

Monday, December 26th, 2016

Boxing Day

Dreadnought House

"Wake up!"

Kaitlin growled; she was tired. Then the little girl's duvet was ripped off her and she rolled onto her back and opened her eyes. She glared at the grinning face of Cassie.

"I'm tired."

"Don't care! People will start to arrive in a couple of hours. We have a lot to do."

Kaitlin rolled out of bed and she slunk to the bathroom.

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Forty minutes later, Kaitlin, Naomi, and Jake were finishing off their breakfast.

Andrew appeared a few minutes later with Sasha having just taken the large dog for a walk. Andrew was shivering with the cold.

"It's ruddy freezing out there!" he exclaimed as he warmed up beside the Aga. "You guys all look happy."

"She pulled us out of our nice warm beds!" Naomi growled with a glower in Cassie's direction.

"It was time to get up," Cassie offered unrepentantly as she smiled at the three tired youngsters. "Right - if you've finished: bowls in the dishwasher, go get dressed - clean underwear, Kaitlin - please dress smartly as we have guests arriving in about an hour."

"Can I take a shower?" Jake asked.

"If you can be quick."

"Oh, yeah," Naomi grinned. "Charlotte's coming!"

"I like her is all - we're not an item; that would just be weird."

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Cassie was becoming more and more frustrated as the time wore on.

Naomi understood why - it was the first time that Cassie had hosted an event with so many people, and she wanted it to be perfect as all of her friends and some of her family would be present. Due to the numbers coming to visit (and stay overnight), there would be no formal sit-down meal. So far, there would be nine adults, seventeen children . . . and two dogs. The living room and the dining room had been rearranged. The dining room would be set up as a buffet so that everybody could help themselves (Jake and Kaitlin had been warned not to eat everything). The living room had plenty of chairs arranged so that most could sit down with an overflow into the kitchen.

At around eleven o'clock, people began to arrive. Cassie rushed off to see who it was while Jake was left keeping an eye on the food which was steadily cooking.

"Cassie!" Charlotte exclaimed as she and Sarah came in the door.

Cassie was almost bowled over by the excited twelve-year-old who quickly let go and ran through to see Kaitlin and Naomi.

"She's a little excited," Sarah pointed out unnecessarily as she hugged her little sister.

"I noticed," Cassie laughed as she heard all the excited chatter in the living room.

It wasn't like they had been apart for long - it had only been the previous evening when they had last talked. By the time Sarah and Cassie had finished their introductions, Charlotte was giving Jake a hug in the kitchen.

"Charlotte would you help me in the kitchen, honey?" Cassie asked as she sent Jake through to the living room, so he could annoy the younger girls and Sarah.

Andrew appeared, and he gave his future sister-in-law a big hug.

"Hi, Andrew," Sarah hissed through squeezed ribs.

"Hello, Sarah."

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Cassie was very grateful for Charlotte's assistance - she had the kids under control in no time, and Cassie's mood eased immensely as Charlotte took over the food preparation.

More people began to arrive, Sinead with Dakota in tow came first, followed by Keira, Blake, an excited Diana and the decidedly talkative Harper. The adults abandoned the kids who all vanished up the stairs while they remained in the living room enjoying polite conversation without the constant interruptions of the younger human variety. Last to arrive were Natasha, Cameron, and Eric, all of whom had suffered enormously to bring the final load of young people: Scarlett, Amber, Christopher, Olivia, Jessica, Craig, Jordan, Kate, Jeremy, and Ewan. They had also brought Nika along, much to Sasha's delight and both canines quickly retired to a corner of the living room to chat. There was the resonating thunder of hooves and a hoard of animals thundered down the stairs to join the latest batch of similarly hyperactive animals who had just arrived.

Apparently, Craig and Olivia had been forced to travel in separate vehicles, so the moment they were together again. . .

"That is so disgusting!" Jessica exclaimed as her big sister was pushed up against a wall by Craig.

Blairhoyle

The missing adults had opted for a polite, well-mannered Boxing Day lunch.

As such, Richard and Alexandra were joined by Jasper and Lynn, David and Amy, plus Trevor and Kensi. They all arrived at roughly the same time and Richard passed out drinks to all.

"Listen to that?" Lynn said.

"Listen to what?" David asked.

"Exactly," Lynn pointed in.

"No kids!" Amy laughed. "We all love them dearly, but it is so good to have some time away from the little angels."

"You have angels?" Jasper inquired to general laughter.

Dreadnought House

"Rabid."

"Undomesticated."

"Feral."

Keira had challenged the other adults to come up with one-word descriptions for the noisy creatures that were stuffing their faces and shouting at the same time.

"Bestial?" Blake suggested.

"Good one!" Cameron laughed.

"Truculent," Sarah threw in.

"Destructive."

"Barbaric."

"Callous."

"Rancorous," Cassie added.

"Isn't that something from Return of The Jedi?" Andrew asked.

"The Rancor?" Cassie asked.

"Yeah."

"I suppose Olivia does look bad first thing in the morning," Natasha chuckled.

"So not funny!" thirteen-year-old Olivia Kensington scowled as she walked past the laughing adults.

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For once, Amber was actually joining in with the others.

She had piled a plate full of food, before sitting down alongside Diana. Nobody quite knew what to make of Amber as she kept herself to herself. Diana, of course, wanted to be friends with just about everyone, and Amber had decided that it was simpler to let Diana have her way than try to fight it - that had been Harper's advice. Diana was probing those she did not know well, wanting to know their story. Harper had warned Diana not to pry into other people's past lives, but Diana craved knowledge of any type and she simply wanted to be friendly. Amber, however, she enjoyed being alone, but she figured that that was not going to be allowed and the twelve-year-old was allowing Scarlett to guide her - to a point.

As she dug into her plate of food, trying to listen to parts of Diana's constant chattering - how the girl actually managed to eat, Amber couldn't fathom - Amber noticed that she was being studied from afar. She looked up to find Kaitlin examining her. The eight-year-old tended to freak Amber out. She was simply not a normal child, to Amber's thinking, and neither were her friends. Harper appeared to have fought a minor war - and lost. Where she could have gained such injuries without being hauled off by Social Services, Amber had no idea. She could not stand that Olivia girl - she was always snogging the boy, Craig . . . slut! Amber was watching everybody and taking in what she saw, and mentally noting down her thoughts on each person. Sarah and Cassie were

sisters, as were Harper and Keira. The new boy, Jake - he was nice . . . ewww! Amber had no time for boys, although parts of her had other ideas which crept her out. Amber had not had much contact with boys as she grew up, so they were a total mystery to the girl.

"Come on, Amber: smile!" Scarlett suggested.

Amber smiled and she decided that it was no great loss.

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After stuffing their faces with their main course, the kids, with their insatiable appetites, moved straight onto pudding.

Finally, there was quiet as the kid's mouths were crammed with Christmas Pudding, and a host of other sweet, unhealthy specialities. Even those normally able to talk while they ate were not using their special ability, deciding instead to simply enjoy the food arrayed before them. Naturally, Olivia was giggling almost continuously while Craig whispered sweet nothings in her ear as she ate. Pretty much everybody ignored the two lovebirds - most thought it was disgusting.

"Those two are putting me off my food," Kaitlin grumbled as she shovelled food into her mouth.

"You have a valid point," Jessica grinned. "For once."

"I am full of wonders," Kaitlin replied. "Don't be fooled by the little girl exterior."

Naomi burst out laughing, almost spraying her pudding across the room. Kaitlin simply scowled at Naomi. Cassie raised an eyebrow at her youngest daughter's profound comment and chuckled. Kaitlin was right - the little girl was full of wonders; some of them rather undesirable, but Cassie would have her no other way. Naomi was a very different girl, but she had her own wonders, just like Kaitlin. For her first family gathering in her new home, Cassie was very pleased with the result. For the very first time, she felt complete. She had her perfect home, she had her husband-to-be, and she had three amazing youngsters as her children.

Not bad for a young twenty-year-old woman, she thought.

That evening

There was more chaos.

Maybe a sleepover had not been the best idea, but it was happening. The plan had hung loosely around the older children acting in a mature fashion and helping to keep the younger children under control. Cassie figured that had gone out of the window the moment she saw thirteen-year-old Olivia Kensington streaking across the landing as she ran between Naomi's and Kaitlin's bedrooms. She was closely followed by an equally naked almost thirteen-year-old Charlotte and the naked almost twelve-year-old Jessica Kensington. Christopher, Ewan, Jake, Jeremy, Craig, and Jordan were laughing their heads off at the girls' antics while Harper, Scarlett, and Diana were winding up Nika and Sasha, causing the two canines to bark loudly. Not surprisingly, Kaitlin was also naked, as was Naomi.

Why, Cassie did *not* want to know!

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"They naked?" Andrew asked.

"Take one guess!" Cassie grinned.

"They are what they are, I suppose," Keira reasoned. "They find fun in ways that seem outrageous and strange to us."

"Even Olivia?" Sinead asked.

"She went through a lot, that girl," Cassie admitted with a grin. "To be honest, I think she's part *Predator* now."

"I would agree," Sarah commented. "She's gone wild, just like my nieces."

"A bunch of psychotic animals, if you ask me," Eric grinned.

Everybody laughed.

"Adds a bit of excitement to life," Cameron commented.

"That, it does," Natasha agreed.

"Anybody for another beer?" Andrew asked as he got up from his chair and headed into the kitchen.

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"Why are they all so strange?"

"They are what they are, Amber," Kate replied.

"Everybody is entitled to a little fun," Dakota conceded. "Even if naked."

"It's obscene," Amber continued. "Why would anybody want to run around naked all the time - it's not like anybody is forcing them to put themselves on display. Kaitlin is weird, so I kind of expect her to behave weirdly, I suppose, but Olivia is thirteen and she should know better than to show off her tits to everybody."

Kate laughed.

"Just 'cause you don't have any tits," Dakota suggested.

"You saying I'm too chicken to streak?" Amber scowled.

"I never said anything," Kate stated.

"I dare you to strip and go kiss Sasha," Dakota challenged.

Amber glared at Dakota for a moment before she pulled off her pyjamas and stood before the other two girls, completely naked in Naomi's bedroom. The twelve-year-old took a deep breath and she bolted for the room in search of Sasha.

"What are you doing, Amber?" Scarlett demanded as the girl ran past completely naked.

"Showing that she isn't a chicken," Dakota grinned.

"That girl is so strange!" Scarlett commented.

Meanwhile, Amber, her face scarlet, ran into Kaitlin's bedroom where she found Sasha being stroked by the now dressed Kaitlin and Jake. Amber ignored the other kids in the room as she grabbed Sasha's head and kissed him on the nose. There was laughter from the doorway as Scarlett, Dakota, and Kate watched Amber.

"Happy?" Amber demanded.

"Yeah!" Dakota laughed.

Amber vanished from sight and a door was heard to slam at the opposite end of the landing.

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"Are you nuts?" Scarlett asked as Amber sat on her sleeping bag, having pulled on her pyjamas.

"Definitely, to pull a stunt like that," Amber replied.

"I didn't think you had it in you."

"Neither, did I."

"It was funny, though," Scarlett grinned. "It was the first time I've seen you in the buff."

"And the last."

"Live a little, Amber - you'll enjoy life more that way," Scarlett advised.

"We'll see," Amber replied as she climbed into her sleeping bag. "I'm tired - night."

"Night, Amber."

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Scarlett headed out to see what the others were up to.

She found the girls laughing - mostly about Amber - but other things too. There was also some entertainment, too. Charlotte was showing off her dancing skills - which were not half bad, Scarlett thought. Apparently, she was dancing to one of her favourite songs - a Sia track - which Scarlett recognised, and they were part way through:

Here comes the shame, here comes the shame

Everybody cheered as Charlotte executed a perfect forward splits.

"She's flexible!" Diana noted as Charlotte continued to dance.

One, two, three, one, two, three, drink

One, two, three, one, two, three, drink

One, two, three, one, two, three, drink

Throw em back till I lose count

Charlotte then demonstrated how good a dancer she really was as she continued to dance along with the track.

I'm gonna swing from the chandelier, from the chandelier

There was another rousing cheer as Charlotte completed an amazing front aerial somersault without her hands touching the floor - a remarkable feat of flexibility and skill.

I'm gonna live like tomorrow doesn't exist

Like it doesn't exist

I'm gonna fly like a bird through the night, feel my tears as they dry

I'm gonna swing from the chandelier, from the chandelier

The cheering when Charlotte finally finished her dance routine was loud enough that Cassie and Keira came up the stairs to order everybody to bed.

"That includes you, Diana," Keira said as Diana pretended to ignore the order.

Harper hauled Diana out of Jake's bedroom and pushed her towards Kaitlin's bedroom where they were both sleeping that night.

"Boys!" Cassie yelled. "In Jake's bedroom and nowhere else!"

"Olivia and the other girls will have to settle with playing with themselves," Keira added. "Or each other."

"Ewww!" Harper exclaimed.

"So gross!" Diana called out.

"I'd pay to watch a bit of that," Craig commented.

"Me, too," Jordan added.

"Dirty bastards!" Kate growled as she stalked off to her allocated bedroom.

"Just remember to wash those fingers in the morning, Katie," Jordan called out.

Kate turned, and she raised a fist, but Keira swept the girl away and towards the bedroom.

"Boys!" she yelled.

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When it was finally time for the adults to sleep - the women got the bedroom upstairs while the men slept down in the living room.

As Cassie and Keira headed up the stairs, behind Sarah, Sinead, and Natasha, they looked into each bedroom in turn. Everyone was in bed, with some fast asleep, while others whispered and giggled quietly. Kaitlin came running out of her bedroom when she heard Cassie muttering to Keira. The eight-year-old wrapped her arms around Cassie's waist and squeezed with all her strength.

"Thanks for today, Mum - love you."

With that, Kaitlin vanished back into her bedroom, squeezing into bed with Naomi and Jessica while Harper and Diana slept on the floor in sleeping bags.

"Night, girls," Keira said, and she saw Harper and Diana grinning happily.

"Night!" Harper replied.

"Night, Keira," Diana added.

"Night, Mom!" Naomi called out.

Jessica was already asleep, so she said nothing. The next stop was Naomi's room with the older girls. Dakota and Kate were sharing the bed while Olivia, Charlotte, Scarlett, and Amber slept on the floor in sleeping bags. There was giggling going on between Dakota and Kate while all, but Charlotte, were fast asleep.

"Night, girls," Cassie called out.

"Night!" the three girls replied.

The final stop was Jake's bedroom. Before they even opened the door, Keira could hear the immature laughter expected of a bunch of adolescent boys. The room was fairly full, what with four boys stretched out on the floor in their sleeping bags and Jake in the bed on his own. Apparently, none of the boys felt like sharing with Jake.

"Get some sleep, please, boys," Keira directed.

"Aye, aye, ma'am!" Jake called out to general laughter.

"Night, Jake," Cassie laughed.

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Cassie and Sarah were sharing the bed while Keira, Sinead, and Natasha were on the floor in sleeping bags.

As far as they were concerned, adult or not, they were going to have a fun sleepover. As such, Sinead started things off.

"Okay, I'll begin, we tell one each, and we'll see who has the best joke. Why shouldn't you let a man's mind wander?" Sinead paused for a few seconds.

"Because it's way too little to be out all alone!"

Once the laughter had died down, Keira took over.

"What's the difference between a knife and an argumentative man?" she said before pausing. "A knife has a point."

The girls were getting into the spirit of things as Natasha thought one up.

"Not bad, Keira," she said. "Why did God make Adam before Eve?"

"No idea," Sinead said.

"Everyone needs a rough draft before they make the final copy," Natasha responded.

The laughter was getting louder, so Cassie piped up.

"Pipe down, guys - you'll wake the little shits," she warned. "My turn: Men are like snowstorms . . . you never know when he's cumming, how many inches you'll get, or how long he will last."

That joke went down well, then Sarah took a turn.

"A tough looking group of hairy bikers are riding down a road when they see a girl about to jump off a bridge, so they stop. The leader, a big burly man, gets off his bike and he asks, 'What are you doing?' The woman responds, 'I am going to commit suicide.' While the biker does not want to appear insensitive, he also does not want to miss an opportunity, so he asks, 'Well, before you jump, why don't you give me a kiss?' After a moment's thought, she does, and it is a long, deep, lingering kiss. After she's finished, the tough, hairy biker says, 'Wow! That was the best kiss I've ever had! That's a real talent you're wasting; you could be famous. Why are you committing suicide?' The girl grimaces as she responds, 'My parents don't like me dressing up like a girl. . .'"

There was a pause while everybody digested the joke and then there was loud raucous laughter from each person present.

"Sarah wins," Sinead decided.

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Down in the living room, Andrew, Blake, Cameron, and Eric were casually chatting as they lay in their sleeping bags.

"Hey!" Eric said. "I've got a joke: As an airplane is about to crash, a female passenger jumps up frantically and announces, 'If I'm going to die, I want to die feeling like a woman.' She removes all her clothing and asks, 'Is there

someone on this plane who is man enough to make me feel like a woman?' A man stands up, removes his shirt and says, 'Here, iron this!'

"Don't say that with Cassie around," Andrew said as he laughed. "She'll cause you great pain. I made the mistake of telling one of those jokes and I couldn't feel my left shoulder for an hour."

"What joke was it?" Blake asked.

"Okay. Is Google male or female?"

"No idea," Eric replied.

"Female, because it doesn't let you finish a sentence before making a suggestion," Andrew replied to general laughter.

"Okay," Blake said. "Try this one on for size: A boy asks his dad, 'What's the difference between potential and realistic?' His dad tells him to go ask the rest of his family if they'd sleep with Brad Pitt for a million dollars, and then he would tell him the answer. The boy goes up to his mum and asks her. She responds, 'A million dollars is a lot of money, sweetheart. I could send you, your sister, and your brother to great colleges, so sure, I would.' He then goes and asks his sister to which she replies, 'Brad Pitt? Hell yeah; he's the hottest guy ever!' Next, the boy asks his brother who replies, 'A million dollars? Hell, yes, I would; I'd be rich.' When the boy excitedly returns to his dad with the family's responses, the dad explains, 'Well son, potentially, we have three million dollars. Realistically, we have two sluts and a queer.'"

After some laughter, Cameron came up with *his* joke.

"A man escapes from prison where he has been for a long stretch. He finds a house, and he breaks into it looking for money and guns. Inside, he finds a young couple in bed. He orders the guy out of bed and ties him to a chair. He ties the girl to the bed and he gets on top of her, kisses her neck, and then gets up and goes into the bathroom. While he is in there, the husband tells his wife, 'Listen, this guy is an escaped convict; look at his clothes. He probably spent lots of time in jail and he hasn't seen a woman in years. I saw how he kissed your neck. If he wants sex, don't resist, don't complain, just do whatever he tells you. Satisfy him no matter how much he nauseates you. This guy is probably very dangerous and if he gets angry, he'll kill us. Be strong, honey; I love you.' His wife responds, 'He wasn't kissing my neck. He was whispering in my ear. He told me he was gay, thought you were cute, and he asked me if we had any Vaseline. I told him it was in the bathroom. Be strong honey; I love you, too.'"

The laughter echoed up the stairs.

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"Okay," Sarah said. "How about an embarrassing story?"

"Sounds good," Sinead responded. "What is it about?"

"Cassandra's first period."

"No, fucking way, Sarah!" Cassie exclaimed, poking her big sister in the side.

Sarah ignored her little sister and began the story.

"Let's see - a little over seven years ago, Cassandra was about three weeks shy of her thirteenth birthday. I was fifteen and, to be honest, I found my little sister to be an annoying hindrance. However, puberty had not been easy for her, and I didn't really help her out much. I did intervene at school when boys

teased her, but only when I felt like it. I wasn't the nicest big sister and Cassandra stayed at arm's length unless she felt like bugging the hell out of me. Well, one night, I was awoken by my little sister climbing into my bed - she was crying, so I allowed it . . . she was my sister, after all, and I did love her. Well, a few hours later, I awoke to find something not feeling right and when I put my hand down the bed, it came back wet. I threw back the duvet and turned on the light. My sheets were red, and my pyjamas were soaked in what could only be period blood - it wasn't mine; I wasn't due for another couple of weeks, and I didn't think that Cassandra had started her periods. To be honest, she barely had any breasts and her pubic hair was abysmal."

"Was not!" Cassandra interrupted.

"Please, most boys had bigger boobs than you," Sarah teased. "Still a bit small, to be honest! Anyway - I woke up the sleeping Cassandra and I told her to check herself. She screamed when she pushed down her pyjama bottoms and she found her groin and thighs covered in blood. She began to sob, and it took me several minutes to calm her down and explain what it was. Mum then appeared, and she took Cassandra away for a shower, and she told me to get my bed cleaned up. I felt sorry for my little sister, but only so far."

"Yeah, she teased the fuck out of me for weeks afterwards," Cassie growled.

"I'll tell you the story about her first tampon another night," Sarah chuckled.

The other women present laughed as Cassie just scowled into the darkness.

Two days later

Wednesday, December 28th

Dreadnought House

Everything was getting back to normal.

Christmas was over, and everybody was preparing for the upcoming New Year celebrations. Cassie had enjoyed the entertaining, but it had been exhausting. While 'normal' in her household was entirely relative, it was *her* normal, and she loved it. As she walked into the kitchen, that morning, she found Kaitlin, wearing only her pyjama bottoms, digging into an overflowing bowl of Coco Pops - just like most mornings. Next to appear was a scruffy-looking Naomi, yawning madly as she sat down at the table. After a few moments, the nine-year-old stood up and she grabbed a bowl, a spoon, and the box of Weetabix. Somehow, despite her semi-dazed state, Naomi managed to place three Weetabix into her bowl, several scoops of sugar, and then drown them with copious amounts of milk - not to mention leaving milk, bits of Weetabix, and some sugar scattered across the table top. There was very little chatter as the two girls concentrated on their cereal. Cassie made herself a mug of tea, placing a mug down for each of the two girls.

For breakfast, Cassie opted for toast as usual, and she cut two thick slices from the loaf of wholemeal bread before she dropped the slices into the toaster and pushed down the lever. As she reached into a cupboard for the marmalade, Jake and Andrew slunk into the kitchen. Andrew went straight to the kettle and he made two mugs of tea, one for him, and one for the tired boy who stood beside him. Nobody in the household was good first thing in the morning - not even Cassie. Sasha lay on the floor under the table, awaiting any fallen scraps, and he was snoring. It took a further forty minutes for life to gradually return to them all and that was when the tranquil silence was broken as Kaitlin dropped her spoon noisily into her empty cereal bowl and she bolted

for the door. Cassie caught her as she went, grabbing the eight-year-old around the stomach.

"What's the hurry?" Cassie asked.

"I have things to do, and I don't want to miss a minute of the day," Kaitlin replied.

"Bowl - dishwasher," Cassie reminded the youngster.

"Okay!" Kaitlin groaned as she reluctantly executed the highly difficult task of placing one mug, one bowl, and one spoon into the dishwasher.

"Children!" Naomi commented as she placed her own items into the dishwasher without being asked.

Kaitlin scowled and ran out of the kitchen, closely followed by Naomi. Cassie could hear the two girls bickering over something and she chuckled.

"Can I take Sasha for a walk, please?" Jake asked as he placed his dirty items into the dishwasher.

Sasha appeared from under the table, suddenly wide awake with his tail wagging.

"Of course," Cassie replied, and Jake vanished with Sasha running after the boy.

"Life is fun around here," Andrew chuckled as he gave his wife-to-be a hug.

"Yes, it is," Cassie replied as she enjoyed the hug.

Life was good.

Blairhoyle

Alexandra was enjoying another pleasant, but chilly, morning.

She strolled outside, enjoying the chilly air and the peace that their countryside home provided. However, she paused as she heard feet pounding towards her and she turned to see Charlotte come to a very rapid halt next to her. The girl was grinning excitedly, and she was obviously buzzing to ask something.

"You have something to ask, Charlie?" Alexandra asked.

"How did you know?" Charlotte asked.

"Please - I have brought up two girls, already."

"Okay. I need to ask a favour, Alexandra. Some of the girls from school are going out, Thursday afternoon and into the evening . . . I'd like to go out with them . . . it's just into Stirling - pizza, cinema. Can I go, please?"

Alexandra thought about it for a moment. It was still a little too early to allow the almost-thirteen-year-old to go out on her own, and Alexandra had also heard more than a few troubling things about some the girls whom Charlotte saw as friends. As a parent, Alexandra had always taken a keen look at who her daughters had seen as friends, ensuring that Sarah and Cassie did not fall in with the wrong crowd. Alexandra was determined to guided Charlotte in the very same way, just as if the girl was her own flesh and blood. Alexandra could see the hope in the young girl's eyes, and she felt bad for having to dash those hopes. Charlotte was not a normal child, and she needed protection from a world which she did not know.

"I'd rather you didn't, Charlie. Maybe in the New Year, okay?"

Alexandra saw the instant change in the girl's eyes. They darkened for a moment, before clearing.

"Please, Alexandra - I'll do anything; you can trust me."

"It's still a little early for you going out on your own, honey."

"You don't trust me, do you?" Charlotte growled. "I made a mistake and chose to become a Marauder. That choice is always going to haunt me, and not one of you is ever going to give me a chance, are you?"

"I am not going to argue this, Charlotte," Alexandra replied. "Please accept my decision."

Alexandra saw the annoyed expression as Charlotte turned and began to walk back to the house.

'Teenagers!' she thought with a chuckle.

The following evening
Thursday, December 29th

Blairhoyle

Alexandra stepped out of the kitchen and she called up the stairs.

"Charlie! Dinner!"

Normally, there was the stampede of feet as the youngster pounded down the stairs, eager for food. Instead, there was silence. After five minutes, Alexandra tried again.

"Charlie! Dinner time! *Charlie!*"

"I'll go find her, Mum," Sarah suggested, and she headed up the stairs.

"Probably engrossed listening to her music," Richard commented.

A few moments later, Sarah came back down, a confused expression on her face.

"Well?" her mother asked. "Is she coming down?"

"There's no sign of her, Mum."

A few hours later

Blairhoyle

Charlotte looked up as her bedroom door was pushed open.

Normally, people knocked, so Charlotte glared at whoever it was. Then she changed her expression very quickly once she saw who it was.

"You have some explaining to do, young lady," Alexandra said calmly.

"I only went into Stirling with my friends - nothing happened," Charlotte replied insolently.

"I thought I said, no, Charlotte."

"I'm old enough to look after myself."

"You are still a child."

"Maybe, but I've done a lot more than most adults have . . . and I can look after myself - it's not like anybody could actually rape me; I'd kill them the moment they laid a finger on me."

"You are not helping your case, Charlotte. You are grounded for one week. Now, get to sleep."

Charlotte was fuming as Alexandra left the bedroom and closed the door.

The following night

Friday, December 30th

Blairhoyle

Charlotte pushed open the backdoor, and very carefully she crept into the kitchen which was pleasantly empty.

The girl crept across the kitchen and headed out into the dark hallway before turning for the stairs. After three steps, a light came on.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" Alexandra demanded from where she had been sitting on the stairs.

"I was only enjoying some time out with my friends," Charlotte replied in a slightly aggressive tone.

"You are outside of your curfew, young lady."

Charlotte grinned for a moment, refocussing her responses.

"I'm sorry, Alexandra - I won't do it again, I promise."

"Get upstairs and stay in your bedroom. A decision will be made on your future, tonight."

Charlotte winced - maybe Alexandra was not the pushover that she had expected.

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As she reached her bedroom, Charlotte slammed the door and then dived onto her bed.

She figured that she had screwed up, but she also figured, rather brazenly, that her new family were the forgiving sort - she hoped. However, she figured that maybe she had fucked up, and she felt tears welling up inside as she considered the possible outcomes of her behaviour. Then she found herself sobbing at the realisation of what she had risked.

Outside the bedroom door, Sarah could hear the sobbing, but her own emotions were mixed as to what should happen to the girl.

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Forty minutes later, Charlotte was more than a little apprehensive as she was led from her bedroom by Sarah.

Somehow, she felt like she was leaving her cell on death row and being led to her execution. That feeling was confirmed as she was led into the living room. Sarah motioned Charlotte to stand before the couch where three people sat while Sarah went and sat down in a chair. Other than Sarah, Charlotte found herself facing Natasha and Cameron. She began shaking and she realised that she had

really pushed things way too far . . . way - too - far. She began sobbing again without knowing it and pleading for clemency. Natasha stood up and she glared down at the sobbing twelve-year-old.

"Cut it, the fuck out, Grey!" Natasha demanded sharply, and Charlotte's expression changed to one of disbelief, but her tears remained. "We don't need those crocodile tears, girl - so fake!"

"They are not *bloody* FAKE!" Charlotte retorted angrily.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, young lady," Cassie directed as she grabbed a thick folder from a table. "Are you Charlotte Grey?"

"You know I am."

Cassie began to read from the folder.

"Charlotte Lorna Bailey was born on the first of February 2004, in York, England. She was taken for *Urban Predator* in February 2012 at the tender age of eight. Her identity was reassigned on completion of basic training and she became Charlotte Grey - the young girl who now stands before us. Does that sound correct, Charlotte?"

It was the very first time that she had heard those details and she was quite surprised - and a little unnerved - to find out that they had her *Urban Predator* file.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay," Cassie continued. "You completed Phase 1 training in February 2013 with very favourable marks on your training. We see you struggled, but with the help of Jake, you got through training. Blah, blah, blah. Short for your age, back then, apparently - that's improved some! Now, Charlotte, I want you to read the highlighted portion."

Charlotte took the folder from Cassie and she focussed on a particular passage which had been highlighted in yellow.

"Out loud, if you please," Cassie directed.

Charlotte's shoulders slumped as she quickly read what she was about to read out loud and she felt the noose tightening around her neck. She began to speak, barely recognising her own voice.

"*Grey is deemed on-track for her Phase 2 training. Her entry into puberty a few months after her eleventh birthday initiated a growth spurt allowing her to match her contemporaries in height as expected. The girl has also developed an intriguing, if sometimes undesirable, ability to manipulate and turn people to her advantage.*" She paused, "This isn't me. . ."

"Continue," Cassie directed coldly.

Charlotte felt the tears returning as she continued to read.

"*From the age of ten, Grey began to twist people, both instructors and her fellow Predators, as she talked herself out of trouble or into a more desirable position. On numerous occasions, Grey has demonstrated a cold selfishness and a Machiavellian motivation to assist her with her progress as a Predator. Of the three personality traits for the so-called 'dark triad', Grey has demonstrated the aforementioned Machiavellianism trait and there appears to be a limited set of psychopathic tendencies beginning to surface. For the moment, though, there have been no obvious signs of any narcissistic tendencies, but that may change as Grey gets older. Instructors have been warned not to tolerate her*

manipulation and to put a swift stop to any outward attempts at manipulation which may be deemed a danger to instructors, Predators, or the program in general."

Charlotte finished reading and she just stared down at the printed words, her tears dripping onto the paper. The silence as the four adults simply looked at her was more than the youngster could bear and she sobbed as she stood there before them.

"After everything that people have done for you," Cassie said quietly. "Hit Girl wanted you all to have a second chance. We thought that you could be trusted, but we were obviously very wrong. . ."

"I can be trusted!" Charlotte interrupted.

"No, you cannot be trusted," Natasha responded. "Do not interrupt."

"Was what they wrote in that folder wrong?" Cameron asked as he spoke for the first time.

"Yes . . . no . . . yes, but . . . I'm not like that anymore. Please believe me. I would never do anything like that to you all - I love it here."

"I think you should go back to Hit Girl until she is happy that you are properly rehabilitated."

"NO!"

"Until then, this goes back on," Cassie said as she took the folder away from Charlotte and she produced the ankle monitor.

Charlotte's face went very pale and she began to beg. It took both Cameron and Natasha to pin the struggling girl to the floor while the monitor was fitted to her left ankle by Cassie. All the time, the girl struggled and fought as she sobbed hysterically in floods of tears. Charlotte yelled out and very quickly she began struggling to breathe as she worked herself into such a state that she was released, and she just lay on the floor panting for breath. She was shaking and sweating as she struggled to take in a breath.

Then the girl suddenly bolted for the closest bathroom and she vomited violently.

..._...

Cassie stood by the door to the living room, awaiting Charlotte's return.

She felt a hand on her arm - it was Kaitlin (she had insisted on going along with Cassie), and she looked very angry.

"What is it, honey?"

"I believe her, and I think that you should too."

"You were listening in, were you? I know you always like to see the good in people, but Charlotte is highly skilled at manipulation and twisting people to get her own way," Cassie explained gently. "We have no idea if she has truly reformed."

"Please give her another chance - just one more," Kaitlin asked.

"We can't - we have no way of trusting her."

"I trust her - something inside of me says that she's innocent - well, yes, she fucked up, but I fuck up too, and you've never suggested sending me away."

"I would never send you away, Kaitlin."

"Then why would you send Charlotte away?"

Cassie smiled down at the young girl.

"I'll see what I can do, okay?"

"That's all I ask," Kaitlin replied, still looking angry.

"Okay, honey - go get ready to go as we need to get home."

..._...

Charlotte returned, and she looked thoroughly miserable while her face was white and streaked with tears.

"Charlotte, sit down," Cassie directed, pointing at a chair.

Once Charlotte was seated, Cassie studied the young girl, searching for any hint of malice or manipulation. Then, after a pause, Cassie knelt down, and she lifted Charlotte's chin so that she could look directly into the twelve-year-old's eyes. The blue eyes had lost their usual sparkle, and for the first time, Cassie saw real fear in those eyes.

"We are at a crossroads, Charlotte," Cassie began. "One road takes you back across the Atlantic Ocean and to Chicago where you will return to Level 8. I know you don't want that - and to be honest, neither do I."

Cassie saw a faint flicker of hope in those young eyes.

"Give me your ankle."

Cassie gently removed the ankle monitor and she saw a look of intense gratitude appear on the young girl's face.

"You have one week, Charlotte Grey, to sort out your life," Cassie directed as she stood up. "You are on probation and you fuck up, you have a one-way ticket westward. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," came the, almost whispered, response.

"LOUDER!" Cassie almost bellowed, shaking Charlotte to the core.

"Yes, ma'am," the shaking Charlotte responded.

"Go upstairs, get yourself cleaned up, and get into bed," Cassie directed.

The young girl fled from the room.

..._...

As Charlotte washed herself in the shower, she struggled to process everything that was happening to her.

Everything had been good but then everything had suddenly taken a nasty turn for the worse. She was on the verge of being sent back to that subterranean hellhole in Chicago. No, that was *not* going to happen. She could not take living in that depressing place again. When she returned to her bedroom, she looked at the clock beside her bed - it was a few minutes before midnight. She did some quick maths in her head and she grabbed her mobile phone, running through the contacts before selecting a number. It took a few seconds to connect before the phone at the other end began to ring.

"Hello."

"Abigail?"

"Hi, Charlie!" Abigail called out from Chicago.

"I've fucked up."

"What do you mean?" Abigail asked her friend.

"They want to send me back . . . to Level 8."

"What have you done?" Abigail asked, aghast at the news.

"I broke curfew and went out when I was told not to. Not to mention the other things I've done. They put me on probation."

"Christ, Charlotte! You can get through this. You got through your time on Level 8 and I know you can do this. You're a good person, Charlie."

"Maybe you should have killed me when you had the chance, Abigail."

"Don't you fucking talk like that!" Abigail almost shouted.

"I don't know what to do - you're the only person I have to talk to."

"You have friends over there, Charlotte. You are not alone. Talk to Cassie."

"She's the one who put me in hack."

"I promise you that she's fair - talk to them and ask for help."

"Okay," Charlotte replied. "Thanks for listening to me whine."

"Anytime, Charlie - I'm your friend, and always will be. Stay strong."

"Thanks. Bye, Abigail."

"Sleep tight, Charlie."