

**Saturday, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

***Dreadnought House, Dollar***

"Holy fucking shit!"

Cassie laughed at Kaitlin whose mouth was about to say the same thing, but Jake had beaten her to it. Kaitlin glared at the boy. Cassie was getting annoyed with the eight-year-old's unnecessary and uncalled for disdain in relation to the boy. The boy had been with them almost a week and Kaitlin had barely said more than a few words to him. Anyway, back to the house.

It was a new house and it would be the new home for Cassie, Andrew, Kaitlin, Naomi, and Jake - not to mention Sasha.

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The property was a Georgian-style country home set in the middle of nowhere, about six miles from the town of Dollar and 34 miles from Edinburgh.

As you turned off the B934 road, you were met by a set of electric wrought iron gates which led to a pebbled driveway which in turn led over a small bridge to the main house which had a detached quadruple garage off to the right. A small burn ran to one side of the house, beneath the bridge. The pebbled driveway encircled the house and a good-sized pond sat to the front of the house as part of a beautifully landscaped garden within grounds of about 1.7-acres. The property was south-facing, ensuring the warmth of the sun throughout most of the day. Well-established trees and shrubs surrounded the perfectly lawned areas. There were additional lawned areas to the rear and side of the property with a mix of young and mature coniferous trees to the rear.

The house, itself, offered luxury accommodation spread over two floors with four bedrooms upstairs and two downstairs. A covered porch area provided access to a pair of wooden doors made of thick oak. Those doors opened onto the main entrance hallway which led to each of the many rooms on the ground floor. The floor was carpeted and there was a feature fireplace to the right of the front door. Solid wood panelling clung to the lower half of the walls. Immediately to the left was a comfortable sitting room with its own feature fireplace and windows to the front and a carpeted floor. Across the hall from the sitting room was the formal dining room, a substantial room which could seat eight easily, and more besides. Apart from windows to the front, two sets of glazed double doors opened onto the living room.

The living room featured a large bay window, to the front of the property, and enough space to seat a dozen people with plenty of floor space. Another feature fireplace featured on the east wall. From the living room, a pair of glazed double doors led back into the main entrance hallway while a smaller door led into the Pantry. Returning through to the entrance hall there was a doorway to a smaller hall with the kitchen to the right with the pantry and utility room on the far side of the kitchen. A guest bedroom with ensuite existed opposite the kitchen. The kitchen had a tiled floor and there was an AGA, in addition to a smaller, more conventional oven with a four-burner gas hob. The kitchen had two windows overlooking the back and roadside of the property. A door to the rear garden led from the pantry. Also leading off from the main entrance hallway, there was a large snooker room with a full-size snooker table towards the western end of the property at the rear. After a study beside the staircase, another bedroom with ensuite completed the ground-floor rooms.

The carpeted staircase led up to the first-floor. All four first-floor bedrooms were accessed from the capacious first-floor landing. As well as the main staircase, there was also a fire escape stairwell with access to the outside of

the property at ground level. Each of the four bedrooms had full ensuite facilities with both a bath and a shower while the master bedroom also enjoyed the benefits of a jacuzzi as well as a large dressing room.

Externally, there was a large detached quadruple garage with one large double door and two single doors all accessing the one large internal area with ample space for four large vehicles.

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"This . . . place . . . is . . . bloody . . . am-AZING!" Kaitlin exclaimed as she ventured into the main entrance hallway.

Very quickly, the three kids found the stairs and they vanished upwards in search of the bedrooms which they would be able to call their own. They each stopped dead at the top of the stairs, amazed by the space. Jake promptly grabbed Kaitlin and he threw her over his shoulder and down to the floor.

"Hey!" Kaitlin demanded indignantly from the carpeted floor. "What was that for?"

"I wanted to see if there was enough space to swing a cat," Jake replied smoothly. "I couldn't find a cat, so I thought a Kaitlin would do."

Naomi laughed out loud as her cousin/sister scowled.

"What are you doing down there, Kaitlin?" Cassie asked as she came off the stairs onto the landing.

"Jake. . ."

"Don't blame the boy because you can't stand on your own two feet!" Cassie chastised with a wink.

Kaitlin stood up and she scowled before grinning insanely. She looked at each of the many doors before she focussed on four of them; they each had a small china plaque mounted two-thirds of the way from the floor. The one to her right read: 'Naomi'. The next around read: 'No Predators Allowed' - Kaitlin scowled at Cassie before moving on. The third plaque read: 'Jake'. The final door read: 'Kaitlin'. Each child made for their own door and plunged on through.

Cassie and Andrew ignored the shrieks and shouts of happiness as they pushed open the door with the 'No Predators Allowed' plaque.

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Kaitlin loved her new bedroom.

It was pink - very pink. She had a brand-new bed with pink fluffy pillows and a thick duvet with a pink 'My Little Pony' themed cover. She was grinning so badly, she thought that she might pull a muscle in her face. She peered out of the window and she found herself looking out over the garden to the rear of the property. On one wall, there was a desk and a chair with an array of books along with paper and loads of colouring pens and coloured pencils. She ran into her bathroom and she found that the window looked out to the side of the property. Inside, she had fluffy pink towels for when she washed, took a bath, or enjoyed a shower. She had an assortment of soaps, body washes, and bubble bath.

She could not wait to test it all out, as soon as possible.

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Across the corridor, Jake was a little bemused by everything.

His bedroom also overlooked the garden to the rear of the property, but there was also a little window looking out onto the large detached garage to the side of the house. He had a comfortable bed with blue bedding - naturally. He also had a desk equipped with everything he might need to do his homework, he thought sourly. His bathroom was also equipped with some high-quality blue towels and an array of shower gel and soap. The boy took a moment to sit down on 'his' bed and he felt something running down his cheek. He reached up and he found it was a tear. For a moment he had no idea why he was crying, but then it hit him like a bullet striking a watermelon.

For the first time in over four years, he actually had a bedroom which he could call his very own.

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As for Naomi, her bedroom was on the opposite corner to Jake's bedroom.

The walls were painted in a pale purple colour which in Naomi's eyes was perfect. The curtains were a deep purple, complimenting the walls and broadening the smile on the young girl's face. The bed had cream and purple bedding with lots of soft pillows and a thick duvet. Beside the window which overlooked the front garden, there was a desk with lots of arts and craft type items which had the girl smiling even further, if that were even possible. The bathroom was compact, but well-equipped, with both a shower and a bath. Overall, she was very happy with her bedroom.

'Her bedroom' - the nine-year-old liked the sound of that.

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Cassie and Andrew were in their own bedroom which was at the front of the house, just like Naomi's.

They also had a *massive* dressing room with plenty of wardrobe space, drawers, a pair of comfortable chairs and a coffee table. Cassie was hugging her fiancé and she was looking forward to 'testing' the bed . . . and the floor . . . and the bath . . . maybe the shower, too. However, before she could make any moves on Andrew, she began to hear a disconcerting sound emanating from the landing. Cassie ran out of the dressing room towards the sound of tears and she found Kaitlin sitting on the landing, sobbing her little heart out.

"What's this all about?" Cassie asked as she crouched down beside the girl, and it was a few seconds before the tears eased enough for Kaitlin to respond.

"I love my new bedroom . . . only . . . I'll miss Naomi."

The tears began again, in earnest, and Cassie looked up to see Naomi standing close to them in stunned silence. Cassie understood why the youngster was so shocked; Naomi had never considered that Kaitlin really liked her. The nine-year-old went over to sit next to the miserable eight-year-old and she put her arm around her little cousin/sister.

"I'll still be here - just in that room, over there," Naomi offered.

"But I'm used to you being right there."

"You're a big girl, Kaitlin; you'll be nine soon," Naomi replied. "You can survive me being a few extra feet away, I'm, sure."

"I know - I'm sorry for being such a wus."

"You're just human, Kaitlin," Naomi replied.

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As they returned down the staircase into the main entrance hallway, they all stopped to watch Sasha as he rolled around on the carpet and then bolted from one end of the house to the other . . . and then back again.

The dog appeared to be having the time of his life as he explored his new home, but once he saw the two girls, he ran for the front door, barking. Naomi ran over, and she opened the front door, allowing the young dog to bolt for freedom. Kaitlin ran after the animal as Sasha made for the large pond where he began to stick his nose into the cold water and sniff around. Cassie grinned - Sasha appeared happy with his new home, too! However, she scowled as she saw Jake hanging around by the front door of the house while the two girls ran around the front garden, checking everything out. Cassie quickly caught Naomi's eye and she tipped her head towards the lonely-looking boy. Naomi followed Cassie's glance and she nodded before running directly at Jake and slapping the boy on the chest.

"You're it!" she shouted before bolting to safety as Jake suddenly bolted after her.

Cassie laughed as Naomi screamed while zig-zagging to avoid the pursuing twelve-year-old who had longer legs and probably much more energy. Kaitlin was a little slow to catch on, but she quickly caught up as Jake slapped her on the shoulder.

"You're it!" Jake yelled, sprinting away.

"Cunt!" Kaitlin countered as she sprinted after the rapidly vanishing boy.

Kaitlin pursued the boy around the house, putting everything into her legs as she struggled to keep up with the much older boy. Jake was laughing as he ran, easily staying ahead of the small girl who appeared very angry with him for some reason. She also appeared to have a good, if incredibly foul, vocabulary which had Jake laughing even harder. As the boy came around the back of the house, he found Naomi ahead of him and he grinned at the girl before he dove to the grass, and Kaitlin, not having seen Naomi, cannoned into her. Both girls went down hard, rolling on the grass. Kaitlin jumped up and she was about to restart her pursuit of Jake when it occurred to her that she already had her target and she slapped Naomi on the chest.

"You're it, Naomi!"

"Bollocks!" Naomi growled as she regained her feet and ran after the fleeing eight-year-old.

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### ***That evening***

After an afternoon back at Blairhoyle, packing their clothes and personal effects, they all returned to their new home and as it was late, they sat down to dinner.

Cassie was annoyed as they sat, eating steak, egg, and chips. For some reason or other, Jake was totally blanked by Kaitlin. Naomi would engage the boy in conversation, as would Andrew and Cassie, but Kaitlin barely acknowledged him when he asked Kaitlin to pass the ketchup. Cassie had hoped that the wild game, earlier that day would have the kids bonding, but no. Naomi could see no valid reason for her cousin's behaviour, although she figured that it had something to do with Jake being a boy.

After dinner, the kids were all sent upstairs to bed.

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After half an hour, Cassie headed up the stairs with Andrew who went to speak with Jake while Cassie made a beeline for Kaitlin's bedroom.

"Naomi, your bedroom, please."

Naomi scampered out of Kaitlin's bedroom and over towards her own. Kaitlin looked up at Cassie and she groaned.

"We need to talk, little one," Cassie began.

"I'm *really* tired," Kaitlin complained as she scrambled under her duvet and closed her eyes. "Can it wait until tomorrow?"

Cassie was not fooled for even a second; she knew the little girl's habits, mannerisms, and tell-tales far too well. Cassie grinned as she sat cross-legged on the end of Kaitlin's bed.

"You too tired for a cuddle, then?"

"That is so low!" Kaitlin growled as she threw back her duvet and crawled over to Cassie, plonking herself down in Cassie's lap and cuddling into her.

Cassie wrapped her arms around the youngster.

"What's so wrong about him?" Cassie asked. "You tolerate Craig."

"He's different."

"He's a boy - if you want, I can get Olivia on the phone to confirm that biological fact?" Cassie teased.

"Funny! Why do we need a boy?"

"I thought that you might like a brother - I always wished for one, to be honest."

"I hate boys - they're annoying and they smell."

"Now, I know that that is complete bullshit!" Cassie responded. "You can still run around naked - I'm sure Jake won't mind."

Kaitlin giggled.

"The boy's been through a lot - just like you and Naomi. Why should he not have a chance at having a family?"

"I'm not saying he can't - just not here."

"If he is to stay with us, it has to work for us all," Cassie said. "We can send him back to Mindy, if you want. Mindy told me that he was really happy about coming to Scotland. You know what he said to Mindy when she told him about you and Naomi?"

"What?"

"He said: '*Girl Predators* are bitches' - I think he's right."

Kaitlin frowned, and her shoulders slumped. Andrew came in just then and he did not look very pleased.

"Jake is not a happy boy: he thinks that Kaitlin hates him and that he doesn't belong here. To be honest, I felt ashamed that Kaitlin would treat him like he was nothing."

Kaitlin cringed at the comment.

"I'm being really nasty, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are," Cassie replied.

"I didn't mean to be nasty."

"But that was the way it came across. The boy just wants to be friendly, but you shrug him off and ignore him. Maybe you aren't the girl I thought you were," Andrew said.

Ouch! Kaitlin suddenly realised what she had done - some of it subconsciously. She bounded out of Cassie's arms and she ran over to Jake's room, shoving open the door. The boy was sitting on his bed and it was obvious that he had been crying. Kaitlin stood before him and she smiled.

"I'm sorry, Jake. I went too far. I want you to stay. I promise I'll be less of a bitch."

"I couldn't work out what I had done to offend you."

"You did nothing, Jake - I just saw you as a threat, I suppose. You were something different. I'm really sorry."

"No harm done, I suppose," Jake grinned.

"Friends?" Kaitlin asked, holding out her right hand.

"Friends," Jake confirmed, shaking the outstretched hand.

"Night!"

"Night, Kaitlin."

Jake scrambled under his duvet, a massive grin on his face. Cassie smiled down at Kaitlin as she scampered back to her bed and dived under the quilt.

"Proud of you, little one," she said as she gave Kaitlin a kiss.

"We both are," Andrew confirmed.

Kaitlin dived out of her bed and she wrapped herself around Andrew, hugging him tightly. It took a minute to prise Kaitlin off him and he dropped her onto the bed. He took a moment to study the bruising on the righthand side of the youngster's face where some shotgun pellets had pelted her mask the previous evening. Her angelic face was marred by the bruising but the little girl grinned through it. Andrew could see plenty of other bruises on the girl's chest, arms, and legs from the fighting. He hated to see kids with bruises, but Kaitlin had gained them by being a hero and ultimately helping others.

"Night, little one," Cassie said as she turned out the light and closed the door.

"Night, Cassie!" Kaitlin yelled out. "Night, Andrew! Night, Naomi! Night, Jake! Night, Sasha!"

Cassie groaned, and she looked up at Andrew. "Here we go. . . ." she moaned.

"Night, Cassie!" Naomi yelled back. "Night, Andrew! Night, Kaitlin! Night, Jake! Night, Sasha!"

Not to be left out, Sasha barked twice. Then another voice joined in the yelling.

"Night, Cassie!" Jake yelled very loudly. "Night, Andrew! Night, Naomi! Night, Kaitlin! Night, Sasha!"

Sasha added a further bark from his position on the end of Naomi's bed.

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After a brief check around to ensure that everything was locked up, Cassie and Andrew retired to their bedroom.

They were just getting settled and Andrew was warming Cassie up to christen their new bed when there came a knock on the bedroom door. It was Kaitlin who strode in and dived onto the bed, crawling up towards Cassie.

"What do you want, little one?"

"I just wanted to say thanks for setting me straight," Kaitlin replied before she scowled. "Are you both naked?"

Cassie grinned fiendishly.

"That is so disgusting!" Kaitlin growled as she quickly reversed off the bed and walked back to the door.

Then she paused as she looked up to see a yellow sign on the wall beside the door. Her expression darkened considerably as she turned to glare at Cassie.

"That is so not funny!"

Kaitlin stalked out, pulling the door closed behind her. Cassie grinned up at the sign as she checked her bedside cabinet for a certain bright yellow device. The sign was yellow, with black writing, and had a triangular image of a person being Tasered.

'CAUTION: DANGER OF ELECTROCUTION!'

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### ***That same morning***

#### ***Auchenross***

It was still dark when the two girls were roused from sleep.

Both girls covered their eyes as the overhead light was turned on and they both groaned loudly and pointedly. The duvet was yanked off them both and the two girls shivered with the cold of the bedroom.

"Alright, ladies!" Sinead bellowed. "Get your backsides out of that bed. You have FIVE minutes to pee before I want you downstairs in the kitchen. You will wear underwear, T-shirt, shorts, trainer socks, and trainers - nothing else!"

Sinead vanished, leaving the two girls to wake up and sort themselves out. Charlotte was the first to make use of the bathroom and as she came back into the bedroom, she began grousing while dressing.

"This is just like being back in Colorado!" she stated as she pulled off the T-shirt she had slept in and pulled on knickers and a sports bra.

"One difference, though," Dakota pointed out. "Sinead has our best interests at heart - and she doesn't carry a baton or a strap."

"Good point."

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"It's still dark!" Charlotte exclaimed as they entered the kitchen.

"So?" Sinead replied.

The two girls exchanged a glance and they both decided that no excuse was going to get them out of the punishments, so it was better if they just sucked it up and got with it. After all, the quicker they began, the quicker they would finish. Sinead watched the soundless exchange as she opened the kitchen door and both girls jumped back from the blast of cold night air. Sinead was clad in warm joggers and her Royal Marines T-shirt, along with a pair of lightweight combat boots. Sinead waved the girls out the door and she followed the reluctant pair, closing the door behind her. Without a word, Sinead began to jog away from the house and towards the road. Soundlessly, the two girls followed suit, running side by side.

Charlotte was the first to scream as her left foot splashed into a very wet, very cold, and slightly muddy puddle. The water soaked her bare legs, making them even colder, her left trainer sopping wet. But she did not complain, but just dug deep for the stamina to get through the punishment. Sinead led them out of the drive and she turned right onto the very dark road. After thirty yards, she vaulted a five-bar metal gate into a field. Both girls followed suit, demonstrating their athletic ability. Charlotte was glad of Hit Girl's fitness regime back in the United States as both her and Dakota were still as fit as they had ever been. Dakota was taller, and her legs were longer, as were Sinead's, meaning that Charlotte had to put in some extra effort to keep up.

Sinead was no monster, but she was a stern disciplinarian and she kept the pace suitable for Charlotte, but not too slow as to benefit Dakota. They ran over slippery grass which was covered in the early morning dew and some frost. The pace kept all three of them warm as their bodies produced heat. They ran up hills and over rocks. Both girls were hopelessly lost after twenty minutes and they were a little puffed out, but still capable of a lot more. Sinead enjoyed taking both girls through parts of the fields which she knew were both boggy and muddy. Dakota laughed out loud as Charlotte went face down into some mud, skidding to a halt, totally covered from head to toe on her front. That did not last for long as Dakota slipped, and she rolled into a bog, soaking herself to the skin and covering herself in mud on her back and her front. Both girls laughed as did Sinead who turned the group towards home and it was with intense happiness that the two girls saw lights and then recognised Auchenross and the prospect of warmth. Sinead took the side door which led past the boiler room and the laundry. She pointed up the back stairs.

"Use the shower room at the top of the stairs and please bring your dirty clothes back down to the laundry when you've both showered and changed, then we can have breakfast."

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The first rays of dawn were beginning to show as the two girls shed their wet, muddy clothing and they both shared the shower, enjoying the hot water as they struggled to remove the mud from each other's hair.

By the time they were clean, had dried off, dressed, and they had dumped their sodden and muddy clothing in the laundry, they found Sinead - herself showered and changed - in the kitchen placing a pair of frying pans on the Aga.

"Dakota - get the bacon, sausage, black pudding, and eggs from the fridge, please. Charlotte - that cupboard, over there, please grab two cans of baked beans and a can of plum tomatoes, thanks."

Both girls followed instructions and they grabbed the food for Sinead, bringing it over to her as she poured some oil in to the two hot frying pans.



"Charlotte - you can do the bacon while Dakota - you can do the sausage and black pudding. I'll sort out the baked beans and the tomatoes. The eggs we can do last. I hope you two are hungry!" Sinead chuckled.

Both girls were starving, and the run had made them ravenous for food of any kind. As Charlotte began placing rashers of bacon in one frying pan, Dakota placed rectangular sections of sausage into the other frying pan along with thick, round slices of black pudding. Sinead was busy opening the tins of beans and tomatoes, emptying the contents into a pair of Pyrex jugs before placing both jugs into the microwave and setting the timer for five minutes. By the time the microwave 'pinged', the bacon was doing nicely, and Charlotte was turning each rasher and adding more to the pan as they shrivelled up.

The sausage and black pudding were both crackling and spitting under the guidance of Dakota as the kitchen filled with the enticing smells of breakfast.

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Charlotte poured some orange juice out for everybody as Dakota began dishing out the food onto hot plates laid out on the counter opposite the Aga.

Sinead placed several slices of toast into a toast rack in the centre of the table, adding marmalade and butter to the bottles of Ketchup and HP sauce. Charlotte added to the table three mugs of freshly made hot tea, just as Dakota placed three plates of food onto the table and everybody sat down. Sinead raised her hand just as the two girls were about to dive in.

"You both did very well, this morning - this is your reward," she said with a reassuring grin. "Dig in!"

Both girls dived into their breakfast with barely concealed gusto, stuffing food into their mouths as quickly as they could. Sinead chuckled as she dug in with more thought as to manners than the two girls.

"Is that it, then?" Dakota asked hopefully as she took a breather from eating. Charlotte grinned just as hopefully.

"Hit Girl has nothing on me," Sinead chuckled fiendishly.

Both girls groaned but they grinned too, knowing that they were in safe hands.

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At the end of the meal, the two girls helped to clear away the dirty plates, glasses, cups, and cutlery.

Dakota moved towards the dishwasher, but Sinead intercepted her.

"Dishwasher isn't working, this morning," she said as she flicked off the switch labelled: 'Dishwasher'.

Dakota scowled as she figured out what was coming.

"This part of our punishment, too?" she asked resignedly.

"Have fun, girls!" Sinead chuckled as she sat down at the table and she pulled out a car magazine to read.

Dakota groaned as she started to fill the kitchen sink with hot water, squirting in some Fairy Liquid to help things along. She began to wash the dirty dishes as Charlotte passed them over to her. The two girls were not too put out by the punishment - usually, a punishment involved humiliation and the strap, so washing up was not exactly arduous to a pair of *Predators*. The pair

talked a little but mainly concentrated on the task as their training directed. Charlotte's mind drifted into her dark and murky past.

Her first ever punishment had been when she was just eight-years-old. It had shocked her to her core. She had been brought up believing that nobody ever hit a girl. That assumption vanished very quickly as her instructor had stripped her half-naked and then taken the strap across her bare behind three times. She had never felt such pain in her entire life. It was like her backside was on fire and she had screamed and screamed. However, that was not the last time that Charlotte had been strapped and humiliated.

"Excuse me? Charlie?"

Charlotte snapped back to the present to see Dakota holding out her hand for the next dirty plate.

"Sorry - my mind was wandering."

Both girls were giggling by the time they had finished washing and drying everything which had been used to cook and consume breakfast - and both were very wet from splashing one another. Sinead had allowed them to have some fun - she knew all about their history and she allowed them some semblance of fun. Both girls were pleasant to have around. Sinead was fully aware that both were certified killers - but then so was she. She was not intending on being hard on the girls - she just wanted them to understand how to behave in their new lives.

It would not be easy for them as their bad habits were so ingrained during such formative years of their young lives.

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Sinead allowed the girls an hour to themselves before summoning both of them to the gym on the top floor, right at the top of the house.

The floor was partially covered in soft matting and there were various weights and two benches. Extending out from the end wall, there was a punchbag. Both girls felt a little uneasy and they were wondering what was coming next.

"I understand that you both have training in close-quarters-combat," Sinead commented as both girls nodded. "During your time in the US, you both indicated a reluctance to fight - and I don't mean that in a bad way. However, you both have skills which I would like to see. Do either of you object to some simple sparring?"

Both girls shook their heads. The three of them took up positions on the mat and they slowly exchanged a few Martial Arts moves. The moves got faster as they warmed up and Sinead decided to figure out how good the two girls really were. She could cope with fighting two on one so a twelve-year-old plus a fourteen-year-old were child's play - ignoring the obvious pun. Sinead was taller than both girls while Dakota had a few inches on her younger friend which meant that each girl was using a different tactic to cover for the difference in height. The girls were skilled, that was blatantly obvious, and Sinead could see the intense concentration in both sets of eyes as they watched Sinead's movements to figure out her next move.

Dakota's eyes moved constantly, catching each and every movement of her opponent. Her over five years of intensive training had given her a set of skills that encompassed many forms of fighting both armed and unarmed. As she fought Sinead, Charlotte was kicked off to one side to allow Sinead to focus on Dakota. There arms and legs whirled as they fought, and Sinead hoped that Dakota remembered that it was only a friendly sparring session. She almost

missed Charlotte moving down her left side as the girl attempted to flank Sinead and attack from the side. But it was a feint, for as Sinead struck out at Charlotte, Dakota struck from the front, kicking Sinead hard in the chest and pushing the Royal Marine Commando backwards. Sinead was punched twice in the side by Charlotte before Dakota struck again and again.

Sinead decided that enough was enough and she came to the conclusion that the two female *Predators* were not '*sugar & spice & all things nice*' - not by a goddamn longshot! With practiced ease, Sinead put Charlotte down with a kick to the girl's shoulder, sending her rolling the length of the mat. Dakota took a little more work, but she was no match for Sinead as she too was deposited beside her friend. Sinead grinned down at the two girls who grinned back.

"Did we learn anything today, girls?" Sinead asked as she sat down beside them.

Charlotte looked at Dakota and both girls laughed.

"Don't mess with a Royal?" Dakota ventured.

"Damn right!" Sinead confirmed.

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***Also, that same morning***

***Moss-side Hall***

Olivia was not enjoying her morning so much.

She lay on her front while Lynn applied some soothing lotion onto her badly bruised side. Jessica had considered some sort of joke as her sister lay there with just a bra to cover her upper body modesty, but the vivid bruising had stopped Jessica in her tracks. She enjoyed embarrassing her big sister, but she hated it when she was hurt. They had all had a busy night and they were still somewhat tired.

Instead, Jessica cuddled up with Nika.

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***Vengeance Command Centre***

***Edinburgh***

"So," Electra ventured over breakfast that morning. "Did you learn anything?"

Mary grimaced as Ginny chuckled. Ginny enjoyed seeing her protectee squirm. The girl had learnt humility which had been very important to the teenager. Ginny knew that the two girls were very close. Indeed, Electra had saved Mary from an inglorious death which might have ultimately collapsed the Monarchy. Electra could be very hard on Mary - especially when it came to anything that matched the younger girl's skill set. Mary took it all in her stride and Ginny was fully aware of what the teenager had endured the night before. Ginny had been there, watching, to ensure that Mary did not suffer too much - Harper had requested she be there in case anything had got out of hand. Ginny had almost stepped in to bring things to a halt when Harper had pushed Mary into the puddle outside, but she had restrained herself from interfering. Ginny had heard Mary crying during the night but she had left her to cry.

"Yes, I did," the embarrassed girl responded.

"Like what?"

"Having your pubic hair tugged - it hurts!"

Ginny laughed.

"Can't say I've ever experienced that," Electra commented with a grin.

"I can't believe that Harper did that to me - not to mention dragging me *outside*! But I know that I needed some harsh treatment to knock some sense into me."

"Damn right!" Electra growled.

"So long as you learnt something," Ginny said seriously.

"Yes, ma'am," Mary replied. "Did you see it all?"

"Yes, I saw everything."

"I was naked, so everything was quite a bit!" Mary scowled. "I will admit, the puddle was a nice touch. How Harper survived that night after night while injured, I'll never know."

"She's a brave girl," Ginny admitted. "Take what she suffered as an example, Mary."

"I will - and I'm sorry for having put myself in a situation where I needed such a reminder."

"We all make mistakes, Mary," Electra grinned. "You will make more, just as I will."

"Thanks," Mary replied.

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### ***East Mayfield***

It was a nasty habit which Harper was determined to cure Diana of, even if it killed her.

The girl had absolutely no idea what a goddamn lie-in was! Harper was very tired from all her exertions the previous evening and she just wanted to sleep, but no, an annoying eleven-year-old was sitting at the end of Harper's bed bouncing up and down.

"You do know that I could kill you in a second," Harper growled with as much menace as she could manage.

"I know," Diana responded. "But I also know that would never hurt somebody like me."

"Like you? A girl with no legs."

"Somebody that isn't one of you and isn't a bad person," Diana retorted.

Harper groaned - the girl was right; she usually was!

"Fuck this!" Harper growled as she threw back the duvet and carefully swung her feet onto the floor.

With a struggle, Harper eased off her T-shirt which acted as a makeshift nighty, and she stood up a little shakily before heading off for a shower.

"I hate it when you do that," Diana complained as the naked nine-year-old hobbled out of the bedroom.

"I know!" Harper grinned as she continued on her way to the bathroom.

"Morning, Harper," Keira chuckled as she appeared out of her own bedroom.

"Hi, Kei."

"Why does she have to go naked - it's so creepy," Diana bleated. "The scars scare me as well."

"Ignore her," Keira suggested, knowing that Harper was just winding Diana up in retaliation for Diana waking her so early.

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***The following morning***

***Sunday, December 18<sup>th</sup>***

***Dreadnought House, Dollar***

Naomi's time had come.

Cameron and Natasha had come over to see the new house, along with Scarlett and Amber. After a tour of the house, Cassie had turned to Jake and Kaitlin.

"Could you both take Sasha outside and show Scarlett and Amber the garden, please?"

Kaitlin recognised the tone and she knew that it was no idle suggestion. Naomi made to follow, unaware that she was about to endure the bollocking of a lifetime.

"Naomi!" Cassie called out, her voice cold. "Living room - now!"

Naomi looked very worried as she stepped into the living room to find Cameron and Natasha looking very grave as they sat in chairs. Cassie followed Naomi into the room and she closed the door behind her before grabbing the nine-year-old by the shoulders and placing her in the centre of the room facing Natasha. Cassie then sat down on another chair.

"Are you totally stupid?" Natasha began, her expression cold and her tone even colder. "You have to have been insanely stupid to pull a stunt like that, Naomi. I always thought that you were level-headed, but this is even beyond something which Kaitlin would do! Are you trying to get yourself killed before you turn ten? Are you trying to make *Vengeance* lose a life?"

Natasha's voice was increasing in volume and the young girl was struggling with her emotions as she took in the stinging words of rebuke.

"Did you stop to think for even one second about what you were doing? You went off alone without saying a damn word - and even worse, you took on Anna Bowman on your own!"

"I killed her, didn't I?" Naomi retorted angrily.

"SHUT UP!" Natasha shouted. "Did I say that you could talk? That response just shows how stupid you really are! First, Mary fucks up - but then she's not had much training, then YOU a trained *Predator* goes against everything that she knows. What was it? Were you in search of glory? You wanted to make a name for yourself?"

"No!"

"You could have got yourself killed! The end DOES NOT justify the means, young lady! Right now, I am unable to decide if I still want you in *Vengeance*. But I am also very glad that you are alive and unhurt. Just bruises, right?"

Naomi nodded, her eyes brimming with tears as she stood before the adults.

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Outside, the raised voices could be heard, if not the actual content of what was being shouted.

"Is Naomi in trouble?" Jake asked.

"Yeah," Kaitlin replied.

"Why?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you."

"Okay."

Kaitlin knew exactly what it was about, and she was very pleased that she was not in trouble - for a change. Sometimes, no matter what the eight-year-old did, she often got herself into trouble. The youngster noticed that she was the object of somebody's attention. Scarlett was staring at her. Kaitlin did not like the girl and she grinned slightly as her eyes noticed the girl's right hand - that had been Naomi's handy work, Kaitlin thought, chuckling at the unintended pun.

As for Scarlett, she was having mixed emotions concerning her new life. The nightmares and the terror as her life was torn apart were there every night and the memories kept bouncing back during her waking hours, too. The time in the hospital had dulled things in her mind - mainly due to the drugs that they had pumped her full of, for the pain - and it had taken time for the memories of her father dying to resurface. Strangely, the only time that Scarlett had felt she could cope, since losing her hand, was when she was talking to Harper Sharp. That girl was different in so many ways, many of them unfathomable, but somehow, Scarlett had bonded with Harper on a level which had had Scarlett regretting everything that she had done to the girl. Scarlett had never enjoyed hurting people, but she had so wanted to impress her father - he had seen his daughter as a bit of a wimp. Being placed in charge of Harper and some aspects of her imprisonment had given Scarlett a feeling of power - even if it was only over a nine-year-old girl.

Her father had told her that Harper was pure evil and damaged in the head. He had insisted that keeping Harper subdued by fear was the only way to prevent any problems. Naturally, Scarlett had trusted her father, only that trust had begun to ebb the first time that she had heard Harper's desperate screams as, one by one, her fingers had been snapped. Scarlett was not stupid, she knew full well that her father was not a particularly nice man and that he could be very cruel at times. That life of his . . . that was not for Scarlett. At the time, there was nothing that she could do. She hated to contradict her father and he would not stand for it should she get uppity and try to stand her ground. The muddy puddle had been Scarlett's idea - in her mind it had been a relatively benign way to keep Harper in line. Her father had overridden things, such as feeding Harper and then torturing the girl so that she threw the food straight back up again.

Thankfully, Harper had been too traumatised by her experience to offer up anything more than token resistance. That had been good as Scarlett had not had to hurt Harper further. The attack at their property in Coventry which had resulted in the death of that Morris bitch - good riddance - had been the last time Harper had been tortured. The worst part had been stopping Harper's rescue - only, she had been too scared of her father not to follow his instructions. She had cringed as Harper had screamed out for her sister. Scarlett had considered letting Harper go and that had been her plan, but she had been too scared to let it happen. Her father had had no further use for Harper and he had come up with the idea of faking her death. Scarlett had refused to have

anything to do with it, but she had been there when the unconscious girl had been taken down into the cellars.

Her father did not care if Harper lived or died, but he hinted that keeping her alive may be beneficial. Scarlett had spent hours each day down in the cellar. It solved two problems - keeping Harper company and staying away from her father who appeared to have had enough of his daughter. Fifteen days had passed before Harper was finally rescued, and Scarlett's life had fallen apart. For fifteen days, Scarlett had kept Harper alive amidst the worry that her father might throw her into the same cell and throw away the key. The girl was badly injured, but Scarlett could do nothing to help her apart from talking to Harper and giving her painkillers. It was not long - just a few days - before Harper gave up eating. Scarlett had had to force the delirious girl to drink water and ingest some watery soup. Harper was giving up on life.

The fire which Harper had once displayed was long gone and Scarlett had not thought it would be long before the girl succumbed to her wounds and died.

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At that moment, back in Scotland, Scarlett was studying the younger girl.

She was about the right size: she was short, and a female. It had been a short female vigilante who had taken her hand. 'Was it her?' Scarlett asked herself as she walked over, looking directly at Kaitlin.

Kaitlin frowned as Scarlett came towards her. Kaitlin did not like the girl and she did not care that Harper had put her off limits, but she also figured that there was more to the Scarlett/Harper story than she actually knew. Harper had not gone into much, of any, detail about what had occurred behind closed doors.

"I know you don't like me, err Kaitlin."

"I don't dislike you - I just don't like you, and neither am I going to shove you into a muddy puddle while naked," Kaitlin responded, hoping to get the message across.

Scarlett's face went scarlet at the comment and the older girl winced. Jake frowned at the exchange, unsure what to make of it. He knew what a *Predator* suppressing anger looked like when he saw one. He filed it away until later as he figured that it might be something private. Kaitlin was annoyed with herself for the comment which had told Scarlett much more than Scarlett was actually cleared for, but Scarlett would not have been there if nobody trusted her, Kaitlin figured. The young girl noticed that Amber was splitting her attentions between the unintelligible yells coming from inside the house and her own conversation with Scarlett. Kaitlin did not trust Amber for reasons that she could not quite fathom, but then, Kaitlin was not trusting many people right at that moment.

Jake was highly intelligent and despite often playing the idiot, he was far from actually being one. Every day, he was watching everything that was going on and filing away everything he heard. His mind was profiling each person and filing the details away. Kaitlin was a friend and he trusted her. Scarlett was an unknown, but she appeared to know more than she was letting on. As for Amber, she was setting off alarms in Jake's head and they were backed up by her actions as she tried to listen in on everything which was going on around her. Jake watched as Kaitlin manoeuvred Scarlett well away from Amber and so he called Amber over and they began to play with Sasha.

The boy noticed Kaitlin's grin in his direction confirming that he had done the right thing.

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"Scarlett," Kaitlin began. "You have a lot of shit buried away in your head. You need to talk to someone before you explode - or destroy a police BMW."

"Destroy what?" Scarlett asked.

"Never mind," Kaitlin responded quickly. "Take it from me - you can't bury emotions that are too big to be buried. I know a lot went on between you and Harper. The fact that you are still alive tells me that you did some good. Okay, I hate your fucking guts - I saw you shoving Harper into a muddy puddle while stark naked. I saw you kick mud in her face, then hose her down with a hosepipe. I assume the water wasn't hot?"

"It wasn't."

"One day, I might return the favour . . . but until then, I will be your friend."

Scarlett shuddered slightly at the hinted retaliation.

"Can you set it up, so I can talk to Harper - maybe even that nutcase, Diana?"

Kaitlin laughed - it was an apt description for Diana.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Do you trust Amber?" Scarlett asked.

"Should I?" Kaitlin asked leadingly. "You live with her."

"I've seen her before . . . I just don't know where."

"I trust her less than I trust you - do you see her as a threat of some kind?"

"You know who my father was, right?"

"Yes."

"I think I might have seen her on one of my Dad's visits to London - he'd take me along for company when visiting William Fraser."

Kaitlin winced at the name.

"Get some of that dark shit out of you brain and then you might just start to remember more stuff," Kaitlin suggested. "Useful stuff."

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"You're a *Predator*, right?" Scarlett asked after taking a deep breath.

"What makes you think that?" Kaitlin responded.

"Promise you won't kill me?"

Kaitlin nodded as very gently, Scarlett reached over and moved Kaitlin's hair away from behind her right ear.

"The tattoo - Harper had one, and I saw yours just a few moment's ago."

"Feel free to rant - most people do," Kaitlin said resignedly.

"When I first found out that there were children out there who had been turned into assassins, I was sceptical. I was told that *Predators* were scum. That they were warped children who had been taught to kill and maim. That they ought to be put down for their own sakes and every other person's sake. I pitied them for what they were forced to become, but I could see no valid reason why they



should be allowed to integrate into normal society. Then I met Harper Sharp and everything changed."

"Do you even know what a *Predator* really is?" a voice growled ominously and both girls turned to find Jake standing two feet away.

"Stealthy, huh?" Kaitlin commented approvingly. "Where's creepy cunt?"

"You mean, Amber?" Jake asked with a grin. "She went inside to go wee - Naomi's whatever has finished."

"Just what I've figured out. I know that what my father told me was wrong - or maybe just his take on it. I saw the truth with my own eyes. Harper Sharp was just a young girl forced into a horrible life and trying to make the best of it. She never volunteered to be taken and tortured, and I'm certain that she never volunteered for the life she has. Same for you, Kaitlin - you, too, Jake?"

"I was eight-years-old when I was yanked off the street, along with my parents. I was treated like an animal - yelled at and slapped when I was too slow, or I cried - and humiliated worse than I had ever thought possible. I was brainwashed into killing my parents - I put a bullet into each of their heads. I was trained to kill. I was trained to use a hundred different weapons. I was trained to bury my emotions. I had no choice but to obey or I would be put out of my misery by a nine-millimetre bullet in the head. I may be something dark inside, but I am still a boy who wants a childhood. I want to be able to have fun. I want to be a normal child. I don't want to kill or do anything I was trained to do, but it's a struggle to ignore the training that was so deeply ingrained in who I am. Over more than four years I was turned into an assassin. Even now, wherever I go, I look for exits, I look for threats, I look for potential weapons. In my mind, Scarlett, I have already considered a dozen different ways to end your life and four different ways to hide your body so that it would never be found. I can't stop my brain from working out these problems and solutions all on its own. Am I right, Kaitlin?"

Kaitlin nodded. Her training was nowhere near as advanced as Jake's, but her brain worked in a similar manner; it had been hammered into her during her Phase 1 basic training.

"I need to make sense of my life . . . the way it is now. I need to know that I did the right thing in keeping Harper alive. I need to figure out what I am going to do next."

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The yelling had ceased, leaving Naomi quietly sobbing to herself.

Cassie had led the girl out of the living room and up the stairs to her bedroom.

"Do you understand what happened today?" Cassie asked.

"Yes, Cassie, I did. I was stupid."

"You did well and yes, you killed Anna Bowman. However, killing her may not have been quite what we wanted, right now. Her brother is going to be a tad angry that you killed his sister, and that makes him unpredictable, honey."

"I'm sorry - I got caught up in the moment."

"We all make mistakes, sweetheart."

"I know - normally, it's Kaitlin."

"Tell me about it!"

"Do you love me any less?"

"Honey, there is nothing on this earth that could make me love you, or Kaitlin, any less."

"Thanks."

Cassie left the girl to her emotions and her thoughts.