

A little over a week later

Friday, 5th August, 2016

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

Room 32

“Hi, Mum!”

“Morning, daughter!” Mindy replied with a grin.

“What you got there?” Stephanie asked as she noticed the bags that Mindy carried.

“Bright as a button, as usual,” Mindy laughed as her daughter’s cheeks coloured slightly. “I think it’s time for a little lady to come home.”

Despite the reaction being expected, Mindy was appalled by the reaction that her supposedly happy proclamation had brought as Stephanie began to cry out of sheer relief and happiness.

“You don’t know what it means to me to hear you say that.”

“Yes, Steph, I do,” Mindy smiled.

“Right, kiddo, let’s get you disconnected for your final time!” Nurse Kittiwake grinned as she breezed into Room 32.

After the usual ignominies of having the duvet and her gown removed, followed by all the sticky pads, Stephanie found herself dumped into a bath where she was bathed – another humiliation – before being returned to sit on her bed wrapped in a towel.

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“I bought you some new clothes, considering that you possessed nothing *remotely* suitable,” Mindy began conversationally.

“Nothing *remotely* suitable?” Stephanie echoed. “How so?”

“Da-da!”

“You can get to fuck!” Stephanie growled as Mindy laid out some clothing on the bed.

“Dave quoted you word for word!” Mindy laughed. “Look, I know you hate wearing anything which makes you look like a girl – but that bath reminded me that you are, in fact, a girl.”

Stephanie glared down at the two offending articles of clothing. The first was a dark blue blouse with black buttons up the front. The second – and in the ten-year-old’s mind, the worst – was a medium-blue, wrap-style denim skirt.

“Why?”

“It occurred to me that you currently have limited mobility in your left arm and that the other is going to be strapped up for a few more weeks. You need clothing that is easy to put on and take off – a blouse. You also need to make use of the bathroom. . .”

“I’ve been using the bathroom for the past week; ever since that damn hose thing was removed from my cunt.”

Mindy noticed that Stephanie was getting annoyed. She smiled.

“You’ve been using the bathroom wearing only a gown – nothing else. So, I thought a skirt would help you – from a purely practical point of view.”

Stephanie’s shoulders slumped as she gave up trying to fight the very logical argument and she looked annoyed for a moment before she smiled.

“Thanks for looking after me, Mum.”

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Mindy gently eased the sleeve of the blouse over Stephanie’s immobilised right arm and then passed the garment around her back to the other side.

“Talking of you being a girl,” Mindy commented as she helped Stephanie push her left arm into the other sleeve. “I think you might need a training bra of some sort. . .”

“My chest is *flat!*” Stephanie growled as her face turned pink.

“Not all *that* flat – even Tommy noticed, you know, on the boat.”

“Let’s talk about boobs another day, huh?”

Mindy chuckled and she helped Stephanie into a pair of pink knickers before she then wrapped the denim skirt around the ten-year-old’s waist.

“I like it – comfortable,” she admitted, somewhat grudgingly.

Two hours later

Glenview

Stephanie was feeling more than a little humiliated as Dave lifted her out of the car with ease and he carried her inside the house.

“I can walk – sort of – I am *not* an invalid!”

“Yes, you are – so, shut up!” Dave replied with a grin.

Stephanie gave up moaning and she just leant into Dave’s chest, enjoying his comforting warmth as she was carried upstairs to her bedroom.

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As Stephanie was laid gently on her bed, she looked around the room which she had not seen in over five weeks. The bed was much softer than that which she had occupied at the hospital, which she welcomed. On her desk was a large bouquet of electric-blue flowers.

“Thank Josh, for me, Mum.”

“He thought you’d like them,” Mindy smiled. “Glad to be home?”

“Hell, yeah!”

“You will not leave the bed except for using the bathroom – understand, young lady?” Dave lectured seriously.

“Yes, Dad – I’ll be a good little patient,” Stephanie grinned.

“You think we were born yesterday?” Mindy asked as she helped her daughter out of the blouse and removed the skirt.

“Maybe. . .”

“Get some rest – you have a busy day tomorrow,” Dave suggested as he pulled the duvet over the tired girl.

Stephanie did *not* want to miss the party, so she closed her eyes and soon sank into a peaceful sleep.

That same time

Several miles away. . .

“Congratulations, young lady, that was some of the best driving I’ve seen in a long time. You have some great reflexes and a very pleasant manner.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

I climbed out of the car and I was struggling to control my grin as I walked over to Mom.

“Well?”

“You have a brilliant daughter, Dr Bennett. She’s very talented and a very sweet girl. . .”

Mom blinked and raised an eyebrow.

“Was it *this* girl you had with you?” Mom queried as she indicated yours truly.

“Oh, yes, such a lovely mannered teenager.”

Mom looked at me quizzically.

Forty minutes later

Morton Grove

“Well?” Joshua asked with baited breath.

“Do you *have* to ask?” Chloe demanded.

“She must have hypnotised the examiner,” Cathy commented. “It was sickening: ‘. . .she’s very talented and a very sweet girl. . .’ – I ask you!”

“Chloe?”

“Yes, me, you damn asshole, Joshua!”

“Sorry – just a little surprised. . .”

“So, can I get a car now?” Chloe demanded with an enormous smile.

The following day
Saturday, 6th August

Cathy came by.

“So, Steph,” Cathy said conversationally, as she examined Stephanie from head to toe. “Anything exciting happen while you were in hospital?”

“You are kidding me?” Stephanie demanded.

“Just distracting you from my prodding,” Cathy chuckled as she knew full well what had occurred a couple of weeks previously. “You’re doing good – now for the serious part, Stephanie.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t push yourself too much, please. You are no longer a *Predator* and Psyche is convalescing – *understand?* You do anything stupid and I *will* have you restrained – *understand?*”

Stephanie nodded at the relevant points and cringed. She was desperate to heal but she knew that offending the Doctor was way worse than offending Hit Girl!

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After Cathy had gone, Stephanie decided it was time to see what her left arm could do, so she eased herself out of bed, took a deep breath for the pain, and pushed her left hand between the mattress and the base of the bed. She frowned – there should have been something there. . . She checked four other places around her bedroom – nada!

“Fucking bitch!” she muttered as she made her way back to the bed and laid down.

Ten minutes later, Mindy breezed in.

“How did you know?” Stephanie demanded.

“The guns?” Mindy chuckled.

“Yeah – the guns!”

“I hid being Hit Girl from Marcus for quite a while – hiding weapons became second nature to me.”

“You actually checked my teddy-bear?”

“There might have been something inside it. . .”

“What sort of sick individual would hide a weapon in a teddy-bear?”

“No idea. . . but I think I got all of them. I decided that you might try to train or something equally stupid.”

Stephanie scowled.

“You get the one behind the Rainbow Dash poster?”

“No – thanks,” Mindy grinned.

“Doh!”

Later that afternoon

Stephanie scowled as she found herself wearing *another* skirt.

“So, I *do* have a sister,” Anne-Marie commented approvingly.

“You want your arm broken again?” Stephanie hissed.

“I’m just glad that you’re home,” Anne-Marie said with a concerned smile.

“Yeah – for once she’s talking sense,” Danny commented.

‘Woof!’ Razor added as he lay at Stephanie’s feet in the living room and Horatio jumped up beside Stephanie with a small meow.

“I am glad to be home – and glad to be with my family,” Stephanie admitted. “Thanks for caring.”

“Anytime, sis,” Anne-Marie grinned.

That evening

Safehouse D

Marty, Kim, and Abby had outdone themselves.

There was a stage, massive speakers, a karaoke machine, and plenty of tables and chairs. A huge banner hung over the stage: ‘Happy Sweet Sixteen’. They had transformed the utilitarian warehouse into a birthday venue. It was warm, cosy, and homely with a large dance floor in the centre. Cathy, Emily, Shannon Morgan, and Paige had prepared an enormous pile of food which threatened to collapse the tables arranged over to one side of the warehouse. Tony Morgan had set up a bar for the night to provide the drinks.

Over to one side, there was a covered area which was marked as ‘off-limits’. Everybody knew better than to go anywhere near it – mainly because they knew it could be *anything*, at least if Hit Girl had anything to do with it.

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At around six, that evening, people began to arrive.

Cathy and her daughter were among the first. Chloe wore a very short blue dress which accentuated her feminine curves and long legs. Her blonde hair, with the single purple stripe was hanging loose. Next in was Paige and Marcus, with Megan – who wore a very fetching black dress which went nowhere near her knees (and in Marcus’ opinion showed *far* too much thigh) – and Curtis. Arriving at the same time were Lizzie and Lauren, along with the Fellowes family. Brad was holding Lauren’s hand and the young girl was blushing as many eyes examined her ‘compact’ yellow dress which showed off her long legs.

Saoirse and Morgan were also in very revealing outfits, not that either of them minded the attention one bit. Abby breezed in with her mother in tow and she was quickly joined by Avery and Riley – both of whom were giggling away and very pleased to be welcomed to their first *Fusion* event. Kyle arrived and he promptly sat down with Hailee who arrived a few minutes later with her mother, Vicky. Once people had begun to mill about and grab a drink, it was time to begin.

“Okay, people,” Marty began from up on the stage. “We have a lot to get through, tonight – so please drink, be merry, and you all have fun now! Oh – looky here – our very first *Predator*, and she’s actually dressed like a girl – who knew! Welcome back, Stephanie!”

Said *Predator* froze as she entered the space near the stage and she cringed as everybody looked in her direction and cheered.

“Hi, y’all!” Stephanie drawled as she grinned enormously and waved her available hand a little nervously.

“I think you have nice legs and I like it when you show them,” Tommy commented before he stopped talking and looked a little apprehensively at Stephanie.

Stephanie ignored the sniggering (Saoirse and Megan) and instead, she scowled at the older boy before she then marched right up to him and stared up into his face.

“You come down here and say that. . .” she growled.

Tommy looked around and the twelve-year-old went pink in the face as everybody went ‘ooooh’. They all expected Stephanie to slap, or otherwise hurt the boy, as was her manner. Instead, as he came closer, she reached up with her left hand, seized his chin, and she kissed him, full on the lips. There was total silence for almost a full minute and then Joshua broke the stillness.

“You sly dog, Tommy boy!” he laughed as both kids went very pink.

“You were just kissed by the baddest *Predator* ever, Tommy – you like to live dangerously, don’t you?” Saoirse quipped.

Marty then got clever and began to play ‘*French Kissin’ In the USA*’ by Debbie Harry – Stephanie was not amused.

“Not fucking happening, asshole!”

Everybody laughed as Stephanie headed over to some chairs.

“How sweet – Steph’s got a boyfriend,” Saoirse teased.

“Steph’s got a boyfriend, Steph’s got a boyfriend,” Anne-Marie sang. “Stephanie and Tommy sitting in the tree, k – i – s – s – i – n – g!”

“If I could, I’d kick your sorry collective arses!”

“We’re looking forward to it,” Saoirse grinned.

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Joshua and Chloe had received strict instructions not to vanish into a dark corner to ‘enjoy each other’s bodies’ as Cathy had put it. Tommy was receiving a lot of jibes about his kiss – mainly from Curtis and Joshua. The young boy took all the ribbing in his stride, like everything in his life. Nevertheless, he went to sit with Stephanie, taking her a glass of Coke.

“Thanks, Tommy.”

“Sorry I embarrassed you,” Tommy offered.

“I can take it – I suppose I’m going to have to get used to people making comments about my body. It was nice, though, thanks.”

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"How are you holding up, Mindy?" Vicky asked as she watched Stephanie talk to Tommy.

"I'm feeling a lot better now I have her home," Mindy admitted.

"I bet," Vicky replied with a chuckle. "Motherhood is one hell of a challenge, huh?"

"Tell me about it," Mindy groused. "Being Hit Girl is *way* easier!"

"You just wait until you have teenaged girls. . ." Vicky laughed.

"I am *so* looking forward to that!" Marcus chuckled as he grinned fiendishly.

"Look, old man," Mindy replied with her own grin. "You have Megan turning thirteen in a little over a year."

Marcus' grin faded instantly.

"My life is going to hell in a basket," Marcus moaned.

"Just keep her on the right road, just like you did with me, and she'll be fine," Mindy offered.

"Keeping you on the right road was like trying to herd cats."

Mindy and Vicky laughed.

"Look at me as practice for Megan."

"I must have been a really bad person in a former life."

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All chatter ceased as Dave and Marty climbed onto the stage wearing trilbys and dark suits. Dave spoke first as the stood behind a pair of microphone stands.

"One, two, one, two, three, four."

Everybody cheered as the music began and the two friends began to dance on the stage. Then Dave spoke again.

*We're so glad to see so many of you lovely people here tonight
And we would especially like to welcome all the representatives of Illinois' Law enforcement
community, who have chosen to join us here in the Safehouse at this time
We certainly hope that you all enjoy the show and remember people, that no matter who you are
and what you do to live, thrive, and survive
There are still some things that make us all the same:
You, me, them
Everybody! Everybody!*

Marcus, Vicky, Paul, and Sam all cheered loudly at the second line as Dave and Marty sang together:

*Everybody needs somebody
Everybody needs somebody to love
Someone to love (Someone to love)
Sweetheart to miss (Sweetheart to miss)
Sugar to kiss (Sugar to kiss)*

*I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you in the morning
You, you, you when my soul's on fire*

Then it was Marty's turn:

*Sometimes I feel
I feel a little sad inside
When my baby mistreats me, I never never have a place to hide, I need you!*

There was a lot of cheering and yelling during the instrumental break, then Marty came on again:

*Sometimes I feel
I feel a little sad inside
When my baby mistreats me, I never never have a place to hide, I need you!*

*I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you*

Then it was Dave's turn and he looked directly at Mindy as he sang:

*You know, people, when you do find that special somebody
Hold that man, hold that woman
Love him, please him, squeeze her, please her
Signify your feelings with every gentle caress
Because it's so important to have that special somebody
To hold, to kiss, to miss, to squeeze, and please*

Mindy blushed wildly as people followed Dave's eyes.

*Everybody needs somebody
Everybody needs somebody to love (Everybody)
Someone to love (Needs somebody)
Sweetheart to miss (Everybody)
Sugar to kiss (Needs somebody)*

*I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you*

*I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you
I need you, you, you*

*In the morning
When my soul's on fire
When there ain't no-one around*

*I need you, you, you, you
I need you, you, you, you
I need you, you
I need you!*

Mindy was a little concerned that the cheering and chanting might outdo the sound proofing on the Safehouse. . .

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As the cheering died down, Mindy stepped up onto the stage and waved for silence.

“Before we get onto the big presents for my two miscreant lieutenants, I would like to say a few words about a very special ten-year-old who has suffered through immense pain and trauma over the past several weeks. Her fortitude has been an inspiration to us all as she fought past her injuries. Twice her heart stopped, and twice she required emergency surgery. But, as you all know, nothing ever stops that girl – nothing. Many have tried to kill her, and they all failed. Despite being half-dead from her latest relapse, she even had the wits about her, and the fortitude, to put down an attempted assassination. To be honest, in all my time as a vigilante, I have never, *ever*, seen somebody killed with a spoon. . .”

There was a burst of laughter and Stephanie grinned sheepishly.

“However, that should be a warning to us all of what that young girl is capable of when she is angry or threatened. She still has a lot of work ahead of her and I hope that everybody will support her as she heals – we all want her back out there, kicking ass, but that is a while away. In the meantime, Dave and I have plans for our eldest daughter – more of that next week. Ladies and gentlemen, please raise your glasses to our one and only, Stephanie Lizewski.”

Stephanie had been cringing during the entire toast and now she blushed bright pink at both the applause and the acknowledgements. She grabbed hold of her best friend and she hauled herself, a little shakily, to her feet. Saoirse supported her best friend as the applause died down.

“Thanks, Mum. The past few weeks have been very hard and many, many times I wanted to throw in the towel and just give up. Only the tough love from my Mum and my best friend got me through the dark times. Without the both of them. . . Thank you, all of you who took the time to visit me and to encourage me. I really never knew how many real friends I had . . . thank you.”

Stephanie dissolved into tears and Saoirse hugged her tightly as more applause echoed through the Safehouse.

“Will you two get a fucking grip!” Mindy growled as she walked past Cathy and Paige who were both crying, despite her wiping away tears from her own eyes.

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“Okay, we’re gonna do one more – yeah!” Megan shouted as she mounted the stage with Saoirse and Hailee.

Saoirse handled the opening:

*All the old paintings on the tombs,
They do the sand dance, don’t you know?*

*If they move too quick (oh whey oh)
They're falling down like a domino.
All the bazaar men by the Nile,
They got the money on a bet.*

*Gold crocodiles (oh whey oh)
They snap their teeth on your cigarette.
Foreign types with their hookah pipes say
(Ay oh whey oh, ay oh whey oh)
Walk like an Egyptian.*

Then Hailee took over:

*The blond waitresses take their trays
They spin around and they cross the floor;
They got the moves (oh whey oh)

You drop your drink then they bring you more.
All the school kids so sick of books,
They like the punk and the metal band.
When the buzzer rings, (oh whey oh)

They're walking like an Egyptian.
All the kids in the marketplace say
(Ay oh whey oh, ay oh whey oh)
Walk like an Egyptian.*

It was Megan with the final verses that got the biggest laughs and cheers:

*Slide your feet up the street bend your back
Shift your arm then you pull it back
Life is hard you know (oh whey oh)
So strike a pose on a Cadillac

If you want to find all the cops
They're hanging out in the donut shop
They sing and dance (oh whey oh)
Spin the clubs cruise down the block

All the Japanese with their yen
The party boys call the Kremlin
And the Chinese know (oh whey oh)
They walk the line like Egyptian

All the cops in the donut shop say
(Ay oh whey oh, ay oh whey oh)
Walk like an Egyptian
Walk like an Egyptian*

The cheering was enormous and the four cops present had joined in with the final 'Ay oh whey oh, ay oh whey oh' having grown up with the song and they each knew the lyrics.

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Mindy stopped before the cordoned off area and she turned to the crowd as the cheering wound down. Everybody turned towards her in eager anticipation.

“I’m sure that both Chloe and Josh have guessed what is behind here, but I just want to drag it out a little longer – ‘cause I can!”

There was laughter and Chloe scowled at her friend.

“Let’s go with ladies first – not that Chloe is a lady . . .”

“I have a cunt, does that count?” Chloe challenged.

“That’s no way to talk about Josh!” Mindy quipped back before she continued. “We all thought long and hard about what these two should have. Chloe in particular as the last car she drove; well, she rolled it! We couldn’t find a self-righting car, so we got her the next best thing . . .”

Chloe scowled.

Mindy signalled Marty who pressed a button and the black curtain around one of the items dropped to the ground. A chorus of comments erupted as a car was revealed in all its sparkling glory.

The Mini John Cooper Works Clubman All4 sparkled in the lighting. The paintwork was chilli red with black sport stripes along the sides and twin stripes over the bonnet while the mirrors and roof were black with the mirrors each sporting a Union Jack in black and white. The car sat on eighteen-inch alloy wheels and had every conceivable extra fitted – plus some features that did not exist on the standard options list.

Chloe was totally speechless – for about the first time in her sixteen years of life!

“Now that’s what I like – a silent Chloe!” Curtis quipped as his cousin just stared at the vehicle.

“It’s beautiful . . .” Chloe muttered after a couple of minutes.

“It’s from your father and me. Well, the car is – the spy shit is from Mindy!” Cathy explained as she hugged her daughter.

Chloe had had a difficult phone call with her father that morning; she really missed him. But for him to do this for her – Chloe instantly regretted all those years when she had been so bitchy to her father. Tears ran down her face as her mother guided her around to the driver’s side and she handed her daughter the key which was actually a small oval remote.

Chloe sat inside her new car and she gazed over the interior, mesmerised by the fact that she actually owned her own car.

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While Chloe enjoyed her new car, Mindy moved on. . .

“Now – for Joshua!” Mindy called out and the next black curtain soon fell to the ground to reveal another car.

The Audi S3 sedan in ara blue crystal, shone under the lights as it sat on its nineteen-inch alloy wheels.

“Wow. . .” was all the boy could muster.

“A present from Jack, Dave, and me,” Mindy said. “You’ve had a tough couple of years, Josh – enjoy it.”

Mindy grimaced as Joshua quite literally picked her up in a bear hug, pinning her arms to her sides, and he gave her a big kiss on the cheek. Mindy’s face went pink and she began to growl, so Joshua wisely put Mindy back down on her feet.

“Thank you, Mindy.”

“You’re welcome, Joshua.”

Joshua was soon joined by the other boys as he examined his new car.

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“You okay, Steph?”

“Yeah, Mum . . . just very sore.”

“You wanna go home?”

“Nah – but I could do with a lay down. . .”

Mindy cleared off a couple of chairs and Dave materialised with a pillow.

“Thought the little lady might need a rest,” he said with a gentle smile.

Stephanie laid back on the chairs with Mindy’s help and as Dave gently moved her hair out of her face, she closed her eyes and quickly fell asleep.

“I never thought of that – thanks,” Mindy said as she gave her thoughtful husband a kiss.