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Chapter Thirty-Four: 5:30am (pps272-279)

Guns in the kitchen

EF: 1st para. Did Miranda cross from the cottage to the house naked in the snow?

EF: P272 –P273 – para 2. Kit's "stylish" car. I thought he drove a Peugeot.

IT lines 4 and 8 – rept uncomfortable/uncomfortably. Suggest 1.8 'Now, however, she felt unsure of herself' or something.

5:30 a.m.

Miranda felt uneasy about the weird threesome of Nigel, Elton and Daisy. Were they what they claimed to be? Something about them made her wish she was not wearing her nightdress. She would have got dressed, but her clothes were all in the cottage.

She had had a bad night. Lying uncomfortably on the sleepchair in Kit's old study, she drifted in and out of consciousness, dreaming of her stupid, shameful affair with Hugo, and waking to feel resentful of Ned for being judgmental instead of supportive. When she heard voices downstairs she had been relieved, for it meant she could get up.

Now, however, she felt uncomfortable. The strangers were more than a little peculiar. Did Nigel have no wife, family or girlfriend who wanted to see him at Christmas? What about Elton? She was pretty sure Nigel and Elton were not a gay couple: Nigel had looked at her nightdress with the speculative eyes of a man who would like to see underneath it.

Daisy would seem weird in any company. She was the right age to be Elton's girlfriend, but there was no affection between them: rather the opposite, in fact—they seemed to dislike one another. So what was she doing with Nigel and his driver?

Nigel was not a friend of Daisy's family, Miranda decided. ^{She was seeing} There was no warmth of any kind between them. They were more like people who worked together but did not get on particularly well. But if they were colleagues, why lie about it?

Her father looked a little strained, too. She wondered if he was having suspicious thoughts about the strangers, as she was. She would ask him at the first opportunity.

The kitchen filled with delicious smells: frying bacon, fresh coffee, and toast. Cooking was one of the things Kit did well, Miranda mused: his food was always well presented. He could make a dish of spaghetti look like a royal feast. Appearances were important to her brother, she knew. He could not hold down a job or keep his bank account in credit, but he was always well dressed and drove a stylish car, no matter how hard up he was.

Now he handed each of them a plate with crisp bacon, slices of fresh tomato, scrambled eggs sprinkled with chopped herbs, and triangles of hot buttered toast. The tension in the room eased a little. Perhaps, Miranda thought, that was what Kit had been hoping for. She was not really hungry, but she took a forkful of eggs. He had flavoured them with a little parmesan cheese, and they tasted delightfully tangy.

Kit made conversation. "So, Daisy, what do you do for a living?" He gave her his winning smile. Miranda knew he was only being polite. Kit liked pretty girls, and Daisy was anything but that.

She took a long time to reply. "I work with my father," she said eventually.

"And what's his line?"

"His line?"

"I mean, what type of business does he do?"

She seemed baffled by the question.

Nigel laughed and said: "My old friend Harry has so many things going, it's hard to say what he does."

Kit surprised Miranda by being insistent. In a challenging tone he said: "Well, give us

an example of one thing he does, then.”

“He’s into property.”

“Sounds as if he likes owning things.”

“Property development.”

“I’m never sure what that means, ‘property development’.”

It was not like Kit to question people aggressively, Miranda thought. Perhaps he, too, found the strangers’ account of themselves hard to believe. She felt relieved. This proved that they really were strangers. Miranda had had, in the back of her mind, the fear that in reality Kit knew them, and was involved in some kind of shady business with them.

There was a hint of impatience in Nigel’s voice as he said: “Harry buys an old tobacco warehouse, applies for planning permission to turn it into flats, and then sells it to a builder at a profit.”

Once again, Miranda realised, Nigel was answering for Daisy. Kit seemed to have the same thought, for he said: “And how exactly do you help your father with this work, Daisy? I should think you’d be a good saleswoman.”

Daisy looked as if she would be better at evicting sitting tenants.

She gave Kit a hostile glare. “I do different things,” she said, then tilted up her chin, as if challenging him to find fault with her answer.

“And I’m sure you do them with charm and efficiency,” he said.

Kit’s flattery was becoming sarcastic, Miranda thought anxiously. Daisy was not too bright, but she probably knew when she was being insulted.

The tension was spoiling Miranda’s breakfast. She had to talk to her father about this. She swallowed, coughed, and pretended to have something stuck in her throat. Coughing, she

got up from the table. "Sorry," she spluttered.

Her father snatched up a glass and filled it at the tap.

Still coughing, Miranda left the room. As she intended, her father followed her into the hall.

She closed the kitchen door and motioned him into his study. She coughed again, for effect, as she went in behind him.

He offered her the glass. She waved it away. "I was pretending," she said. "I wanted to talk to you."

"About them?"

"Yes. What do you think?"

He put the glass down on the green leather top of his desk. "A weird bunch. At first I wondered whether they might be shady friends of Kit's, until he started questioning them mistrustfully."

"Me, too. They're lying about something, though."

"But what? If they're planning to rob us, they're getting off to a slow start."

"I don't know, but I feel threatened."

"Do you want me to call the police?"

"That might be an overreaction. But I wish *someone* knew these people were at our house."

"Well, let's think—who shall we phone?"

"How about Uncle Norman?" Her father's brother Norman, a university librarian, lived in Edinburgh. They loved one another in a distant way, content if they met only once a year.

“Yes, Norman will understand. I’ll tell him what’s happened, and ask him to phone us back in an hour and make sure we’re all right.”

“Perfect.”

Daddy picked up the phone on his desk. He frowned, replaced the handset, and picked it up again. “No dialling tone,” he said.

Miranda felt a stab of fear. “Now I *really* want us to phone someone.”

“It’s probably just the weather. Heavy snow sometimes brings down the lines.”

“All the same...”

“Where’s your mobile phone?”

“In the cottage. Don’t you have one?”

“I keep it in my car.”

“Olga must have one.”

“No need to wake her. I’ll just throw on a coat over my pyjamas and go to the garage.”

“Where are the keys?”

“Key cupboard, on the wall in the boot lobby.”

“I’ll fetch them for you.”

When they stepped into the hall, Miranda heard the voice of her sister, Olga, coming from the kitchen. Her anxiety level went up another degree. Olga was nothing if not tactless. She opened the door and stepped into the room.

Olga was leaning against the kitchen counter, wearing a black silk wrap that reminded Miranda of a barrister’s gown. Nigel, Elton and Daisy sat side by side at the table, like a panel. Kit stood behind them, hovering anxiously. Olga stood on the opposite side of the

table, in full courtroom mode, cross-examining them. She was in full swing, as if she had been there for several minutes. Miranda noticed a rectangular bulge in the pocket of the silk robe: Olga never went anywhere without her phone.

Olga said to Nigel: "What on earth were you doing out so late at night?" He might have been a delinquent teenager.

He frowned with disapproval, but answered all the same. "We were on our way to Glasgow."

Miranda stood by the door, watching, the keys forgotten.

"Where had you been?" Olga said. "There's not much north of here until you get to Aberdeen."

"A big country house."

"We probably know the owners. Who are they?"

"Name of Robinson."

"Doesn't ring a bell. Almost as common as Smith and Brown. What was the occasion?"

"A Christmas party."

Olga raised her dark eyebrows. "You come to Scotland to spend Christmas with your old friend, then you and his daughter go off to a party and leave the poor man alone?"

"He wasn't feeling too well."

Olga turned her headlights on Daisy. "What sort of a daughter are you, to leave your sick father at home on Christmas Eve?"

Daisy stared back at Olga in mute anger. Miranda suddenly felt that Daisy could be violent. Kit seemed to have the same thought, for he said: "Take it easy, Olga."

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EF: The fight over the briefcase. This could be the moment to move the virus from its originally intended container to an improvised one if this hasn't already taken place.

Olga ignored him. "Well?" she said to Daisy. "Haven't you got anything to say for yourself?"

Daisy started to put her gloves back on. For some reason, Miranda found that ominous. Daisy spoke at last. "I don't have to answer your questions."

"I think you do," Olga said. She looked back at Nigel. "You're three complete strangers, sitting here in my father's kitchen filling yourselves with food, and the story you tell is highly implausible. I think you need to explain yourselves."

Kit said anxiously: "Olga, is this really necessary? They're just people who got stranded--"

"Are you sure?" she said. She turned her gaze back on Nigel.

Nigel had seemed relaxed and urbane, but now he appeared shaken. A hint of anger showed as he said: "I don't like being interrogated."

"If you don't like it, you can leave, of course," Olga said. "But if you want to stay in my father's house, you need to tell a better story than this farrago."

"We can't leave," Nigel said. "Look out of the window. There's a fucking blizzard out there."

"Please don't use that word in this house. My mother always forbade obscenities, and we see no reason to relax her rule." Olga reached for the coffee pot on the table, then pointed to the burgundy briefcase. "What's this?"

"That's mine," Nigel said.

"Well, we don't keep luggage on the table in this house." She reached out to pick it up. "Not much in it—ow!"

She cried out because Nigel had grabbed her arm. He detached the briefcase from her

grasp, but kept hold of her wrist.

"That hurts!" she said.

Nigel's mask of urbanity had gone. He spoke quietly but distinctly. "Leave. The case. Alone."

Daddy appeared beside Miranda. He had been dressing for the outdoors while Olga ~~was getting into trouble~~, and now he wore a coat, gloves and boots. "Take your hands off my daughter," he said. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Kit said: "Let her go, Nigel."

Nigel said: "Shut the fuck up, Kit."

With her free hand, Olga slapped Nigel's face.

Nelson barked loudly. With a surprisingly quick movement, Elton reached down and grabbed Nelson's collar.

~~Nigel slapped Olga back.~~

~~Daddy gave a grunt of anger and strode towards Nigel.~~

~~Miranda cried out: "No!"~~

Everyone shouted at once.

Daisy leaped up from her chair and stood in ^{Stanley's} Daddy's way. He tried to push her aside.

There was a blur of movement, and ^{Stanley} Daddy ~~cried out and~~ fell back, bleeding from his mouth.

Then, suddenly, both Nigel and Daisy were holding guns.

The room fell silent but for Nelson's frantic barking. Elton twisted the collar until the dog was choked into silence.

Daddy said: "Who the hell are you people?"

Miranda slipped out through the door.