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Chapter Nine: 12 noon (pps82-90)

Miranda arrives at Steepfall

West coast of Scotland

- Sea lochs
- Most houses are by the shore line.
- Poor farms. Grazing. Horses in coats.
- Winding road. Bridges over burns.
- Villages with churches, harbours, lines of council houses along the side of the loch.
- Most houses are painted white.
- Plenty of cliffs, but few houses on cliff tops!
- A long twilight from 4 to 5. A long period of half light from 8am to 9am.

AZ: Stanley can be gentle and kind with his family, be sensitive to them; but they nonetheless should all be somewhat in awe of him. A poor boy who by dint of will and intelligence and endless labor has given them tutors, the best schools, luxurious holidays, financial assistance when they needed it. Olga can and should rail at him as she does, but I wonder if this ought to be as easy for her as you now have it. There are times when Stanley comes off as something of a milquetoast whereas I feel he ought to be more powerful and commanding.

He should be warm but also distracted, tense. When does he call back Mahoney, or has he already done so?

AZ: Miranda, as I've indicated in my marginal notes, loves everyone in her immediate family, and she finds reasons to admire them despite their obvious faults.

We know that her dilemma is, will Ned be accepted by the family which she desperately wants. But then, should she have a child with him? Or are Tom and Sophie more that enough? In her heart of hearts, she could long for another baby, a girl.

AZ: We know what Miranda wants, but is there anything in particular which she fears? Something one of the relatives might do or say that could cause things to turn out badly?

EF: We miss Stanley's PoV. How does he feel about Marta?

PG: Call him Stanley, not Daddy.

EF: line 3: Visibility doesn't shorten. It diminishes, I think.

12 noon

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

The atmosphere inside was subdued. In the back, Sophie was listening to her own music on headphones, while Tom was lost in the beeping world of Game Boy. Ned was quiet, occasionally conducting the orchestra with one waving forefinger. Glancing sidelong at his bearded face, as he gazed into the snow and listened to Elgar's cello concerto, Miranda realised he had no idea what he had done.

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

Miranda looked in the rear-view mirror. Sophie was nodding her head in time to the music from her Walkman. Satisfied that she could not hear, Miranda said: "Jennifer was bloody rude."

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

She had to tell him what he had done. "It's not Jennifer's behaviour that bothers me," she said. "It's yours."

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

"It's not that. We all make mistakes."

He looked puzzled and annoyed. "What, then?"

"Oh, Ned! You didn't defend me!"

"I thought you were well able to defend yourself."

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

"A knight in shining armour."

"Yes!"

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

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

"I'm afraid I'm not the combative type."

"I know," she said, and they both fell silent.

Her mood was not dispelled until they arrived at Steepfall. The house was reached by a long lane that wound through woods. Emerging from the trees, the drive swept around a headland with a sheer drop to the sea. The garage came into view first. Standing sideways-on to the drive, it was an old cowshed that had been renovated and given three up-and-over doors. Miranda drove past it and along the front of the house.

Seeing the old farmhouse overlooking the beach, its thick stone walls with their small windows and the steep slate roofs, she was overwhelmed by a sense of her childhood. She had first come here at the age of five, and every time she returned she became, for a few moments, a little girl in white socks, sitting on the granite doorstep in the sun, playing teacher

Does she ask herself if she still wants to marry him? Or does she decide to forgive him? Or to try and change him?

to a class consisting of three dolls, two guinea pigs in a cage, and a sleepy old dog. The sensation was intense, but fleeting: suddenly she remembered exactly how it had felt to be herself at five, but trying to hold on to the memory was like grabbing at smoke.

Her father's dark blue Ferrari was at the front of the house, where he always left it for Luke, the handyman, to garage it. Miranda parked beside it. "Leave the presents for now," she said. "Let's go in and say hello to Grandpa."

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

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

The black Labrador, Nelson, wagged his whole body with joy and licked everyone. Miranda greeted Luke and Lori, the Filipino help, who were preparing lunch. Lori said: "Your father just got home, he's washing."

Miranda told Tom and Sophie to lay the table. She did not want to the children to put down roots in front of the TV and stay there all afternoon. "Tom, you can show Sophie where

everything is." And having a job to do would help Sophie feel part of the family.

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

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

If Ned was going to be part of Miranda's life, he had to love this house and the family that had grown up in it. He had been here before, but he had never brought Sophie and he had never stayed overnight, so this was his first major visit. ^{she so wanted} It was very important that he should have a good time and get on well with everyone.

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

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

"Hi, Miranda, it's Kit."

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

"A bit shattered, actually."

"How come?"

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

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

"Well, I'm coming after all."

"Good!" She decided not to ask what had changed his mind. He would only say

"Long story" again.

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

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

"Thanks! See you later." He hung up.

As Miranda cradled the handset, Daddy came in. He was still wearing the waistcoat and trousers of his suit, but he had rolled the cuffs of his shirt. He shook hands with Ned and kissed Miranda and the children. He was looking very trim, Miranda thought. "Are you losing weight?" she asked.

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

"That was Kit. He's coming, after all."

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

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

He patted her hand. "We ^{try to} all love Kit, but we know what he's like. I hope he shows up, but I'm not counting on it."

"He really wants to sleep in the cottage."

"Did he say why?"

"No."

No residual ill feelings after the embezzlement and the broken promise about gambling?

P86

IT:1.11 I think to call Stanley 'Daddy' in speech is good, but to refer to him as such in the narrative seems odd – why not just 'her father'?

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~~P104~~

JT: When Olga arrives she relates to Miranda as if they had not met up for coffee that morning.

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

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

Daddy said: "Anyway, I don't mind where anyone sleeps, you know that."

"Good." Miranda thought he looked tense. "I'm sorry about the technician who died," she said.

"Me, too."

~~"What made him do it?"~~

~~"We all get weird ideas into our heads, but a lonely person has no one to tell him he's crazy."~~

~~"Have you had the press on your back?"~~

~~He nodded. "I think we handled it okay. My facilities director turns out to have public relations experience, which was extremely useful."~~ He looked at his watch. ~~"But~~ "I'm waiting to see what the lunchtime news makes of it."

The door opened and Olga came in. As always, she walked in speaking. "This weather is a nightmare! People are skidding all over the place. Is that wine you're drinking? Let me have some before I explode. Nelson, please don't sniff me there, it's considered vulgar in human society. Hello, Daddy, how are you?"

She was followed in by her husband Hugo, a small man with impish charm. When he

kissed Miranda, his lips lingered a second too long on her cheek.

Olga said: "Where shall Hugo put the bags?"

"Upstairs," said Miranda.

"I suppose you've staked your claim to the cottage."

"No, Kit's having it."

"Oh, please!" Olga protested. "That big double bed and a nice bathroom and a kitchenette, all for one person, while the four of us share the poky old bathroom upstairs?"

"He particularly asked for it."

"Well, I'm particularly asking for it."

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

"So he's getting the best bedroom because he stole from Daddy—is that your logic?"

"You're talking like a barrister again. Take your wig off."

"All right, you two," said Daddy, sounding the same as he had when they were small.

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

Olga said: "So no one gets what they want."

"It will teach you not to quarrel."

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

Daddy smiled. "You're absolutely right. My approach to child-rearing has been wrong all along. Should I start again?"

Excellent

P89

EF: para3--I was momentarily unsure who Craig's father was.

“Too late.”

“Thank God for that.”

Miranda just hoped Kit would not be offended enough to turn around and drive away again.

Olga’s children came in. Caroline, seventeen, was carrying a cage containing five white rats. Nelson sniffed it excitedly. Caroline related to animals as a way of avoiding people. It was a phase many girls went through but, Miranda thought, at seventeen she should have got over it.

Craig, fifteen, carried two black plastic rubbish bags crammed with wrapped gifts. He had his father’s wicked grin, though he was tall like Olga. He put the bags down, greeted the family perfunctorily, and made a beeline for Sophie. They had met once before, Miranda recalled, at Olga’s birthday party. “You got your belly-button pierced!” Craig said to Sophie. “Cool! Did it hurt?”

Miranda became aware that there was a stranger in the room. The newcomer stood by the door to the hall, so must have come in by the front entrance. It was a tall woman with striking good looks—high cheekbones and a curved nose, lush red-blonde hair and marvellous green eyes. She wore a brown chalk-stripe trouser suit that was a bit rumpled, and her expert make-up did not quite hide signs of tiredness under her eyes, but she was smiling at the animated scene in the crowded kitchen, as if she thought that big quarrelsome families were likeable and amusing. Miranda wondered how long she had been watching.

The others began to notice her, and slowly the room fell silent. At last, Daddy turned around. “Ah! Toni!” he said, jumping up from his seat. “How kind of you to drop in. Kids, this is my colleague, Antonia Gallo. Toni, meet my daughter Olga, her husband Hugo, and

their children, Caroline with the pet rats, and Craig the tall one. My other daughter Miranda, her boy Tom, her fiancé Ned, and Ned's daughter, Sophie. That's Luke peeling carrots and Lori at the stove. Nelson, that will do, the lady does not want a chew of your rawhide bone, touched though she is by your generosity."

Toni said: "I'm very pleased to meet you all." She sounded as if she meant it, but at the same time she seemed to be under strain. She looked at her watch and said: "Stanley, it's five to one."

"Excuse us," Daddy said to the family. "We're going to watch the news in my study, and see whether we're to be crucified or pardoned." He was not really joking, Miranda saw as he ushered Toni out.

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

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

"A bit older. ~~Forty~~. And Daddy's lost weight."

"I noticed that."

"A shared crisis brings people together."

"Doesn't it just?"

"So what do you think?"

"I think the same as you think."

Miranda drained her wine glass. "I thought so," she said.

P90

EF – para 2: I thought Toni might say a little more to the family here. She sounds a bit short.

If she's on a first name basis with him, then suggest you bring this in earlier.

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