

Friday, 17th June, 2016

Early evening

Scotland

United Kingdom

We were *not* the most orthodox family in the world.

“Get out of my room!” I yelled and the two eleven-year-olds scampered out laughing and giggling.

Though they both drove me around the bend, I was relieved that they *were* able to laugh and giggle. Especially, after what they had both been through. The three of us had shared a single violent event just eight weeks previously. I felt that it had been much worse for my younger sister, Jess; not only had she lost her parents, just as I had, but she had also been savagely wounded and, as a direct result, she had spent a month in hospital. The cast had only come off her shoulder the previous week and she was still relearning how to use her left arm. While I too had been wounded, my wound had only been a simple flesh wound which had healed fully within the first month. As for my new step-brother, he had lost somebody too, but he got on with Jess really, really, well and the two of them could *not* keep out of trouble!

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I had always thought of my former neighbours, and now step-parents, as boring. Then, I had found out what my new step-parents used to do for a living. Without them, though, the Kingston family would have been completely wiped out. Sometimes, I cried at night and I wished that I had died too; survivor’s guilt they called it, but then I would be very grateful for my second chance at life and for that of my sister. It was a strange feeling to have parents – even step-parents – who killed for a living, and *not* be freaked out about it – apparently, their own kids had never even known. Jess and Chris had taken to it a lot better than I had.

Then, we had all been uprooted from everything that we had ever known and driven north – a long way north – all the way to Scotland. I had never been so far north and I was a little concerned that Scotland might not have Facebook but Jessica had told me to stop being so stupid and Chris had laughed.

Okay, I was not the most tech-savvy!

One week previously

None of the kids had even seen their new home – not until the day that they drove north.

The drive had been long and arduous not least because of three tired kids who just wanted to arrive and rest. They were each fed up of sitting in traffic jam after traffic jam as they meandered up the country’s motorway network. Finally, after many hours, they arrived at their destination.

“Woah!” Olivia breathed as they swept through a set of electric cast iron gates and then up the tree-lined drive in the Jaguar XJL to the gravel turning circle directly before the main house which was a stunning white on the outside.

“It’s amazing!” Jessica muttered to herself.

“It’s enormous!” Christopher chipped in.

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The house was referred to as Moss-side Hall of Boquhapple and was built in 1991 on the site of a ruined farm steading. The building was constructed of harled brick under an overhanging slate roof. The house was approached by a stone terrace which led up to steps to the portico with double wooden doors.

In the reception hall, a sweeping staircase led upwards before splitting to the left and right to the same galleried landing on the first floor. At the top of the stairs, Jasper pointed to the room on the right.

"The teenager goes in there."

"Cool!"

Olivia vanished into her new room. Jasper escorted the remaining youngsters into the room on the left.

"One of you gets this room and through the bathroom, over there, is another room for the other one."

Jessica walked into the bathroom and then looked through into the other bedroom. She came back and looked at Christopher.

"You *dare* come in while I'm in the shower and I'll cut your balls off!"

"Jessica!" Jasper exclaimed.

"I'm a girl; I need . . ."

". . . to apologise!" Olivia finished as she entered the bedroom and clamped a hand over her sister's mouth.

Jessica pulled her sister's hand away and looked over at Jasper.

"Sorry."

"Jessica?" Olivia hinted.

"Sorry, Chris. I'm a girl; I need privacy."

Olivia laughed

"Jess, you have *nothing* for Chris to see," Olivia reminded her younger sister.

"Do, too."

"Nothing!" Olivia persisted with a grin.

"Okay – but I will have."

"Yes, you will."

Jessica turned back to Chris.

"Chris, could I have this room so I can be next to my sister?"

"Of course, you can, little sis."

“You’re only a week older than me, not so big brother!”

The unpacking had been long and tedious but the essentials had been put away.

Jessica had asked if she should put photos of Mum and Dad up and I had said yes. I knew that Jasper and Lynn would not mind and they had told me as much. As far as they were concerned they were just helping to take care of Jessica and me, not replacing our parents. I thought it important that Jessica never forgot our parents. She was young and I knew that her mind was often on other things but I wanted her to remember Mum and Dad as they were.

By the end of the very long day, everybody was very tired and the adults were cranky. To save overt warfare, Jasper had ordered the two younger kids to their bedrooms soon after dinner. As a ‘responsible teenager’ – Jessica had laughed at that – I was allowed to stay up and help until I felt it was time for bed. Eventually, I could not keep my eyes open, so I headed upstairs. I checked in on the youngsters and I was surprised to not hear them as I came up the stairs. The reason for the silence became apparent.

The two youngsters had both fallen asleep on Chris’ bed.

Saturday, 18th June

Early evening

Moss-side Hall

“Chris, honey, could you set the table for dinner, please?”

“Yeah, Mum.”

“Jessica – help Chris, please . . .”

“I’m watching TV . . .”

“I’m working out your pocket money . . .”

There was a brief scrambling sound and my sister quickly bolted off the chair all smiles and headed for the dining room. I just rolled my eyes and went back to my Facebook. Sanity came from my friends and as long as I could talk to them, I was fine.

I just hoped that my life could return to normal and that nothing weird would happen.

Monday, 20th June

Government Communications Headquarters

The Doughnut, Cheltenham, England

“Good morning, Commanders. I am Commander Lawrence and I will be briefing you on your new posting.”

The Commander paced up and down for a moment before he turned to Jasper.

“Vengeance.”

Jasper looked taken aback for a moment, however, as was the fact for most naval officers, he was well used to unorthodox briefing methods.

"The verb or the vigilante organisation?" he replied quickly.

"The latter."

"A paramilitary organisation based on the American *Fusion*, I believe."

"Very good, Commander. You will be their MI5 contact, taking over from me . . . locally."

"What!"

Commander Lawrence chuckled.

"*Vengeance* is just what you described it as. However, they are partially funded and often tasked by HMG."

"HMG supports vigilantism?"

"It is a curse of the modern world, Commander. Too many arseholes that need to die but no death penalty."

"You're telling me that *Vengeance* is supported by HMG and is therefore operating outside the law?" Lynn Collins asked.

"For a certain amount of what they do, yes."

Jasper groaned.

"By listening to this we have already been deemed to have accepted the posting and we are now delving into special compartmented information?" Jasper stated.

Lawrence smiled deviously.

"Got it in one, Commander."

"Okay – you want us to be handlers for an organisation of unknown idiots who hide behind masks while acting as judge, jury, and executioner on the streets of the United Kingdom," Jasper announced without any attempt at hiding his annoyance.

Lawrence went very serious for a moment.

"I know *each and every one* of those 'idiots' and I have seen them each fight for justice and for those who cannot fight for themselves. I will not hear a word raised against them, *from anybody*. I would suggest that you get to know them first before you begin judging them, Commander Collins."

Commander Collins took the obvious veiled threat for what it was.

"My apologies. As you say, I should get to know them first *before* I jump to any conclusions."

"Okay – I will now run you through the members of *Vengeance* and how they came to be who they currently are. The organisation is headed by fraternal twins, Cameron and Natasha King . . ."

Three hours later . . .

"As you can see, they had a traumatic time in France but they accomplished their mission and *Urban Predator* was no more. Any questions?"

Jasper and Lynn Collins just sat there in shocked silence. Both were stunned by everything that had just been thrown at them. They had been informed about *Fusion*, Hit Girl, *Urban Predator*, The Chicago Vigilantes, Gotham, The Waterloo Killings, the mysterious activities on The Rock a few months previously, and many other events. Some of the events were new to them while others were either believed to be apocryphal or events that were deemed unbelievable.

"Okay – that is a lot to handle. Will our family be put at risk?" Lynn finally asked.

"No. Both *Vengeance* and *Fusion* are good people – if anything, they will be safer. You and your family would be joining a larger family. You would gain the protection of some very capable people. If the shit hit the fan as it were, you could expect Hit Girl to come to your aid."

"She comes to the UK often?"

"A lot more than she used to," Commander Lawrence admitted. "Usually she comes on business, in which case somebody usually dies quite violently; Hit Girl has a twist for the dramatic."

Jasper looked over at his wife and they both smiled.

"We're in!" Jasper concluded.

Tuesday, 21st June

Moss-side Hall, Scotland

School had been fun, but it had been a long day and I was *very* tired.

While I loved my new bedroom and my new bed, I was apprehensive every time that I slid under the soft duvet and closed my eyes. I knew that the nightmare would come, just as it always did. I would be back in my old bedroom at my old house with my family still alive. I would be rudely awakened and dragged out of my bed by a foul-smelling individual. The terror I had felt at having a strange man in my bedroom was enormous. I had screamed. I had kicked. Nothing prevented my being dragged into the living room where I had found more strange men.

Jessica and I were forced to kneel beside our parents with our hands on our heads. Jessica was sobbing and shaking with fear. I had felt confused, disorientated. Then when I tried to get an explanation from Daddy, I was struck by the back of somebody's hand. The pain had been extreme and I did not resist as my hands were bound and tape was placed over my mouth. I shook with the terror that had taken over my body.

I was forced to witness Jessica being stripped naked before all the strange men (she never spoke about it and I hoped she had forgotten about it). Then it had been my turn. I was yanked to my feet and despite my wordless pleading, my pyjamas were ripped off me. Nobody had ever seen me naked and despite the terror, I felt ashamed as the men ran their eyes over my body. I could not believe that Daddy was putting me and Jessica through such torture; what could have been so important?

The man had touched me with the end of his pistol. I had squirmed as the cold metal passed over my breasts; I felt violated and I dreaded what might happen to me next. Then everything moved very swiftly to the next level as Jessica was shot in the shoulder. I tried to scream but I could not – I could

not believe what I had just witnessed. Was Jessica dead? There was so much blood. Daddy had given in and called out a string of numbers.

After a few minutes the men had returned and that man looked me over and I felt myself shaking with abject fear. Was he going to touch me? Or worse? Oh, my God! The man just shot Daddy! The man just shot Mummy! The man then raised the pistol to my head and I thought I was going to die . . .

I was almost deafened as gunfire exploded out all around me. I did not know what to do so I tried to stand up but then I was shoved down beside my dead parents. Somebody told me to 'Stay!' like I was a dog. There was lots more gunfire and then after what seemed like hours but must have only been minutes, Jasper appeared. I must have been screaming as my mouth was open. I felt wet; I was covered in blood – my parents' blood. The ties on my wrists were cut and I felt my left hand guided to my side where I felt more blood – had I been wounded?

My right hand was placed onto Jessica's shoulder and pressed down. I was told to keep pressure on it which I did, then Jasper was gone. I barely remembered the rest as I was helped off the floor and my wound was tended to. Then I felt somebody carrying me and laying me down . . .

I had awoken to find myself on the sofa in a strange room which turned out to be our neighbours' front room. I would awake for real after that and I would be bathed in sweat and often screaming. Each time I would find either Jasper or Lynn there soothing me back to sleep.

As far as I knew, Jessica did not have any severe nightmares but I had no idea why.

Wednesday, 22nd June

Moss-side Hall, Scotland

The kids were all at school.

Lynn was busy unpacking another of the seemingly endless stream of boxes from the garage. Jasper was reading through the seemingly endless stream of files on his secure laptop. Each file related to either *Fusion*, *Vengeance*, *Urban Predator*, or a whole host of corrupt people and criminals that the vigilante organisations had put down since *Fusion's* inception. As he was opening a file entitled: 'The D'Amico Family', there came a sharp tone indicating somebody at the main gate. Jasper examined the CCTV image and saw a tall man in a dark suit standing beside his Ford Mondeo saloon.

"Hello?"

"Courier, sir."

"Identification?"

An MI5 identity card was held up to the screen. Jasper released the gate and headed for the front door while the courier drove up the drive. The courier climbed out of his car and walked towards the Commander.

"Identification, please, Commander."

Jasper pulled out his own MI5 identification and the courier checked it out before handing over a large package which Jasper had to sign for.

“Thank you, Commander.”

With that, the courier left and Jasper went back inside the house. He went directly to the Library, with Lynn in tow. There, they locked the door and opened the package. Inside, was a file containing photos and several hundred sheets of paper – plus a note with a secure video-conferencing reference.

“Somebody wants to talk with us,” Jasper chuckled as he dialled up the VC kit.

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After a few moments authentication, an image appeared on the forty-inch screen that was mounted on the wall above the fireplace in the Library.

“Good morning, Commanders!” Commander Craig Lawrence said cheerfully from his office in London.

“Commander.”

“Sorry to disturb your morning, but we have a situation that involves you both, directly. On Tuesday evening, a Government Data Storage Facility was infiltrated and a single data storage device taken. Now, you’ll both be wanting to know how this involves the two of you – well, the data stolen just happened to be the digitised version of the file your neighbours were killed for and . . .”

Commander Lawrence did *not* have to continue . . . the death of their daughter was still very fresh in their minds. After a pause, the Commander continued.

“It was not just the data stolen, which intrigued us, it was also the method used . . .”

A video appeared on the screen. It was obviously from a CCTV system and was in full colour with the usual date and time stamps along the bottom of the image. A small shape appeared on the video at around 01:30. It looked like a person in a black hooded-top with black trousers and shoes.

“It looks like a kid!” Lynn exclaimed.

After a few minutes, the person turned towards a camera for just a moment.

“It’s a little girl – she’s tiny!” Lynn exclaimed again in genuine surprise.

“Yes – we believe she may be a *Predator*,” Lawrence explained as the video ended. “Notice how she’s limping; she’s been hurt, so obviously being mistreated too.”

“I’ve not finished reading the *Urban Predator* bumph, yet – do they come that young?” Jasper enquired.

“Unfortunately, they do,” Lawrence replied. “I personally know a girl who was only seven when she was taken as a *Predator*.”

“My God!” Lynn breathed.

“Since *Urban Predator* was taken apart, we have been trying to trace every child involved. We have many missing – in the hundreds. We know some are dead – massacred – we are still matching names to remains. We know some may have escaped and they are either on their own out there, or they are being used by some unscrupulous bastards.”

“The girl may be doing this of her own free will,” Lynn commented.

“Don’t believe so – we’ve yet to come across any *Predators* who have preferred killing to having a family life. Anything is possible, though, and we *must* keep an open mind. Anyway, you have the files. Check them out.”

“We will, Commander,” Jasper replied.

“Oh – don’t forget your appointment on Thursday afternoon with your new team!”