

Two days later
Saturday, July 2nd, 2016
Mid-afternoon

Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Room 28

Two days of flitting between the Safehouse and the hospital – it was only a three-mile, fourteen-minute, drive but it had seemed like an eternity, each and every time.

Two days of trying to be with the twins and with Stephanie without letting the former think that I had abandoned them in favour of their elder sibling.

Two days of pacing around the same damn room.

Two days of shit coffee from the machine down the corridor that hated dollar bills.

Two days of well-meaning nurses offering kind but infuriating words.

Two days of absolute hell.

But it was nothing compared to what my daughter was going through – nothing at all.

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For the first time, in a real long time, I was scared.

I knew full well that I wasn't her real mother, in that I had not given birth to her, but I still felt like my insides were churning as I worried about her. I would go from moments of pure anger where even Dave would keep me at arm's length, all the way to moments of intense sadness where I would just cry and cry.

I missed her. I missed having her around me. Her infectious laughter. Her cheeky smile and shit-eating grin. I even missed her cold, and very lethal, view on killing. Above all, I missed the love that the young girl spread about. She loved me, she loved Dave, and she loved her siblings; Anne-Marie and Danny. She even had love to spare for everybody in *Fusion*. In return, without exception, everybody loved her. She was very popular with just about everybody that she met and, generally speaking, everybody loved having her around. We had all felt her wrath, at one time or another, as well as her fists.

Within *Fusion* there was much sadness but there was also a demand for blood – somebody was going to pay dearly for what they had done to Stephanie.

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When she awoke for the first time, I was there; I was always there.

First came some movement; the first in well over a day, and then I heard a moan followed almost immediately by crying. I turned to see Stephanie's eyes open and she looked around the room in a panic. I squeezed her hand gently and reassuringly as I spoke.

"You're safe, Steph. You're in hospital."

Stephanie's eyes stopped their wild scanning around the room and they focussed on my face.

"I'm scared . . . it hurts . . . Mummy, it hurts . . ."

"I know, honey."

I really had no idea how to react. She was not behaving like the Psyche which I normally knew; she was behaving like the ten-year-old girl underneath and she was both very scared and in a lot of pain. Her voice was croaky, so I held a plastic cup with a straw to her dry lips and she slowly took a tentative sip. Stephanie grimaced with the pain of swallowing the cool water but she smiled her gratitude.

I wiped away my daughter's tears with a tissue – I'd been going through a lot of tissues and had plenty.

"What happened to me?" she asked very quietly as she put on a brave face.

Safehouse Zulu

Anne-Marie was not a happy eight-year-old.

She lay on the floor between Sophia and Razor. The younger animal missed his owner and his canine intuition told him that something was wrong. Anne-Marie had taken to spending a lot of time with Razor. Hope and Kiara, along with Horatio, Hercules and Piper would just ignore their brother as he moped. The animals had all arrived at the Safehouse the previous day with Marcus and had promptly enjoyed checking out every corner of the facility.

Anne-Marie hated to be cooped up and above all, she wanted to see her big sister but nobody was letting her leave the Safehouse, let alone traipse a few miles across the city to the hospital where her sister lay at death's door.

"Anne-Marie, Danny! Training!" Chloe called as she walked out of the Accommodation and into the Recreational Space where Anne-Marie, Danny, and Megan were watching TV.

"Ye-ha!" Danny yelled as he vaulted the back of the couch and ran towards the stairs.

"Anne-Marie, come on."

"No."

"Come on, girl."

"I'm not training today, Chloe, so go take a hike!"

Anne-Marie never saw Chloe's expression change, nor the hands that yanked her off the couch and then dragged her bodily towards the stairs. The eight-year-old struggled and she swore violently but Chloe just ignored the younger girl as they headed up a level.

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Joshua looked up as he heard yelling and he saw Chloe dragging Anne-Marie into the Training Space before throwing the younger girl onto the mat. Anne-Marie immediately sprang to her feet and turned to face Chloe.

"Bring it on, quarter-pint!" Chloe growled.

Anne-Marie kicked out at the older girl but Chloe dodged out of the way with practiced ease. However, the little Lizewski was not finished. She was angry and scared for her sister; Chloe knew

that and she wanted to help. Anne-Marie had not talked with anybody, not even Dave. Mindy was always at the hospital except when she came by to shower and grab a change of clothes. Megan had tried, with no success, and Anne-Marie had clammed up as far as her twin brother was concerned.

Chloe continued to dodge as Anne-Marie tried everything she knew to strike at the bigger girl. In return, Chloe was not giving the smaller girl an easy ride. A slap here, a strike there. Anne-Marie screamed through the pain and she just learned to move quicker and dodge faster. Joshua began to get concerned about how far Chloe might take things, despite him guessing correctly what she was up to. He walked over to a wall-mounted phone and selected the tannoy setting.

“Dr Bennett to the Training Space!”

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Chloe knew how far to take the sparring session. She was able to see when Anne-Marie was beginning to tire but instead of backing off, Chloe moved faster to exhaust the girl quicker. Anne-Marie was kicked backwards and she stuck the mat hard with a scream. She sprang up and threw herself back into the fight kicking Chloe in her side. Then she paused and looked up at Chloe who just smiled before sitting down on the mat.

“You done?” Chloe asked once she was comfortable.

“Yeah,” Anne-Marie replied as she sat down close to Chloe.

“Feel better?”

“Yes, I do.”

Chloe pulled Anne-Marie over and wrapped her arms around the eight-year-old.

“Talk to me.”

“I miss Steph.”

“We all do,” Chloe said. “I know it hurts; I miss her too and so does Josh. I’ve been there. When Josh was hurt, I hated waiting for him to heal.”

“It just hurts inside – I want her home.”

“Being eight isn’t easy; I remember!” Chloe chuckled.

“Tell me about it – total nightmare,” Dr Bennett said as she entered the space and her daughter scowled. “Just thought I’d come to check on any injuries.”

“We’re fine, Dr Bennett, thanks,” Anne-Marie said.

“We’re all here to help you Anne-Marie; you just have to talk to us and explain that you’re struggling with what has happened. We have all been through bad stuff and we know something about inner pain and frustration,” Chloe said as she hugged the eight-year-old.

“Thank you, Chloe – you know, you’d make a great Mom.”

Chloe looked pained at Anne-Marie’s suggestion but then she laughed.

“I’m a long way away from that, girl!”

“A long, long, long way,” Joshua confirmed.

“While I am in no rush to become a grandmother, Chloe, Anne-Marie is quite correct.”

“Huh?” Chloe inquired and slightly flabbergasted at the suggestion.

“Over the past two-and-a-half years, Chloe, you have changed from an obnoxious teenaged brat into a mature, open-minded, young woman. Both your father and I are very proud of what you are right now and I would even say that your meeting Dave and Mindy in that alley, was probably the best thing that could have happened to you – despite it also being the stupidest thing that you have ever done, which is saying something!”

“Thanks, Mom – I think. . .”

“I’m sorry I spoke to you, like that – it was not nice,” Anne-Marie apologised.

“As long as we each learn from our mistakes as we make them, then there is hope for us all,” Chloe said seriously.

Safehouse F

“This sucks!”

“Why?” Hailee asked as she looked across the table at Curtis.

“I’m the only guy here. . .”

Saoirse looked over at Abby and she grinned fiendishly.

“Have no fear – we won’t rape you,” she teased.

“Thanks, SD, that makes me so much happier!”

“I think he misses Megan’s company,” Hailee suggested.

“More like her hand on his. . . Ow!”

Saoirse rubbed her arm where Curtis had just punched her.

“You’re not supposed to hit a lady,” SD growled.

“Well,” Curtis replied smoothly. “When a lady appears in the Safehouse, I’ll refrain from hitting her.”

Hailee and Abby burst out laughing and Saoirse went very pink in the face.

“Despite what Stephanie might say, I *am* a lady!” Saoirse retorted with a grin.

Then she went quiet and just stared at the table and her mug of coffee. She had mentioned the name that they had all agreed not to mention. All of the fun stopped dead and everybody became very subdued.

“Despite my wanting to kill her all those times, I hate what has happened to her. I miss her so much. . .”

Tears ran down Saoirse’s face as Hailee hugged her.

Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Room 28

Once Mindy had finished explaining the events since Stephanie had been shot, Stephanie spent several minutes going through everything in her head.

"I can't think straight – my head is mush!"

"That'll be the painkillers; they fuck with your mind and your brain goes slow," Mindy explained.
"Been there. . ."

Stephanie lifted up the white sheet covering her with her left arm – her right was pinned to her side – and she peered down the length of her body. Her eyes took in the mass of dressings which covered her chest and the vivid bruising visible around the edges. She looked up at Mindy, a single tear running down one cheek.

"Am I going to die? I don't want to die. . ."

"You are *not* going to die. We've been here before, you and me – you are *not* going to die!"

More tears fell.

"Say it!"

Stephanie shook her head and began to sob.

"Stephanie Lizewski – you are *not* going to die, goddammit!"

"I'm scared. . ."

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Mindy was worried by her daughter's demeanour. For her to heal, Stephanie needed to be positive. Being depressed and scared would not help her at all. There was a knock on the door and a man entered.

"I'm Doctor Charles – is now a good time for a chat?"

Mindy took in the writing embroidered onto the man's lab coat. On the right chest, it read:

Daniel Charles, M.D.
Dept. of Psychiatry

Mindy's eyes narrowed. She hated shrinks! Doctor Charles noticed and he smiled the most disarming smile Mindy had ever seen.

"I'm not here to 'shrink' anybody; I'm just here to see if I can help. I believe the young girl in the bed has been through a very traumatic event and from your expressions, you're both struggling to cope. May we. . .?"

Behind the doctor was a young woman of medium height and bushy long brown hair. She smiled.

"Doctor Sarah Reese," she said introducing herself.

"Please. . ." Mindy said as she waved them both to a pair of available chairs.

Doctor Charles took a seat while Dr Reese remained standing.

"I'm Mindy Lizewski and this is my daughter, Stephanie."

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"Hello, Stephanie," Doctor Reese began. "I understand you've only been aware of your injuries for the past few hours?"

"Yes," Stephanie replied slowly. "My Mum just explained everything to me."

"You're English?"

"Yes – got a problem with that?" Stephanie bristled.

"Of course, not," Doctor Reese chuckled. "Just don't get that accent around here very often."

Doctor Charles never said a word but Mindy could tell that he was studying Stephanie's expressions and mannerisms as she replied to Doctor Reese's questions. Mindy was unsure about the Psychiatrist; how deep was he going to dig and would Stephanie, in her weakened state, expose herself and by extension, Mindy and the rest of *Fusion*.

"What was your first reaction to your Mom's explanation, Stephanie?"

"I felt scared. Me and my Mum, we have no secrets . . . but I wish she'd not told me I'd actually died – not her fault; we've agreed never to lie to each other."

"A good mother-daughter relationship," Doctor Reese replied approvingly.

"My kids have had various knocks and scrapes – many times – but nothing like this," Mindy said.

"She's so young and she has her whole life ahead of her."

"Stephanie," Doctor Charles said as he spoke for the first time in several minutes. "It's obvious that you're loved very much. Think of that, each time you feel scared or lonely."

"Thanks, Doctor Charles," Stephanie offered with a shallow yawn.

"We'll leave you to get some rest," Doctor Reese said as Doctor Charles stood up. "If either of you want to chat, we'll be available."

"Thank you," Mindy said as the two Doctors left.

An hour later. . .

Room 28

Stephanie scowled as I placed a tray down before her.

"I'm not hungry."

"Yes, you are; you haven't eaten in two days. . ."

"Not happening. . ."

Stephanie studied the contents of the tray.

"Jelly?"

"It's Jello, honey," I corrected her.

"It's jelly – jelly is for little kids . . . I am *not* a little kid!"

"No, it isn't, and anyway, you'll find it easy to swallow."

"I can't; I hurt too much."

"You have to eat, Stephanie; your body must be screaming out for energy and it needs that energy to start healing."

"But it hurts . . ."

"I know; I've been shot before and I know what it feels like."

"I'm not eating it . . ."

It was time for some tough love.

"Okay," I said coldly. "If it keeps you alive and it helps you to get better, then I will do *whatever it takes* and coming from me, you know that that is no idle threat, Stephanie."

For a moment, I saw fear but then I saw that I had hit home. Stephanie knew full well what I was capable of and how far I would go to achieve my aim.

"It's embarrassing. . ."

I patiently held the spoon, loaded with Jello, to her mouth.

"You're my daughter and I love you. Whatever it takes, remember. . ." I said in a reassuring tone.

Stephanie reluctantly opened her mouth for the spoon and she swallowed the Jello. Then she began to cry – I felt her left hand grip my own as tightly as she could manage – which, admittedly, was not very much in her weakened state. I recognised the expression of hopelessness and frustration on her face as she sobbed. I had never seen Stephanie in such a state; she was so far away from how we normally saw her – the hard-as-nails girl who would not think twice about punching way above her weight – that it brought *me* to tears as well, despite my wanting to stay strong for my daughter.

After a lot of stops and starts, I managed to get a good quantity of Jello into Stephanie. She finally lay back and gave me a weak smile before she closed her eyes; her small hand still gripped my own. I felt the pressure on my hand gradually ease as the ten-year-old girl fell asleep and I took a moment to dive into the bathroom to wash my face.

That evening

Room 28

When I entered the room, both girls were fast asleep.

I was very pleased that Mindy was getting some rest – she had been on the go without sleep for a long time. Mindy was struggling to cope on every level. Nothing that Damon had taught her had prepared her for what had happened – not that Damon had been able to teach *anything* about parenting. Okay, that was nasty but it was also very true. Mindy was my number one responsibility in life and I had to cope with what Damon had made her. The three kids were equally the second most important responsibilities, although temporarily, Stephanie was moved above the twins – they did not mind; they knew what was at stake.

Seeing Mindy and Stephanie suffering so much, hurt me badly. It also hurt to see a girl so young going through so much shit. I had felt anger like I had never known before – if I ever got my hands on whomsoever had shot Stephanie, I would rip them limb from limb and I would take great joy in listening to their screams as I did so.

I was not the only one to think in that way; Chloe and Joshua were seething. Just don't get me started on Saoirse; Kim had told me the girl had spent over an hour sharpening her Butterfly swords the other night and her face had been like thunder as she did so. Nobody had dared go anywhere near the girl while the swords were out. The twins had not taken it well; they desperately wanted their big sister back and for the moment, they were unable to even come to see her. Anne-Marie had been inconsolable the other night during dinner; she just broke down in tears and sobbed for over an hour before she finally succumbed and fell asleep. Danny was just as worried about his big sister as everybody else was, only he reacted differently and I usually heard him crying at night.

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I sat down in a chair on the opposite side of the bed from Mindy and I wrapped a hand around Stephanie's much smaller one. I felt the hand move and her gun-metal blue eyes opened and they looked around for a moment before they focussed on me. My daughter smiled and I squeezed her hand gently. It was the first time that I had seen her awake since she was shot.

"Hi, Daddy. . ."

"Hi, Steph. How are you feeling?"

"Scared. . ."

One word and then she seemed to fold into tears.

"You are not alone, Stephanie, and you never will be. We are all here for you and we will all do everything that we can to help you."

"I know. . ."

The poor girl began to sob harder but within a few minutes, the ten-year-old managed to regain control of herself and I wiped away her tears; she forced a smile and then looked a little embarrassed.

"Thanks, Dad. I think I upset Mindy earlier," Stephanie said as she looked over at Mindy.

"Just remember; when things get too much it's okay to cry but it's also good to talk – something your mother never seems to understand."

"I hate not being in control. I hate being helpless; Mindy actually had to feed me earlier. . ."

For a moment, I thought that Stephanie was about to burst into tears again but thankfully she did not.

"You have a lot in common with Mindy; you're both control freaks and you both hate it when you have to rely on others. You're strong, so you *will* get through this. It'll take time and I know you'll be just as well-behaved as Mindy was when *she* got hurt. You can't rush healing; it happens in its own time. You'll hate having everybody doing things for you but it is unavoidable. Your right arm can't be used for a while and there will be a limit to what you can do with your left."

"As long as I can wipe my own arse and fanny, I'll be happy."

I laughed as I detected some of the old Stephanie showing for a moment – but only for a moment. . .

“The pain in my chest makes it difficult for me to breathe . . . and to eat. . .”

She was crying again and it looked like the talking had taken a lot out of her.

“Go back to sleep, Steph. Rest.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Stephanie closed her eyes and the young girl was soon asleep.

Earlier that afternoon. . .

Office of Doctor Daniel Charles

“So, Sarah, what did you get out of that little interview?” Doctor Charles asked as he leaned back in his chair behind his capacious desk.

“The little girl is hurting and she is very scared. Underneath, there is something else; I saw it in her eyes. I don’t think the girl normally gets scared about anything – which is making the whole experience more frightening for her. Her mother seemed to latch onto everything that her daughter was saying – no idea why,” Doctor Sarah Reese replied from a comfortable chair opposite the desk.

“Very good. Yes, you are right – there *is* something going on.”

“Child abuse?”

“No – definitely not; too much love between the two of them. I also think Stephanie can normally look after herself very well, thank you very much. Wouldn’t rule out some abuse before she met her current parents, though. Her medical notes are interesting. According to the State of Michigan and the City of Chicago, Stephanie Walker was adopted by Melinda and David Lizewski at Christmas, last year. She is the eldest of three children apparently – monozygotic twins the other two. Behind her right ear, there is a small tattoo – a commando dagger if I am not mistaken.”

“A dagger?” Sarah asked.

“She is very fit – a bonus considering her injury. Something about that child troubles me – let me think on it some more.”

The following morning

Sunday, 3rd July

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

Room 28

I was very glad that I was there to protect the medical personnel.

Mindy awoke just as a male doctor and two nurses appeared on their rounds. While the nurses busied themselves tidying up the room and changing Stephanie’s catheter drain bag, the Doctor took a few moments to check Stephanie’s notes which hung at the foot of her bed before he gently shook the young girl awake.

“And how are we feeling, this morning, young lady?”

Stephanie blinked as her eyes became accustomed to the bright sunlight which streamed in through the freshly opened curtains and then she scowled.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

The doctor laughed.

“And neither are you, young Stephanie.”

“Okay, you got me there, doctor . . . who?”

“No, I am no time lord, just plain old Doctor Edward Salmon. So, how have you been feeling, since you awoke yesterday?”

“I hurt and I feel frustrated. I hate being in bed all the time and I keep crying and . . . and I feel scared. . .”

“Don’t feel bad; all that is perfectly normal. That should surprise your Mum; she says that you are not a normal girl.”

Stephanie smiled weakly.

“She’s right, I suppose. . .”

“Now, let us look at your wounds. This is going to hurt; I’m sorry, but there is no way around it.”

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I moved around the bed towards Mindy; I sensed trouble. The Doctor pulled back the sheet and he first ran his eyes and fingers across the dressing that covered most of Stephanie’s chest from just below her right shoulder and across her chest to her left side.

“This will hurt. . .” The Doctor advised as he gently eased back the dressing.

Stephanie screamed out in pain and I felt Mindy try to jump up but I used all my strength to hold her down in the chair.

“They’re . . . hurting . . . her. . .” she hissed angrily.

“They have to – she’ll get through it. . .”

Mindy, reluctantly, ceased trying to push past me and she sank back into the chair.

“I know. I just feel so helpless.”

“Just control yourself; the Doctor probably enjoys living,” I whispered and Mindy growled like an angry Rottweiler but I saw a smirk on her lips.

Stephanie was crying with the pain but it had obviously subsided now that the dressing had been removed. I cringed at what I saw. The wound was jagged and had been stitched up, but where the stitches were, the skin was savagely bruised and I dreaded to think what the insides were like. Mindy had seen the bullet, and naturally, she had identified it almost immediately.

It had originated from a Soviet 7.62-millimetre sniper rifle round and such a large and savage bullet had played havoc with the young girl’s insides. Her left lung had been nicked which had caused it to collapse. The trauma had included three broken ribs but had avoided anything critical. The bullet

had ultimately lodged between two of Stephanie's ribs after it had damaged the shoulder joint of Stephanie's right arm. Mindy had deduced that it should have been a very long-range shot, otherwise Stephanie would have been torn in half. That was a conundrum unto itself. The bullet must have been part-loaded which meant that the bullet had, thankfully, expended most of its kinetic energy before it had struck the girl. The doctors had had to perform an operation just to get at the bullet and remove it. The bullet was now in the custody of Hank Voight.

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Stephanie held tight to Mindy's hand as the Doctor prodded and poked the wound. Finally, once the Doctor was satisfied that all was in order, a nurse applied a fresh dressing to the wound. I turned away to allow my daughter some privacy as the other nurse pulled the sheet down past Stephanie's knees – she was naked – and then checked the catheter which had been inserted into her bladder.

"Ewww. . ." Stephanie complained as the nurse probed her nether regions and Mindy laughed. "It's not funny, Mum – how would you like to have a damn tube stuck up your twat. . ."

Mindy raised an eyebrow along with the Doctor. The nurses just smirked and exchanged a glance.

"Forget I said anything. . ." Stephanie groused.

Mindy looked up at me all smiles. Her expression spoke volumes – she was overjoyed at hearing the real Stephanie.

An hour later. . .

Office of Doctor Edward Salmon

Mindy sat across from the Doctor on a couch while the Doctor sat in a chair.

His office was decidedly well fitted out as suited a senior surgeon. Dave had left about twenty minutes previously after Stephanie had been given her daily dose of various drugs which had had the side effect of knocking her out for several hours.

"So," the doctor began. "Is Stephanie a healthy child, does she exercise much?"

I smirked as a vision appeared in my mind of a ten-year-old girl dressed in jungle camouflage as she viciously killed dozens of gunmen while on a crazed rampage across an island in the Mediterranean.

"Yes, she keeps active," I replied.

"Does she get on well with her siblings?"

"Oh, yes," I replied as another image of the girl appeared in my mind. It was of Psyche shooting a woman for hurting Anne-Marie. "She'd kill for them. . ."

"Metaphorically speaking, of course. . ."

"Of course, . . ."

"Now, in a few days, once I am happy that Stephanie is out of danger and she is healing correctly, I will pass her onto Paediatrics and unto the care of Doctor Natalie Manning, one of our paediatricians. Incidentally, Doctor Manning saw Stephanie when she was first admitted into the ER and is up to speed with Stephanie's condition. She will then oversee Stephanie for the next few

weeks as she heals enough to be allowed home. Stephanie still has a long road ahead of her . . . I understand her normal doctor is Doctor Catherine Bennett – she’s up on the fifth floor, west wing?”

“Yes – Cathy looks after us all. . .”

“Code Blue, Room 28 . . . Code Blue, Room 28!”

The doctor was out of the room in a second with Mindy close behind the moment the computerised announcement began.