

**Saturday, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

They were all exhausted.

Totally exhausted. Psyche had not lied to them, although some wished that she had. She had promised them hell - and she had delivered. Nobody dared resist or fight back. They each agreed to take their punishment and move on. It was harsh on the younger members, but they were all managing to get by. The food was good. The accommodation was better than could be expected. If they behaved, then they were treated with respect. That was hard, very hard. Each one of them was pushed to their physical and mental limits, and that caused tempers to fray and things to be said. Surprisingly, the vigilantes supervising them took the abuse and allowed it to wash over them - at least until someone took things too far. Twelve-year-old Jake Wistrum just could not keep his mouth shut and each time he opened it, he managed to say something which earned him some punishment or other. The punishments were not hard, but they took their toll and more surprisingly to them all, they began to bond. Bonding had not been allowed in *Urban Predator*. Bonding was a weakness - to a point. Some of the *Marauders* knew that they could only get through the dark days ahead with mutual support. Thought they hated one another, they began to talk, and they began to see the other person as a human being, suffering just as they were. Twelve-year-old Charlotte tended to spend time with the two youngest girls, Lin Lai and her sister, Xiāngxìn. She was joined by Jesse and James when they sat down to eat. The girls tended to be stronger than the boys at controlling their emotions but there were times when even the boys succumbed. Despite the hardships that the *Marauders* endured, they were looked after, and they had each been introduced to a pair of psychiatrists, Dr Charles and Dr Reese. Each youngster had been through a pair of sessions - for some, the sessions had ended in tears as they had truly realised what they had done. Remorse was a key factor in helping the kids endure their punishments. None of them had the faintest idea of what lay ahead of them and that scared some.

On that Saturday, the *Marauders* found themselves joined by *Fusion* vigilantes - and some other *Predators*.

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**Training Centre Echo**  
**Level 4 - Exercise Area**

"Okay, boys and girls," Wildcat explained. "It's time you guys were given something to work for. If you can beat your opponent, you earn yourself some extra rations and maybe some time off. As you can see, we have been joined today by some *Fusion* members. Some have faced off against them in combat and some are known to you as *Predators*. This is a friendly competition and if anybody abuses that then we will not offer anything like it again. Do you all understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am!" came the unified response; each *Marauder* wanted to better a *Fusion* vigilante and their former compatriots.

"We start with the climbing wall - Joel will race Jackal; get ready, boys," Wildcat directed.

Watching from the sidelines, Lucy chuckled. She had read Joel's file and he was an ace climber - not that she had let on to Joshua. There was cheering from both sides as their climbers stood at the base of the climbing wall and prepared to race to the top.

"Ready . . . set . . . CLIMB!" Wildcat roared.

The two sixteen-year-olds ran at the wall and jumped up as high as they could, their hands reaching for handholds and their muscles rippling as they pulled themselves upwards. Jackal was good, and he was very strong, but Joel scrambled up the wall like he was a human spider. His arms were longer than Jackal's and he was able to reach further, increasing his lead. At the very top, Discord awaited the climbers' arrival. She grinned as Joel's right hand struck the top of the wall, just two seconds ahead of Jackal's. There was an enormous roar from the *Marauders* as Discord indicated the winner.

"Well done, Joel," Wildcat laughed as she clapped. "Next up, let's see if his arms can move as fast as his mouth - Jake, you will race Hellcat."

Jake stepped forwards, grinning at the applause and then scowling at Hellcat as she stepped up. He took in the younger girl's figure and he guessed at what she might look like underneath her mask.

"Eyes on the wall, cunt!" Hellcat warned to general laughter.

Surprisingly, Jake was good, and he was level-pegging with Hellcat all the way up the wall, but just as Hellcat put on a final burst, so did he and Discord struggled to see who the winner was - but she finally indicated Hellcat after a short deliberation. Again, there was cheering, even from some of the *Marauders*.

"Hard luck, Jake - you'll have to toss yourself off, tonight!" Wildcat chuckled to more laughter. "For the final wall race, Xiāngxìn, you will race Scamp."

The two young girls faced off and sized one another up - they were about the same age and size.

"Ready . . . set . . . CLIMB!" Wildcat roared.

The youngsters began to climb to enormous support from those below, *Marauder* and vigilante alike. The youngsters were nimble if not fast and Xiāngxìn was pronounced the winner. As soon as she reached the ground the bewildered youngster was pounced on and congratulated by the other *Marauders*. The eight-year-old forced her way out and faced Scamp, holding out her hand.

"Good race - well done," she said to Scamp who took the offered hand and shook.

"Next, we go to the track," Wildcat announced.

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"Okay. Ewan, Lucas, Kieran, Dylan, and Dakota - you will race against Splinter, Stormtide, Discord, Nightmare, and Tempest. Please line up - you will run two 400-metre laps," Wildcat directed. "That would make a total distance of, Willow?"

"Eight-hundred-metres!" Willow replied with a scowl.

The ten runners arranged themselves on the track. It would be a free for all as there were only four lanes.

"Runners, are you ready?"

"Get with it, Kitty!" Splinter chuckled as Wildcat gave him the finger.

"Ready, steady . . . GO!"

The entire cavern was filled with shouting as the ten runners moved off at a steady run. The discipline was there from the *Predators* and the *Marauders*, not to mention those who were lucky to never have been both. Hit Girl appeared at the edge of the track just as the runners passed three-hundred-metres. She was impressed by the cheering and the fact that her people and the *Marauders* seemed

to be working together. The nasty shock the previous weekend appeared to have struck home and even the more difficult *Marauders* were going along with their punishment. She was also pleased that the *Fusion Predators* were assisting in the rehabilitation of their former comrades. Stephanie had reported back about the *Predator* feelings towards the *Marauders* and at first Mindy had been unsure about letting them mix. There was a lot of hate between *Predators* as it was, let alone when you had the older *Predators* who had gone rogue. So far, things were going well without any injuries. Talking of which, the injured *Marauders* were healing. Willow was struggling to integrate with her former colleagues and there was a lot of hate towards her for unknown reasons. Her bullet wound was all but healed but she was suffering from migraines according to Doctor Staite. Then there was Charlotte with her stomach wound. Abigail kept a close eye on the girl and she was usually present for medical examinations and also there to provide comfort during Charlotte's time with the shrinks. Charlotte was almost healed too which was good and she was among the rising stars amongst the *Marauders*.

There was one more thing; Rachel. She had shot Willow, but no *Marauder* knew that she was alive - that would have to be sorted out before too long and Mindy feared a significant backlash against Rachel from those who might see her as being just as guilty as them. Maybe Rachel should have been punished with her fellow *Marauders*, but that point was passed, and Mindy owed Rachel for Stephanie's life and the girl had shown remorse for her actions. For the moment, there was no plan of what might happen to the *Marauders* once they were deemed to be 'rehabilitated'. There had been some talk about homes for some, but not for the majority. They had discussed shipping some over to L.A., and maybe the U.K., but no plans had been made. There had also been questions about whether the *Marauders* could ever be trusted enough to allow them to join *Fusion* - that had been a fun conversation with Stephanie - *not!*

Hit Girl cheered along with the rest as Kieran and Dakota fought for first place along with Splinter . . . before Dakota took the imaginary tape.

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After a brief discussion with Wildcat and Discord who had been running the activities, Hit Girl turned to face the gathered *Marauders* and *Fusion* vigilantes.

"Considering the behaviour last weekend, things have moved on. I am impressed by the teamwork which is appearing, and I am also pleased to see that the *Marauders* and the *Fusion Predators* are able to be in the same room without anybody actually getting killed," Hit Girl lectured and there was some uncomfortable laughter from those present. "It has only been a little over a week, but you are all making progress in your own way. You are all very different and as such, we are going to be handling each of you independently. All of you, please remember: there *is* an end to this, and so far, you are all doing very well. As time moves on, I can promise you more trust and more freedom - but you have to earn it. As for today, you all did well and you all worked as a team, so, from 22:00, you will not be disturbed until 06:00 on Monday morning. Enjoy your rest - but do not abuse my trust," Hit Girl growled.

There were smiles across the board as the youngsters congratulated one another.

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### **Safehouse E**

#### **Level 8 - Detention Level**

"How are they doing?"

Shannon turned to see Stephanie entering the communal area.

"They're bonding better. The games idea of Wildcat's was very successful. She wore them out, but Hit Girl was impressed, too."

The Marauders were enjoying a veritable feast. The rewards given to the winners had been granted to them all and morale was very high as they contemplated an entire day of relative freedom.

"Despite my feelings about them, I want them to get through this. I detest the very air they breathe, but I was allowed a second chance, so I have to allow them a chance to show that they can change."

"You carry far too much on your shoulders, you know," Shannon replied.

"I know, but that seems to be my lot in life. How's Willow doing?" Stephanie asked as she noticed the sixteen-year-old sitting alone, playing with her food.

"They all shun her. It got around what she did to you - and that seemed to have been too low even for *Marauders*."

"That's something, I suppose."

Stephanie walked over to where the older girl was seated, and she sat down. Willow visibly recoiled away from Stephanie.

"They all want me dead because of you; why don't you just fucking shoot me?" Willow hissed.

"Don't tempt me, Hartman. Come with me."

Stephanie stood up and she left the space, several pairs of eyes burrowing into her back. Shannon gave Willow a supportive grin, but Willow blanked her, just as she was the evil looks she was receiving from the other *Marauders*. Stephanie led Willow down the corridor, away from the exercise area and deeper into Safehouse E. Willow was very unsure about what was happening, and she was a little worried that Stephanie was going to seek revenge on her. Finally, they stopped at a room with a steel door. Stephanie swiped a card through a slot and the electronic door lock was released.

"Inside," Stephanie directed the older girl.

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Stephanie was enjoying herself - the expressions crossing Willow's face were worth all the cloak and dagger.

Willow looked around the room, ignoring the grinning ten-year-old bitch. It looked like a den and suspiciously that of a ten-year-old bitch. There was a pair of fairly comfortable arm chairs which were in appalling condition with copious amounts of Duct Tape holding them together. Some new-looking cushions helped to make the chairs a little more appealing. In front of the two chairs was a low table covered in gun magazines, motorcycle magazines, and several newspapers - a mixture of U.S. and U.K. tabloids and broadsheets. There was a leather couch off to one side with its own Duct Tape pattern hinting at its age. The room itself was dingy and what there was of the walls which was not covered in rust and damp, was covered in maps and posters - and a large Union Flag. Stephanie stepped over to a small fridge and she pulled open the door.

"Coke?"

"What?" Willow replied.

"You want a Coke?" Stephanie asked as she held up a can from the fridge.

"You fucking with me?"

"No. I just want to know if you want a can of Coke - simple question."

"Yes . . . please," Willow replied hesitantly.

"Sit down."

Willow did so.

"What are you doing, Walker?"

"I am no longer known by that name - call me Steph or Stephanie. Look, Willow, I am not exactly enthralled by having you in my private hidey-hole, but we need to talk."

"What about?"

Stephanie moved some of the magazines around and she uncovered a length of blonde hair secured in what appeared to be a pony tail but severed just above the trebled up elastic band. Willow's expression hardened at the sight of the hair which she herself had cut off. Then she felt that sense of remorse coursing through her. She regretted every part of the past few months. She hated Stephanie Walker and everything she represented but she was also wise enough to realise that Stephanie Walker - or whatever she was calling herself - was her only way out of hell.

"I know that many people hate me - for reasons which are probably quite reasonable, to be honest. I know that you hate me, and you tried to get your revenge in the worst way that you could imagine. So many times, I considered either shooting you . . . or just raping you as you did me. You ever been raped, Willow?"

"What sort of a question is that?" Willow demanded.

"You ever had something shoved up your vagina without your permission?" Stephanie persisted. "A penis or a baton?"

Willow closed her eyes and Stephanie saw the pain in her face - she had struck a nerve.

"I did not want to do it, but I had no choice - the bastard is dead now and I never told a soul. It was something so horrifying that I thought you should suffer in just the same way."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve - he was one of the instructors. You are the first person I've ever told . . . Stephanie, I am really sorry for putting you through that."

"I survived - I think of it every time I wash my hair."

"I deserve to suffer . . . I deserve to die."

"Okay."

Stephanie stood up and she walked over to a large steel cupboard. There, she punched in a code and pulled open the steel door. Willow's eyes went wide as she saw an enormous array of weaponry before her eyes. Everything from pistols, through submachine guns and onto assault rifles, hand grenades, and mines. Stephanie pulled out a small Glock 26 pistol and she inserted a magazine of ten rounds.

"Don't tell Hit Girl I have this little stash - it's my private collection. Here, if you deserve to die - kill yourself."

With that proclamation, Stephanie pulled back the slide to load a round in the breech before she handed the loaded pistol to the amazed Willow.

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Willow held the pistol in her hand.

She had not held a weapon in weeks. Now, she had a pistol in her hand . . . and her nemesis standing before her. She had a choice - she could kill Stephanie and make her escape, or she could just kill herself. She studied the pistol closely. She knew the specifications like she knew her own name. Just 5.5-pounds of pressure on the trigger and the bullet would be fired down the barrel with the right-hand, hexagonal rifling. A handgun bullet travels at more than seven-hundred-miles-per-hour. Her life would be over within a blink of an eye. But could she do it? Then a thought occurred to her and she chuckled.

"As if you'd give me a functioning weapon," she said as she placed the pistol on the table. "You think I'm *that* stupid, Stephanie?"

Stephanie nodded as she picked up the pistol and then nonchalantly fired two rounds into the carpet-covered concrete at Willow's feet. The sixteen-year-old screamed as she jumped backwards. Then she grinned.

"You fucking bitch!"

Stephanie just grinned as she cleared the weapon.

"How did you know I wouldn't just shoot you and escape?"

"Because you're intelligent, Willow, and you feel more guilt than you have ever felt in your life."

"You think you know me!" Willow exclaimed angrily. "You thought you had me figured out? You were that certain that I would not just blow that smug look off your Brit face?"

Stephanie ignored the raging - she knew all about raging; she was a certified expert at it - and she sat down in one of the chairs and pulled out a card-covered folder from the pile of magazines. She opened the folder and she began to read aloud.

"Willow Olivia Hartman. Born: September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000 to Drew and Bethany Harrison in the quaint city of Minot, North Dakota. Only child. Did well at school and then you were seized by *Urban Predator*, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010 as part of the *First Predator Intake*. You endured the very worst that the system had to offer at just ten-years-old. You excelled, though, and you formed a few friendships. One of whom was Kara Newton - I'm really sorry that she had to die. If I had not done that then maybe, I would not have become what I am today - or I might have died way back when. *Urban Predator* was shit for everybody involved, Willow, but that abomination is gone - I saw to that. You've seen the *Predators* who are now part of *Fusion*, right? I'm doing everything that I can to rescue every kid who got caught up in *Urban Predator*. Forty kids are now safe - and that includes the sixteen of you. We've all done bad things that we regret, and we just have to look forwards."

"You talk like you've done this shit before - talking *Predators* down."

"Willow - please, sit down and drink your Coke."

Willow did so, taking a long pull of the cold fizzy drink.

"I had to talk a gun out of the hand of a *Marauder/Predator*, just the other night. She wanted to kill herself as she could no longer handle the guilt of what she had been part of."

"You stopped one of us from dying?" Willow asked, a little surprised.

"Just because I think you should all die for what you did, does not mean that I will let that happen. I have a conscience, Willow, and I know you do, too. You all need protecting from yourselves and I want to help."

"Who was it?" Willow asked.

Stephanie took a deep breath before she responded.

"Rachel."

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***The following morning***  
***Sunday, November 13<sup>th</sup>***

***Glenview***

"Stephanie - before you open that little mouth of yours and start belly-aching, Dave and I would like to go out. We also want to come back to our home which would still be intact," Mindy explained.

"I'm ten-years-old and I've done a lot more than most adults," Stephanie growled. "Besides, I handed back the Claymore mine and the C4 explosives."

Mindy laughed.

"Yes, you did, sweetie," Dave confirmed.

"We know you have your own personal stash on level 6 - a cute little den," Mindy admitted.

Stephanie scowled.

"You're not mad?"

"No, honey. I look after my *Predator* daughter, and I allow her to have some space when she needs it. I'm not going to argue when you squirrel away my weapons - I'd have done the same thing."

"Okay, time to use the boobs! Don't these mean that I am mature and able to stay at home alone?" Stephanie asked as she pointed at the small bulges on her chest.

Dave laughed out loud, and Mindy rolled her eyes.

"You are so like Mindy!" Dave exclaimed, ignoring the indignant look his wife threw at him. "So, little lady, you want us - two sane adults - to leave a ten-year-old assassin in charge of the house and her younger siblings, not to mention four, not so normal, animals."

"That about sums it up," Stephanie replied. "Although, I would not refer to Mindy as being 'sane', exactly."

"You are *not* helping your case, sweetie," Mindy growled dangerously.

"Aw come on!" Stephanie exclaimed in a broad American accent reminiscent of Anne-Marie. "I can be the perfect little angel and I promise the house will be in the same state you left it - trust me, dammit!"

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***That same time***

***West Columbia***

Marcus grimaced as he walked past his stepdaughter's bedroom.

Naturally, Marcus had taken young Curtis in after Cathy had died - it had seemed the natural thing to do. Megan had been over the moon - naturally. Only, she had insisted that her single bed was replaced with a double. Marcus was having none of it and he had obtained a twin bed, but he had not stopped there - he had ensured that the beds were screwed down to the floor. Megan had known better than to argue as Marcus had reminded her that the spare room was available. . . For Paige, having another mouth to feed was not a big problem and Curtis enjoyed helping out with little Damon. She also knew that the youngsters cared for each other, greatly, and they had known each other for a couple of years.

Marcus would just have to stop being so old-fashioned.

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***A few miles away***

***Fielding Drive***

Joshua was helping himself to some tea as an aid to waking up.

The boy was alone in his kitchen, enjoying the peace of a quiet morning. Then, his solitary tea sipping was interrupted by the padding of bare feet on the wooden floor. They were small feet, so it had to be Becky. Only, as she walked past Joshua, something appeared off - it was not only the feet which were bare.

"Morning, Dad!"

"Becky, are my eyes deceiving me or is something missing?"

"You noticed, huh?"

Becky continued to collate the components of her breakfast: bowl, cereal, spoon, and milk. Joshua *had* noticed what was missing - clothes.

"Yes."

"I'm butt naked," Becky offered, unnecessarily.

"Yes . . . why?"

"I was told that you and Chloe are nudists and you liked to cavort around naked."

"Cavort?"

"It means. . ."

"I know what it means - who told you that?"

"Curtis," Becky replied as she sat down to put her breakfast into the bowl. "He said you two liked to be naked, so I thought I should let you both know that it was fine by me. I've seen Chloe naked before, and I've seen your thingy, too."



"I don't think. . ." Joshua began, unsure of what to say.

Chloe entered the kitchen and she did a double take.

"Why's she naked?" Chloe asked simply as she grabbed a coffee.

"She wants us to know that it's fine for us to be nudists," Joshua explained. "She's showing solidarity."

"Is she, now," Chloe growled, then she grinned. "You going outside, naked, Peanut?"

"You think I'm daft?" Becky pouted. "It's bloody November!"

Chloe just chuckled.

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### ***Later that morning***

Paige, Megan, and Curtis walked up the path and Megan knocked on the door.

"Hi, guys!" Chloe exclaimed as she opened the door. "Come in."

Paige walked in and she sat down, pulling off her jacket. Megan followed suit, as did Curtis.

"Why is it so warm in here?" Paige asked.

"Hello!" came a voice and Paige turned to say hello back.

"Why is she. . .?" Paige began with a glance up at Chloe.

"Don't even ask," Chloe grimaced.

Megan laughed as the still naked Becky sat down beside her, ignoring the fact that there was a boy on the other side of her.

"Becky - you've got no clothes on," Megan pointed out.

"I know."

"Becky," Curtis said. "I know I said Chloe and Josh like to go around naked, but I did not mean that you should."

"It's quite liberating, really," Becky replied.

"Megan used to run around naked - until she was about eight or so," Paige commented.

"Mom!" Megan growled, her cheeks turning pink.

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### ***That evening***

#### ***Glenview***

Dave looked down at Mindy who just shrugged.

The three Lizewski kids appeared unnerved by the situation.

"Do you hate us?" Anne-Marie asked Mindy.

"No, honey," Mindy laughed. "I trust Stephanie and so should you. A bit of advice for each of you: don't annoy her or piss her off. She speaks with the same authority as me - understand?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Yes, Mom."

"Yes, Mum."

As the front door closed, Stephanie appeared in the entrance to the living room. All chatter ceased, and the three youngsters looked very apprehensive.

"Right, kiddies! I am in charge. . ."

Razor and Kiara both whined and covered their faces with their paws.

"Traitors!" Stephanie hissed before she refocussed on her uncomfortable siblings. "Anne-Marie - you and me will order pizzas while the boys will go walk the dogs."

That was not as bad as they had thought it might be, so the boys scurried off to find the leads for Sophia, Razor, and Kiara. As the three excited dogs vanished out the door, dragging the two boys with them, Stephanie and Anne-Marie settled down at Stephanie's laptop to order food.

"How much you got?" Anne-Marie asked as she looked down the list of pizzas and extras.

"Let's keep it under a hundred bucks," Stephanie suggested.

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An hour later, two boys, two girls, three dogs, and a cat were happily munching on pizza, sides, and drinking enormous quantities of Coke.

Danny and Jamie had been planning to make things go wrong for Stephanie, but they decided that having angry parents and an angrier big sister, who was a just a little bit insane, was not worth the potential gain. As they ate, they watched TV and just enjoyed each other's company. Apart from some minor squabbling between Razor and Horatio over some pepperoni, things were going well, and Stephanie was pleased that everybody was cooperating. Once the pizza was finished, she stood up.

"Anne-Marie and Jamie - can you both clean up the pizza boxes, please. Danny, upstairs, shower, and get into your pyjamas, then you can come back down to watch TV until Mum and Dad get home."

Amazingly, the three youngsters followed instructions without complaint. When Danny returned from having taken a quick shower, he was in his pyjamas. Stephanie handed the boy a steaming mug of hot chocolate with marshmallows and he went to sit down on a couch. Anne-Marie and Jamie were then sent upstairs for their showers and to get into pyjamas. On their return, they both received their own steaming mugs of hot chocolate with marshmallows and then joined their brother on the couch. Stephanie then took the opportunity to run upstairs to her bedroom, where she stripped off and dived into the shower recently vacated by Jamie. On her return downstairs in her pyjamas, she found Jamie waiting for her.

"Here."

The boy handed over a fourth mug of steaming hot chocolate with marshmallows. Stephanie was a little surprised as she joined her siblings who were all smiling.

"What are you lot up to?" Stephanie demanded as she curled up with Horatio.

"We thought you might be a bitch - like your reputation," Jamie explained. "But you've been really nice; so, we decided to be good and not cause trouble."

Stephanie smiled.

"Thanks, guys."

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### ***Much later***

"I should have called. I should have checked in."

"Mindy, calm the fuck down!" Dave chuckled from the driver's seat. "Stephanie and Jamie have both survived alone. The house is a fucking fortress, honey, and two of our kids are trained assassins."

"I worry," Mindy bleated. "I'm trying to be a good mother. . ."

"Give me strength," Dave muttered. "I see no flashing blue or red lights."

"So far."

"Come on, Mindy. I know you trust Stephanie with our lives and we both know that she would die before letting anything happen to those kids."

"Yes, I know. But they're only young, and kids fuck up - I did."

"Mindy - shut up!" Dave suggested, and Mindy glowered as she stared out of the side window.

Mindy's apprehensiveness only grew as they pulled into the garage. Yes, the house was intact and not burning down. However, the silence as she climbed out of the Audi R8 was killing her. Dave's cautious expression prevented her from pulling her pistol but even then, she braced up as she entered the house. All was suspiciously quiet - too quiet for a house currently occupied by two eight-year-olds, a nine-year-old, a ten-year-old, three dogs, and a demented cat. Something was very wrong, Mindy thought as she pulled her pistol and slowly moved towards the living room from where she could hear the TV. She stepped through the arch, her pistol held ahead of her. Then she grinned as she saw that all, but Stephanie were fast asleep. Stephanie looked up from where she had been dozing.

"Really?"

Mindy sheepishly put the pistol away as she peered through into the pristine kitchen.

"You call in cleaners?" she teased.

"They were all well behaved and they did what I asked of them - surprised the hell out of me."

Dave chuckled from behind Mindy.

"Well done, Stephanie. I'm sorry for not trusting you - I was wrong."

"Thanks."

"Let's wake the little buggers up and get them to bed," Mindy grinned as she poked the three sleeping kids awake.

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***The following morning***  
***Monday, November 14<sup>th</sup>***

## **North Park Elementary School**

"For the love of everything, Jackson: what are you staring at?" Stephanie demanded.

Katy Evans giggled as she watched her twin brother just stare at Stephanie and Abigail.

"He's freaking me out," Abigail confirmed.

"I'm going to slap him," Stephanie decided.

"You are the two women in my life and I love watching you both," Jackson explained in a cringeworthy tone.

"Ewww!" Abigail groaned as Katy giggled even more.

"It is a bit creepy," Ali Johns agreed.

"He likes those bumpy things on your chest, Steph," Craig commented, attracting glares from all the girls present.

"Steph's are the biggest. Katy's getting some - but they're really small," Jackson went on. "Yowwww!"

"Stephanie Lizewski!"

"Hi, Principal Rooney," Stephanie grinned.

"You lay a hand on another student, young lady, and there will be trouble. Now, apologise to Jackson, please."

Stephanie rolled her eyes but stood her ground.

"He deserved it, sir; he keeps talking about my boobs."

"Will you apologise for hitting Jackson around the head?"

"No."

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## **That afternoon**

### **Glenview**

"Hi, Mum!"

"Hello, young lady - do you have something for me?"

Stephanie's shoulders slumped. Then she dug into her pack and pulled out an envelope.

"Letter. . .s, Principal. . ."

Stephanie fled, and she was about to bolt up the stairs. . .

"Stephanie Lizewski! Get your sorry butt back in this kitchen, *NOW!*"

Stephanie groaned as she considered racing up to her bedroom and locking the door. However, she turned around slowly and walked the short distance - it felt like a mile - to the kitchen.

"Nice knowing ya," Danny chuckled.

Stephanie paused a few feet from Mindy, averting her eyes and staring at the floor.

"Okay, Steph - either the Principal was very bored, this afternoon, or he printed out a few too many copies of his letter."

"I suppose."

"One . . . two . . . *three!* Even *I* never got three letters in *one day!*"

"There was a little misunderstanding. . ."

"Was that before or after you told Principal Rooney to - and I quote - 'go procreate with yourself'. Ran out of swear words, did we?"

"No."

"Thought it would get you into less trouble?"

"Kind of. . ."

"You hit Jackson?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He was talking about our boobs."

"Did you ask him to stop?"

"No."

"Wouldn't that have been more diplomatic?"

"In hindsight. . ."

"When will you learn, Steph? Check your surroundings, *before*, you hit somebody."

"Mindy!" Dave commented with a frown.

"When will you learn, Steph? You should never hit somebody - when the Principal's watching."

Dave glared pointedly.

"When will you learn, Steph? You should never hit somebody . . . period!"

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Stephanie had been sent to her room to do her homework.

Forty minutes later, she was summoned back downstairs. She found Mindy and Dave in the kitchen with Katy and Jackson, plus their mother, Deborah.

"I am so sorry, Deborah," Mindy said.

"Don't be silly, Mindy" Deborah Evans replied. "They are the very best of friends and Katy explained why Stephanie hit him. He got a blast from his father when he found out. Jackson."

"Sorry, Steph - I shouldn't have been so rude."

"Thanks."

"Stephanie - apologise to Jackson, please," Dave said forcefully.

"Sorry, Jackson - I overreacted," Stephanie said as she offered her hand.

Jackson shook the offered hand. "Apology accepted, although I'd have preferred a kiss. . ."

"Jackson!" Deborah exclaimed in exasperation.