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Chapter Thirty-Two: 4:45am (pps255-262)

Tension in the Steepfall kitchen

AZ: Should Kit be worried for his family's safety? After all, these people carry guns.

IT 1.8 'elegant but vulnerable'

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4:45 a.m.

Daisy drained her cup of tea and filled it up again with whisky from the Glenmorangie bottle.

Kit felt unbearably tense. Nigel and Elton might be able to keep up the pretence of being innocent travellers accidentally stranded, but Daisy was hopeless. She looked like a gangster and she acted like a hooligan. What was he going to do?

When she put the bottle down on the kitchen table, Kit's father picked it up. "Don't get drunk, there's a good girl," he said mildly. He stoppered the bottle.

Daisy was not used to people telling her what to do. She looked at Daddy as if she was ready to kill him. He was elegantly vulnerable in his grey pyjamas and black cashmere robe. Kit waited for the explosion

"A little whisky makes you feel better, but a lot makes you feel worse," Daddy said. He put the bottle in a cupboard. "My father used to say that, and he was fond of whisky."

Daisy was suppressing her rage. The effort was visible to Kit, and he wondered what his father thought.

Then the tension was broken by his sister Miranda, who came in wearing nothing but a pink nightgown printed with a flower pattern.

Daddy said: "Hello, my dear, you're awake early."

"I didn't sleep very well, on the sleepchair in Kit's old study."

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IT 1.5 Kit worried again that Miranda might have noticed he wasn't in his bed. We've had this before, so I don't feel the reader needs to know again.

"I didn't even know you were here—you were supposed to be in the cottage."

"Don't ask why."

Kit knew why—*doubt we need to repeat this* (she had quarrelled with Ned last night, after Kit had let out the secret of her affair with Hugo) She still looked miserable, though she was trying to be bright. Kit had been worried that she would get up in the night and notice that he was not in his bed. Now it did not matter.

"It's early for visitors," Miranda said.

"This is my daughter Miranda," Daddy said. "Mandy, meet Nigel, Elton and Daisy."

A few minutes ago, Kit had introduced them to his father and, before he realised what he was doing, he gave their real names. He had realised immediately that he should have invented false names, but it was too late.

Miranda nodded to them. "Did Santa bring you?" she said.

Kit explained: "Their car died on the main road, a few yards from our turn-off. I picked them up, then my car gave out in the lane, and we walked the rest of the way here."

Would she believe it? Why should she not? And would she ask about the burgundy leather briefcase that stood on the kitchen table like a bomb? *which could kill them all.*

She questioned a different aspect of his story. "I didn't even know you'd left the house," she said. "Where on earth did you go, in the middle of the night, in this weather?"

"Oh, you know." Kit had thought about how he would respond to this question, and now he put on a sheepish grin. "Couldn't sleep, felt lonely, went to look up an old girlfriend in Harbourmouth."

"Which one? Most of the young women in Harbourmouth are old girlfriends of yours."

“I don’t think you know her.” He need to think of a name quickly. “Lisa Freemont.”

He almost bit his tongue. She was a character in a Hitchcock movie.

Miranda did not react to the name. “Was she pleased to see you?”

“She wasn’t in.”

Miranda turned away and picked up the coffee pot.

Kit wondered whether she believed him. Kit was a fan of Hitchcock, he watched the films on DVD in his apartment late at night and knew them all. Grace Kelly had played Lisa in “Rear Window,” wearing a sleeveless dress. But Miranda would not know that. However, she did know that Kit would not normally visit an old girlfriend without calling first to make sure he would be welcome. It was not that he was too polite to drop in unexpectedly. Rather, he was too lazy to risk a wasted journey. And she would realise that. He saw that the story he had made up had not really been good enough. He cursed silently. Why had he not given it more thought?

However, he told himself that Miranda could not possibly know why he was lying. Surely she would assume he was involved with a woman he didn’t want people to know about—probably someone else’s wife. There were advantages to a bad reputation.

While Miranda was pouring coffee, Daddy addressed Nigel. “Where are you from? You don’t sound Scots.”

Nigel answered. “I live in Surrey, work in London. My office is in Canary wharf.”

“You’re in the financial world.”

“I source high-technology systems and heavy machinery for third world countries, mainly in the Middle East. Navigation apparatus, earthmoving equipment, television cameras, light aircraft. A young oil sheik wants his own discotheque and doesn’t know where to buy

the music system, so he comes to me and I solve his problem.”

It sounded pat, Kit thought, as if he always said the same thing when people asked what his job was.

Miranda brought her coffee to the table and sat opposite Daisy. “What nice gloves,” she said. Daisy was wearing expensive-looking light-brown leather gloves that were soaking wet. “Why don’t you dry them?” Miranda asked.

Kit tensed. Any conversation with Daisy was hazardous.

Daisy gave an angry look, but Miranda persisted. “You need to stuff them, so that they’ll keep their shape,” she said. She turned around and took a roll of kitchen paper from the counter. “Here, use this.”

“I’m fine,” Daisy muttered.

Nigel stepped in. “Don’t be daft, Daisy, you don’t want to spoil your gloves.” There was an edge of insistence in his voice, Kit noticed, as if he wanted Daisy to understand his words as an order rather than a suggestion. Nigel was obviously as worried as Kit that Daisy’s usual bad behaviour would cause trouble in a normal domestic setting. In a firm tone, Nigel added: “Do what the lady says, she’s being nice to you.”

Once again Kit waited for an explosion. But, to his surprise, Daisy took off her gloves. Kit was astonished to see that she had small, neat hands. He had never noticed that. The rest of her was brutish: the black eye make-up, the broken nose, the zippered leather jacket and the heavy boots. But her hands were beautiful, and she obviously knew it, for they were well manicured, with clear polish on the nails. That would be why she liked expensive gloves.

Miranda helped her stuff the wet gloves with kitchen roll. “How are you three

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IT 1.11 suggest 'enough charm'

connected?" she asked Daisy. Her tone was conventionally polite, as if she were asking a dinner-table companion what he did for a living.

Daisy looked panicked. She made Kit think of a schoolgirl being questioned on homework she has forgotten to do. After a moment, Nigel answered the question. "We're not related," he said. "Daisy's father is an old friend of mine."

That was fine, Kit thought, but Miranda would wonder why Daisy was unable to say it.

Nigel added: "And Elton works for me."

Miranda smiled at Elton. "Right-hand man?"

"Driver," he said brusquely.

It was a good thing that Nigel was personable, Kit thought: he had to supply charm for the three of them.

Daddy said: "Well, I'm sorry the weather has turned out so poorly for your Christmas in Scotland."

Nigel smiled. "If I'd wanted to sunbathe, I would have gone to Barbados."

"You and Daisy's father must be good friends, to spend Christmas together."

Nigel nodded. "We do a bit of business as well."

It seemed obvious to Kit that Nigel was lying. Was that because he knew the truth? Or was it apparent to Daddy and Miranda as well? Kit could not sit still any longer: the strain was unbearable. He jumped up. "I'm hungry," he said. "Dad, is it okay if I scramble some eggs for everyone?"

"Of course."

"I'll give you a hand," Miranda said. She put sliced bread in the toaster.

Daddy said: "Well, I hope the weather improves soon. When were you planning to return to London?"

"Heading back on Boxing Day," Nigel said.

Kit got a pack of bacon out of the fridge. Daddy was making small talk, Kit saw, but also gently probing. Was he suspicious, or just curious?

"A short Christmas visit," his father commented.

Nigel shrugged. "Work to do, you know."

Kit realised he needed to do something to show that he was not in league with Nigel and the other two. As he began to make breakfast, he wondered if he, too, should question Nigel, as if he mistrusted the story. Perhaps he could deflect suspicion from himself by pretending that he, too, was dubious about the strangers.

Daddy said: "You may have to stay here a little longer than you anticipated. I can't see them getting the roads clear by tomorrow."

The thought seemed to make Nigel anxious. He pushed up the sleeve of his pink sweater and looked at his watch.

Elton suddenly became talkative. "How about your Christmas, Professor?" Kit had introduced his father as Professor Oxenford. "Got your family all around you, it seems. What, two children?"

"Three."

"With husbands and wives, of course."

"My daughters have partners. Kit's on his own."

"And grandchildren?"

"Yes."

"How many? If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't mind in the least. I have four grandchildren."

"A quiverful!"

Kit was surprised that a gangster such as Elton should know that Biblical expression. Perhaps he had been given a religious upbringing. If so, it had not done him much good.

Elton went on: "Are all the grandkids here?"

"Yes."

"That's nice for you and Mrs Oxenford."

"My wife died eighteen months ago, sadly."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Thank you."

What was this interrogation about, Kit asked himself? Elton was smiling and leaning forward, as if his questions were motivated by nothing more than friendly curiosity, but Kit could see that was a charade, and he wondered anxiously whether it was just as obvious to his father.

Elton had not finished. "This must be a big house, to sleep, what, ten of you?"

"We have some outbuildings."

"Oh, handy." He looked out of the window, although the snow made it difficult to see anything. "Guest cottages, like."

"There's a cottage and a barn."

"Very useful. And staff quarters, I presume."

"A Filipino couple help out in the house, but they don't live here. They have a cottage a mile or so away. We may not see them today."

"Oh. Shame." Elton lapsed into silence again—having carefully established exactly how many people were on the property, Kit realised.

He wondered if anyone else had noticed.

Should Kit be worried for his family's safety? After all, these people all carry guns.