ^{yet} again. All the same it was a blow, for she

Kit's not coming should be almost agonizing for her. died. Might be fear that he'll leave Scotland and abandon the whole family.

badly wanted them all to be together, as they had been most Christmases before Mamma died. She drove into a village of stone-built miners' cottages and pulled up outside a larger

house that had probably been occupied by an overseer. Ned had lived here with Jennifer until they split up two years ago. Before then, they had modernised the place at great expense, and the payments still burdened Ned.

Would she hate this house that Ned must keep paying for?

loves his idiosyncrasies ✓

so

yet

for her. ✓

✓

p65

AZ: If Miranda is to get Ned in the end, do you want to make him look so pathetic here? KF: Probably yes. He will be brave when it comes to the crunch.

AZ: What if Sophie were to like Miranda better than her own mother, always wants to go to Miranda's place, confides in Miranda as to an older sister, and Jennifer knows this and this is why the mere sight of Miranda infuriates her? KF: It would be more in character for Sophie to pretend to her mother than she prefers Miranda, and to pretend the opposite to Miranda.

Has M. seen her? What does M. think of J's looks?

Miranda engaged the handbrake, but left the engine running. She and Tom stayed in the car while Ned walked up the path to the house. Miranda never went inside. She rarely even spoke to Jennifer. Although Ned had left the marital home before he met Miranda, Jennifer still acted as if Miranda had been responsible for the end of the marriage.

How? Does what?

✓

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

The radio played one of Dvorak's Hungarian dances. In the back seat, Tom's playstation beeped irregularly, but Miranda was used to that, and tuned it out. Snow blew around the car in flurries. She turned the heater up. Ned came out of the house, looking annoyed.

He came to Miranda's window. "Jennifer's out," he said. "Sophie hasn't even begun to get ready. Will you come in and help her pack?"

"Oh, Ned, I don't know if I should," Miranda said unhappily. She felt uncomfortable about going inside while Jennifer was not there.

Ned looked panicked. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure what a girl needs."

Miranda could believe that. Ned found it a challenge to pack a case for himself. He had never done it while he was married to Jennifer. He had to now, for Miranda refused to pack for him, on principle; but she still checked his luggage, and usually found that he had forgotten something important. To pack for someone else was beyond him.

She sighed and killed the engine. "Tom, you'll have to come too," she said.

The house was attractively decorated, Miranda thought as soon as she stepped into the hall. Jennifer had a good eye. She had combined plain rustic furniture with pretty fabrics in

when they go where?

the way that an overseer's houseproud wife might have done a hundred years ago, when coal mining paid good wages. There were Christmas cards on the mantelpiece, but no tree.

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

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

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

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

Sophie looked rebellious.

"Hurry up," Miranda said. "We're short of time."

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

"We'll be at Steepfall for five days, so you need ten pairs of knickers, for a start," Miranda said.

"I haven't got ten."

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

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

"Come on," Miranda said. "I'm not going to be your maid. Get some knickers out." She stared at the girl.

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

"Pack five bras," Miranda said.

Sophie began taking items out.

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

Sophie thawed a little. "It's new."

"We should wrap it so that it doesn't crease. Where do you keep tissue paper?"

"In the kitchen, drawer, I think."

"I'll fetch it. You find a couple of clean pairs of jeans."

Miranda went downstairs, feeling that she had got off to a good start with a difficult child. Ned and Tom were in the living room, watching TV. Miranda entered the kitchen and called out: "Ned, do you know where tissue paper is kept?"

"I'm sorry, I don't."

"Stupid question," she muttered to herself, and she began opening drawers.

She eventually found some at the back of a cupboard of sewing materials. She had to kneel on the tiled floor to pull the packet from under a box of ribbons. It was an effort to

reach into the cupboard, and she felt herself flush. This is ridiculous, she thought. I'm only thirty-five, I should be able to bend without effort. I must lose ten pounds. No roast potatoes with the Christmas turkey.

As she withdrew her head from the cupboard, the back door of the house opened and she heard the footsteps of a woman. She looked up to see Jennifer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't bother to apologise," she snapped. "Just get her out of here."

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

"That's right," Jennifer said.

Ned said to Miranda: "I'll bring Sophie out as soon as I can."

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

"You can use the back door," Jennifer said.

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

"Just a minute," he called.

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

"That hurts!" he protested.

She slammed the front door. "Next time, come when I call," she said. She released his arm and walked down the path.

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

P70

IT I love this scene with Tom and his Game Boy. V. apt for a young boy.

enter the house. And then, worst of all, Miranda had taken out her anger her son. She should have shouted at Jennifer, not Tom.

She looked at him in the driving mirror. "Tommy, I'm sorry I hurt your wrist," she said.

He replied without looking up from his Game Boy. "It's okay," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't come when you called."

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

away.

It is to get Ned in the end do
 you want to make him look so
 pathetic here?
 What if ~~Sept~~ Sophie were to like
 M better than her own mother,
 always wants to go to M's house,
 confides in ~~her~~ M as to an
 older sister, and Jennifer knows
 this and this is why she
 made right of M in twitter
 her.