

Late evening

Thursday, July 7th, 2016

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

Room 28

I was alone and 'enjoying' my eighth night in hospital.

I had been instructed to keep my mind busy. I had nothing to lose – my mind was fully functional even if my body was a train wreck. I thought back to the previous week – the Wednesday night, the night before I had been shot.

Wednesday, June 30th

I was struggling with flashbacks.

I needed time to myself and I wanted to be alone. I knew that if I woke Mindy, she would want to accompany me. I also knew that I was breaking about a dozen unbreakable rules and bending many more. Nonetheless, I soon found myself in a taxi and heading south. The guy dropped me off some distance from my destination for obvious reasons.

"You okay out here, alone?" he asked as I got out of the taxi.

"Yeah, I can look after myself," I replied with a smile.

"Okay. . ." he responded dubiously as I slammed the car door shut and walked away towards W 36th Place.

I enjoyed the darkness; it had never scared me. I savoured it's all encompassing blackness which comforted me more than daylight did. My senses were always peeked in darkness as sound travelled better. I performed several sweeps to ensure that I was not being followed or monitored in any way. I was skilled at counter-surveillance and had been for several years

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Mindy had issued standing instructions that pedestrian traffic was not to use the same entrance but to spread across the various different entrances to put off trackers. Therefore, I headed for Pedestrian Entrance Two or PE2 for short. PE2 was a very non-descript property at South Albany Avenue and West 36th Place. The dwelling was unoccupied – supposedly the property was owned by a large company who use the place for transient sales-people. I hopped over the steel fence into the front garden and then headed down the side of the property to the side door.

I punched in an access code and the door unlocked. Once inside, I made for what the plans deemed 'a tornado room'. The room was solid steel and concrete. Entry was by hand-print identification only. I placed my hand on the reader and the screen turned green. The steel door slid to one side and I stepped inside a small ante room. Once the main door had closed, another opened and I found a small lift before me. I placed my hand against the screen to one side and the doors opened soundlessly.

Once inside the lift, I hit the second button from the top and the doors closed and the lift plummeted downwards.

Safehouse F

Safehouse F was a haven for me. It was rare to be there when the place was empty as in most cases the place was full of people going about their tasks. Eating, sleeping, sparring, shooting, planning – it all went on forty feet or so beneath Chicago. As I exited the lift and headed for the kill zone, I took the time to study my surroundings. The walls were bare concrete as I made my way down the corridor known as F4. The floor was concrete painted with a red paint. The lighting was harsh and white. I reached the security door and placed my hand on the pad which flashed green a moment later.

I turned right and faced the outer door for the kill zone. I repeated my hand scan twice more before I entered the three-storey Safehouse. It was cool inside and I shivered slightly. The stone walls added a coarseness to the facility as the bright overhead lights automatically clicked on. I smelt the ozone from the air-conditioning system and the smell of bleach. As always, the facility was spotless. To my right, the armoured glass walls of the Command Centre shone in the bright lights. Beyond the glass, the multi-coloured lights and screens of the computer systems never slept.

I turned left and headed for the changing rooms. I opened my locker and pulled out my pistol and access card – I felt naked without them in the Safehouse. The H&K P30SK Compact pistol, in its holster, clipped onto the belt of my jeans while the access card slid into my left back pocket. I strode out and headed towards the vehicles at the far end of the Safehouse beyond the great glass barrier. I swiped my access card and passed through.

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Before me sat *Beast*, *Brute*, and *Hound*. I walked past the big 4x4s and stopped at the motorcycles. The first belonged to Kick-Ass, with Hit Girl's Ducati Panigale beside the Ducati Diavel. I stopped beside my own Honda CRF250L which sat between Wildcat's Ducati Monster 821 Dark and Foxtail's Aprilia Caponord 1200 Rally.

I turned and stared at the top of the stairs that led to the lower level. That was where I had tried to attack Shadow my first time in the Safehouse. I remembered waking up in the bed and accidentally triggering Wildcat's claws – almost made me shit myself! I took the other stairs upwards and walked along to the Briefing Room. There, I stopped before the memorial wall.

At the top was the picture of Mindy's Mum and Dad – they both looked really happy. I understood that it was taken before Mindy was born. Next to that, on the right, was one of Dave's Mum and Dad on their wedding day. I knew that Dave's dad had been murdered on the orders of Chris D'Amico. Below those two was one of Big Daddy in full battle-order with his daughter, Hit Girl. She was about my age, maybe a little older. Very few people had ever seen Hit Girl in that get-up. I thought she looked awesome and I hoped I would be just as awesome – one day. It also struck me that Hit Girl was really short!

Below them was a larger photo with many people in it. *Justice Forever*. I felt pangs of sadness and tears in my eyes as I focussed on Night Bitch – she had her arms wrapped around Kick-Ass. I recognised Dr Gravity, Battle Guy, and Finding Tommy. I knew that Insect-Man and the Colonel were long dead – the Colonel another victim of Chris D'Amico and his cunts. Then my eyes fixed on the next photo and I smiled.

The image was of a very handsome Royal Marine Commando in full dress uniform with his bride. It was Joshua's Mum and Dad. I knew that his Mum was dead but I had never asked about how his Dad had died. Beside that picture was another one. I did not know the lady but I had been told that she

was Natalie Bay and that she had been murdered on the same night that Joshua himself had been shot and almost killed.

I had not wanted to get to the last picture on the wall. I sank to the floor and cried as I looked into the eyes of Miranda. She had died saving my life. Losing her had been so hard. Dave and Mindy had brought me into the Safehouse one night and we had hung that picture. I had come apart and sobbed for quite some time before I was able to talk.

I was a Predator. I was trained to kill. I was trained to look after myself – only there were so many things where I needed outside support. For that I had Dave and Mindy, then the twins, then Saoirse. I knew that I would never be alone again as long as I lived. How much torment could a ten-year-old take before she went totally barking and fell off the wagon of sanity?

I left the Briefing Room as soon as I finished crying and headed towards the Engineering Workshop beyond the vehicles.

Safehouse E

I passed through a pair of airlocked security doors and made my way 'next door', as Marty would put it.

I smirked when I considered my first time in Safehouse E. I had been all but naked which had soon changed to totally naked thanks to Mindy and her warped training ideas. The 'next door' Safehouse was very stark in appearance. It was all concrete and steel while what paint there was was grey. I walked past the armoury and headed upwards towards the concealed Safehouse E entrance.

As I climbed up through a hatch, I found myself underneath a car!

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As I emerged out of the pit, I turned to look at the car. The car seemed somehow familiar but I could not think where from. It was a gloss black from bumper to bumper and it had two doors . . . otherwise, it was sleek and very business-like but dated. One strange thing to note was an illuminated 'scanner' at the front, mounted just below the hidden headlights at the rim of the bonnet. It scanned from left to right and then right to left. The colour? Purple – thought it should have been red, to be honest.

"Needs a bit of work," I muttered.

"At least I'm fully grown!" a female voice growled.

The voice was reminiscent of that generated by our *Fusion* masks. I was instantly on my guard as the voice was *not* familiar and I expected to be alone at going on for 4am.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Z.O.E."

"Zoe?"

"Zed – oh – eee."

"I know how it's spelt – who are you?"

"Look to your left."

"The car?"

"Intelligent girl!"

Was I actually conversing with a car?

"What are you, KITT?" I laughed.

"No, but if you would like I can change my voice to the Knight Industries Two Thousand – better?"

The voice had changed from a female to that of a male and was vaguely familiar.

"I liked the previous voice, thanks – that one is a bit before my time."

"As you wish. . ." the female voice replied. *"Are you going back down below?"*

"I am – why?"

"You can take me with you. . ."

At that, the driver's door swung open.

"Centre console – small cell phone."

I reached in and picked up what looked exactly like a small cell phone.

"I am integrated into the Safehouses and I will obey any commands you give me – just preface any commands with either 'Zoe', 'Duty Officer', or 'Computer'."

"Is that last one a joke, or was your creator a Trekkie?"

"Bit of both, I think."

"Shouldn't that LED thing be red?"

"If you wish. . ."

The scanner changed from purple to red.

"Blue?"

The scanner changed from red to blue.

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As I went below, I decided to test out the device. I paused before a locked door that blocked my way down the passageway.

"Zoe . . . please open Echo-One-Seven."

I felt slightly stupid – until the door clicked open.

"Err . . . thanks."

"You're welcome, Stephanie."

"You know who I am?" I asked as the door clicked shut behind me.

"Stephanie Lizewski, nee Reeman. Kidnapped. . ."

“Okay – I know my own backstory!”

Thursday, July 7th

Safehouse F

I noticed something secured to the shaft of the arrow; it was a note.

In hindsight, it was callous but I was intrigued. I momentarily ignored Chloe’s wound and removed the note. I unrolled the note and read it. I began to shake with both a mixture of fear and anger – but mostly anger. Dave grabbed the note from my shaking hands and I saw his fingers flex and his face went very dark.

“What is it?” Hailee asked as she looked past Dave’s shoulder and read the note herself:

*I MUST APOLOGISE
I MEANT FOR A CLEAN KILL
IF YOU WISH, I CAN FINISH THE JOB*

“That’s fucking sick!” Hailee exclaimed. “Totally sick!”

Josh got up from the mat where Abby was seeing to Chloe’s wound which turned out to be minor as less than an inch of arrow had penetrated the armour and the suit.

He walked over to Mindy.

“We are all behind you, Mindy. . .”

As Josh touched Mindy’s arm he suddenly found himself on his knees as Mindy twisted his hand savagely and pinned him. Joshua swore loudly with the pain. Mindy released him immediately.

“Oh, Josh, I’m so sorry.”

“Mindy, if you hurting me helps you get through this then keep at it,” Josh offered seriously.

Mindy laughed and she gave Josh a hug.

“Thank you . . . all of you.”

“We are *Fusion*,” Joshua stated. “We are a single entity, fighting crime, *together*.”

“Well said, Josh,” Hailee commented.

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“We know of two people who regularly use arrows like this,” Marty stated as he held up the arrow from Shadow’s armour.

“You mean those two miscreants that appeared a few weeks back?” Mindy asked.

“Yes, them.”

Mindy’s mood darkened.

“Then let’s go see Apollo and Artemis – I want to talk to those two. . .”

“Mindy,” Dave cautioned. “Talk first, mutilate later. *If* they’re guilty. . .”

An hour later

West Cermak Road and South Ashland Avenue

The pair of Yamaha MT-10 motorcycles cruised side by side down the avenue at the speed limit.

The Race Blue machine was ridden by Apollo in a black combat suit with blue highlights. The twin machine, in Tech Black was ridden by Artemis in her all black combat suit. Both vigilantes were out on the streets doing what they could to keep the streets safe. Then their peaceful night came apart, very quickly as several motorcycles and a pair of armoured SUVs appeared as if out of nowhere.

It was a classic ambush as the purple Ducati Panigale shot out of a side street and came up on their right. A yellow and green Ducati Diavel Carbon appeared on their left. Two more motorcycles pulled in front, a Ducati Monster 821 Dark and a Aprilia Caponord 1200 Rally. Behind, two black SUVs, one a Range Rover Sentinel and the other a GMC Sierra 3500HD with a mounted mini-gun pulled into the convoy.

“I think they want to talk,” Apollo said dryly to his cousin.

“We done anything wrong?” Artemis growled back.

“Not that I know of. . .”

Artemis raised her right hand, signalling surrender and Hit Girl pointed to the right and they both kept with the convoy as it turned down South Ashland Avenue.

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The two cousins had no choice but to obey instructions. They stayed close and rode for another mile or so in a seemingly endless spiral around the roads before they approached a large five-storey structure. The convoy rode up a ramp and straight into the building before they all stopped in the darkened interior.

A roller-shutter closed behind them and they suddenly felt trapped and very worried. Lights came on all around them as the *Fusion* vigilantes dismounted from their machines and gathered around them after removing their helmets. The occupants of the SUVs remained inside their vehicles – just in case they did something stupid.

They were not *that* stupid – it was *Fusion* and you did *not* take on *Fusion*; unless you were fucking nuts!

The two cousins appeared distinctly apprehensive as they carefully pulled off their helmets and looked around, their hands well away from any weapons. Hit Girl strode forwards and she circled the two young vigilantes, her lip curling. She said nothing as Apollo and Artemis stood very still, uncertain of what to do. Hit Girl grabbed a Saya with Katana off her back.

“You were both in the city, last night – we have you on CCTV.”

“We were out,” Artemis replied slowly. “What. . .?”

Hit Girl swung the Saya and struck the back of Artemis's lower legs. The eighteen-year-old fell over backwards and crashed to the concrete floor. Apollo was seized by Kick-Ass before he could go to his cousin's aid.

"Get your hands off of her!" he yelled.

"I will ask the questions!" Hit Girl growled. "You, Artemis, will answer them!"

Artemis nodded as she did her best not to cower beneath Hit Girl's stare. She was scared – who would not be when faced with an angry Hit Girl!

"Pass me an arrow," Hit Girl went on. "Slowly. . ."

Slowly, Artemis reached into the quiver on her back and retrieved a standard arrow. She handed the arrow to Hit Girl who looked closely at the tip. Hit Girl looked down at Artemis and her stance changed.

"You shot Shadow. . ."

It was almost a hiss, but it was enough to make Artemis quiver with fear.

"No . . . never . . . please. . ."

"Beg all you want . . . tonight, you die."

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"We did nothing – we would never. . ." Apollo tried. "Please . . . we have no idea what this is about. . ."

"We are on *your side* – we would *never* hurt any of you," Artemis added desperately.

Hit Girl grabbed Artemis' armour and pulled her to within inches of her face.

"Why should I listen to you, you fucking vigilante wannabe?"

"Because we are your friends."

"I don't *have* friends – that's for fucking pussies like Wildcat!"

Without warning, Artemis was thrown backwards and her head hit the concrete. Only the armour on her mask protected her from injury.

"Ow!" she complained.

"Let the whelp go!" Hit Girl ordered and Kick-Ass released Apollo who ran forwards to assist his cousin. "What can you say to help your case?"

"We lost three arrows the other night – they were missing from my quiver – we think they were taken during a brawl," Apollo explained doing his best to keep the anger from his voice. "Is Shadow okay?"

"Yes, she is – not that it is of *any* concern to you. Let them go!"

The following morning
Friday, July 8th, 2016

**Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Room 28**

I awoke feeling remarkably refreshed, considering.

Don't get me wrong, I hurt like hell all over but you had to be alive to feel pain, so I was glad of it. I had managed to get a really good night's sleep – my first since arriving in the damn hospital. I knew that I had fallen asleep remembering my visit to Safehouse E and F but somehow, I had had the weirdest dream involving a talking car and a voice-activated Safehouse!

I opened my eyes and I didn't see much until somebody opened the damn blinds! I blinked in the early morning sun and I was able to make out a shadow by the window. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I recognised the familiar silhouette.

"Mum?"

"Morning! How's my little girl feeling?"

I considered a rebuke but then decided that I liked being called that – at least in private.

"She's doing good; I'm feeling a lot better."

"Pleased to hear it. Sleep well?"

"I did – very well, thanks, Mum."

"Good – you've got some fun today. . ."

I scowled as my eyes focussed properly and I noticed that Mindy was wearing shorts and a t-shirt. That was very rare in public – it was usually jeans and a blouse as a minimum.

"What's with the get up?"

"It's time to get your ass out of that bed and into a bath!"

"You going to *bathe* me?" I asked in horror as Mindy just smiled dangerously – I hated that smile!

Ten minutes later. . .

A nurse – Kittiwake, her name was – had run a bath in an adjoining bathroom. Next, ignoring the indignant moans, she pulled back the sheet protecting the young girl's dignity and disconnected all of Stephanie's wires and drips, plus the catheter.

"I hate that thing!" Stephanie complained.

"Give it a few more days and then you can start using a bedpan," Kittiwake said and she laughed at Stephanie's grimace as she carefully removed the various wound dressings.

"Why does everybody enjoy humiliating me?" Stephanie demanded as she winced at the pain when the dressings were removed.

"We don't. . ." Mindy chuckled as she scooped the naked ten-year-old off the bed and carried her into the bathroom.

"Better not be too hot. . ."

“Shut up!” Mindy said as she carefully lowered her daughter into the water.

Everything was fine until the water touched Stephanie’s wounds and she cried out in pain. It took a minute for the pain to ease as she settled back into the warm water. Initially, Stephanie had been a little freaked out by the idea of somebody washing her but Mindy was surprisingly gentle as she went about washing her daughter from head to toe. Stephanie took great delight in splashing Mindy and getting her just as wet as she was. While Mindy washed Stephanie’s long blonde hair, they talked.

“You’re a really good Mum.”

“Me?” Mindy chuckled. “I’m crap – being a Mom scares me more than facing down cunts.”

Stephanie looked up into Mindy’s eyes.

“You’re the best Mom out there. You are kind and fair. You care and you give out compassion and discipline when required – harsh discipline too. I hate being disciplined but I hate letting you down more. I don’t like being bad or getting into trouble but I’m learning to be a child. I like being a child; I like being *your* child.”

Mindy did not know what to say so she said nothing. Stephanie saw the pink on Mindy’s cheeks and the smirk of embarrassment and knew she had hit home.

“Thanks for being there for me, Mum. You’ve been there ever since you took me into your home, last year. You kept me sane while I hung upside down off a damn skyscraper. You kept me on the straight and narrow in the Caribbean and Europe. You’re a saint, Mindy – despite your night job!”

Mindy almost choked at that.

“Dave says I’m learning empathy from you three . . . I suppose I am . . . it’s totally alien for somebody like me to worry about the feelings of others but I have to with you guys. I love having you guys around and I’ll do anything to look after you. I know I fuck up from time to time . . . but I’m trying, I promise.”

“I don’t care if you fuck up, Mum. I just care that you’re there for me when I need you – like right now . . . ow!”

Mindy had just finished drying her daughter’s hair and she was brushing it firmly.

“More Sensitive Mum, less Hit Mum!” Stephanie suggested.

“Let’s get you out of there.”

Once Stephanie was dried off, Mindy held her up in front of the mirror and the ten-year-old girl looked shocked as she studied her wounds for the first time.

“I’m a fucking mess!”

“Understatement of the year!”

Mindy helped Stephanie through to her bed.

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The bedding had been changed and instead of a sheet, a duvet in a blue cover was lying at the foot of the bed.

“Hope you like blue, Stephanie,” Nurse Kittiwake asked as she helped the girl back onto the bed.

First came all the wires on sticky pads in various places on her torso, then the catheter was reconnected – Stephanie made many colourful and crude comments as the nurse checked the ‘plumbing’ before she taped the tubing to the inside of her left thigh. Some cream and dressings followed before a fetching light blue hospital gown was put on the girl and the drip was fixed back in place. Finally, Stephanie was laid back and the duvet pulled up her.

“Comfortable?” Nurse Kittiwake asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Hungry?” Mindy asked.

“Oh, yeah!”

Just over an hour later, Stephanie had finished her breakfast and she was feeling fully energized instead of tired.

“You changed?” Stephanie asked her Mum who was wearing a smart pair of blue jeans and a mauve blouse.

“Can’t exactly stay in shorts and a T, can I?”

“Okay.”

“Ready for some visitors?”

“Who?” Stephanie asked excitedly.

“Surprise. . .”

Mindy vanished out the door before she returned a few minutes later and Stephanie could hear excited voices in the corridor outside.

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First in the door was Jackson Evans with his Mom, Debbie.

“Jackson?”

“Hi, Steph!”

They were followed by Ali Johns, Craig James, and Katy Evans, Jackson’s twin sister. Stephanie was over the moon to see all her friends, even the boys.

“Hi, guys!”

“We’ve got a card – signed by the entire class,” Katy said, handing over an enormous card liberally covered in signatures and comments. “Everybody was really worried but we’re glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah,” Craig grinned. “Jackson missed you.”

Stephanie blushed at the comment.

“You’re just lucky Steph can’t hit you,” Ali pointed out.

“She looks different – I’ve never seen her with her hair down; I like it.”

Stephanie looked horrified as Katy and Ali giggled and resolved to never have her hair down in Jackson’s presence again.

“Can we see your wound?” Jackson asked.

“No!” Stephanie replied scornfully.

“Why not?” the boy persisted.

“It’s in a place that you will *never* see!” Stephanie retorted.

“Huh?”

“Jackson, really! It’s obvious; the wound is on her chest and she is *not* about to expose herself.”

“I don’t mind. . . She ain’t got boobs, anyways.”

“That’s not the point!” Katy growled as she slapped her brother who just grinned sheepishly.

At the sound of snickering, Stephanie glared at the corner of the room where the two adults sat trying desperately not to laugh.

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“She looks better than I expected,” Debbie Evans commented.

“You should have seen her a few days ago – she’s got one hell of a bruise on her chest,” Mindy replied.

“Jackson and Katy were very upset when they found out it was Stephanie who was shot. You’ve done really well to cope, Mindy.”

“I’ve got a lot of people to support me.”

“You’ve got us, too. Anything you need – just ask.”

“Thanks. I’m just really pleased to see Stephanie laughing and joking. I’ve been so worried about her. She misses human contact. She misses her friends.”

“She’s a strong little girl.”

“That she is.”

That afternoon

Stephanie was over the moon at having had her friends to visit.

“Thanks for setting that up, Mum.”

“They were really worried about you, especially your boyfriend. . .”

“I may be an invalid but I’ll still slap you!”

“You’d lose a battle with a fly, right now. . .”

“Would not!”

“Would too!”

The argument petered out quickly as three people walked into the room. Stephanie’s smile was enormous as she saw three of her best friends. Chloe, Saoirse, and Hailee gathered around the bed. Hailee peered down the inside of Stephanie’s gown and grimaced.

“I had better bruises,” she chuckled. “They’re way worse than you described, SD.”

Chloe had a look herself before she sat down on a chair.

“Everyone had a good look?” Stephanie growled.

Saoirse looked quickly at Mindy who smiled.

“Somebody’s feeling a lot better,” Saoirse commented.

“Thanks to you and Mum. . .” Stephanie tailed off as she saw Chloe’s painful grimace when she moved her left leg. “What’s happened?”

Chloe explained the events of the previous evening once Mindy had checked that the door was closed.

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“We wanted to recce the area – check it was safe. I went out with Jackal on motorcycles and we headed in a large box pattern extending out a few miles. We saw the usual trouble-makers and a few snouts – we grilled them about the past week but found out nothing of use. After about an hour, we found that we had a tail. It was a black SUV that turned out to have fake plates. We didn’t bother to try and ditch it; there was no point – at the time. Okay, in hindsight, that was a mistake but we had no way of knowing that at the time. We had stopped off to check on a group of young men when out of nowhere an arrow struck my thigh and penetrated my armour. I screamed; the pain was excruciating. The SUV vanished about the time I was hit and we never saw it again. Jackal bound the wound with a dressing and we headed back to the Safehouse where we found a very pissed off Mindy. While I was bleeding on the mat, she spied a note on the arrow and retrieved it.”

“You were doing fine,” Mindy chipped in. “But I’m sorry if I appeared insensitive.”

“I’m used to it – besides, you had other things on your mind. . .” Chloe replied. “Anyway – my wound was only minor, but very painful. As for the note. . .”

Chloe hesitated and looked over at Mindy for guidance. Mindy scowled and got to her feet. She sat on the bed by her daughter and pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket. It was a copy of the original note. Stephanie read it and her face went very dark and then she shrugged.

“Not the first time somebody has tried to kill me, I suppose.”

“You do have that effect on people,” Saoirse said without humour.

“Yeah – the list of people would be pretty big,” Chloe commented. “We’re talking phonebook big!”

“So, no sex for you, then?” Stephanie retorted and Chloe scowled. “Till you heal?”

“Did you and Jackson get up to anything, then?” Chloe asked innocently.

Stephanie growled and Chloe smiled.

“SD, if you please. . .” Stephanie ordered and Saoirse slapped Chloe.

Chloe just laughed.

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“You saw mine, can I see yours?” Stephanie asked as she looked down at Chloe’s thigh.

“The arrow only went in about an inch and Mom gave me a clean bill of health. . .”

“That’s *not* what she said,” Hailee commented. “Spill!”

Chloe’s cheeks went a bright pink before she spoke.

“Alright! The good Doctor told me to stop behaving like ‘a snivelling little bitch’ and to ‘suck it up’ as I only had a scratch compared to a certain ten-year-old who had had her chest ripped open and had not even whimpered.”

“I couldn’t whimper; I was unconscious!” Stephanie pointed out quite reasonably.

“You were still very brave – much braver than Chloe!” Mindy chuckled. “Now, our brave little princess needs some sleep.”

Stephanie scowled at the ‘brave little princess’ bit but made no comment. As the three girls got up to leave, they each gave Stephanie a hug. Saoirse whispered into her friend’s ear.

“Stay strong, Steph; you’re doing great.”

“Thanks, SD.”

Stephanie allowed herself to fall back onto her pillows with an enormous smile on her face and a good feeling inside. Within seconds she was fast asleep. Mindy grinned to herself and headed out to find a coffee.

She had some planning to do.