

Sunday, December 4th, 2016

Downtown Los Angeles

The sudden screech of tyres and the roar of engines heralded something dangerous approaching.

Maddie turned to see a pair of dark-coloured SUVs swerving left and right as they zigzagged through the traffic on Sepulveda Boulevard. Sharp cracks of gunfire could be heard, and the muzzle flashes indicated that the pair of vehicles were exchanging gunfire. Maddie reacted out of an unknown instinct, shoving two kids younger than herself down to the sidewalk. Sky, in turn, then shoved Maddie to the ground, just as the vehicles drove past, still engaged in their deadly battle. Then they were gone, and all that remained were startled observers as the sounds of gunfire was quickly replaced by chatter and some screaming.

"That was damn close!" Sky observed dryly. "Maddie?"

Maddie did not respond, so Sky turned to look at her. All colour drained from her face as she took in the scene beside her.

The young girl lay on her side, her eyes closed, and a growing pool of blood spreading from beneath her torso.

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Despite her training, Sky began to shake.

"Oh, no! No! No! Not Maddie! Help! I need help!"

Sky began to panic as she rolled Maddie onto her back and she tried to staunch the flow of blood from the girl's torso. Sky never heard the sirens, nor did she hear the ambulance coming to a rapid halt just a few yards away. Everything turned into a blur of images as she was roughly shoved to one side and a burly paramedic began to check Maddie over.

However, within minutes, Maddie and Sky were in the back of the ambulance, the siren screaming as they cut through the evening traffic.

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"Hi, Sky," Erika said as she answered her cell.

Erika could barely understand a word of what Sky was saying through the tears and the sobbing - what the hell? Then, after almost a full minute of sobbing, Sky sorted herself out for just long enough to get a few words out.

"Maddie's been shot."

**Office of the CEO
The Tomahawk Group**

Central Los Angeles

The fallout from the other evening was still unfolding.

While there had been some success - the vigilantes *had*, ultimately, been hounded from San Diego after all - things had not quite gone to plan. Dieter Mannheim had wanted a minute-by-minute breakdown of events which had led to the firefight and numerous expensive losses on the Interstate. The amount of money that had been dished out to muddy the waters with the San Diego Police Department had been beyond extreme. He also wanted to know why the much-vaunted

Tornado had not killed the vigilante interlopers. He also wanted to know how his sharpshooter had been killed.

The San Diego Police Department had found the two dead bodies atop the roof, but the rifle had been missing. The cause of the deaths was being reported as 'unclear' by the investigating detectives.

"Unclear!" Dieter had bellowed.

"Their throats were ripped out by what appear to be claws," Anton Renke advised his apocalyptic boss. "The police found nothing else at the scene."

"So," Dieter said calmly - which was calmly enough to scare everybody in the room - with a snide chuckle, "we have a raging carnivore on the loose in San Diego . . . not very likely."

"I believe that there is another player on the board, boss," Renke announced. "There is an unknown killer, assassin if you will, who is known to favour the use of ninja hand claws. I believe that she may have resurfaced after several years of inactivity and maybe taken her persona to a new level."

Dieter Mannheim mulled that over for several moments.

"For once, Renke, you are actually making some sort of sense. Rosa!"

Rosa came through from her office.

"See what you can find out about finding an assassin who favours ninja claws."

Good Samaritan Hospital

Emergency Room

Erika had arrived as quickly as she had been able.

The phone call from the panicky Sky had been a real shock to her and she had found herself shaking by the time she had reached the hospital and parked her car. Chrissy was with her and she had been very pale for the entire duration of the journey. As soon as they had both run into the emergency room, Sky had seen them, and she had almost knocked Erika over in her haste for a hug. The girl had tears streaming down her cheeks as she tried to explain what was happening.

"Sky - calm down," Erika tried but she got nowhere.

"Are you the girl's guardian?"

Erika turned to see a nurse.

"Yes, I am. Erika Cho."

"This way, please."

Erika left the twins with Chrissy hugging her sister. She was taken towards where there were several sectioned-off areas and she found herself directed towards one of them and she felt so scared. What was she going to find? Suddenly, she stopped. She instantly recognised Maddie's dark brown hair spread-out on the pillow. She lay on her right side, her face at peace, her eyes closed. Erika could see the dried blood on Maddie's torso, her fair skin contrasting against the dark red blood. The thirteen-year-old's top had been cut away, leaving her naked from the waist up. A doctor was busy tending to the wound to her chest while a nurse was assisting from the back of Maddie's torso where there was an obvious exit wound.

"As far as we can tell, there is no bullet inside her - it was a through-and-through," the nurse who had led Erika over, explained. "She was very lucky - nothing that won't heal in time. We've given her some strong painkillers which have knocked her out for the moment. Once the doctor has finished, we'll take her upstairs for a scan to ensure there is no shrapnel, and then we'll take Maddie to a private room and you'll be able to sit with her until she wakes."

"How long will she be in the hospital?" Erika asked, relieved by what she had already been told.

"Just a few days to begin the healing process," the nurse confirmed.

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Erika waited until Maddie's dressings had been applied and then she watched as the youngster was taken upstairs for some scans.

As it would take about an hour or so for Maddie to be ready in her room, Erika took a few moments to explain to the twins all that she had been told. There was obvious relief on their faces and Sky's tears lessened considerably as they both gave Erika a reassuring hug.

"Thank you, girls," Erika said. "Maddie is a part of our little team, and it is truly horrible to have her suffering and in pain. But . . . she's going to pull through this and then we'll have her back, okay?"

"Yes," Sky replied, and Chrissy nodded.

"I need to dash out - look out for Maddie, okay?"

Both girls nodded as Erika ran back to the car.

Whittier Drive

After a fast drive across town, things had not gone exactly as Erika had expected - or had it?

"I cannot believe that you won't go to see your own daughter when she's in the hospital!" Erika exclaimed in response to the incredible indifference shown by Maddie's mother.

"I'm busy, and I have a boy who is well-behaved to take care of."

"Ha!" Erika exclaimed. "She was *shot*, for God's sake!"

"Stupid girl."

"She saved a life!"

"Good for her."

Erika had had enough of the unbelievably crass behaviour, and she turned to leave the house, only to find her path briefly blocked by Maddie's younger brother, Connor.

"Is Mads going to be okay?" the boy asked with a surprisingly genuine tone.

"What the hell do you care?" Erika growled as she stormed out of the house.

Three days later

Wednesday, December 7th

Good Samaritan Hospital

Maddie looked thoroughly miserable as she sat in the hospital bed with her left arm across her chest in a white sling.

She had endured three days of pain and suffering. Waking up to find Erika by her side had been wonderful. Even better, Sky and Chrissy had appeared. For the first time in years, she actually felt wanted. She could not remember very much from the shooting - just a lot of pain, and then nothing. The pain when she had awoken early the following morning had been enough to have her crying like a baby until a nurse had administered a sedative into her drip. She had lost consciousness again and it had not been until that evening, on the Monday, when Maddie had been able to properly see her surroundings and Erika. They had talked for a short while and Erika had helped Maddie to eat some Jell-O and drink some water. On the Tuesday morning, the twins had visited and forced Erika to head home for some rest. While Erika was gone, Sky and Chrissy had entertained Maddie - at least while the younger girl was awake. Tuesday had been spent sleeping, mostly, but Maddie had also endured a sponge bath which had been embarrassing but Erika had been there to help things along. During rounds on the Tuesday night, the doctor had been very pleased with Maddie's wounds and he had suggested that Maddie could go home the following morning, assuming there were no problems overnight.

Maddie had been overjoyed and she had fallen asleep, one hand gripping Erika's and with her mouth set in a broad grin.

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Erika had awoken that morning to find Maddie stirring in her bed.

As Maddie's eyes opened, Erika smiled down at her.

"How are you feeling?"

"It hurts!" she declared.

Erika forced a chuckle.

"It will, honey."

"When can I come home?"

"In a couple of hours, I've been told," Erika replied. "The bullet missed anything important, but it will hurt."

"I'm important!" Maddie groused.

"Anything important *inside* your body," Erika laughed. "You'll have to take it easy for a few weeks, but you'll be fine."

Their conversation was interrupted by a muted knock on the door.

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"Hello. May we come in?"

FBI Special Agent Frank Draper and FBI Special Agent Aimee Francis stepped into the room. Erika scowled as she was shown their Federal credentials.

"What do you two want?" Erika demanded.

"Well," Special Agent Draper replied. "When the LAPD ran Miss Tyler's name after she was shot, they received an alert to call us. We understand that Miss Tyler was just an innocent - must be a first-bystander, and not involved in anything nefarious."

"We just wanted to check that she was okay, too," Special Agent Francis added.

"She's fine and she'll be coming home, soon," Erika replied, doing her best to keep her anger in check.

"Okay," Special Agent Draper said. "You get better soon, Miss Tyler."

With that, both agents left the room.

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Two hours later

The doctor had been and gone, and he had given permission for Maddie to go home.

Almost the moment the door had closed behind the doctor, Maddie had tried to wriggle out of her hospital gown, but with very little success. Erika eventually gave in and she helped the thirteen-year-old to remove the gown. It was the first time that Maddie was able to look properly at her wound - sort of. Erika helped the girl off the bed and across to a full-length mirror mounted on the wall. Maddie was appalled by what she saw. Apart from the sling and a large dressing on her left chest, she was completely naked. Her hair was a mess and her eyes appeared bloodshot.

"The bullet went in just above your left breast and it exited below your left shoulder blade, nicking a muscle or two on the way out - that's why your arm is in a sling, to give your muscles time to heal."

Maddie turned slightly so she was able to see the other dressing on her back, just below the shoulder blade. It was a little painful, but Erika helped Maddie into a loose T-shirt, some knickers, and a pair of trousers. A pair of pumps finished off the ensemble. After Erika had signed some paperwork, Maddie was free to go. Sky was waiting outside in her Ford Focus and Maddie gingerly slid into the rear seat where Erika insisted on doing up her seatbelt, much to Maddie's annoyance.

"Let's go home," Erika suggested, and Sky headed out onto the main road.

Oak Pass Road

Maddie found being back at home a little bit trying as the two she-devils insisted on doing everything for her.

That had been fine for the first few hours, and Maddie had enjoyed having two slaves, however, they were behaving totally out of character for the two teenage girls which was freaking Maddie out.

"Guys?"

"Yes?" Sky replied.

"Yes, Maddie?" Chrissy added.

"You don't have to do this, guys - I prefer it when you are both bitches, to be honest."

Sky grimaced.

"You were shot when you were with me, Maddie," she pointed out.

"It wasn't your fault, err which one are you?" Maddie responded.

"Sky . . . you know who we are, you little. . .!"

"Sky - she's bating us," Chrissy chuckled.

Maddie smiled at the two girls.

"Okay - we'll stop being saps," Chrisy commented with a grin.

"You just rest, okay," Sky said seriously before grinning. "We need you in top form . . . so we can fuck about with you."

"I'll do just that, Sky-girl."

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Despite it being December, the temperature was still pleasant, and it allowed Maddie to spend time outside.

Her body was healing - slowly. There was a lot of pain involved and the youngster found herself doing an inordinate amount of crying. But the support which she was receiving from Erika and the twins was all that she needed to get through the pain and the nightmares. Maddie concentrated on her tasks, researching the so-called Axis of Evil of which Dieter Mannheim appeared to be a part. Maddie was determined to find a link between that bastard and past events in both Los Angeles and San Diego. Every now and then, she would cringe as she twisted her body wrongly - she also *hated* typing with one hand, but there was nothing much she could do about that.

She had some solace, though, which she found in her friends down at D-JAK.

The following evening

Thursday, December 8th

D-JAK:LA

Almost the instant that Maddie appeared on the mat, she was almost mobbed by Cara and Kristen.

"What happened to you?" Cara demanded as she examined the sling supporting Maddie's left arm.

"I was collateral damage during a shootout," Maddie explained.

Cara's hand went to her mouth in shock and both girls appeared speechless.

"Where?" Kristen asked.

"How?" Cara added.

"Bullet went in my front and out the back."

"Cool!" Kristen exclaimed before she stopped and cringed. "Sorry."

"Did it hurt?" Cara asked.

"Stupid question!" Kristen commented.

"Just a bit," Maddie responded with a grimace. "I'm going to go sit down over there and watch the class - I get weak very easily."

Kristen actually walked with Maddie while Cara followed behind. Once Maddie was safely sitting down, they both turned to head back to the class which was being led by Sky who waved at Maddie. Maddie grinned back at her friend.

"We'll come back and join you at the break," Cara said.

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"Hello, Maddie," Mollie Hendricks said as she came over to sit with the wounded teen.

"Hi, Mollie."

"I was very sorry to hear about you being shot. Do you need anything?"

"Thanks. I'm fine - I just took some pain killers about an hour ago, so I should be good for a little longer."

To Mollie, Maddie looked very pale - which was kind of understandable since the young girl had been shot only a few days before. Mollie had been shocked when Erika had told her - she did have a daughter of her own, after all. Mollie had no idea how or why Erika was looking after a thirteen-year-old girl, but Mollie could tell that Erika was distraught by the shooting incident. Indeed, Erika was not teaching that week and she could be found shut up in her office, worrying. Mollie sat with Maddie for a few minutes, both of them watching Sky's class as they practiced. Cara and Kristen spent most of the time giggling and falling to the mat. Sky was getting very annoyed with the twelve-year-olds and her temper was rising, Maddie had noticed.

"Excuse me!" Sky shouted, and the two girls stopped giggling.

Sky strode through the other kids and she glared down at the two girls.

"Hi," Kristen tried.

"You are disrupting the class with your immature behaviour," Sky lectured.

"Pull yourselves together!"

Sky returned to the front of the class, ignoring the two girls who were still not really paying attention. Maddie grinned as Mollie just shook her head forlornly.

"I'd better go get things ready for the break before I then go and break my daughter's neck," Mollie commented.

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Maddie was joined by Cara during the break and they both drank some fruit juice and enjoyed some biscuits.

Kristen appeared a few minutes later, her face red from having received a major telling off from her mother. She sat down quietly beside Maddie and drank her juice.

"You two shouldn't wind up Sky, you know," Maddie commented.

"She's harmless," Kristen commented. "I think she's nice, to be honest."

"She's my friend and I don't like people making her mad," Maddie countered.

"Sorry," Cara said.

"We promise to behave," Kristen said. "Besides my Mom was a little bit angry with me."

"Sky was with me when I was shot, and it scared her a bit, I think - don't tell her I told you that."

"Our secret," Cara replied.

"Time to go," Kristen said as Mollie called out that the break was over. "See ya later, Maddie."

Two days later

Saturday, December 10th

Burbank Airport

It was not something which she had time for, to be brutally honest, but she had no choice.

The boy was tall with dark brown hair which seemed to point at all angles. The boy was just six weeks past his fourteenth birthday, but there was something about him which reassured Erika that she had made the correct choice.

"Hello, James - my name is Erika."

The boy looked a little uncomfortable as he spoke.

"Hi, err . . . I am a *Marauder* and I am looking for a new life."

"Are you sorry for what you have done?"

"I am," he nodded.

Erika grinned.

"Then, a new life, you shall have - welcome to Los Angeles, James."

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The drive from the airport to the house was short, but the boy spent the entire trip gazing out of the car window, lapping everything up.

"You ever been to Los Angeles, James?" Erika asked.

"No, ma'am - never went further than Colorado," the boy replied politely.

Erika grimaced; she knew exactly what had gone on in Colorado.

"You are safe here, James. You will never suffer that kind of abuse here, I promise."

"Thank you. I err . . . nobody told me what I was coming to."

"Do you like girls, James?"

"I'm not gay if that's what you mean!"

Erika laughed.

"Sorry, James - that's not what I meant. You will be living in a house with four girls - me, Maddie, Sky, and Chrissy. Might that be a problem?"

James thought about that for a moment before he replied.

"Don't see a problem," he replied diplomatically.

"We are unforgiving Bitches, James, but we'll cut you some slack for a day or two."

"Bring it on!" James grinned.

Oak Pass Road

"A boy!" Maddie exclaimed.

"Yes, Maddie, James is a boy."

"Hello, I'm James Todd - and you would be?"

Maddie looked startled by the accent.

"I'm Madeline Tyler, but I prefer to be called Maddie."

"Pleased to meet you, Maddie."

"Maddie," a grinning Erika asked as she watched Maddie's face turn pink. "Where are the twins?"

"Oh, you can't," Maddie began, but then she smirked. "They're out the back."

Erika showed James out the back and she waved towards the pool.

"James, please meet . . . oh, fuck!" Erika exclaimed as she noticed that both twins were lapping up the last of the December sun and that both girls were completely naked.

The two girls sat up and then they scowled at Erika, before focussing on the grinning Maddie as they grabbed towels to cover up.

"Very nice boobs, girls!" James quipped, ignoring the scowls.

"James - this is Christina Abbot; she prefers to be called 'Chrissy', though."

"Nice to see you, again, Chrissy, err very smooth."

"And her sister, Sky."

"Hello, Sky," James chuckled. "You look better with hair."

"A boy, Erika?" Chrissy asked.

"Thought we were getting a little too girly around here," Erika replied with an enormous smile. "This is James Todd."

"We remember him," Sky commented sourly.

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"Are we going to have a problem, girls?" Erika asked pointedly.

"No, Erika."

"No, Erika."

"James?"

"No, ma'am."

Maddie was a little surprised to see the two girls squirming as Erika glared them down. Obviously, the boy knew the twins, and they, him. The memories were not all that good, either, apparently. Nobody offered an explanation, so Maddie did not ask. The twins vanished before returning twenty minutes later wearing some light clothes. In the meantime, Erika had shown James to his new bedroom which was next door to Maddie's. The boy seemed very quiet and he stayed in his room for about an hour before reappearing. At lunch, the boy barely spoke except to say thank you when Erika passed him a plate of sandwiches.

As bedtime approached, Maddie was watching TV with James - she could see no problem with the boy, but he appeared somewhat depressed by the twins welcome.

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"Spit it the fuck out, girls!" Erika demanded after she had corralled both girls in Sky's bedroom and then slammed the door.

The two fearless *Predators* stared at the floor of the bedroom, unable to match Erika's eyes.

"We were not very nice to him, to be honest," Sky began.

"You know about our reputation," Chrissy said. "Well, we really went overboard when the Second Intake arrived. We wanted to be the big girls on the block, so to speak. The eldest was Lucy - she was eleven, and we were just ten. The boy was only eight, the youngest *Predator* yet, along with a couple of others. We made his life hell - along with almost everybody else."

"We decided that being strong would protect us - we had each other, so we gave up any idea of friends and just wanted to make sure that nobody went after us," Sky explained. "Only, that damn boy was too wily for his own good - he and a little brat from the Third Intake . . . what was the cunt's name?"

"Kieran . . . something," Chrissy growled.

"Brennan?" Erika enquired.

Sky groaned.

"He's not coming here, too?" she groaned as she saw Erika's expression.

"You bring boys here and you pick the two that made our lives hell?!" Chrissy demanded angrily.

"You said it, yourself, Chrissy - you made James' life hell," Erika pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

"She has a point," Sky conceded. "Those two led a revolt against the two of us and some of the other girls. They stripped us naked and . . . and they forced us into sexual poses with the other girls - you know, snatch to snatch. They were going to make me give one of the boys a blowjob. . ."

"But she threatened to bite his little dick off," Chrissy finished with a grin, then she scowled. "I was made to stick my nose into another girl's snatch."

"I think that was when she found she enjoyed being a lesbo," Sky quipped, and Chrissy laughed. "God, we were bitches!"

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"James!"

The boy turned to see the two girls running towards him and he flinched.

"We're sorry - we brought it on ourselves, what you and the other boys did," Chrissy admitted. "I think I enjoyed the snatch diving, though."

James laughed.

"It was a bad time for us all, and I apologise for humiliating you both," James then said.

"Snatch diving?" Maddie asked, dreading the answer.

"It's when a girl puts her face against another girl's labia," Sky explained.

"Ewwwwwww!" Maddie exclaimed, crossing her legs.

James laughed again.

"Boys go snatch diving too," James commented.

"Ugh," a thoroughly disgusted Maddie exclaimed as she threw the dirtiest look possible at the twins . . . and the boy. "I'm going to bed!"

The following morning
Sunday, December 11th

Oak Pass Road

James Todd awoke a little after dawn - it was his habit.

He had slept well, despite the problems of the day before. He had been a little worried to meet the worst girls he had ever known. They had both attracted a reputation for being hardcore lesbians due to how badly they hated boys. James knew that they had simply put on the hard outer shell to protect themselves and it had worked - neither girl was troubled much as they grew older . . . and more menacing. It was a tactic used by many of the Predators, and the instructors appeared to actively encourage it as it caused friction and appeared to weed out the runts who would then be 'removed from training' - a cold euphemism for a bullet to the head.

James went outside and he sat down on some steps, looking out over the rolling hills. The view was beautiful as the sun rose higher in the sky. He was very pleased with his decision to head out west, and he figured that he would do well. On a depressing note, now he was wearing shorts, he could see the black box attached to his left ankle which he tried to ignore, but it was always there. It was no longer the explosive-laced one which Hit Girl had first had fitted to his ankle, but a slimmer version which was not expected to take his ankle off - he hoped. Ignoring the twins from hell, who appeared to have mellowed since the last time they had met, James could not take his eyes off Maddie. She was beautiful and alluring - was that the right word? He had caught her looking at him a few times over lunch the previous day. Seeing the twins naked again had been fun, but would Maddie allow herself to be seen naked? Somehow, she did not seem the type and she definitely was not a *Predator* for whom nudity was fairly commonplace.

He sensed the arrival of somebody else in the garden and he turned to see Maddie walking towards him.

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Maddie was appalled at herself.

She had awoken that morning bathed in sweat. She had endured a horrible dream that had featured the twins and James - all naked. Why horrible? Well, she wasn't into boys - and no, she wasn't into girls, either . . . ewww! However, she had caught James looking at her the previous day during lunch. She had felt weird inside when he looked at her, too. Nothing bad - she kind of liked the way he was looking at her. Normally, most boys looked at her once and then ignored her, as if to say: 'stay away geek'. She was happy with that; boys were weird, noisy, smelly, and disgustingly obnoxious. So why would she have weird feelings for James?

As she walked into the living room, she spied somebody sitting out in the middle of the lawn on the steps. It looked to be James. Maddie headed outside, and she walked out onto the lawn and towards where the boy was sitting. He turned to her and she found herself smiling at him.

"Hi," Maddie said as she walked closer, but then she froze.

She had caught sight of James' ankle accessory.

"Are you dangerous?" Maddie asked.

"Honestly?" James replied. "Yes, I am - but not where you are concerned, Maddie."

"Did you do something bad?"

"Yes, I did - but I'm paying for my mistakes. This place is my reward for good behaviour."

"Okay, I trust you," Maddie said. "You want some breakfast?"

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Erika could hear chatter coming from the kitchen, and she found Maddie scooping cereal into her mouth while trying to talk to James at the same time while James appeared to have better manners and he at least waited until his mouth was empty before attempting to speak.

"I think Los Angeles is really cool - I've never lived anywhere so nice; this house is brilliant too."

"I've live in L.A. all my life, and it's pretty bad, but I was spoilt with a big house in a good neighbourhood, so I'm not the best to judge these kinds of things."

"You the resident geek, here?"

"Yeah."

Maddie was still figuring out James. She had already figured out that he was somehow the same as the twins - damaged and with a bad childhood - but not why he was that way, or how he had come to live with them, or why. Maddie had no problems with James moving in; they had plenty of space, and it was cool to have another kid her age. Nothing against the twins, but they were too old for Maddie to be able to connect with.

"They made out yet?" a voice stage-whispered.

"Sky!" Maddie exclaimed. "I ought to slap you silly!"

"She's so sweet when she gets mad," Sky chuckled as she ruffled Maddie's hair much to the younger girl's annoyance.

James laughed as he finished eating his cereal.

"Never a dull day around here!" Erika commented.

"What have I missed?" Chrissy asked. "Is Madeline mad about something?"

"You want a slap, too?" Maddie asked.

"She's so lovely!" Chrissy quipped as she made Maddie's hair even messier.

"Get off!"