

Two days later
Tuesday, 19th July, 2016

Glenview

Mindy headed upstairs to check on the twins.

She began with Danny – he was lying on the floor of his bedroom, playing with his toys.

“Hi, Mom – what’s up?”

“Just checking – you go back to whatever.”

Danny smiled and turned back to whatever he was doing.

Next, Mindy headed for Anne-Marie’s room via the shared bathroom. She was not in her bedroom. A few moments later, she found the eight-year-old. She was curled up on Stephanie’s bed, with a purring Horatio in front and a dozing Razor behind. Mindy knew that Anne-Marie was taking Stephanie’s stay in hospital rather hard.

“Hi, kid,” Mindy said as she sat down on the bed beside her daughter.

Mindy stroked Horatio as he stretched and exposed his tummy. Razor opened a single eye and whined before going back to sleep again. Anne-Marie was cuddling her Rarity pony and looking very down.

“I know you miss her – we all do.”

“I know she’s done terrible things, but she’s also done good since she’s been with us. She saved my life and . . . she doesn’t deserve any of this.”

“We live in a world of bad people, Anne-Marie. That is part of the reason why I became Hit Girl – I wanted to fix what was broken. Believe me, we *will* find whoever shot Stephanie and I’ll make you a promise, Anne-Marie. If you want in at the end of that, then I will let you participate.”

“Will I be able to hurt them, like I hurt the man who kidnapped me?”

“If that is what you want, but you may have to take a ticket. Many people want a piece of that shooter.”

Anne-Marie wrapped her arms around Mindy’s waist and Horatio snuggled in for a cuddle of his own. As Mindy hugged her youngest daughter, she looked around the bedroom of her eldest daughter. Everything was in its place, as it always was. Anne-Marie’s bedroom was a disaster zone and you took your life in your hands when you went in there, but Stephanie’s was always neat and tidy. It was a place where Stephanie felt safe and she could act like a normal ten-year-old rather than the killer she was. Then Mindy remembered something.

“You want a laugh?” Mindy asked the morose eight-year-old.

“Okay,” Anne-Marie replied noncommittally.

Mindy pulled out her cell phone and she fiddled around for a few moments, searching for a particular video. Once she found it, she held the phone so she and Anne-Marie could see the screen, then she pressed play. As the video played, Anne-Marie’s eyes went wide and she began to giggle. At the end of the video, Anne-Marie smiled broadly and looked up at Mindy.

“Don’t ever tell anybody you saw that video,” Mindy suggested. “Matter of fact, don’t tell *her* either or she’ll cut our throats one dark and stormy night.”

Anne-Marie laughed at that.

“Can we watch it again?”

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Stephanie had been singing, one Saturday afternoon.

Mindy could hear her voice, but no music, so she had carefully eased open the door of the ten-year-old’s bedroom, her cell up and filming, to find the young girl dancing on her bed, facing away from the door and singing into a hair brush. On her head were a set of wireless Bluetooth headphones.

‘I am immortal, I have inside me blood of kings, I have no rival, No man can be my equal, Take me to the future of the world.

‘Born to be kings, Princes of the universe, Fighting and free, Got your world in my hand, I’m here for your love and I’ll make my stand, We were born to be princes of the universe.’

...+...

“Bit full of herself, isn’t she?” Anne-Marie commented with a smirk. “She’s actually pretty good.”

That evening

Safehouse F

Joshua and Saoirse were sparring, without additional armour.

Joshua was an enigma to some, actually most, to be honest. Most of the girls saw him as chivalrous and a young man that would never knowingly hurt a female. The likes of Abby and Chloe both knew otherwise, as did Mindy. The newer females in *Fusion* tended to forget that Joshua had learnt to fight, the hard way. He had also been forced to fight against Chloe in the early months of his time with us. As such, he had learnt rather quickly that pulling punches just because his opponent had boobs and a snatch, was a very quick way to end up flat on his face.

Saoirse attempted a feint followed by a kick but she was shocked to find herself punched in the left boob and then in the upper-right arm in quick succession. She fell to the mat groaning and writhing in pain.

“Ow, ow, ow – you are a *total* wanker, Joshua!”

“Don’t think I’m going to go easy on you just because you have tits and a fanny.”

“Would never expect you to . . .” the chastened Saoirse moaned as Morgan fell about laughing.

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A few yards over, Lauren and Lizzie were taking turns practicing disarming techniques with a very real but unloaded Glock 17 pistol. Lizzie was quick off the mark when it came to learning new skills and in part, she showed up her big sister who at times took a little longer to grasp something. The two girls were very different but then Lizzie had not suffered as Lauren had.

The two girls paused as Tommy and Hailee continued with a rather violent sparring session. Hailee had upped the violence of her sparring ever since her return from Europe and Tommy was an ideal candidate as he rarely pulled his punches, so ingrained was his hard-learned training. Mindy had had pause to contemplate Hailee's change in training tempo. There had also been some reckless behaviour out on the streets but Mindy tolerated it considering what had happened to the girl in Europe.

Tommy fought dirty, but Hailee (in her Petra persona) could fight just as dirty. Despite Tommy only being twelve-year-old, he was still a match for the eighteen-year-old Hailee. That was something that Hailee could not allow, and neither would ever back down. It would normally take intervention from somebody powerful, such as Dave or Joshua, to bring the sparring session to a close. That day was no exception as Mindy whistled loudly at Joshua and tipped her head towards the two sparrers.

Dave heard the whistle and he came out of the armoury to assist Joshua in the task of separating the fighting youngsters.

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"What's going on, Hailee?" Mindy asked her friend after Tommy and Hailee had shook hands and gone their separate ways.

"A very good question . . . I still have nightmares and I feel that I let you down by letting myself be taken. . ."

"Hailee – I know that nightmares cannot be controlled and I have them a lot; ask Dave if you don't believe me. Just remember that we are all here to talk – you know, if you need us?"

"Thanks, Mindy – I *will* talk . . . when I am ready."

"I'll be there for you when you need me."

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Mindy turned as there was a scream and she saw Lauren flipping her sister onto the mat and then diving at her. Saoirse got there first and she pulled Lauren away from her sister.

"Cut that out!" Mindy growled.

"Lauren, you do not attack your sister – you should know better," Dave chastened the young vigilante.

"She started it," Lauren almost spat at her sister.

Dave looked over at Lizzie.

"Sorry – it was my fault. I was teasing her about Brad – they spent time together, this afternoon."

Joshua raised an eyebrow and Lauren's cheeks went pink.

Earlier that day

Wagner Road

"You *can* come closer, Brad . . . you can even kiss me, if you want. . ."

"I . . . I wouldn't want to . . ."

Lauren looked offended.

"You don't want to touch me because I was raped?" she almost exploded. "Or just because you don't like what you see?"

"Lauren!" Brad replied strongly. "I don't want to take advantage of you – I know what happened to you and I am sorry that you had to go through that. I just don't want you to have to do anything which you don't want to."

Lauren smiled.

"You always say the right thing, Brad. I'm sorry I overreacted. Look, I'm Nightmare, I won't *allow* you to do anything I don't want, 'kay?"

Brad smiled and moved closer to Lauren. Then he leant in and he kissed her, on the lips. Lauren's eyes closed as she savoured the kiss which was sloppy and wet, but nice. Both teenagers blushed as they separated and stared at each other.

"You liked it?" Brad asked tentatively.

"It was nice – my first kiss," Lauren said as she reached up under her t-shirt and fiddled with her bra.

"Mine too."

Lauren took Brad's right hand and she pushed it up under her t-shirt and then under her loosened bra. Brad almost yanked his hand back but then relented and allowed Lauren to guide him. He felt very soft skin that was very warm to the touch. Then he felt a soft mound rise under his fingers and Lauren took a deep breath as a finger touched something hard.

"Oh, wow. . ." Lauren breathed.

"Tell me about it," a voice announced.

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Brad yanked his hand from under Lauren's t-shirt and both turned to see Lizzie standing in the doorway.

"I'm telling Mom. . ."

"Lizzie!" Lauren called out.

"You'll tell Mom what, Lizzie?" Emily Edwards asked as she pushed Lizzie further into the bedroom.

"They're doing something disgusting, Mom. Brad had his hand up Lauren's T-shirt and look, her nipples are sticking out a mile."

Lauren went bright pink for a moment before she started to turn red with anger.

"Brad, are you forcing yourself on my daughter?"

"Mom, no! For your information, Brad didn't want to touch me. *I* invited him to kiss me. *I* undid my bra. *I* placed his hand on my breast and what my nipples are doing has fuck all to do with *that* nosy bitch!"

Emily sighed.

“She has a point, Lizzie – your sister is old enough to need her own privacy and you should *not* be going into her room unannounced and definitely *not* when she has company. Lauren, take it slowly, please.”

“Mom, no boy is going anywhere near my vagina until I am good and ready. I trust Brad and I want to share myself with him in my own way and in my own time. I promise that I will not be having sex any time soon.”

“Ewww!” Lizzie announced and she vanished from the room.

“I trust you, too, Brad. Stay safe, both of you.”

***Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Room 32***

Dave pushed open the door to the hospital room with a smile on his face for his daughter, only the smile quickly faded when he saw Stephanie’s expression.

“When can I get out of here – I hate it.”

Dave sat down on the edge of the bed and he took his daughter’s left hand in his own.

“Very soon, I promise. The Doc says you’re doing really, really well.”

“Everything still hurts and I can’t move my right arm.”

“You can handle the pain; I know that you can. Your arm will take time and we’ll look after that once you’re out of here. Your chest and your side will be painful for a while longer – more once you start to move around more. There’s no way around that, honey.”

Stephanie leaned over to cuddle into Dave and a small tear ran down her cheek.

“Don’t cry – you’re better than that. Where’s our fearless Psyche?”

“She’s feeling tired and dejected right now, Dad. It’s just your little girl at the moment and she’s hurting.”

Dave squeezed Stephanie’s hand as the young girl began to cry in earnest. The door to the room opened and Saoirse walked in. She stopped dead at seeing her best friend in tears and her heart went out to the younger girl.

“Steph?”

Stephanie looked up and she smiled at her best friend.

“Hi, SD. Sorry, I must look like shit.”

“That’s allowed, Steph; you’ve been through a lot.”

“I just want this to be over. I want to go home. I want to be with my friends and with my family.”

“It’s just around the corner, Steph. We’ll all be there for you, once you get out. You just need to bide your time. You’ve beaten all the odds before, Steph. You beat those bastards who put you in The Cage. You survived their attempts at humiliating you. You survived that bitch, Murdoch – and you

survived me. Stephanie, you survived everything that *Urban Predator* threw at you, and you tore them apart in retribution. This is nothing compared to all that, girl.”

Stephanie thought about that as she wiped away her tears.

“Yeah, I’m a bad bitch, ain’t I?”

Saoirse laughed and Dave smiled down at his daughter, proud of her inner strength and resolve.

That night

Glenview

“How’s she doing?”

“She had a little crying session but with Saoirse’s help, we cheered her up and pointed out that she’s beaten much worse.”

“She has a had a crap few years and my own childhood pales into insignificance against hers,” Mindy replied.

“She’s just as strong as you are, honey, so I know that she’ll come out of this.”

“She is feisty, I’ll give her that,” Mindy chuckled. “I miss having her around the house.”

“I will admit, it has been a bit quiet – even with the twins around.”

“Hopefully, she’ll be out in two more weeks – at least Cathy and Steph’s Doc say so – assuming she behaves.”

“It’s Stephanie . . .” Dave chuckled.

“Yeah – a little unpredictable, isn’t she?”

“Just like you, honey.”

Mindy snuggled into her husband and she felt immense comfort in his warmth. All her problems and worries went away as he gently rubbed her back.

Intercontinental Hotel

Miami Beach, Florida

The Ole Restaurant

“Thank you for coming, Ms Cummings.”

“It is an honour to meet you, Mr Valachi; your reputation precedes you.”

“As does, yours, Ms Cummings – and please, call me Joseph.”

“Susan. Now, for what did you suggest this meeting?”

“I understand that we have both had dealings with a former native of New York, who now lives in Chicago.”

Ms Cummings expression went cold, very cold.

“That bitch needs to die – she cost me millions . . . not to mention my yacht.”

“She cost me my niece and her husband, not to mention their son. My family owes them and my father, Vito Genovese, he wants blood.”

“What did you have in mind, Joseph?”

“We have an operation underway in Chicago, right now. A week or so ago, we issued an ultimatum to the purple bitch – ninety days to leave Chicago. We are keeping the pressure on.”

“Let me know what you need from me. . .”

Two days later

Thursday, 21st July

Lunchtime

North Western Avenue, Chicago

The Pizza Hut restaurant was crowded and a certain set of tables was very rowdy as they ate their pizzas.

“We are gathered here today . . .”

“Marty, it’s *not* a wedding!”

“Sorry, Megan – we are here to celebrate the sixteenth birthdays of two very obnoxious young women. . .” Marty corrected.

“. . . and by ‘obnoxious’,” Joshua interrupted, “we mean that these two could give *Mindy* a run for her money!”

The two girls in question glared at Joshua with their mouths hanging open.

“Hey! Nobody out does me when it comes to being obnoxious!” *Mindy* declared and there was some raucous laughter from all those present.

“Anyway,” Marty went on. “Happy Birthday, Sky and Chrissy!”

There was plenty of rowdy cheering as the two girls blushed with the attention.

Later that afternoon

“Saoirse McBride, as I live and breathe...”

Saoirse stiffened. It was a name that she had not heard in seven years and as far as she was aware, nobody else knew of it. She did her best not to react but the name had shaken her. It had also been delivered in a perfect Belfast accent. Something was *very* wrong. Nobody alive could have known who she used to be before she was taken and given the identity of Saoirse Doherty. Saoirse chose to ignore the man and she continued on her way.

“You’re the image of your ma. On for a wee dander?”

Saoirse composed herself and she turned to look at the man.

"I have no idea who you are, sir, but would you please leave me alone," she offered in her best British accent.

The man was taken aback for a moment before his eyes narrowed.

"Aye. My apologies young lady."

The man turned and he walked away. Once the rattled fifteen-year-old was certain that he was gone, she pulled out her mobile and she dialled a number. The call was answered speedily.

"Mindy . . . I think I'm in trouble."

That evening

West Columbia

Kim jumped up from the couch to answer the knock on the door and she was very surprised to see who stood on the doorstep.

"Nicole?"

"Hi, Kim – we were in the neighbourhood, so we thought we'd stop by."

Kim hugged her big sister and then turned to the young girl who pushed past.

"Aunt Kim!"

"Hi, Zoe!"

After Kim had hugged Zoe, she closed the door and waved them into the living room. Marty looked up and he gave his wife a confused look.

"You remember my sister, Nicole, and our niece, Zoe?"

"Err, yeah, I do," Marty responded as he got up and gave his sister-in-law and niece a hug. "I had no idea they were coming by?"

"No, neither did I . . ." Kim replied.

"Sorry – we're going to be in town for a little while . . . me and Zoey, and we wanted to spend some time with you and your family, Kim."

"Where's Marty?" Zoe asked as she looked around the room.

"He's upstairs, sleeping," Marty replied. "Come on, you can come see him."

Once Marty and Zoe had gone upstairs, Kim turned on her sister.

"What's going on, Nicole."

"Me and Jordan . . . we're getting divorced."

"What?"

"It's for the best; everything's fine."

"What happened?"

“We just decided a couple months ago; no need to get into details. Zoe and I thought we’d move to Chicago . . . where we have family.”

“Okay. How’s Zoe taking it?”

“I don’t really know; she won’t open up. I thought . . .”

Kim smiled.

“You thought her Aunt Kim could get her to open up?”

“You always were good with Zoe – better than me, sometimes. She’s eleven and she’s got enough on her plate without her parents divorcing too.”

“Let’s sit down, shall we?”