

SHIELD

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LONG AFTER HER best friend's car finished peeling down the quiet street, Kara Watson replayed Ella's final promise.

"I'll see you soon."

Kara knew it had been a lie. Not an intentional one, of course. Ella was merely hoping, as she always did when it came to Kara. The Watsons needed hope. Nine years after Mrs. Watson's death, Kara's father hadn't mended, her brother still locked himself inside his own head, and she was centimeters from falling apart on most days. For Ella's sake, Kara grinned and bore it. She wasn't one to upset the cart, and Ella liked being her shield.

Though, lately, Kara had felt the stirring of what she'd eventually deemed *independence*. Self-reliance. It had awoken during Ella's year of homeschooling, when Kara had realized how tightly she'd clung to her lifeline, a child attached to her stuffed bear. With her shield gone, Kara had been forced to chart her own course through the hallways of Whale's High. She thought she'd managed fairly well. During that phase, she'd applied for Pius University – stealing to her mailbox, eyes half closed as she'd shoved the envelope inside, retracting her decision a dozen times until she'd finally tossed the envelope into her neighbor's mailbox and reminded herself that retrieving it might be considered a crime. *That* was how Kara Watson had made her first mark upon the world: by trespassing in Mrs. Crawley's mailbox.

When the reply came, Kara had been only mildly affected by that friendly line of acceptance. She'd decided not to attend before shrugging the letter out of its package. Pius University was a possibility for those who didn't quake in their shoes when their best friend stayed home from school.

Last week, Ella had returned to Whale's. Normalcy should've resumed, but it didn't. She was different, and their roles had shifted. Ella had needed answers for her sudden athleticism, and Kara had tried her hardest to provide them, even if both friends knew the explanations were paltry. Kara believed she might've found the strength to prove to Ella she could return the shield, after nine years of loan. Finally, Kara could be the strong one.

Thirty minutes ago, that hope had been doused. Ella was leaving. Again. And Kara knew she wouldn't return. She'd read enough books to understand how these situations evolved. When heroes found themselves

on the cusp of adventure, they never came back to mundane high school and a friendship with someone too scared to open an envelope. Ella was off to a world of clandestine conspiracies, and Kara didn't think she had the strength to build herself another shield.

After pushing a headband over her blonde curls, she unloaded her school bag on the kitchen island, where she had a decent view of the TV hanging near the fridge. It had occupied that corner wall since Kara was seven, but she hadn't used it in years. When she wanted to watch a movie, she went to Ella's.

A few smacks against the white frame brought the TV to life. It had six channels, three of them local news. Car commercial, weather report, and an interview with some romance author. There was no mention of alien attacks at Whale's High.

Kara didn't *really* believe they were aliens. Most likely, they were terrorists of the same vein as the maniacal scientists who'd injected Ella with steroids (according to their latest theory). As Kara had been at the doctor with her Dad, she'd missed the excitement at school, and had only Ella's rushed explanation to depend upon. As usual, Ella's priority in the middle of a crisis had been ensuring Kara's safety.

"Don't go to Whale's today," her friend had told her. Then she'd sped off with promises of finding answers – and, of course, that naïve belief that they'd see each other soon.

Kara set to her homework, glancing at the TV every other minute, finger absently skimming the red yarn knotted around her wrist. Breaking news didn't interrupt the boring programs, which was odd. A small town like Briarwood would certainly latch on to an attack at a high school. It was possible –

Someone rapped on the front door. Kara jumped, dropping her textbook onto the countertop as if it had bitten her. Hoping Ella had returned, she hurried to the foyer; but, when she wrenched the door inward and saw someone who'd never asked where she lived, let alone been to her house, Kara stopped short.

"I wanted to make sure you're all right," Jimmy said. "Did Ella stop by?"

Kara gaped. Had Jimmy Daniels actually driven twelve miles to check on *her*? The question had a brief life, then dissipated as Kara moved toward the next: Why did Jimmy look as if he'd just escaped a wrestling

match? Blood stained his shirt collar, his wavy hair was matted and smooched into further disorder, a red lump swelled along his jawline, and he was sweating.

“Are you okay?” she said. “Those attackers at Whale’s – Ella told me.”

“The police came. It’s been taken care of.”

“Oh. That’s a relief.” Kara smiled, though uncertainty worked against her mouth. She didn’t know her classmate well, but she could recognize evasion when she saw it. Jimmy was hiding something. He was also injured, on her doorstep, making sure *she* was okay when he was the one covered in blood. “I’ve got a first aid kit,” she said. “Want me to bring it?”

“Sure.” Jimmy scrutinized her. Something like doubt stirred in his eyes – hazel, Kara noticed. Riveting.

Oh no. She was staring.

But so was he.

A flush tingled her neck, particularly when she remembered she’d donned the decade-old headband covered in daisies. She knew it was a matter of seconds before splotches overwhelmed her cheeks. Before Jimmy could see, Kara spun around.

The first aid kit was wedged under the bathroom sink. She made sure the box actually had bandages and not empty wrappers; her older brother never paid attention enough to aim for the trash can. Satisfied, Kara headed back to the doorstep and politely ushered Jimmy by his arm. He felt rooted as a tree; she may as well try tugging a mountain with a string, but Kara couldn’t let go now, not without appearing ridiculous.

I already look ridiculous!

He moved, and Kara found herself rocked off-balance. She teetered and knew her body would complete its humiliation by letting her trip right out the door.

Jimmy caught her instead, a simple grip of her elbow that felt as unyielding as his tree-like stance. He cleared his throat. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, yes! I’m okay. Are you?” She cringed at the repeated question.

“Yes,” he said, “other than my arm.”

“Your arm?”

“It’s asleep. You’re stronger than you look.”

Another embarrassing moment passed before Kara understood his meaning. She was still holding onto him. Letting go faster than a spring uncoiling, Kara said, “I’m sorry! Are you okay?”

Jimmy's brows quirked. Broken-record-Kara had skipped again.

"Well, here." She thrust the first aid kit toward him.

The quiet seconds in which Jimmy searched the box stretched like a giant's strides. She worried her presence was unnecessary and awkward; but, when she considered leaving him alone on the front porch, that seemed rude. So she watched him peel apart bandage wrappers. Conversational topics rose with vigor and always curled in her throat at the memory of squeezing his arm until it fell asleep.

He was inspecting his elbow when he said, "I like your headband."

"My mom gave it to me," she replied automatically. "It's kiddish, I know." Feeling stupider than ever, Kara reached to remove the offensive accessory.

Jimmy tugged on her wrist. He did so swiftly, as automatically as her answer. "Why are you taking it off?"

Beneath his curious stare, Kara couldn't summon anything other than the truth. "I don't know."

"It's not kiddish. If my mother had given me something, I'd wear it too."

The sincerity of his words chased the silliness away, and Kara smiled. "Even a headband?"

"Well, probably not."

Kara felt a smidge of self-respect for managing something that bordered on a joke.

Jimmy's gaze shifted down her arm. He appeared to remember they were touching, and he let go, attention switching to the kit. Only after he latched the box shut did Kara realize he hadn't actually utilized any of its contents. Before she could comment, Jimmy handed her the kit.

"I didn't come here for Band-Aids. I want to tell you something." He leveled gazes with her. His expression was so intensely focused that Kara's pulse skipped. "You should go to Pius," he said.

"How'd you know —"

"You're smart, Kara. You'll do well there. I know it's not in Florida, but that's a good thing. This city... there's nothing worth staying for."

He must've paid attention to the postings on the school bulletin board. Kara had felt strange to see her name there alongside a handful of top students, but not as strange as now. Though that wasn't exactly the word. She felt... *noticed*, and with that came the uncomfortable tingle of exposure.

Was she so cowardly that any random classmate could see she'd flee from a golden opportunity like Pius? Kara longed to defend herself, particularly to him.

"There are *plenty* of things worth staying for," she said. "There's Ella, plus Dad. He's sick. I can't leave him."

"If your dad healed, you would go?"

"It's a moot point." Kara fumbled with the box, unable to meet his gaze.

"Not really. If your dad isn't sick and Ella isn't here, it's straightforward. Go to Pius. There's nothing keeping you here except yourself. Don't be afraid. That's stupid."

With Kyle as an older brother, Kara had learned to reassign insensitive remarks. Rather than sting her straightaway, they relocated to the cornered-off section of her heart, the place she accessed when she was alone and brave. Kyle Watson's insults had lost their potency over the years, but Jimmy was someone she hardly knew. The novelty gave his words strength. Had she known he would drive twelve miles to stick a funhouse mirror in her face, showing her just how miniature she was—well, she wouldn't have opened the door.

"Are you upset?" he asked.

"N-no, I'm fine."

"I'm sorry. I'll leave."

When she glanced up, he was already halfway across the yard.

Kara closed the front door and leaned against it. Perhaps Ella's farewell had made her more fragile than usual. Kara longed to blame the current turmoil on her friend, but that would be unfair.

She *was* afraid to attend Pius. It hadn't taken a close friend to recognize that. The going didn't terrify her so much as the staying. Prolonged exposure without her shield had awoken an independence that unnerved her. What would she do, alone and self-sufficient, over a four-year span?

A firm *tap-tap* behind her startled the tears away. Kara patted her eyes, took a breath, and opened the door.

Jimmy seemed in a thicker stew than her own. He clenched his fists, tawny hair somehow more unruly than a minute ago, and stared at her in an agonized sort of way. "I'm not tactful, I know," he said in a rush. "I didn't mean to upset you, Kara."

Conflicted or not, Kara wasn't blind to his remorse. Sure, it had been inconsiderate of him to speak so bluntly, but she couldn't fault him for

being honest. Finding a smile, she said, "It's okay, Jimmy."

He moved onto the doormat, so close Kara was grateful she'd lingered in the doorway, where another foot still separated them. "Can I take you somewhere?" he said.

"Somewhere?"

"Anywhere you want. A date. I want to take you on a date."

She blinked. Those words were the last she would have predicted *any* guy to offer her. "Really?"

Jimmy nodded keenly.

"Look, you don't have to... to make it up to me. That's entirely unnecessary. Thank you for the offer, but—"

"I've been wanting to take you on a date for a long time. I'm... attracted to you." He frowned when he said this, as if annoyed by his admission.

"Oh."

"Do you believe me?"

Kara wasn't sure she did, but it seemed rude to say so.

Not saying anything was as good as an answer, and it agitated Jimmy further. He sighed and pushed his hair back. For a spell, he paced on the porch, gathering steam that he released with one earnest swivel back to her. "I'm attracted to you. I think you're smart, beautiful, and kind. I want to spend time with you. I don't know how else to say it."

Kara's instinct was to shove Jimmy's speech toward that protected square in her heart, where later, in lonely solitude, she could nurse the sting his words had induced. They couldn't be true. People didn't notice Kara. Ella had drawn a few crushes, but Kara had never piqued the interest of even a pre-school admirer.

For a moment, she was ready to resign. Politely, she'd thank Jimmy, then close the door until she could no longer see that earnest, agitated, impatient boy on her doorstep. Her rejection got snagged on his impatience like a shirt on a wire fence, keeping her tethered. Surely a guy who wished to trick a girl would have the intelligence to hide his discomfort.

"Okay," she found herself saying.

Though she assented, he stepped closer still, all the more bothered by her acceptance. "Don't come out of some sense of obligation. Come because you want to."

Kara lifted her head higher, and again said, "Okay."

“Okay what?”

“I want to.”

She stood on the doorstep, a few inches taller than usual, but Jimmy’s long legs positioned him a whole foot higher. Neither blinked. He was busy scrutinizing, and she unable to budge – though her heart fiercely walloped her lungs when a smile broke through Jimmy’s vexation. That one smile cleared the darkness away. He was just an eager boy now, asking a girl on a date.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“You mean – now?”

“Yes. Before you change your mind.” His grin made her blush.

“I need to tell Dad first. Where are we going, and when will we be back?”

“You decide.”

“Oh. I-I don’t have anywhere exciting in mind. Um –”

“I don’t care where we go,” he interrupted, growing impatient again. Yet his next sentence was delivered so softly that Kara could have believed she’d imagined the impatience. “As long as you’re there.”

Had he not voiced that, Kara would have still gone happily with him. Nervously too, of course. But happy. Now, she would go with Jimmy wholeheartedly.

Romance was a dangerous thing.

After a tiny nod, she closed the door.

She made sure not to sprint toward the sitting room, though she did skip a little. She wished Ella were here. There would be teasing, but Kara would have endured it. Her first date! And with Jimmy Daniels, of all the seniors at Whale’s. He was not like the other guys, obnoxious and loud. Jimmy kept to himself – and, in all that quiet, mysterious air, he’d noticed her.

Perhaps this was a sign, a gentle breeze urging her to take that leap toward the unknown. Pius *could* happen. Kara *could* be bold, confident enough to meet an admirer’s gaze and tell him yes. Ella wasn’t here now, but maybe Kara could weigh the pros and cons of Pius with Jimmy instead.

The idea made her smile.

Dad wasn’t in his armchair. A quick peek in the kitchen told her he must’ve gone to the bathroom. She pranced down the hallway for her

room. She'd freshen up, then tell Dad on her way out. He wouldn't have an opinion one way or another, but Kara was dutiful.

His bedroom door was open. Unfamiliar shapes in her peripheral drew her attention. When Kara glanced into her dad's room, a concrete wall could not have halted her more forcefully. Her happy bubble popped.

Dad and Kyle hung, slack-limbed and pale, in the arms of two creatures. Her chest squeezed, because she knew exactly where these creatures had come from. Ella hadn't exaggerated when she'd described them as aliens. Humanoid in shape, the figures had ashy skin the texture of a pockmarked reptile. Black gouges marked up their faces; Kara couldn't tell if they had eyes, or simply holes.

Her mouth opened.

"Do not scream for the elak."

Surely she had not imagined the rough voice, but neither of the creatures had moved their lips.

The one holding Dad lifted its arm. Kara glimpsed a gun just before black haze and a rush of nausea forced her into unconsciousness.

KARA HAD NEVER dramatically fallen unconscious, not in all her eighteen years. The aftereffect hurt. Her head throbbed, as if her skull were beating itself. The incessant shaking beneath her didn't help. Thirst and stale air hung in her mouth. She closed it, swallowing, and opened her eyes.

A gritty ceiling hung above her head. Kara flinched when fabric scratched her nose. Not a ceiling, then – a sheet of some sort, stretched tautly over her, hardly rustling despite the rush of wind that indicated she moved fast. The light bleeding through it gave the sheet a close-textured appearance; she could see the tiny pixels that knitted the fabric together.

She tested her head and found it could move, brushing the fabric as it did. There was no light source, other than the glow above the sheet, but it was bright enough that she could make out the ridges and familiar definition of a truck's bed. She lay in a moving truck, and someone had tied a tarp over the top to keep her from view.

Not just someone. Those creatures. They took me. Oh, please – Jimmy. Dad. Kyle.

The creatures were surely the ones who'd wreaked havoc on her school. She wondered whether they were the negotiating type, provided Kara felt brave enough to attempt any. And what did she have to offer? If they

wanted money, she had none to give. She couldn't stop herself from conjuring every unimaginable terror. Kidnapping led to two outcomes: torture or death.

Or both.

A shudder rasped in her throat. Kara coughed it out. "Help!" She thrashed about, finding her arms twisted and bound beneath her. Rope cinched her ankles together, too. "Help me! I've been kidnapped!" She shouted at the tarp, which made her words – the bits that didn't disappear through the fabric – reverberate inside the truck. Even to her ears, her voice sounded useless.

She couldn't move nor attempt escape. She was trapped.

Kara's cheek pressed the warm indentions of the bed, but that was hardly a comfort. The truck jostled; metal jarred her cheekbones. Tears filled the ridges, making a nice, pitiful puddle for her face. No one could hear her screaming, but at least no one saw her crying, either.

"Please, someone help me," she whispered. All her life, Ella had been the only one who could. Kyle didn't care, Dad's depression made him oblivious, but Ella had always been stalwart and there. Now, she wasn't.

Time passed in the measure of sunlight. It beat through the sheet, bringing perspiration to her temples. Gradually, the light lifted, pulling back. Cooler air stole inside, too cool for Florida, December though it was. They were taking her north.

Daylight fell away. She was left in darkness, cold and alone, praying that Jimmy had not waited very long before realizing Kara wasn't coming. She wouldn't allow herself to wonder if he'd heard a noise and entered the house to investigate.

"I'd rather hide in my room all day."

Kara started, twisting her head. Nightfall had robbed the truck bed of its definition, but she didn't need Ella's newfound eyesight in order to see no one was there.

"Who said that?" she croaked.

"But they're strangers," the voice continued. "And they probably won't like me."

She swallowed. That voice was the only familiar thing around – but *around* its owner was not. "Ella?" she whispered.

"No," Ella answered.

"Then who is this?"

“Except maybe that Avary girl,” Ella added. “And Sheedy's not too bad....”

That time, Kara noticed that the sound didn't seem to pass through her ears. Ella's voice – and she was certain it was hers, regardless of what Ella had said – originated from inside Kara's head. Somehow, Kara was hearing Ella.

That didn't bode well.

“What do you want?” Kara asked.

Ella-voice didn't give an answer. Kara was going crazy. That realization gave her a sudden burst of fervor. Rejuvenated, she strained against her bindings and craned her lips toward the fabric.

“Help! I'm in here!” Kara shouted repeatedly, knowing the wind stole her words – knowing that these creatures wouldn't have left her free to speak if they'd believed her words could do anything. She screamed herself hoarse again.

Nighttime, brought quicker in the winter, fully spread by the time her throat ached. Cool air trickled through the tarp.

In that horrid quiet, Kara's thoughts returned to her future, which might be shorter than she'd predicted. No Pius University, no Bachelor's degree, no date with Jimmy Daniels – and those were the selfish desires. She had no way of knowing whether the creatures had killed her father and brother. Possibly Jimmy, too. If her family had survived, would Kyle resume her mantle of caring for Dad, or would their father wither toward the grave he'd aimed for since Mom's death? And if Dad died along with Kara, Kyle would have no one left tying him to earth, however fragile and forced those strings had been. The Watson family would cease to be.

“I'm also talking to you,” said Ella.

The voice was back. Kara didn't mind it so much. Imagined or not, the voice brought a small measure of comfort.

“Can you hear me, El?” she whispered.

“Me either,” Ella said.

“Help me. Please. I know I'm weak, but I promise I'll be stronger after this. I just... I need you to save me one last time.”

“It's weird being here, Kar. Who would've thought – me, a metahuman? But I think I could get used to it. Maybe the MTA is... is where I'm meant to be. Does that sound cheesy? Yeah, probably.”

Kara's breath hitched as the voice continued, detailing an adventurous

day that Kara would've never had the creativity to imagine, complete with someone called "Burnette," and frequent inclusions of an Ethan Sheedy.

"It's so stupid," the voice said after interrupting her story, yet again, with his name. "I don't even know this guy. But he's really nice. Ugh, I've said that already, haven't I? I'll stop. I need to get to sleep, anyway, instead of having imaginary conversations with you. Wish you were here, Kar. Night."

"Wait, don't go!"

Ella-voice didn't return. Even her crazed hallucinations abandoned her.

Kara felt for the red yarn around her wrist, hoping to ward off the despair. Her fingers touched skin. A frantic swipe up and down her arm told her the friendship bracelet was gone. It must've fallen off during the tussle. That seemed like an omen.

"Come back," she whispered, not sure whether she was talking to the voice, the bracelet, or her shield. "Please. Come back."

None of them answered.