

SMACK

Kara's fist hit the soft, white pad. The cushion enveloped her knuckles before she pulled them back. She jumped and spun around, till her foot connected with the pillow, held head high, knocking her partner backward.

While her classmate stacked wooden boards between two cinderblocks, Kara caught her breath. Sweat dripped down her pale cheeks and strands of golden hair stuck to her ivory skin.

The boards didn't survive long, as Kara's hand chopped through them easily.

Sam Trammell sat at a foreign desk and made a few quick strokes on a keyboard. The office around him was abandoned for the night and most of the fluorescent lights overhead were already out, but Sam was stuck behind, helping a co-worker. "You can't click on the pop-ups. Your computer does not need to be updated, and if it does, I will do it for you, alright?" Sam told his elderly co-worker without pulling his eyes from the monitor as he kept typing.

"I'm sorry to keep bothering you with this stuff," said the middle-aged man as he stared down at the worn, blue carpet between his feet, feeling too guilty to look at Sam.

"This is what I get paid for," Sam said with a laugh. He pulled some of the long, black hair out of his eyes so that he could continue to work.

"I guess you'll never be out of a job as long as old folks like me are around," the co-worker said with an uncomfortable chuckle.

“I hope not,” Sam said with a smile as he patted the man on the back. “See ya tomorrow,” Sam continued before trotting to the elevator as he threw his messenger bag over his shoulder.

Kara hugged the brown paper bag of precious cargo to her chest as she walked past rows of two-story brownstones. A chilled breeze blew through the thin, white material of her gi and made her shiver. A train rumbled down the track overhead, the noise of its metal wheels scraping on the metal tracks drowned out most other sound in the neighborhood.

“Food’s home!” Kara announced as she pushed the door closed behind her with her black sneaker.

The four small rooms of their apartment were sparsely decorated, yet still felt cramped. Kara didn’t care. To her, it was cozy. And she got to share it with the man she loved.

“Oooh! My favorite,” said Sam as he lifted himself off the narrow, dark blue, Ikea couch and away from the video games he had been playing. “What did I do to deserve this?” Sam asked as he pulled white containers out of the brown paper bag and Kara laid out the plates and silverware.

‘Do I mention it and dare tempt fate? Or simply say because I love him?’ Kara thought as she let her long hair free of its tight bun and bought herself a moment to think before responding.

“It’s been six months since the last time you used. I’m really proud of you,” Kara told Sam as she leaned across the table and placed her lips to his.

Sam took her hand and squeezed it. “It’s all thanks to you. I know I put you through a lot and I can never say sorry enough. I only hope you think it was worth it.”

“Of course it was. I’m glad I still have you with me.” Kara smiled before putting a pork dumpling past her pink lips.

Kara laid in bed and read as Sam softly strummed on his acoustic guitar. “No. Not this song again,” Kara said as she put her hand over the strings of Sam’s guitar. “No more My Chemical Romance. I can't take it.”

“Sorry,” Sam said and winced. “I take requests. What would you like?”

“How about something romantic and sweet? Like Taylor Swift.”

“I can do that,” Sam said and smiled before he started strumming again.

Kara went back to reading while her personal Spotify gave her soft background music.

Minutes later, a yawn escaped from Kara’s lips. She placed her book down on the crowded bedside table and told Sam, “I’m going to sleep, Baby. Don’t stay up too late.” Kara rolled over and closed her eyes, filled with happiness at having spent another day with her favorite person on Earth.

Sam strummed for a few minutes longer before succumbing to fatigue himself. After he set the old, wooden guitar against the wall, he opened a drawer in his bedside table to put his pick away. There it was.

The beaten, black, leather case that Sam had spent so much of his life with was staring up at him. He knew every crack and crevice of it. The case held the tools of his addiction-the lighter, spoon, leather strap and needle that were all Sam cared about for years. The sight of the bag alone made Sam's hands tremble and his skin start to itch. Sam slammed the drawer shut and ran from the room.

Sam thought maybe a few minutes of mindless scrolling through Instagram would help the thirst to pass. He stared at the screen of his phone and took a few long breaths. The hunger

was still gnawing at him from the inside and trying to claw its way through his skin. Sam closed the app and quickly dialed the numbers that he could never forget.

“You still at the old spot?” Sam asked.

“You know.”

“Be there in five.”

Sam’s fingers trembled while they tied his black and white Converse sneakers as fast as he could. He bounced down the four flights of marble stairs between his apartment and the street.

Before the winter night could even make his body cold, Sam was back in bed with his tools. The needle slid through Sam's skin like a cloud through sky. The brown liquid hit his vein and immediately filled him with the old, familiar warmth. Quickly though, something started to feel wrong.

Sam’s entire body began to shake. His temperature spiked. He coughed. The cough grew worse as blood and bile shot out of his mouth. The shaking quickened, until it stopped. Everything stopped.

Sam slumped against the wall. While his girlfriend lay sleeping innocently mere inches away, Sam’s eyes closed, too. Then, they opened again for the last time.

The sun poured in through a window and hit Kara's face. Her blue eyes slowly slid open to start the day. As she rolled over, Kara said, “Time to get up, Baby.” Sam didn’t answer. His eyes were open and his mouth was agape, but no sound escaped.

“Sam! What’s wrong?” Kara grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “Please, Sam! Wake up!

Sam’s only response was his head dropping forward. With tears rolling down her cheeks, Kara punched his chest. “Asshole!” She screamed at him.

The steam coming off the cup slowly dissipated. The water grew ever darker as the bag bobbed. Even a couple hours after putting Sam in the ground, reality still hadn't hit Kara. She kept waiting for Sam's key to turn in the door or to hear his footsteps moving around the apartment. When Kara finally realized that he wouldn't be coming home, she thought, 'What should I do now?' Even in your twenties, life before love can seem like it was decades ago.

Kara tried to picture what she would be doing now if Sam were there with her. Talking to him. Listening to him sing and play guitar. Watching some awful show and making fun of it with him. Those were the little moments that nobody saw between the big events that were documented on social media. It was those small moments that held them together.

Kara laid in bed with an empty space beside her for the first time in years. She stared at Sam's pillow and tried to fall asleep, but her brain wouldn't let her. There were so many unanswered questions. 'Where had he gotten the heroin from? Why now? Had he been hiding doing drugs from her for all these months? What did she do to cause this? How could she have stopped Sam from dying?' Not knowing made her angry. All this time she was so proud of him. Kara felt like an idiot. She needed answers.

Kara opened Sam's phone, thinking that there would be some clue there. It was all she had left of him now and yet everything important to Sam was still in there. Photos of him and Kara. Half finished song lyrics. Recorded tracks. The websites he looked at were all still open, as if they were waiting for him to return to them. By looking at the things in Sam's phone, Kara felt like she could see into his mind.

There was one call that Sam had made the night he died. No name was associated

with the number, only ten digits which might belong to the last person that he had ever spoken to.

Kara was curious, but nervous. Did she really want to know? Would knowing help or hurt how she thought of her lost love? Now she had good memories left of him. Would knowing more tarnish them? Kara stared at the screen and weighed her choices. Her foot tapped on the floor. 'Knowing can't be worse than not,' she finally decided and pushed the button.

"Yo. What do you need?" said a deep voice on the other end of the line.

"Uh. Hi. I'm calling for Sam."

"And who might you be?"

"His girlfriend. I...uh... he told me to call for him. What do I do now?"

"Go to the lot at North 12th."

"Alright. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Kara's black boots crunched broken glass under them as they marched across the vacant lot. A handful of people were strewn around the cracked blacktop, either high or getting there. Kara had the hood of her sweater up to conceal her identity as best she could, but still she couldn't help feel as if everyone were watching her. She looked around and wondered if it was obvious to everyone else that she didn't have the faintest clue what she was doing. Sitting in the shadow of a nearby building was a picnic table. Kara saw a few people walk up to and then quickly away from it. She decided to follow the traffic.

When she came close, a man younger than her said, "You Sam's girl?"

"Yeah."

Kara didn't want to say too much and give away the quiver in her voice. Hopefully her hands weren't shaking too much as she hid them in the pouch of her hoodie.

"Why's he sending you? Where's he at? He too afraid to come cop on his own now?"

"He's busy working. You know, this stuff isn't cheap."

"That's because it's good. You want that cheap shit, go to the PJs."

"Can you just give me what you normally give him?" Kara asked as she pulled a handful of bills from her pocket.

"Chill, girlie. Can't we conversate? I haven't seen Sam in a minute, then all a sudden he calls me up sayin' he wants some shit."

Sam hadn't bought junk in months. That helped Kara feel like less of a fool.

"How much?" Kara asked and started counting the money in her hand.

"Guess not. One-fifty."

Kara handed the required bills over and received a bag of brown powder in exchange. After the bag hit her palm, Kara grabbed the dealer's wrist and held it tight with her left hand. She cocked her right hand back in a fist and thrust it forward till it met the dealer's nose with a satisfying 'Crunch!'.

The dealer's head snapped back as blood shot forth from his nose. Kara pulled the man from his perch and flipped him to the ground. He laid on his back looking up at her and trembled as Kara towered over him. "What the fuck? What'd I do to you?" he cried, his hand covering his nose and mouth, trying to stem the tide of blood.

Kara maintained her hold on the dealer's wrist while she stared down at him, anger filling every cell of her body as she shouted, "You killed him! You took Sam away from me!"

“I didn’t kill nobody! I swear!” The dealer cried as he trembled and tried to protect himself, anticipating another blow.

“You gave Sam this junk! And now he’s dead!”

Kara used all the strength she could to hold her hand back from striking her already defeated victim, but she let him know that hitting him again wasn't impossible by holding a fist back over her head.

“Nobody’s gotta do anything crazy,” the dealer said with a hand up in surrender as he laid at Kara's feet.

“Tell me where you get this stuff.”

“I can’t. He’ll kill me.”

“Either he does later, or I will now,” Kara said before she pressed the toe of her boot down on the dealer’s throat enough to cut off his air supply. While Kara watched his face slowly grow redder, she commanded, “Tell me! Where do you get this stuff!” All of her grief came out with her words. Kara wanted more than anything to make things even. To take the life of the man who had taken one from her. She watched his eyes leak as he struggled for breath, but knew she needed an answer. Kara lifted her boot enough for him to speak.

“Under the bridge. Prospect Park. Homeboy’s name is Mad Dog. We good?”

“If I ever see you here again, I will end your business permanently. Got it?”

“Yeah, Baby. I got it.”

“Don’t call me Baby.” Kara stomped on the dealer’s chest with her thin heel and quickly stormed off.

Kara remembered walking in this park with Sam as the snow fell one night. Her hands were so cold that she could barely feel Sam's while she held it. It was peaceful and romantic then. That was gone now.

A pair of silhouettes appeared under the bridge ahead of Kara. It filled her with rage to know what these people had taken from her. Sam was gone, so it was too late for Kara. Now all she could do was try to prevent these people from creating more Sams.

When Kara approached, Mad Dog spat, "What do you want?" without moving a muscle. "I don't sell Adderall."

Mad Dog's lean figure barely filled his sweater and his long brown hair stuck out from under its hood.

"Beat it, Susie Schoolbooks!" shouted Mad Dog's companion, Marley, in a harsh Brooklyn accent as she bounced around in a constant state of agitation.

Marley was slightly over five feet tall and maybe a hundred pounds. Her fishnet stockings were so ripped as to be basically pointless. Her teeth were as yellow as a school bus. Long red hair was matted to her filthy skin. Perhaps a few years ago Marley was attractive, but that was before her addiction grabbed hold of her.

"Are you really going to turn down my business?" Kara said as she pulled a fist-sized wad of bills from her pocket.

"Gimme!" Marley said as she snatched the money from Kara's hand and bounced back to Mad Dog's side.

"Now we're talking," said Mad Dog. He pulled three heavy bags full of tan powder from his pocket and dropped them to the ground by his foot.

Kara stared, frozen and confused.

“Come on, sorority sister! We ain’t got all night! Grab it and scram!” Marley shouted.

Kara approached Mad Dog and slowly bent down to pick up her goods. She spun around quickly, catching Mad Dog with a hard kick to the chest. He was thrown up against the wall and when his head connected with the cement, blood flew from his mouth. Mad Dog's limp body collapsed to the pavement. Marley stared at Kara in shock. Once she recovered her senses, Marley yelled, “Now you done it! We ain’t the kind of people you wanna mess with, sister!” as she pulled a knife from her pocket and flipped the blade open.

Kara relaxed into her fighting stance and waited for Marley to attack. The redhead ran and jumped at Kara, knife first. With the slightest and smoothest of motions, Kara’s foot connected with Marley’s chest while her hand knocked the knife from Marley’s grip.

Marley flew backwards and hit the ground with a ‘Thud!’ like a stack of newspapers being thrown from a truck. After a few seconds of lying on the ground to collect herself, Marley again threw her weight and fists at Kara. This time, Kara caught Marley’s jaw with the toe of her boot. Marley lied on the asphalt and bled, the same as Mad Dog did.

Kara straddled Marley's waist. Her left hand pulled Marley’s limp torso up off the ground by her shirt. “Who do you work for? Who’s in charge?”

Once she woke up, Marley spat blood at Kara. “Screw you! I ain’t tellin’ you nothin’!”

Kara spat back with her fist.

Through bloody lips and teeth, Marley tried to reason with Kara. “There’s always going to be somebody higher up. What are you gonna do, kill us all?”

“Yes. I’ll keep going until I’m sure nobody else has to end up like me. Or you.” Kara growled, tears forming in her eyes. “I won’t ask again. All I want is your boss, not your life. But I’ll take both if you make me.”

“Alright. Jeez lady.” Marley wiped blood from her lips with the back of her hand.

“Montgomery Whitten. The Crane Club on 47th. He’s always there, in the back room.”

Kara let go of her prey. “See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Kara rifled through Mad Dog’s pockets, taking all of the money and heroin she could find. Mad Dog and Marley were still trying to recover their senses when Kara quit the scene.

Kara watched the dark red blood run from her hands down the white porcelain to the drain as she washed her hands. More blood covered the soft, ivory skin of her face as she looked in the mirror. A flame of anger burned in her cold, dark blue eyes. Kara barely recognized the woman that looked back at her.

“Please tell me I’m doing the right thing, Sam,” she said to herself as she scrubbed the last remnants of the night from her skin.

A needle slid into the cat’s paw, followed by poison. When Kara saw her furry patient stop struggling, tears formed in her eyes. She ran from the room and tried to cover her face as she began to sob.

Slowly, Kara slumped to the tiles of the bathroom floor. Her hands tried and failed to hold in her tears as all of Kara's grief forced its way out. Her chest heaved under the strain of her sobs. There was a knock on the door.

“Are you alright?” a co-worker asked.

“I’m okay.” Kara took a couple of deep breaths and wiped the mess her face had become on her sleeve. “Give me a minute, please.”

Kara was left alone and eventually her breathing recovered as she pushed the pain back inside.

Meanwhile, across town, Mad Dog and Marley's bruised bodies found themselves seated on soft, red chairs in Montgomery's office.

"We didn't let her take our shit. She kicked our asses, man!" said Marley.

"Yeah, dude. Look at Marley's face," pleaded Mad Dog as he gestured to his sidekick.

Montgomery put his hand up to cover Marley from his sight. "I would prefer not to. If I wanted to see what this shit did to people, I'd actually talk to my customers. But that's what you're supposed to be for."

"What more did you want us to do? We fought as hard as we could. She was like some kinda ninja or somethin'," Marley explained.

"You want me to believe that a tiny blonde girl kicked both your asses? Don't you have protection? If you can't defend my product, what good are you?"

"We're sorry, Boss. We fucked up." Mad Dog leaned forward in his seat and put his hands up in front of him. "But it's past us. The important thing to figure out now is, how do we fix this shit?"

"You make yourselves useful for once!" Montgomery raised his voice in frustration and pounded his fists down on the top of his desk. "Find this girl and kill her! Nobody steals from me and lives! Kill everyone she knows! Kill her dog! Kill her third grade teacher! I want you to burn her life to the ground so I can piss on the ashes!"

"Yes, Boss," replied Mad Dog.

"You got it, Mister," said Marley with a salute.

Kara jumped, flipped and struck at imaginary enemies on the roof of her building as the sun set and turned the sky purple over the skyline of Manhattan behind her. Mad Dog and Marley were easy, but the next step of her plan was going to get much tougher.

Kara slipped a tight, short, black, dress over her head and stepped into a pair of black high heels. She checked herself in the mirror and touched up her hair to make sure that she would fit in with the crowd at Montgomery's club.

In an alley squeezed between two tall, silver, glass buildings, Kara shook out all the bags of heroin she had stolen from Mad Dog. The pile of brown powder grew to nearly a foot high.

Lighter fluid rained onto the pile before a match dropped, sending the powder up in flames. As the flames danced, their shadows crawled across Kara's smiling face.

Kara joined the line of twenty-somethings waiting to get into the club that stretched down the sidewalk, past the next couple of storefronts. Luckily, she looked like she fit right in with them. Nobody who saw Kara would be able to tell that she was there with violent intentions.

Kara spent a few minutes dancing amongst the sea of sweaty bodies to keep her cover up. But where did she go from here? Even though she was in the same building as Montgomery, Kara had no idea how to actually find him. Where would he be hiding? How could she get to him?

Kara ordered and downed a shot of whiskey at the bar to settle her nerves. She continued scanning the room for any clues. Past the end of the bar, tucked into a corner of the room, was a door painted black to blend in with the rest of the wall. A large mountain of a man stood guard in front of it. 'Why would someone be guarding a door, unless they didn't want anyone to see what was behind it?' Kara reasoned to herself. 'That might be a good place to try,' she concluded.

Kara played with her long blonde hair and smiled, turning on her feminine charms as she strutted towards the guard. When he smiled back, Kara knew that this was going to be easy.

“How’d you get such big muscles?” Kara said as she squeezed his hard bicep.

“I drank my milk as a kid,” the guard responded and smiled. The guard looked Kara up and down slowly before adding, “If you like that, I got something else big I could show you.”

“Oh yeah? What would that be?” Kara giggled and twirled her hair around her finger as she continued to do the same with her prey.

“Come with me and I’ll show you,” he said and opened the door, leading Kara into a hallway on the other side.

As soon as the sentry turned his back on Kara to close the door, she punched him in the kidney as hard as she could. The guard dropped to his knees and yelped in pain. Kara wrapped her forearm around his neck and squeezed like a boa constrictor with its next meal. “Show me where Montgomery’s hiding!”

Kara loosened her grip barely enough for the man to reply.

“Fuck you.”

“Wrong answer!” Kara said and squeezed tighter on his windpipe, till his face grew as red as her lips. “Want me to stop? Tell me you’ll take me where I want to go.”

The guard raised his arms in surrender and nodded.

Kara followed him down the hallway, through a heavy, locked, metal door and into another hall. A couple of bare lightbulbs hung from the ceiling on thin strings, guiding the way with their small orbs of yellow light. There, a large, thick, metal door greeted them on all three sides.

Kara’s prisoner pressed a buzzer on the wall. “I got someone here to see ya, Boss.”

“I can see that. Don’t keep me in suspense,” came back a harsh voice through the speaker.

A buzz told them the door was unlocked now. Having no further use for him, Kara elbowed the bouncer in the throat. He dropped to the floor and gasped for air. Kara stepped over him and into Montgomery’s office.

Montgomery wore an expensive black and white pinstriped suit as he sat behind a heavy mahogany desk in the middle of the room. Not a single strand of his silver hair was out of place. The brown leather skin of his face did not show a single crack, despite his advanced age. Two large men, wearing equally as precisely tailored suits framed Monty as he sat in the black leather throne that held him as gently as a satin glove. A trio of girls resembling Kara rested on a leather couch against the far right wall with drinks in their hands. Another pair of large men were shooting pool at a table behind and to the left of Kara. A couple TVs on the wall behind Montgomery played sporting events with the sound off. Music was coming from somewhere. Kara took it all in, but wasn't distracted from the goal she had finally reached.

“Did somebody send me a present? It’s not even my birthday,” Montgomery said with a smile as he lecherously inspected Kara. “What can I do for you, Sweetheart?” he continued.

“Stop selling your poison.”

Monty laughed. “You can’t be serious. The cops haven’t been able to stop me. Other gangs haven’t either, and trust me, they’ve all tried. What makes you think that I would stop for you?”

“They haven’t lost as much as I have.”

Monty laughed again. “Even if you were to kill me, somebody else will simply step up to take my place. As long as there are customers, someone will sell smack to them.”

Kara reached across the table and grabbed the elderly man by his lapels. “I asked nicely once. I won’t be so kind again.”

As soon as Kara’s fingertips touched Montgomery, four guns were pointed at her. Monty smiled. “We seem to have you outnumbered, Sweetie.”

Kara let him go and fell back into her fighting stance, readying herself to be attacked.

Monty laughed. “What is that gonna do against all these bullets?” Monty asked and waved at his guards.

Kara leapt over the desk, kicking both gunmen in the chest. As soon as she moved, bullets began flying at her.

Montgomery’s chair was knocked backwards when Kara’s body hit it, and she landed straddling him. The couple of gunmen laid unconscious beside Kara, but the pair at the pool table continued to unload their weapons in her direction. She ducked down behind the desk and let it shield her from the bullets flying at her. Wood from the desk splintered and flew at Kara from the wounds it was taking.

“You’re never going to get out of here alive,” said Montgomery as he huddled next to Kara.

Kara saw a gun lying on the floor next to one of the unconscious thugs and grabbed it. She pulled Montgomery up with her and stood behind him, using him as a shield. Kara pointed the barrel at Monty’s head and commanded, “I’ve got what I came for. Let me leave and you can both go home tonight.” Kara tried to sound threatening, but her hand was shaking, betraying her, as she pointed the gun at them.

“Nobody’s going anywhere, Baby,” said one of the thugs.

Kara and Montgomery slowly started walking backwards towards a door. When they were only a few steps away from the exit, Kara shot the gangster twice in the head and let him drop to the floor before she sprinted for the door.

One of the bullets flying at Kara struck her below her knee. Her leg buckled and she instantly dropped to the floor.

Kara stood and tried to put weight on her leg but, like a newborn calf, it folded under her and she was on her knees once again.

When Kara looked up, she saw two goons looming over her, blocking her escape. “What do we do with her now?” one asked the other.

“Take her out to the alley and throw her out with all the other trash. But first,” he said and pointed his gun at Kara as she cowered before him. She shook from head to toe and put her hands up before her face. Her skinny fingers were no match for the pair of bullets that tore threw them first and her chest second.

Kara’s limp body was carried out to the alley and thrown atop dozens of garbage bags in a dumpster. She had failed Sam. And now there was nobody left to mourn him.