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Chapter Forty-Three: 8:30am (pps352-357)

Ned is a hero

AZ: More ups and downs for Miranda as she watches this.

8:30 a.m.

745

The pantry was cold.

The Christmas turkey, too large to fit into the kitchen refrigerator, stood in a baking tray on a marble shelf, stuffed and seasoned by Lori, ready for roasting. Miranda wondered if she would live to eat it.

She stood with her father, her sister, and Hugo, the four of them trussed like the turkey and crammed into a space three feet square, surrounded by food: vegetables in racks, a shelf of pasta in jars, boxes of breakfast cereals, cans of tuna and baked beans and soup.

Hugo was in the worst shape. He seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. He was leaning against the wall and Olga was pressing herself to his naked body, trying to keep him warm. Daddy's face looked as if he had been hit by a truck, but he was standing erect and his expression was alert.

The others had tea towels stuffed into their mouths, but Daisy had not bothered to gag Miranda, presumably because there was no point in her shouting now that the police had gone. Miranda realised she could remove the gags of the others. "Daddy, lean down," she said. He bent his tall figure over her obediently, the end of the gag trailing from his mouth. She tilted her head as if to kiss him. She was able to catch a corner of the tea towel between her teeth and tug. Part of it came out, then it slipped. They repeated the process, and this time

the whole thing came out and fell to the floor.

“Thank you,” he said. “By god, that was ghastly.”

Miranda did the same for Olga, who said: “I kept wanting to puke, but I was afraid I would choke myself.” Olga removed Hugo’s gag by the same process. “Try to stay awake, Hugo,” she said. “Come on, keep your eyes open.”

Stanley asked Miranda: “What’s going on out there?”

“Toni Gallo brought the police here with a snowplough,” she explained. “Kit went to the door as if everything was all right, and the police left, but Toni insisted on staying.”

“That woman is incredible,” her father said.

“I was hiding in the attic. I managed to warn Toni, and she got away. She’s somewhere on the property, I don’t know where.”

“She can phone the police.”

Miranda shook her head. “She took off her coat, and her phone was in the pocket. Now Kit’s got it. I don’t know what she can do.”

“She’ll think of something—she’s remarkably resourceful. Anyway, she’s our only hope. No one else is free, except the children, and Ned, of course.”

“I’m afraid Ned won’t be much use,” Miranda said gloomily. “In a situation like this, the last thing you need is a Shakespeare scholar.” She was thinking how feeble he had been with his ex yesterday, when she threw Miranda out of the house. What hope was there that a man like that would stand up to three professional thugs?

She looked out of the pantry window. Daylight had come and the snow had stopped falling, so she could see the cottage where Ned lay sleeping and the barn where the children were. She saw Elton crossing the courtyard. She was horrified to see a gun in his hand. “Oh,

God,” she said. “He’s heading for the cottage.”

Her father looked out. “They’re going to round everyone up,” he said. “They’ll tie us

Suddenly all up before they leave. We can’t let them get away with that virus—but I don’t know what he has a few ideas, no matter how far-fetched to do to stop them.”

Elton went into the cottage.

“I hope Ned’s going to be all right.” Miranda was suddenly glad that Ned was not the belligerent type. Elton was tough, armed and ruthless. Ned’s only hope would be was to come quietly.

“It could be worse,” her father said. “That lad’s a villain, but he’s not a complete psychopath—unlike the woman.”

“She makes mistakes because she’s so insane,” Miranda said. “In the hall, a few minutes ago, she was punching me when she should have been catching Toni. That’s why Toni got away.”

“Why did Daisy want to punch you?”

“I locked her in the attic.”

“You locked her in the attic?”

“She went in there looking for me, and I closed the cupboard behind her and jammed it shut. That’s what made her so angry.”

Daddy seemed choked up. “Brave girl,” he whispered.

“I’m not brave,” Miranda said. The idea was absurd. “I was just so terrified, I was ready to do anything to get help.”

“I think you’re brave.” Tears came to his eyes, and he turned away.

Ned emerged from the cottage. Close behind, holding a gun to the back of Ned’s head, came Elton. With his left hand, Elton held the arm of Tom. Miranda gasped with shock.

She had thought Tom was in the barn. He must have woken up and gone looking for his mother. He was wearing his Spiderman pyjamas. Miranda fought back tears.

The three of them were heading for the house, but then there was a shout, and they stopped. A moment later Daisy came into view, crossing the courtyard from the other end, dragging Sophie by the hair. Sophie was walking bent double, stumbling in the snow, crying with pain. Each time she stumbled, Daisy tugged at her hair.

Daisy said something to Elton that Miranda could not hear. Then Tom screamed at Daisy: "Leave her alone! You're hurting her!" His voice was a childish treble, made more

smile high-pitched by fear and rage
despite her self, knowing

Miranda recalled that Tom had a kind of pre-adolescent passion for Sophie. "Be quiet, Tommy," she murmured fearfully, although he could not hear her. "It doesn't matter if she gets her hair pulled."

Elton laughed. Daisy grinned and yanked even more viciously at Sophie's hair.

It was probably being laughed at that drove Tom over the edge. He suddenly went berserk. He jerked his arm out of Elton's grasp and threw himself at Daisy.

Miranda cried out: "No!"

Daisy was so surprised by the attack that, when Tom crashed into her, she fell backwards and sat down in the snow, letting go of Sophie's hair. Tom dived on top of Daisy, pummelling her with his small fists.

Miranda found herself uselessly shouting: "Stop! Stop!"

Daisy pushed Tom away and got to her feet. Tom jumped up, but Daisy hit him with her fist on the side of the head, and he fell down again. She heaved him up off the ground and, in a fury, held him upright with her left hand while she punched him with her right,

hitting his face and body.

Miranda screamed.

Suddenly Ned moved.

Ignoring the gun that Elton was pointing at him, he stepped between Daisy and Tom. He said something that Miranda could not hear, and put a restraining hand on Daisy's arm.

Miranda was astonished: feeble Ned was standing up to the thugs!

Without letting go of Tom, Daisy punched Ned in the stomach.

He doubled over, his face screwed up in a grimace of agony. But, when Daisy drew back her arm to punch Tom again, Ned straightened up and stood in her way. Changing her mind at the last instant, she punched Ned instead of Tom, hitting him in the face. Ned cried out, and his hands flew to his face, but he did not move.

Miranda was profoundly grateful that Ned had distracted Daisy from Tom—but how long could he keep it up?

He continued to remonstrate with Daisy. When he took his hands away from his face, Miranda saw that he was bleeding from a cut over one eye. As she watched, Daisy punched Ned a third time. This blow hit him full on the mouth.

Miranda was awestruck. Ned was like a wall. He simply stood there and took the blows. And he was doing it, not for his own child, but to protect Tom, Miranda's son.

At that moment, Ned's own child, Sophie, acted.

She had been standing still, watching in a stunned way, since Daisy let her go. Now she turned around and moved away.

Elton made a grab for her, but she slipped through his grasp. For a moment he lost his balance. Sophie broke into a run, crossing the deep snow with balletic leaps.

Hastily, Elton righted himself and pointed the gun at Ned again. But Sophie had disappeared.

Elton grabbed Tom and shouted something at Daisy.

Daisy looked disposed to argue, but Elton shouted again. With a reluctant look at Ned and Tom, Daisy turned and went after Sophie.

Food. Move ups and down i for
Miranda as she watches this.