

Wednesday, September 28th, 2016

Safehouse K

When Lucy awoke, she felt cold and uncomfortable.

As her senses kicked into gear, she realised that she was naked and lying on a cold concrete floor. All around her was darkness but she sensed that somebody was watching her. There was also the sound of movement, somewhere in the darkness. Without warning a dazzlingly bright light came on, illuminating her and the immediate area around her.

"Get on your knees!" came an electronically enhanced voice.

Lucy did as commanded, rising to her knees slowly. She shivered with cold as she tried to focus on what was going on around her.

"What do you want in Chicago?" the voice demanded.

"I came seeking Hit Girl."

"Why would you want to do something like that?"

"I need help."

"Why would Hit Girl want to help somebody like you?"

Lucy saw movement ahead of her and a pair of boots came into the pool of bright light - they were lightweight and purple. Lucy knew that she was in the presence of Hit Girl and probably other members of *Fusion*, too.

"I know there is good in her - she is not the wicked, murderous bitch that my instructors made her out to be. I know that she can help me. I am alone. I have nothing. I was trained to be what she is. I want more out of my life now I am no longer under the spell of *Urban Predator*."

Another pair of boots came into the light.

"Why would we want to help you, Lucy - you represent the misery that we all endured and you caused a lot of it."

"Yes, I caused you all misery but I believed in what *Urban Predator* represented - at least in how it was applied to me and Leo. They gave us both a life. They taught us how to look after ourselves. They tainted the programme by what they did to you all. Yes, I helped to create you all. I created Foxtail. I created Stormtide. I created Discord. I created Tempest. I know you are all listening. I don't regret giving you training - I helped to keep you alive. You were all strong and you all survived. I taught you all values and as far as I can see, you've all put those values to good use by joining the one person that you were all trained to kill, despite being trained to emulate her."

There was no response from the assembled masked individuals who had all stepped into the spotlight.

"You think that being naked humiliates me, Hit Girl. I don't like it but I've endured worse - ask Foxy."

"Don't call me that!" one of the masked individuals called out.

"How did you know it was me?" Lucy asked.

"That was Discord," Foxtail replied. "She heard about a girl in P.E. who got in trouble for having a tattoo which showed below her shorts. By the description, it could only have been that damn fish of yours!"

"You can talk, Foxy!" Lucy threw back.

"I told you to stop calling me that!"

There was a snigger from one of three smaller armoured individuals who stood with Foxtail.

"How can we trust you?" Hit Girl growled as she got things back on track.

"You can't. I have hurt them all. They have no reason to trust me. I did bad things - many bad things."

"You were armed," Hit Girl stated as she waved her armoured gauntlet at a table which was covered with Lucy's clothing and weapons. There were several knives and two pistols amongst other items.

"A girl needs to defend herself in a city which you seem to have lost control of."

Lucy saw that she had hit home as Hit Girl braced up.

"If you are not going to help me . . . then I want you to kill me. You were my only hope. KILL ME!"

Lucy shouted the last two words at Hit Girl.

"Okay," Hit Girl replied as she drew her Tanto and strode directly at the unflinching seventeen-year-old.

Lucy stared directly up at Hit Girl's mask as Hit Girl placed the point of her Tanto on Lucy's throat drawing a little blood.

"Do it!" Lucy said as tears of failure ran down her face. "DO IT!"

Hit Girl stared down at the naked girl and she increased the pressure of the blade which allowed more blood to trickle down the girl's chest. It would take just another ounce of pressure to push the blade into Lucy's throat and sever her airway and then her backbone. It would be a merciful death.

"DO IT!"

***The Urban Predator Academy
Colorado Springs, Colorado***

It was the third batch.

Lucy and Leo were much more involved that time around as they had some wild cards in the batch who did *not* want to follow orders. While most of the intake stripped as ordered, one of the girls, an eight-year-old, resolutely refused to strip naked. One of the instructors tipped his head in Lucy's direction and she stepped forwards. The young girl saw Lucy moving towards her and she screamed.

"No, leave me alone!"

Admittedly, Lucy was a forbidding sight. The eleven-year-old wore black combat pants, a sleeveless black t-shirt over a black sports bra, black jungle boots, and her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail, high on her head. Lucy stood no nonsense as she swept the young girl's feet out from under her and she crashed to the floor of the dining hall.

"Strip, now!" Lucy ordered.

"No!"

People only said, 'no' to Lucy once before the heaven's dropped on their head. The girl had said, 'no' twice . . . and she knew that she had gone too far as Lucy pulled out a Benchmade Model 67 Balisong with Tanto blade. She expertly flicked the blade open before she brought it down towards the screaming girl. With deft movements, Lucy cut off the girl's clothes, ripping off her sweatshirt and T-shirt before attacking her jeans and panties. Once the girl's plimsols and socks were ripped off she huddled herself into a ball on the floor, sobbing.

Lucy grabbed the girl by her jet-black hair and pulled her to her feet. Many saw Lucy as skinny, but there were strong muscles in her body and many had found that out to their cost. The girl screamed as she was yanked to her feet by her hair and she struggled against the iron grip to no avail. Lucy pulled the girl's right arm around and up her back, causing another scream of pain. The girl was frogmarched through the corridors to the changing rooms where Lucy pinned her while her hair was shaved off.

Lucy then threw the girl into the shower area where she skidded and fell to the tile floor in fits of sobbing.

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An hour later, Lucy came face to face with the girl again. She was clothed and looking very scared. Lily O'Brien was her name.

"If you want to survive this, O'Brien, then I would advise you to follow all commands, instantly," Lucy said in a vague attempt at being helpful.

The girl just nodded as she stood with two other new girls in the stores awaiting their main draw of clothing. There were now over fifty Predators at the various stages of their training. The first intake had been there almost a year and some were on the verge of becoming serious *Predators*. Indeed, Lucy and Leo were not all that far away from becoming the very first Phase 2 *Predators* on their twelfth birthdays.

On the way, back to the dining hall, Lucy came across the Abbott twins. Their hair had grown back quite fast and the two eleven-year-olds were progressing well in their training.

"Well, if it isn't our 'queen'," Christina sneered.

"Chrissy!" Sky warned.

"You should listen to your freak sister, 'Chrissy'," Lucy cautioned as she pinned the younger girl against the corridor wall with her left hand.

"Fuck you!" Christina retorted.

Lucy smashed her right fist into Christina's left cheek, allowing the girl to fall to the floor where Lucy kicked her in the stomach.

"Learn respect, you fucking freak!" Lucy growled as she strode off down the corridor.

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Safehouse K

"Do it!" Lucy said as she stared at death without fear.

Hit Girl hesitated for a moment but then she decided that the girl was too dangerous - she was a version of herself and that could not be allowed. But before Hit Girl could exert any more pressure on the blade, she felt a hand on her arm. She looked up to see Stormtide shaking her head. Hit Girl looked over at her senior *Predator*. Foxtail shook her head too.

"Far from me to go against the masses - it's bad enough that my own daughter would like to slash my throat when I ground her but to anger a bunch of fanatical *Predators*. . ."

Hit Girl left the rest unsaid as she stowed her Tanto. Lucy sank down onto her heels and she stared at the concrete floor.

"I don't know why I stopped you," Shannon said as she removed her mask. "I hated her - only without her, I would not be alive. She trained me when nobody else would. I owe her for that."

"She was better than many at that place," Saoirse added as she removed her own mask. "She suffered just as much as many of us - probably worse."

"Get her downstairs and return her clothes," Hit Girl directed as she left the pool of light and vanished into the darkness.

"Lucy?"

Lucy looked up to see Shannon holding out her hand. Lucy looked back down to the concrete.

"Please, Lucy - let us help you."

"Why?"

"Just go with it," Sarah said as she too held out her hand.

"What's downstairs?" Lucy asked as she took both of the hands held out to her.

"Warmth," Shannon smiled.

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"Well?"

Mindy looked up at her husband.

"She's fighting demons inside."

"You feel responsible for what she is."

"Yes, dammit! That girl was taken in response to what I was. She was taken in response to what I did when I rescued your fucked-up ass and my Daddy!"

"There was nothing you could do, honey."

"That's what's so fucking annoying!"

"What are you going to do with her?"

"I need to check her out - her former colleagues have vouched for her. I want to know what she's been up to for the past few months and what she did for *Urban Predator*."

"What about her file?"

"We only have a chunk of it, so far. Everything, after she turned thirteen, is missing."

"Remember, she sought *you* out."

"You know I have trust issues and . . . well, she's me and at times I don't trust me."

"At least she has friends," Dave pointed out as they watched Shannon and Saoirse help their former tormentor get dressed.

"Goddamn *Predators!*" Mindy growled.

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Lucy was feeling a lot more comfortable now she was dressed and in a room with heating. It may have been subterranean but it was

pleasant. Introductions were made of the younger *Predators* and Lucy was very surprised to see so many in one place. She was also surprised by one codename, in particular.

"Well, if it isn't the mighty Psyche," Lucy commented as she studied the younger girl. "You're a legend in your own time. You're more famous than even I am."

"You know - while I hated the *Predator* reunions where their first thoughts were to kill me; these lovey-dovey ones are just creepy!"

Lucy laughed.

"Just enjoy it, Stephanie. You were just like me - you wanted to tear down *Urban Predator*. But the difference between us? You went ahead and did it. You're an amazing girl, Stephanie - never let anybody tell you differently."

"You know, Lucy - I thought you'd be tougher than this. To be honest, you sound like a pussy," Stephanie commented and Saoirse groaned as Lucy laughed.

"Just trying to be nice. You want me rip your head off and piss in it, then I can do that."

"I'll pass, honey!" Stephanie offered with a smug smile.

Lucy turned to Saoirse who visibly wilted before the older girl.

"Hi, Saoirse. Have no fear; I hold no ill will against you - but I don't blame you for hating me. I made your life into a living hell and I apologise for that - I won't make excuses for my behaviour."

"Lucy, you always did talk shit," Saoirse replied. "We both suffered, and I don't blame you for any of it. We were all caught up in the moment and we did everything that we could to survive. I'm just glad that you're alive. Have you heard from Leo?"

"No - we were on a mission, together, back in May - it went to shit when you guys took down *Urban Predator* and we executed our own breakouts. I've not seen nor heard from him since."

Lucy looked very down at her comment.

It was three days late, but the news had finally filtered through that *Vengeance* had been attacked.

Mindy had spoken with Jasper and been reassured that while Cassie and Kaitlin had been hurt, there were no major injuries and both would be back in action very quickly. It had also been worrying due to the fact that a new faction was on the radar. *Who* had attacked *Vengeance* and how had they known *Vengeance* was to be there in the first place? Those were among many questions that passed through Mindy's mind as she considered everything which had been happening.

Her head was hurting as she tried to think about what was going on in England at the same time as what was going on in her own city. She had a new, and potentially deadly, Predator appearing out of nowhere. Jamie's ninth birthday was on Sunday and he was getting more than a little over excited by the prospect. Even Stephanie was excited about celebrating her brother's birthday as it was to be the first for many years. Then, on Tuesday, a select few were due to fly to that hellhole called Gotham.

Then came the worst of it - October 8th - the deadline!

Two days later

Friday, September 30th

Evening

1714 West Grace Street

"So, are you enjoying your new lodgings?"

Lucy almost shot through the ceiling at the words which seemingly came out of nowhere. In response, she spun, sweeping up a kitchen knife off the side and throwing it at the voice.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" Hit Girl asked, the kitchen knife grasped in her right gauntlet.

"You fucking bitch!" Lucy exclaimed. "You scared the shit outta me!"

"My bad," Hit Girl said as she sat down in one of the comfortable chairs.

"You're obviously familiar with sneaking into this place," Lucy offered as she sat down opposite Hit Girl. "Coffee?"

"No, I'll pass, thanks. I once snuck in here to kill Foxtail."

"She's still alive," Lucy pointed out.

"I had a weak moment."

"Why are you here?"

"I want to get to know you."

"So, you can kill me in a more efficient manner?"

Hit Girl was impressed with the verbal sparring - Lucy was a natural.

"Lucy Ford, you are not my enemy and, as I understand it, I am not yours. You have no reason to fear me and believe me, if I wanted you dead. . ."

"Point taken - you still scare the hell outta me!"

"Good," Hit Girl responded, her lips curling into a smirk. "Tell me about your first mission for *Urban Predator*."

Lucy thought back over the years.

"That would have been August 2nd, 2013."

"Very good memory," Lucy's visitor commented.

"Thanks - I was sent to Seattle. There, I was picked up by some grumpy bastard and taken into the city. We stopped outside a big hotel."

Friday, August 2nd, 2013

The Sheraton Hotel, Seattle

"What do you want me to do?"

"Room 412 - you will find this man in there. . ."

An 11-inch by 14-inch glossy colour photo was passed over. Lucy ran her eyes over it a few times, memorising eyes, mouth, nose, shape of the face, hair style. She handed the photo back.

". . . kill him."

"How?"

"That is up to you - you have a gun, you have a knife, you have your skills. The bastard had a skin full, last night . . . so, he should be fast asleep. You have thirty-five minutes - we will wait until then and if you are not back down here . . . you are on your own, Lucy."

"I'd better not hang around then. . ."

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Five minutes later, Lucy was on the fourth floor and walking past Room 412.

She needed a key card . . . her mind went into overdrive as she thought through the problem . . . there . . . a maid; female - no good. She smiled and headed to the floor below where she remembered seeing a male hotel employee. As she walked past the maid, she swiped a towel off the pile and made for the fire stairs.

After jumping down the stairs, she paused outside the door to the third floor, checked that the stairwell was clear, and then she stripped naked. She wrapped the towel around her body - it barely covered her, being only an overlarge hand towel. After taking a deep breath, she pulled open the door and she grinned as she saw the male employee, walking away from her. She dumped her clothing and weapons in the doorway to a room and then ran down the corridor.

"Hey!" she called. "You got a bigger towel, there?"

The young man turned around just as Lucy's towel 'kind of slipped'. His eyes went wide as he took in the tantalising sight before him.

"Err . . . of course," he stammered as he turned to grab a bigger towel, tearing his eyes away from Lucy's assets.

"Thank you," Lucy said as she wrapped the fresh, and much larger, towel around her body.

"No problem, ma'am."

Lucy ran off down the corridor, sweeping up her clothes and vanishing back into the stairwell. After dressing, quickly, she dumped the towel in a laundry chute and she casually flipped the stolen access card over in her hand.

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Lucy returned to the fourth floor and after checking that the coast was clear, she inserted the access card into the horizontal slot near the door handle and the light flickered green and the lock released with a muted click. Lucy pulled the suppressed Glock 26 from the small of her back and then pushed open the door to the hotel room. She cleared the bathroom first and then entered the main room. The man was, indeed, asleep - stretched out on his bed. The man's facial features matched the photo, perfectly.

Lucy levelled the pistol at the man's forehead and without a moment's hesitation, she squeezed the trigger twice. The man would never wake up again. Quickly, Lucy left the room, hanging a 'Do Not Disturb' tag on the outer door handle as she went. She quickly headed back down to the lobby and outside to where her ride was awaiting her return.

"Well?" the man demanded.

"Mission accomplished," Lucy replied.

"Let's go - your flight departs in ninety minutes."

Friday, September 30th

1714 West Grace Street

"How did you feel?"

"Nothing - it was my fourth kill - I saw nothing wrong with killing. By the time, I was twelve, I had already killed an Apprentice *Predator* and two Yellows. You know what a Yellow is?"

"I do."

"They trained me well - maybe too well. It was my second sanctioned kill and my first adult kill. It went like clockwork and I was rewarded."

"Rewarded?"

"I received a steak dinner on my return and two days to myself."

"Not bad, I suppose."

"What else do you want to know about me?"

"Ultimately, everything."

"Until then, you cannot trust me, I understand. Thank you for this apartment - freshly decorated, very nice."

"The CIA burnt it down when they tried to terminate Foxtail - it's been refurbished."

"This was Foxtail's place?"

"It was."

"Great!"

***The following day
Saturday, October 1st***

Glenview

"What are you two up to?"

Jamie and Abigail looked up as Stephanie peered into the bedroom.

"Just getting changed," Jamie responded. "Brad and Lauren will be here in a few minutes."

Stephanie was already in her swimsuit and Abigail was just pulling on her own. Jamie kicked off his underwear and pulled on his swim shorts. Within another minute, all three kids were jumping down the stairs and racing into the kitchen.

"Wondered where you'd gone," Tommy grinned.

Tommy and Stephanie ran through and jumped into the pool, closely followed by Abigail, Jamie, Danny, and Anne-Marie. Soon, they were all laughing and giggling under the watchful eyes of Dave and Mindy. Minutes later, Lauren and Brad appeared and they both dove in to join the fun. Mindy could see that Abigail was not a big fan of water - for perfectly understandable reasons - but she still joined in the fun. Stephanie and Abigail chose to pick on Jamie and then picked the boy up and threw him a short distance across the water.

All *Predators* were strong swimmers, despite their fears, and those *Predators* present quickly demonstrated their superior performance in the pool. Stephanie was arguably the most powerful swimmer there - she could cut through the water at great speed - and she could hold her breath for a decent amount of time when she swam underwater. Abigail, despite her unease, was also a fast swimmer but Stephanie appeared to have the stronger leg and arm muscles which propelled her through the water with ease.

Lauren and Brad were not bad, when it came to swimming, although they just seemed to spend the time swimming together and chatting

with the occasional kiss every few minutes! The twins happily joined in although they were easily the smallest there and often found themselves ducked by the more violent *Predators*. It was a fact of life that the *Predators* played like they fought - hard and without mercy. It wasn't their fault - they were trained to be ruthless and their training had taken over every aspect of their young lives. That came to a head when Abigail and Anne-Marie collided and they both came away with tears running down their cheeks and their heads held in their hands.

There were no lasting injuries and both girls were tougher than they looked. Before long they were back playing with big smiles on their faces.

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For Dave and Mindy, it had been a good day.

The kids had enjoyed themselves while Dave and Mindy had been able to sit and chat - a rare event. After two hours of swimming, the exhausted kids had devoured several large pizzas with the help of Sophia, Razor, Kiara, and the ever-present Horatio. By the time parents arrived to collect Tommy, Lauren, Brad, and Abigail, the kids were still in their swimsuits, so they went home that way with their clothing in bags and a jacket over them for warmth.

Lizzie was appalled to see her sister kissing goodbye to Brad in a manner which she deemed disgusting. Not to be outdone, Tommy kissed Stephanie on the cheek which had her blushing profusely while Jamie and Danny wolf whistled. As was the plan, the kids went to bed early that evening and were soon fast asleep. Dave and Mindy were then able to spend the rest of the evening together, watching a movie and enjoying each other's company.

They also completed their plans for the following day.

The following morning

Sunday, October 2nd

The British Sector

Stephanie awoke soon after six that morning.

She was excited. She had not been able to celebrate her brother's birthday since he was five - now, he was nine-years-old. Stephanie thought for a moment about *why* she had been unable to celebrate his previous three birthdays and why they had been separated in the first place. Ever since Jamie had come back into her life, Stephanie had begun to remember things. She could remember that last day together before everything had gone so wrong.

She could not really remember much about her parents, but she could remember Jamie, and she could remember the events leading up to their kidnapping.

Wednesday, September 18th, 2013

Atlanta, USA

"Steph?"

"I'm here, Jamie."

"What are we doing today?"

"Mum and Dad are taking us to see some stuff in the city."

"Where?"

"I think the fish place - you know. . ."

"We're going to the Georgia Aquarium," Mum interrupted.

"Cool! I want pancakes for breakfast."

"You *always* want pancakes, Jamie!"

"I'm almost six; I'm a growing boy."

"You've still got two weeks to go, little brother!"

Sunday, October 2nd, 2016

The British Sector, Glenview

Chicago, Illinois

Stephanie smiled as she remembered how happy they had all been.

She remembered how much Jamie had been annoying her. She remembered sniping back at him and annoying him back. She remembered being really mean to her little brother in retaliation for annoying her. Then she remembered the horror and panic as their lives had changed.

Stephanie wiped away the tears from her face and she pulled on some clean clothes.

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Ten minutes later, Stephanie snuck up the stairs which led to the third floor (or second floor as she saw it - damn Americans!) where she nipped across a large storeroom and she stopped by a closed door which was usually kept locked. Stephanie pulled out the key which she had swiped from the kitchen, the night before, and she unlocked the door. With practiced ease and patient, she pulled the door open until she could slip through the gap. There, before her was a bed. Sleeping soundly in the bed was her little brother who was now six-years-old. Stephanie had a plan - it wasn't cruel per se, but it would be fun.

The room was still in darkness which was not a problem to the veteran *Predator* who enjoyed darkness to cover her movements.

Stephanie took her time crawling across the floor and around the double bed to the far side where her brother was sleeping. As was usual, the boy was sleeping on his back with the duvet somewhere around his ankles. His left hand was lying palm up on the bed beside his pillow. He was wearing a pair of pyjama shorts but nothing else. With extreme care, Stephanie pulled an object out of a small plastic tub and she gently lifted the waistband of his pyjama shorts and slid the object inside, letting the waistband fall back into place. Stephanie had noticed that ever since his rescue, her brother had been sleeping deeper and deeper in the almost three weeks he had been with them.

His *Predator* skills appeared to be waning - at least at home. Stephanie's next act was to produce a can of shaving foam and then to gently fill her brother's left hand with a good amount of the slimy substance. To finish off, Stephanie produced a feather and she began to tickle her brother's nose. It did not take long for Jamie's nose to twitch and for the boy to squirm. The right hand came up to his face and rubbed his nose before flopping back down to the bed. Stephanie giggled quietly as she continued working with the feather. Then the boy fulfilled Stephanie's mission as he brought his left hand up and . . .

"Ahhhh!" Jamie yelled as he snapped awake.

Stephanie struggled to keep quiet as her brother looked around in the darkness and he wiped his face off, looking very confused.

"Hey, Jamie, you weed yourself?" Stephanie called out, suddenly.

"No!" Jamie exclaimed as a hand checked his groin, only to burst the water balloon which Stephanie had painstakingly inserted into his pyjama shorts. "Fuck, that's cold!"

Stephanie could contain herself no longer as she burst out laughing. A light came on as Jamie fumbled for his bedside light. He glared down at his big sister who was rolling around on the floor, laughing hysterically, barely able to breathe.

"What's going on?" a tired Danny asked as he came up the spiral stairs from the bedroom below.

The boy looked at his new big brother and his big sister, trying to figure out what was so funny at that time on a Sunday morning. Stephanie managed to contain herself long enough to say four words.

"Happy birthday, little brother!"

Mindy's tired eyes flickered open as she heard a combination of excited chattering and giggling, plus the odd excited bark from one of the animals.

With a groan, she nudged her husband.

"The kids are up, Dave."

"I noticed - you go use your obnoxious talents on them," Dave suggested.

Mindy laughed as she sat up and reached for a top but not before Dave had reached out and tweaked her left nipple.

"Ow!"

"Just checking you were definitely awake."

After a pee, Mindy rapidly dressed while her husband dived into the bathroom for a pee of his own. The kids were in the living room chatting animatedly. Horatio and Razor were chasing each other while Kiara sat with her mother and watched the excitement. All four kids were still in their night things.

"Jamie, why do you shaving foam in your hair?" Mindy asked as her eyes travelled down her eldest son before focussing on his pyjama shorts. "Did you pee yourself?"

"No - my adorable big sister decided to play a prank on me."

Stephanie grinned innocently.

"Happy birthday, Jamie," Mindy said with a grin and a chuckle.

"Thanks. It's the best birthday ever - even more because I have Steph with me."

"It's good to have you with us, Jamie. This is your home and you are among people who care about you. Enjoy it."

"Thanks, Mindy."

"Who's for pancakes?" Dave asked as he appeared.

There was an explosion of shouts, barks, and meows as everybody answered in the positive.

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Jamie had a reasonable pile of birthday cards to open which included a massive card from Dave and Mindy as well as a large one from his siblings.

Jamie swore when he counted the small pile of cash which had fallen out of the various cards - there was a little over two hundred dollars.

"Jamie. . ." Dave warned.

Jamie had had a rude introduction to the rules during his first few days at the Lizewski home.

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"For fuck's sake..." Jamie exclaimed on his second morning.

"Jamie - dollar, jar!" Dave said sternly and Jamie looked over at his sister as Dave pointed at the jar.

"But I don't got no money."

"Jamie - you were brought up to talk better than that," Stephanie pointed out to her brother.

"Sorry, I have no fucking money!"

"Two dollars. . ." Dave intoned.

Jamie glared at Stephanie who just shrugged.

"Welcome to *my* world, little brother," Stephanie grinned.

"When you get your first allowance on Friday, we'll take what you owe from it first," Dave commented.

"But then I might get nothing?" Jamie objected.

"Been there," Stephanie groused with a dejected laugh.

"Several times, if I remember correctly," Mindy remembered.

"She owed thirty bucks, one month," Anne-Marie added with a cheeky grin.

Jamie raised an eyebrow at that comment.

"Yes, Jamie, your big sister has a foul mouth on her," Dave commented.

"It's strange - I've never heard her swear before; she was always Little Miss Perfect as I remember it."

"I believe, I was," Stephanie admitted wistfully.

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"Sorry, Dave."

"Just because it's your birthday, does not mean you can get carried away, young man," Dave explained.

Jamie grinned as he ate some more of his pancakes.

"So, how does it feel being nine?" Danny asked his elder brother.

"To be honest, there were times when I never thought I'd reach my next birthday," Jamie replied.

"We're survivors, Jamie," Stephanie said. "We beat them and now we have our whole lives ahead of us."

"Well said, Steph," Mindy commented.

"I have my moments," Stephanie admitted with an embarrassed grin.

When Jamie had finished his pancakes, Dave asked him to go get some more washing-up liquid from the garage. The boy dutifully headed off but then, a minute later there was a yell of joy. Stephanie bolted off her seat and ran for the garage, followed by Danny and Anne-Marie. Dave and Mindy followed more discretely and they found Jamie

staring at a new addition to the garage. Sitting beside the Jaguar F-Pace and the XJR was a small-wheel Honda CRF125F in British Racing Green. There was a large blue ribbon on the front with a small sign: 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JAMIE!'.

"Is that for me?" Jamie asked.

"Who else is called 'Jamie', doofus!" Stephanie exclaimed.

"I don't know what to say," Jamie muttered.

"Steph and the twins have motorcycles, so we thought that you should have one, too."

Jamie turned and he gave Mindy a big hug.

"Thanks, Mum."

It was the first time for Jamie, calling her that, and Mindy just ruffled the boy's hair in response. Stephanie could see the extreme happiness in Mindy's face - Dave's too.

Jamie was fitting in perfectly, she thought.

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Over the next couple of hours, various visitors arrived to see Jamie.

First to arrive was Abigail with the Murphy family. Abigail gave Jamie a big hug and a kiss on the lips which had Brad wolf whistling, embarrassing the hell out of both youngsters.

"Happy birthday, Jamie," Abigail said.

"Thanks, Abigail - I'm glad to be alive to celebrate it."

Next through the door was Marcus with Paige, Megan, and little Damon.

"Happy birthday, little nephew!" Megan said as she gave Jamie a hug.

"Thanks, Auntie Megan," Jamie replied with a cheeky grin.

"She's only three years older than you, Jamie," Stephanie pointed out. "Can the 'auntie'."

"I hope you are enjoying your new family, Jamie," Marcus said as he handed over a small package and a card.

"Cool!" Jamie exclaimed as he produced a crisp new \$100 bill from the card.

Mindy scowled - Marcus had a reputation for being 'tight' with his cash.

"I'm enjoying having grand-kids," he pointed out.

"Thanks, Grandpa!"

"Happy birthday, Jamie," Paige said as she gave the boy a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks, Grandma."

"That makes me feel old - I'm nowhere near as old as Grandpa," Paige laughed.

Marcus growled as Mindy grinned. Jamie ripped open the package to find a professional grade collapsible billy club. Jamie expertly flicked it open and brought it down slowly to the ground. Stephanie and Megan nodded their approval - it was a very nice weapon.

Next to arrive, were the Bennett's. Jamie was forced to endure hugs from Cathy, Chloe, and finally Becky. Joshua just handed over a heavy package with a smile. Jamie grinned as he sat down to open the present. He ripped off the Star Wars wrapping paper with ease and then he stared at the wooden box in his hand. It was heavy and he had to place it down on the kitchen counter to open it. Stephanie and Abigail crowded round, curiously.

"Holy, shit!" Jamie breathed as he opened the lid.

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"Bloody hell!" Abigail added.

"You lucky fuck!" Stephanie threw in.

Jamie pulled out the first weapon.

It was a custom Heckler & Koch SFP9 SD, single-action, nine-millimetre pistol with paddle magazine release, SF-Trigger (Special Forces), ambidextrous safety lever, and extended barrel for a suppressor. Below the muzzle, a combined laser sight and flashlight unit was clipped onto the picatinny rail. The pistol frame was the same flame red colour as Rage's combat suit with signal yellow highlights on the grip and slide which were predominantly black. Jamie placed the weapon on the counter and he dug back into the box, producing an identical pistol which he placed next to the first. He reached back into the box and he produced eight empty magazines, the bases of which were signal yellow. The final items out of the box were a pair of short suppressors that were black with red and yellow streaks down the length of the devices. Jamie looked up at Joshua and the boy almost burst into tears.

"Those are from Dave, Mindy, Chloe, and myself," Joshua advised.

"Thank you," Jamie said very quietly, in awe at what he had just received.

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"Cool pistols!" came a voice and Jamie span around and he ran to hug his friend.

"Easy, boy!" Shannon laughed as they hugged. "Happy birthday, Jamie."

"Thanks, Stormy."

Shannon growled but she let it go.

"Happy birthday, Jamie," Iain and Annabelle offered as they handed over a card.

"Not bad!" Patrick commented as he looked at the pistols.

"We can't have our son out there without proper equipment," Mindy observed proudly.

"Daddy," Shannon said sweetly. "My birthday is coming up soon. . ."

Patrick laughed as she looked over at his wife. Taylor just rolled her eyes.

"You want a pair of fancy pistols, too?" Patrick asked rhetorically.

"I'll love you forever. . ."

"Be a good girl, Shannon, and you never know," Mindy grinned.

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For the next hour, the kids generally ran riot around the house and pool. Jamie and Abigail were making Shannon's life hell as they chased the thirteen-year-old around the house and the pool. Shannon was giggling her head off as she tried to elude her pursuers. Brad was enjoying the view as Shannon had chosen to wear a revealing two-piece bikini, much to her mother's disapproval. Annabelle, Iain, and Megan were getting on really well - 'channelling their inner kitties', Joshua had joked to three, glaring, unamused youngsters.

Stephanie took great delight in regaling everybody with the details of Jamie's early morning wake up. Jamie took it on the chin and the boy laughed with everybody else. For him, it was the best day of his life and well worth a small amount of humiliation. Becky enjoyed being back with Anne-Marie but both were banned from going anywhere near a bath or a shower.

It took a little bit of shouting and coaxing from the adults, but eventually, all the youngsters were corralled and it was time for something to eat. Cathy was in charge of the food (Mindy had wanted to cook but Stephanie had politely suggested that Jamie might not want food poisoning for his birthday) and she had produced copious amounts of foods that were suitable for both the adults and the kids. Soon, the boys were wolfing down pizza, hotdogs, and other savoury snacks which were all washed down with various fizzy drinks. The girls tried a little finesse but they eventually joined the boys in their obnoxious behaviour.

Shannon through all attempts at behaving like a young lady to the wind and she began to demonstrate how to deep-throat a hotdog much to Becky's disgust. The boys began laughing so hard that Brad managed to get Coke flying out of his nose. Megan tried to copy Shannon but she only managed to choke herself and instead she began

dipping the sausages into mayonnaise and then licking the substance off the tip with suspiciously practiced ease.

It did not help that the boys and the girls were cheering her on - even Becky.

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The adults had kept well out of the way of the rabid youngsters, but once they were deemed to have had enough fun - or before somebody got hurt - it was time for the birthday cake.

Cathy had made the cake with the assistance of Chloe and Abigail, who had both insisted on helping. The cake was large and shaped like a number 9. It was a chocolate cake with flame red and signal yellow icing and there were, unsurprisingly, nine candles. Jamie smiled hugely as he was surrounded by his new family, with Stephanie on one side of him, Abigail on the other, and Shannon standing behind him. Mindy lit the candles - Dave tried but Mindy had actually growled at him - before stepping back and waiting for her new son to mark his birthday in the proper fashion.

Jamie grinned up at everybody, seeing all the smiles. All the horror and the uncertainty of the past few months fell away as he concentrated on looking forwards with his new family and all of his friends. He hesitated as he thought about what he could wish for. He felt a gentle, but impatient, nudge from Shannon and a squeeze of either hand from Abigail and Stephanie. Jamie took a deep breath and in one go, he blew out all nine candles, watching the wisps of smoke vanish upwards as everybody cheered.

"What did you wish for?" Abigail asked her friend.

"If I tell, it won't come true," Jamie replied cheekily.

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Everybody grabbed a plate of chocolate cake and settled down.

Becky and Anne-Marie sat down in front of the TV and put on a My Little Pony DVD. They slowly ate their cake as they watched. Before long, Stephanie and Abigail joined the younger girls to watch the animated series.

"So much for hardened, professional assassins!" Brad commented dryly as he watched the four girls giggling at the ponies.

"Do you like having balls, Bradley?" Stephanie asked. "Abigail, would you like a sister, instead of a brother?"

"Could be nice," Abigail mused.

Brad laughed, unsure if the girls were just messing with him.

"We are, so evil!" Abigail said as she glanced over at Stephanie.

"We are, aren't we?" Stephanie replied and they both giggled.

"Jamie, why is it all your women are totally nuts?" Brad asked.

"That thought has crossed my mind, once or twice," Jamie replied. "I have no idea - I just seem to attract nutcases!"

"You saying that I am a nutcase?" Shannon asked.

"You're the worst of all of them!" Jamie replied.

"Cool!" Shannon grinned.

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That night, Jamie Lizewski went to bed the happiest boy alive. All his dreams were coming true and his life could not be any better.

"Goodnight, Jamie. Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Mindy - you're the greatest."

"I know," Mindy grinned.

The boy smiled as he closed his eyes, relieving every minute of the most perfect day, ever.