

Atticus Benight

Krupnik Kiss Off

Kara Lieske was determined not to be the first to flinch. The woman who had raised her glared impassively across the divide, sipping a glass of home-brewed Krupnik.

An ultimatum was coming. Kara knew that at least, after watching her six sisters occupy this same chair on each of their 18th birthdays. For each of them Dinah had cracked the wax from a fresh bottle, poured two glasses and discussed their futures over the strong, honey liquor. Without exception, each daughter was given the same choice—quit school and start earning, or “piss off and never come back.” While Dinah filled and refilled her glass, Kara leaned back, arms folded across her chest, leaving the tumbler in front of her untouched.

The youngest of the seven girls, there was no denying the contrast between Kara and her sisters. The six others all had brown eyes and wore their black hair bobbed off-collar. All were well-tanned with thick, sinewy arms. In contrast, Kara’s spiraling red locks cascaded down her shoulders, stopping at her mid-back. Her skin was dungeon pale and it burned in the sun, peeled in a week, and—once healed—seemed to grow even paler and more sensitive for it.

Dinah’s dark-gray eyebrows were permanently bent in anger, as her muddy eyes locked coldly on Kara’s vivid green stare, which seemed to reflect all the light held by the dim kitchen.

“Get the fuck out,” Dinah finally broke the silence, following her words with a deliberate swallow from her glass.

Kara raised her eyebrows slightly. This was not the time in the ultimatum for “get the fuck out.” That was usually preceded by ten minutes of one-sided mandates masquerading as options.

“That’s it?” Kara asked. “No discussion. No ‘get me the money, or else?’”

“I had you for 18 damned years—18 more than I should’ve,” Dinah slurred.

“Hey, I didn’t ask to be born,” Kara said, through her gritted teeth. “And I didn’t ask for you to be born neither,” Dinah interjected her nasally, high pitched voice raised slightly. “Should never took you on. My own went without—cause of you.”

Dinah raised a gnarled knuckle from her glass then and prodded the air between herself and Kara. Kara raised an eyebrow.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Kara asked, unfolding her arms and leaning forward slightly in her chair. “I am yours.”

“Well if you mean we’re related, I guess we are that,” Dinah conceded. “But I ain’t your fucking mama—more of a wet nurse, really. My daddy brung you to me. Said he couldn’t be carrying on with a baby at his age, what with him pushing 60 and on the rocks with the tramp-of-the-week that shat you out of her little hellhole.”

Kara winced with a look of mingled anger and curiosity, but said nothing as Dinah once again refilled her glass and knocked back another mouthful of the Krupnik. Kara wondered if this rant was inspired by the drink, but deep down she suspected there was some truth to it.

“That Irish bitch crapped you out and they dumped your ass on me. Oh ‘there’ll be money’ they said. ‘It’s just for a while’ they said. Bastards. Oh—excuse me—that’d be you, wouldn’t it?” Dinah raised her glass and chuckled, her mouth curling into unnatural smile. “Can’t tell me you didn’t know. Your sisters—nah, your nieces—are mine and Alek’s, so far as he ever knew anyway. But you, you’re not my problem anymore. So get your shit and get the fuck out.”

Kara nodded thoughtfully without rising from her chair.

“I assume you have proof,” Kara finally said.

“Proof,” Dinah muttered more to herself than to Kara. “Little bitch wants proof. Got proof for her and I’ll shove it up her fuckin’ ass. Proof.”

Dinah stood swaying unsteadily for a moment before catching herself. She tottered to the large bureau sitting against the far wall. She extracted an envelope from the top drawer, turned, and slapped it down on the table in front of Kara. Kara looked up at Dinah, then back at the envelope before picking it up. She opened the flap and pulled out a birth certificate, a letter and a few random documents, and scraps of paper.

Kara unfolded the birth certificate and read her name—or was it? Kara Leigh Tew. The father’s name was familiar enough—Jacek Wyrick. That surname was the same as Dinah’s before she married Alek. But the mother listed was Alina Leigh Tew. Taken aback, Kara looked up at Dinah, who stood with an air of superiority, despite swaying on her feet.

“My last name is Tew?” Kara asked. “But at school I was always—”

“Lieske?” Dinah cut in. “Only to keep us from scandal. How would it look—my father dropping his bastard on us? No—you’d be Lieske so long as I was paying your way. But now you’re gone—you can use the name that tramp of a mother gave to you.”

“But what about your,” Kara began, pausing to look back at the paper, “our father’s name?”

“Well, aren’t you just daddy’s little princess,” Dinah scoffed.

“You’re damn lucky he even signed the papers, aren’t you? Didn’t have to. Could have left you with that hussy of a mother. Not like she didn’t already spread it for every cock that came her way. Her ass was probably redder than the hair on your head.”

Dinah pinched a lock of Kara’s hair between her thumb and forefinger and gave it a sharp tug. Kara leapt up in response, a reflex she had developed early in her childhood.

She was a full head shorter than Dinah, but the size difference had never fazed her. She proved long ago that she could hold her own. It was the only reason Dinah ceased bobbing Kara’s hair when she turned 14. On that day, Dinah held the scissors in one hand and grabbed a fistful of Kara’s hair, Kara elbowed her in the gut, knocking the air from Dinah’s lungs. In response, Dinah grabbed an egg beater from the kitchen counter and split open Kara’s head at the hairline, but it was Kara who put an end to it. She barreled in to Dinah and knocking her to the ground, twisting the scissors from her grip. In her left hand she gripped Dinah’s trachea in exactly the way that Dinah always had. In her right hand she pressed the tip of the scissors into Dinah’s jawline until a droplet of blood began to bead on the leathery folds of her neck. Since then, Dinah continued to pick, but was careful not to provoke another physical altercation with Kara.

Now the two of them were face-to-face again, and Dinah’s eyes fell on the small white scar that peeked out from Kara’s hairline. She smirked, but then she seemed to recall what came next, and the smile fell away. Dinah ran her tongue along her teeth behind her closed lips and stepped back in the direction of her half-empty bottle.

“I ain’t got time for this shit,” Dinah said, refilling her glass for the fourth time—this time almost to the brim. “You have an hour—get the fuck out.”

Kara tucked the papers back in the envelope, turned and pushed through a deteriorating wooden door that led to the stairwell. She pushed her way through the unidentifiable mass of objects that fell down the stairs and, atop the cluttered landing, heaved her way into her bedroom.

Kara swept around the room that she once shared with her sisters Lallie and Tara, or— according to the birth certificate that lay folded in the envelope on her bed—her nieces. Years ago when confronted with Dinah’s ultimatum, Lallie moved in with a friend for the remainder of her senior year in high school, then moved to Florida to escape Dinah’s continued harassment. Tara, the eldest who lived in this room, had married a man named Marshall Fox and was under the impression that a beer swilling husband was far better than a Krupnik and Vodka tipling mother. Tara was wrong. Kara stared at Tara’s old bed, recalling the image of Tara in the hospital, teeth broken, a hole drilled in her head to relieve the fluid from her swelling brain. She

survived—but she was never quite the same after.

With renewed vigor, Kara tucked her clothes in her duffle bag. From the bedside table, Kara lifted a picture frame, a sash-like black ribbon was wrapped diagonally across the image of Kara sitting on Alek's lap behind the wheel of a red pickup truck, her fingers clamped to the wheel as if she were driving. Hitched to the back of the truck was the front of a silver camper. Kara choked back her tears as she stuffed the picture into her bag, stooped and peeled back the carpet, retrieving a roll of bills from between a gap in the floorboards—where Dinah had clearly not looked. She slipped the cash into her pocket and slapped the carpet back just as a man's voice spoke from the doorway behind her.

"It's time, eh?" Alek asked with remorseful tone. "She's forcing you out?"

Kara nodded, but turned back to her bag and continued packing.

"For what it's worth, I'd have let you stay," Alek said.

"Yeah. Thanks, Alek."

"It's Dad," Alek said. "No matter what, it's always Dad—don't forget that."

"But," Kara began, losing her words. She picked up the envelope off her bed and waved it in his direction. Alek frowned.

"Just paper, sweetie," Alek explained. "Doesn't change the fact that you're my little girl. You always were. I'd just assume take a lighter to that."

At this comment, Kara cracked a smile. "Yeah, but I hear you need these papers when you get to college—so I'd better hold onto them for now."

"So you're going to school then?"

"Of course. What else would I do? Think I worked so hard in school to quit now?"

"Nah," Alek shook his head. "Got too much brains to quit. Least you got that from me."

"Well," Kara said, stuffing the last of her essentials into her duffle bag and zipping it closed. "Guess I'd better get the fu—" Alek fixed her with a reproachful stare and Kara corrected herself with, "—get gone."

"Where you gonna go?"

"Don't know," Kara shrugged. "Maybe try my friend Lysa. Her parents have let me stay before."

"For a weekend here or there. How long until graduation?"

"Two months," she said.

"And how much longer till you start college?"

"Just the summer."

"So you'll be asking them to put you up for five—maybe six months? A lot to ask of any friend—no matter how good of friends you are."

Kara shrugged. "What other choice have I got?"

Alek took a few steps forward and glanced down at the picture, still visible in the top of her duffle bag. Kara drew her eyes back to the picture, focusing on the silver camper barely visible in the frame.

"There's always the camp," Alek said in a near whisper.

"I can't do that," Kara whispered back. "She'd find out for sure."

"Nah," Alek waived her off, stepping back and glancing down the stairwell again. "It's my camp—do you think she's ever been there, aside from when we took you and your sisters out there?"

"I don't know," Kara said looking down at her bag, then glancing up into Alek's face.

"Hey, it's just sitting there. Someone might as well use it."

Kara sat at the edge of her bed and considered the thought. Would Dinah possibly find out? If so, what's the worst that could happen?

"I've always taken care of you, haven't I?" Alek asked. "Gave you the truck when I didn't need it anymore. You know, I betcha the keys to the camp are still in the glovebox. Probably the last thing I'll ever be able to do for you. Let me."

Kara waived slightly, but ultimately conceded.

"Alright," she said. "Thanks, Dad."

Dinah's shrill scream sounded from downstairs and Kara glanced at the doorway. When she looked back, Alek had vanished. She closed her eyes and sighed when she heard the heavy footfalls from Alek's steel-toed work boots descending the stairs. She raked the space where he stood with her eyes once more, then examined the room, making certain that she was leaving nothing of personal value. Then she stepped through the door, down the stairs and back into the kitchen.

Waiting there with just a swallow of Krupnik left in her bottle, Dinah smirked at Kara across the table.

"Don't bother sitting," Dinah purred in an inebriated slur. "Keep moving an—and let the door hit your ass on the way out."

"Do you mean *don't* let the door hit my ass on the way out?" Kara asked.

"I said what I meant," Dinah spat.

Kara rolled her eyes, hitched her duffle bag a bit higher on her shoulder, and stepped out the back door through a dilapidated covered porch and onto the gravel driveway. There was Alek perched in the passenger side of his old '74 Chevy C10, motioning for Kara to climb in the driver's seat. With a glance over her shoulder, Kara climbed in. She fired up the engine, backed out of her usual parking space behind the house and pulled carefully down the steep drive and roared onto the two-lane that ran in front of the old farmhouse.

They rode in silence for a while. Every now and again Alek fumbled with the dial on the radio until the voice of a country or folk singer crooned over the speakers. Kara kept her eyes locked on the road while Alek hummed, occasionally belting out the lyrics he knew,

like “My name is Sue. How Do you do?” A few times, when he caught Kara’s eye, he screwed up his face with a random expression and Kara could do nothing to repress a smile.

It wasn’t long before Kara pulled down a dirt lane blocked by a steel cattle gate. She retrieved a key from the bottom of the cluttered glovebox, leapt down from the cab and slid the key into a padlock, stiff with corrosion. With a little effort, she forced the key to turn until the shackle popped free and she proceeded to unwrap the chain that secured the gate. The gate groaned as it swung open permitting Kara to pull the truck through, across a rocky hayfield, and into a stand of trees that concealed Alek’s hunting camp from the road. The camp consisted of a modified Air Stream Silver Streak camper with a wooden addition and three-season porch.

Kara remembered seeing the camper once before, just after Alek bought it. Then the aluminum was polished to a high sheen, the cushions on the sofa inside were newly reupholstered, and the patterned drapes were clean. Now, as she looked on, the tarnished aluminum was concealed beneath a film of old leaves and dirt, black as mildew.

Alek stood beside Kara at the entrance.

“There you are,” he said. “Home sweet home.”

Apprehensively, Kara stepped up onto the porch, noting the weathered, unfinished boards, several of which appeared to be rotting out after years of neglect. As she stepped inside the door, the drapes were drawn and the interior was enveloped by shadow. To the right was a propane stove, antique icebox, sink, and a small table with a sitting area. On her left was a couch, a mounted entertainment hutch with a television, videodisc and a modest collection of movies. At the far end, vented out of a boarded-up window was a small woodstove.

Finally, her eyes fell on the doorway across from her. She stepped through it and into the addition that Alek had built years prior. The first story was largely used for storage. A few rifles were hung on the wall above an old dresser, filled with old long Johns and flannels that anticipated Alek’s return. On the far wall she saw a mounted ladder. She dropped her bag and climbed to see a built-in queen-sized bed and a small kerosene heater. There were windows on all sides, providing a 360° view of the camp, great for deer spotting, though much of her view was now obstructed by the overgrown oaks that surrounded the clearing.

The woody smell she recalled as a child had long gone and was replaced by a mild, musky aroma of wet earth. She climbed down and stepped into the main camper. She opened the drapes to let in the dappled light that penetrated the thin shade cast by the budding trees. Dust shimmered in the intermittent beams of white light that cut laser-like through the space.

Surveying the camper once more she noted that everything was

covered by a thick film. Still, unlike the home she had grown up in, the space was shockingly uncluttered. Everything had been tucked neatly away from Alek's last visit.

Alek settled onto the sofa, causing a plume of dust to rise from the fabric. He wrinkled his nose and let out his characteristic sneeze three times in quick succession.

Kara chuckled. "It is a little dirty," she thought to herself.

"But there is nothing a little spring cleaning couldn't fix," Alek said.

"Yeah, I can rough it out here until September. I can shower in the locker rooms at school," Kara said, moving to a wall mounted lamp beside the sofa. She turned the knob and with a click, the warm glow of an incandescent bulb emanated from the fixture. "And it looks like you even left the power on for me."

"Yeah, I guess I forgot to pull the fuse last time I was out," Alek said.

"Can't believe it's been two years."

"You know, I am sorry I couldn't be there to handle Dinah," Alek said. "Hell, I'm sorry I'll miss your graduation."

"It's not your fault, Dad," Kara reassured him. "Nothing you could do."

Alek grinned. "You know, a dad shouldn't have favorites," he said. "But if I ever had to choose, you would have been mine."

Tears began to well in Kara's eye. There was always a connection with Alek. When he was around, he'd shield her from Dinah. She was the only one of the girls named in the will that gifted his old truck to her. It was something she didn't know about until his will was read—but it made all the difference.

Kara stepped over to the abandoned dresser and wrapped herself in one of Alek's flannel shirts. From her duffel bag, Kara retrieved the picture of her and Alek draped with the black ribbon, before sinking into the sofa cushion next to him. She snuffled in the sleeve as the tears continued gathering and falling down her cheeks. "I miss you Dad." And she heard Alek's voice shushing paternally.

"You'll always be my little girl," he whispered. "Don't ever forget that."

Kara clutched the photo to her chest and moved to lay her head on her father's knee, but Alek was gone, leaving only the dusty cushions to cradle her head.

"I'll never forget," Kara snuffled.

With every sob that heaved her chest, Kara felt the weight of her childhood crumble; the hate ebbed away and was immediately replaced by a surge of relief. It was as though, one last time, Alek had reached beyond death to shelter her from Dinah. And with that notion, Kara closed her eyes, and slept.