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Chapter Forty-Nine: Next Xmas (pps392-400)

PG: Focusing on the family, rather than the issue of bioterrorism, seems to pass too lightly over the threat of such an attack, be it malevolent or accidental. Do you think you might move the last scenes to the lab rather than setting them in the resort? KF: Additional scene at the theatre on Boxing Day. The woman sprays. The police arrest her and the man. The man goes for his mobile phone. The detective says: No point, we've arrested all your friends too.

IT: I don't want you to overdo tying up the ends, but do Carl and Frank get any come-uppance do you think? It may not matter here. And what about Toni's mother: you could add something about her and the puppy, in a light-hearted way. Again, not necessary! KF: Carl interviews Frank on TV about how brilliantly Frank caught the terrorists.

Toni came out of the bathroom naked and walked across the hotel room to the wardrobe.

From the bed, Stanley said: "My god, you look good."

She grinned at him. He was wearing a blue towelling bathrobe that was too small for him, and it showed his long, muscular legs. "You're not so bad yourself," she said.

"I don't suppose there's time for a bit of, you know, before dinner."

She pretended to be indignant. "We just had a bit of *you know!*"

"That was hours ago! But if you're tired...I realise that when a woman gets past a certain age—"

"A certain age?" She leaped on the bed and knelt astride him. "A certain age?" She picked up the pillow and beat him with it.

He laughed helplessly and begged for mercy, and she relented and kissed him.

"Come on, just a quick one," he said. "I'll let you be on top."

"Oh, all right." She sighed as she adjusted her position over him. "The things a girl has to do, nowadays—"

There was a knock at the door.

Stanley called out: "Who is it?"

"Olga. Toni was going to lend me a necklace."

Toni could see that Stanley was about to tell his daughter to go away, but she put a hand on his mouth. "Just a moment, Olga," she called.

She disentangled herself from Stanley. Olga and Miranda were coping well with having a stepmother their own age, but Toni did not want to push her luck. Best if they were not reminded that their father was having hot sex.

She pulled on a green silk robe and went to the door. Before she opened it, she looked

at her husband. "Cover up that tent pole," she whispered. He did so, and she opened the door.

Olga strode in, dressed for dinner in a black cotton dress with a low neckline. "You said you'd lend me that jet necklace."

"Of course. Let me dig it out."

Stanley got off the bed and went into the bathroom, and a moment later Toni heard the shower running.

Olga lowered her voice, an unusual event. "I wanted to ask you—has he seen Kit?"

"Yes. He visited the prison the day before we flew out here."

"How is my brother?"

"Uncomfortable, frustrated and bored, as you would expect, but he hasn't been beaten up or raped, and he hasn't started taking heroin." Toni found the necklace and put it on Olga. "It looks better on you than on me—black just isn't my colour. Why don't you ask your father directly about Kit?"

"He's so happy, I don't want to spoil his mood. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not in the least." In fact Toni was flattered. Olga was using her the way a daughter would use a mother, to check on her father without bothering him with the kind of questions men did not like. "Did you realise that Elton is in the same jail?"

"No—how awful!"

"Not really. Kit's helping him learn to read."

"Elton can't read?"

"Barely. He knows a few words from road signs—motorway, town centre, London, airport. Kit is teaching him *The cat sat on the mat.*"

"My god, how things work out."

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IT 1.3 this paragraph: wouldn't Olga know, both as a barrister, and through press reports, what Daisy's sentence was? I.e. that she isn't dead?

Jt: Am surprised that Olga and Hugo are still together. I can believe that they would have found a way forward after Kit's revelation, but it can't have been easy and I want to know a bit about it.

Ned annoyed me so much I in the beginning I felt his redemption required a bit more on his part.

And finally it occurs to me now that it might be interesting for Stanley to reflect on the choices his daughters have made in their partners. He's a very powerful character in their lives, perhaps they didn't want men who could compete with him in their hearts and minds? I'm curious to know a little bit more about the sisters and their relationship with their father and their partners.

“Kit had news of Daisy, too.”

“I hope she’s dead.”

Toni understood Olga’s hatred. Hugo had never completely recovered from the beating Daisy gave him with the cosh. He had lost the sight in one eye. Worse than that, he had never fully regained his old ebullience. He was quieter, and less of a rake, but he was not so funny, and the wicked grin was not seen so often.

“Daisy’s not dead,” Toni said. “But she killed another inmate of the women’s prison, and she’s got a life sentence for murder added to her existing term. She’ll be in jail until she’s seventy.”

“And a bloody good thing, too,” said Olga.

Miranda put out Ned’s clothes for the evening, black linen trousers and a check shirt. He did not expect her to do it but, if she had not, he might absent-mindedly have gone to dinner in shorts and a T-shirt. He was not helpless, just careless. She had accepted that.

She was dressed already, in a pink cotton frock with a pleated skirt. It made her look a bit wide across the hips, but then, she was a bit wide across the hips. Ned said he liked her that way.

She went into the bathroom. He was sitting in the tub, reading a biography of Moliere in French. She took the book from him. “The butler did it.”

“Now you’ve spoiled the suspense.” He stood up.

She handed him a towel. “I’m going to check on the kids.”

“Thanks.”

Before she left the room, she took a small package from her bedside table and tucked

it into her evening bag.

The hotel rooms were individual huts along a beach. A warm breeze stroked Miranda's bare arms as she walked to the hut her son Tom was sharing with Craig.

Craig was putting gel in his hair while Tom tied his shoelaces. "Are you boys okay?" Miranda said. The question was superfluous. They both looked tanned and happy after a day windsurfing and waterskiing.

Tom was not really a little boy any more. He had grown at least two inches in the last six months, and he had stopped telling his mother everything. It made her a little sad. For twelve years she had been everything to him. He would continue to be dependent on her for a few more years, but the separation was beginning.

She left the boys and went to the next hut. Sophie was sharing with Caroline, but Caroline had already left and Sophie was alone. She stood at her wardrobe in her underwear, choosing a dress. Miranda saw with disapproval that she was wearing a sexy black half-bra and matching thong panties. "Does your mother know you've got that outfit?" Miranda said.

"She lets me wear what I like," Sophie said sulkily.

Miranda sat on the chair. "Come here, I want to talk to you."

Reluctantly, Sophie sat on the bed. She crossed her legs and looked away from Miranda.

"I'd really much prefer your mother to say this to you but, as she's not here, I'll have to say it."

"Say what?"

"I think you're too young to have sexual intercourse. You're fifteen. Craig is only seventeen. In his case it's unwise; in your case, it's actually illegal."

“Not in this country.”

Miranda had forgotten they were not in the U.K. “Well, anyway, you’re too young.”

Sophie made a disgusted face and rolled up her eyes. “Oh, god.”

“I knew you’d be ungracious, but it had to be said,” Miranda persisted.

“Well, now you’ve said it,” Sophie rejoined rudely.

“However, I also know that I can’t force you to do what I say.”

Sophie gave her a surprised look. The girl had not been expecting any concessions.

Miranda took the package out of her evening bag. “So, if you do decide to disobey me, I want you to use these condoms.” She handed them over.

Sophie took them wordlessly. Her face was a picture of astonishment.

Miranda stood up. “I don’t want you getting pregnant when you’re in my care.” She went to the door.

As she went out, she heard Sophie say: “Thanks.”

Grandpa had reserved a private room in the hotel restaurant for the ten members of the Oxenford family. A waiter went around pouring champagne. Sophie was the last to arrive. Craig stared at her as she came into the room. She looked wonderful. His mouth went dry at the thought that she was his girl. She had put her hair up and wore small dangling earrings. She looked so mature, at least twenty. As she passed his chair, she stooped and whispered in his ear: “Miranda gave me some condoms.”

He was so surprised that he spilled his champagne. “What?”

“You heard,” she said, and she took her seat.

He grinned happily at her. He had his own supply, of course. Funny old Aunt

Miranda.

Grandpa stood up, and they all went quiet.

“There’s steak for dinner,” he said. “I ordered a turkey but, apparently, it escaped.”

They all laughed.

He went on in a more sombre tone. “The last twelve months have been the worst year of my life, and the best,” he said. “None of us will ever completely get over what happened at Steepfall one year ago today. Had it not been for Toni, God knows how it might have ended. We’ll have more Christmases at home, I hope, but I thought this year we needed to go to a place that wouldn’t remind us.”

Olga said: “And thank you for bringing us, Daddy.”

“Then we had to relive the entire nightmare twice more. First with the police. By the way, Olga, why do they take statements the way they do? They ask you questions, and write down your answers, then they write out something that isn’t what you said, and is full of mistakes, and doesn’t sound like a human being at all, and they call it your statement. Why do they do that?”

Olga said: “The prosecution likes things phrased a certain way.”

“I was proceeding in a westerly direction, and so on?”

“Yes.”

“Anyway, then we lived it all over again during the trial, and we had to sit and listen to suggestions that somehow *we* were at fault for injuring people who had come into our house and attacked us and tied us up, and then we had to read the same stupid accusations in the newspapers.”

Craig would never forget it. Daisy’s barrister had tried to say that Craig had tried to

murder her. It was ludicrous, but for a few moments in court it had almost sounded plausible.

Grandpa went on: "The whole nightmare reminded me that life is short, and I realised that I should admit, to myself and all of you, how I felt about Toni, and waste no more time. I need hardly tell you how happy we are. Then our new drug was passed for testing on humans, the future of the company was secured, and I was able to buy another Ferrari—and driving lessons for Craig."

They laughed, and Craig flushed. He had never told anyone about the *first* time he had dented the car. Only Sophie knew. He was still really embarrassed and guilty about it. He thought he might confess when he was really old, like thirty or something.

"Enough of the past," Grandpa said. "Let's drink a toast."

They all stood up.

"Merry Christmas, everybody."

They all said: "Merry Christmas."

THE END

Acknowledgments

(to come)