

**Saturday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016**

**Blairhoyle, Scotland**

"I honestly can't believe that I'm saying this to you, Abigail, but you stay safe, okay? We may be mortal enemies but we both love a boy for very different reasons and we both want to see him back in our lives."

"We'll find him, Stephanie - I promise. You stay safe, too, okay - we need a rematch, you and I."

"I'll be there, bitch!" Stephanie grinned as she turned to a very tearful Electra. "I'm going to miss you 'lectra, but at least I'll be free from your snarky comments. Now, don't you let these bitches get one over on you, okay? Remember everything that I've taught you. You're a survivor."

Electra hugged her mentor, tears streaming down her face like Niagara Falls.

"She talkin' about us?" Kaitlin asked facetiously.

"Think so," Naomi replied.

"Cool!" Harper added.

After more hugs, all around, Stephanie and Mindy left for the airport and home.

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**Tuesday, September 6<sup>th</sup>**

**Glenview**

**Chicago, United States of America**

"Are we not picking Megan up?"

"No, Anne-Marie; Megan is starting Junior High, today," Stephanie advised her younger sister.

Anne-Marie nodded and then an evil smirk drifted across her face.

"Bet a certain boy is looking forward to seeing you," she teased her big sister.

Stephanie turned around in the front seat of the Jaguar XJR and glared at Anne-Marie.

"Well, you did take longer to get ready than you usually do," Mindy admitted.

"I have a weak right arm," Stephanie responded lamely as her cheeks turned pink.

"Yeah, right!" Mindy laughed.

"You do look very smart, Steph," Danny said.

"Thank you, Danny."

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**Lake View High School**

"Hi, Megan - you ready for high school?"

"Hi, Chloe - yeah, I think so."

"What's up?"

"Talk about a humiliating morning . . . Mom - she was crying this morning because her little girl was starting high school!"

Chloe laughed.

"Been there - Mom cried on the phone this morning; 'her big girl is growing up too fast', apparently."

Megan was a little surprised at Chloe's candidness. Chloe grinned.

"Megan - you're my friend and you're like a sister to me; I have no secrets from you, all that's in the past."

Chloe ruffled Megan's hair generating a scowl.

"Bennett, I hope you aren't bullying the new kids."

"No, Mr Swanson; just checking that Megan is okay," Chloe grinned as Isaac Swanson winked and sauntered off down the corridor.

"Megan!"

"Hi, Zach."

"Wow, you look hot!"

"Hell, yeah!" Jake added.

Megan blushed.

"She's done a *lot* of growing over the summer, boys, but she could do with a little bit more hair down below," Chloe teased and Megan's mouth dropped open in shocked astonishment.

"Can I see?"

"No, you cannot!" Megan responded tartly, her cheeks a fiery red. "I do not just flash my naked body for anybody. . ."

"Nah, just a dozen people, or so. . ." an Irish lilt quipped.

Megan scowled at the grinning Saoirse as she walked past with Morgan.

"Chloe!"

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Chloe turned to find her two best friends moving towards her through the throng of excited teenagers. Avery and Riley hugged their friend tightly.

"You've been busy, girl!" Avery pointed out.

Chloe rolled her eyes, knowing exactly what she meant. She was not referring to Chloe, but to her alter ego, the vigilante known as Shadow.

"We were worried about you - we never saw all that much of you," Riley said. "How's Stephanie?"

"She's had a rough time over the summer - really rough - but she's pulled through."

"I heard that Shadow was injured," Avery said very quietly.

"Yeah - arrow in my thigh; it was sore as hell, I can tell you."

"You better now?"

"Yeah."

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### ***North Park Elementary School***

"Stephanie!"

The ten-year-old paused and she closed her eyes, wishing that she was invisible.

"I won't ask if you had a good summer, as I know you didn't. We're really glad to see you up and about, not to mention in one piece."

"Thanks, Jackson."

The eyes of Jackson and Craig wandered all over Stephanie's body and she felt a little weird.

"You look really nice, Steph - I like the skirt," Katy offered.

"Despite what some may think; I am a girl," Stephanie pointed out with a grin.

"Taken you long enough to realise that!" Ali commented dryly.

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Almost from the moment she had set foot out of the car, that morning, Stephanie had been mobbed by well-wishers and curious kids wanting to find out more about the shooting, several weeks previously. There was even an argument between a group of boys about which one was going to carry Stephanie's schoolbag - eventually, Stephanie just left them arguing and carried her own bag to class.

The teachers, too, were very curious, but happy to see the rambunctious ten-year-old back at the school. While they often tired of Stephanie's behaviour and often violent and foul-mouthed

outbursts, she was a firm favourite amongst the teaching body as a whole. Stephanie was quick to show her anger and even quicker to resort to physical violence, but she would never hurt anybody younger than herself and she was very quick to defend any youngster who was being bullied.

Indeed, in the months that Stephanie had been attending the school, the bullying statistics had dropped sharply. Her aunt, Megan Williams, had also seen to a lot of the bullies but Megan had deigned to be less obvious and overt about her threats of violence. Stephanie had been warned about vigilantism in the school, but the fact that she only targeted active bullies allowed the school to turn a blind eye to Stephanie's actions. It usually only took her arrival outside at recess for the bullies and troublemakers to fade into the background and the more timid children to come to the fore and enjoy their time outside the classroom.

Stephanie was a very popular pupil and education-wise, she was very intelligent.

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### ***That evening***

#### ***Glenview***

"Mindy, when are we going downtown?" Stephanie asked almost the moment they had all arrived home.

"Not tonight, honey."

"Why?" Stephanie demanded petulantly

"Less of that tone, young lady - homework, please."

"I want to go downtown - I can do my homework there."

"No Psyche on a school night."

"Fuck, that!"

"Stephanie! That is enough - get upstairs, now!" Dave roared.

Stephanie glared at Dave and then Mindy before she ran up the stairs, muttering and swearing.

"I'm off to do my homework - see you at dinner," Danny called out as he headed off up the stairs.

"Pussy!" Anne-Marie called after him.

"Anne-Marie!" Mindy growled.

The eight-year-old grimaced.

"I know. Anne-Marie: put a buck in the jar. Anne-Marie: go do your homework."

Mindy smiled as the young girl dejectedly stuffed a dollar bill into her personal swear jar and then she headed up the stairs.

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Up in the British Sector, Stephanie was calming herself down as she sat at her desk, her school books laid out before her. Mindy had been absolutely right and she had just behaved like a petulant child just because she could not get her own way. That annoyed Stephanie. She was trying to act more mature, hoping that Dave and Mindy might see that she was growing up and that she was due some more responsibility. That idea had failed in a most spectacular way!

Stephanie picked up her mobile and she sent a text:

*Sorry Mum :)*

A few seconds later, a response arrived:

*No harm done :)*

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Downstairs in the kitchen, Mindy smiled as she read the next message:

*Love you Mum*

Stephanie was growing up and showing increasing levels of maturity way beyond her years. But then, *Predators* had been encouraged to grow up and mature much faster than they needed. Mindy was very pleased with how the girl was growing up. Mindy's cell beeped again:

*Steph is sending texts instead of doing her homework :)*

It was Anne-Marie trying to get Stephanie into trouble.

*Steph is talking with ME!*

The reply arrived a second or two later:

*busted :(*

"Let me guess," Dave chuckled as he saw his wife's expression. "Anne-Marie trying to get Stephanie into trouble?"

Mindy nodded as she sipped her coffee.

"Steph's doing well. Must be hormones - kind of reminds me of another girl about the same age. . ."

"I was older. . ."

"Still suffering from hormones - I mean; she was a fucking show off, but a moody bitch, too."

"I suppose, I was," Mindy admitted, "a *little* hormonal."

"A *little*!"

"Funny!"

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## ***That evening***

### ***D-JAK Prime***

It was a busy evening.

As Mindy left the back office wearing her black Gi, she looked over her burgeoning clientele. Many faces were recognisable - indeed, many were her friends while others were her friends but they had no idea that Mindy was *their* friend having only met her in her Hit Girl guise.

In the introductory class, with Kyle, were five teenage friends: Elizabeth, Jesse, Kate, Laurence, and Peter. To most at D-JAK, they were just five friends all learning to defend themselves. To Mindy, they were *Synthesis*, the hacker arm of *Fusion*. The kids were true to their word (or just scared of Hit Girl) and as such, they turned up regularly to learn the art of self-defence - with a few extra skills thrown in.

Further over, the intermediate class was being taught by Megan and Curtis, who each wore a blue Gi. In that class were two sisters: Lauren and Lizzie. In the same class were two of Chloe's friends: Avery and Riley. Avery enjoyed throwing her friend down to the mat but Riley was also quick to put Avery down, just as hard. Megan or Curtis would usually stay close to Lauren as the girl would sometimes get a little carried away when she sparred against her sister.

The advanced class was being taught by Hailee with help from Saoirse. That class had a certain young girl learning advanced skills. Her name was Kelly and she was something very special. So special, that only half-a-dozen people knew that she was a double-agent. The girl had no idea that the smiling young woman in the black Gi had an alter ego for whom she was now working clandestinely.

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Over in a distant corner of D-JAK, were Stephanie and Tommy.

Mindy noticed that something appeared off, the moment she approached. Stephanie was making use of the punch bag with Tommy to help - the two youngsters had been spending quite a bit of time together since Stephanie's return from the hospital and Tommy was helping his friend to regain her previous peak physical condition.

Almost immediately, Mindy noticed that Stephanie seemed annoyed about something and her face was pinker than usual - and not just from the exercise. Mindy looked past the youngsters and she rolled her eyes as she found a very good reason for Stephanie being annoyed - actually three of them. Joshua and Chloe, along with Anne-Marie, were talking together and by Anne-Marie's giggles, Mindy assumed they were all up to no good.

"I suppose you *could* be right; there is *something* showing, well *two* somethings - not much, though. . ." Chloe commented as she studied Stephanie from a safe distance.

"You sure; I can't see *anything*?" Joshua replied with an evil grin.

"They're there," Anne-Marie assured them both. "I've seen 'em - a bit like fried eggs."

Stephanie was wearing a sports bra while she exercised her weakened right arm. Naturally, the garment matched the contours of her body and yes, there were two very gentle mounds on her chest.

"Yeah - I suppose you *could* call those breasts," Chloe continued.

Mindy groaned, figuring that Stephanie was on the verge of exploding - the body language of the ten-year-old was unmistakable.

"Enough - Chloe, Joshua, Anne-Marie," Mindy said, attracting everybody's attention. "Chloe, according to your mother, Stephanie has bigger boobs at ten than you had when you were twelve. Anne-Marie, I am going to allow Stephanie to respond as she sees fit - don't look at me like that; I'm sure it will be quick, but very painful. . . Joshua - how about you spar one on one with Tommy; I am sure he will be fair."

"Sorry, Steph," an embarrassed looking Chloe said.

"Yeah - just joking around," Joshua added.

"Just winding you up a bit - you'd never hurt your little sister," Anne-Marie tried.

Stephanie just scowled at each of them in turn.

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Stephanie smiled at Mindy as she headed towards the back office for a drink. As she went, she heard a yell of pain from Joshua as Tommy laid him out on the mat, closely followed by a scream from Chloe as she was thrown on top of her boyfriend. Anne-Marie had fled. Stephanie saw Saoirse standing with Paige and she altered course.

"So, the ungrateful bitch returns," Saoirse commented as Stephanie approached her.

"Yeah - I spoke out of turn, but I'm glad to have a best friend to set me straight," the chastened Stephanie replied as she surprised her best friend by giving her a hug.

"You can be a big softy, Stephy," Saoirse laughed as she returned the hug.

"About that. . ." Stephanie muttered as she pulled away and punched her friend in the left breast. "I have a reputation to uphold, you know."

"You bitch!" Saoirse called out as she rubbed her breast.

"That's better!" the laughing Stephanie called out as she bolted to safety.

"When you grow some tits, I will make you pay!" Saoirse yelled after the retreating girl.

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Mindy just shook her head as she saw her daughter laughing while she sprinted across D-JAK. Stephanie was still favouring her right arm and that was affecting her running, but not by all that much. The swimming plus a strict training regime had ensured that her arm was returning to full functionality. It had been very painful but with the help of her family and friends, Stephanie had pushed through and she was very close to the home straight.

Saoirse was the driving force behind Stephanie's recovery and Mindy knew that she owed the fifteen-year-old. Maybe Saoirse felt guilt over her attempts at killing Stephanie, so she wanted to do everything that she could to help Stephanie recover from her wounds. Whatever the bond was between them, they were inseparable and they both needed each other. Seeing Stephanie laughing was amazing considering what the poor girl had endured over the previous few months.

Stephanie finally calmed down but Anne-Marie refused to sit next to her in the car on the drive home.

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***The following afternoon***  
***Wednesday, September 7<sup>th</sup>***

***Morton Grove***

"Hi, honey!"

"Hi, Mom!"

"For what do I owe this little visit?"

"Is Curtis in?"

"He's - how should I put it - entertaining Megan, 'downtown'."

Chloe was staring down at the floor, unable to meet her mother's eyes. The sixteen-year-old's body language made her mother wary of what was coming next.

"I've missed my second period in a row . . . and . . . a few weeks back, we had a condom rip. . . Mommy, I'm scared."

Those last two words were a phrase which Doctor Catherine Bennett had *not* heard her daughter say in a long, long time. It was also something that she had never expected to ever hear coming from the mouth of the famed *Fusion* vigilante known as Shadow.



"Well, honey, it shows me that you're taking your new situation seriously."

"You're not mad?"

"I'm a little angry and very worried - you are only sixteen, but I trust you, and I know that you took precautions. You are not the careless young girl from three years ago; it is not your fault. Does Joshua know?"

"About the busted condom? Yes. That I'm pregnant? Not yet."

"What do you think he will say?"

"He'll support me, whatever decision I take; he loves me and he respects me."

"I know he does, honey."

"What am I going to do? I'm only sixteen!"

"Well, in seven months, or so, you are going to become a mother, and Joshua a father."

"Josh a Dad. . . Oh, God - what will Daddy say?"

"He'll be mad, but he loves you very much and I know that he trusts both you and Josh, so I don't see any real problems there."

Chloe sank down onto a couch and she began to cry.

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### ***The following evening***

#### ***Glenview***

Mindy had just learnt of Chloe's situation.

"I'm taking you off operations, Chloe."

"I know. What am I going to do, Mindy?"

"If I can bring up a kid, you can!" Mindy pointed out.

Chloe forced a smile.

"I should be happy, but I'm just scared."

"That's what I said to Marcus when we returned from Gotham with the twins."

"I'm too young for kids - I'm. . ."

"Everybody stood by me when I gained the twins - they'll do the same for you. You have a very big family, Chloe."

"I know."

Chloe began crying again. Mindy had no idea what to do, so she just hugged her best friend. It wasn't the first time that Mindy had cursed her Daddy for not teaching her how to cope with emotions

rather than just teaching her how to block the damn things out! Dave had spoken with Joshua - who had taken the news of impending fatherhood in his stride - and discovered that Joshua was scared stiff about the responsibility of bringing up a child. Mindy had heard Dave's response - and growled at it.

"I was scared at the thought of bringing up the twins and then Stephanie, but then I figured that I had survived Mindy going through puberty, so nothing could *possibly* be worse than that!"

Joshua had laughed.