

Intimidation

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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As always, the first thing the Lane-Kent family did on arriving in Smallville was sit down to a proper farmhouse lunch with Martha and Ben. Kala and Jason were particularly excited this time, and chattered away during the meal, much to the adults' amusement.

They had a right to be so wound up. It was the first day of summer vacation, and they would be in Smallville for two weeks. Two weeks of freedom from classes and schedules, two weeks of lazy summer evenings watching the sunset over the broad Kansas horizon, two weeks of being spoiled by Grandma and Grandpa Ben. Two weeks of all the mischief that a pair of fourteen-year-old twins could get into while their parents relaxed and their grandparents indulged them.

As soon as lunch was over, the last drop of iced tea drunk, the last crumb of homemade biscuit eaten, the twins cleared the table quickly. Now the adults would linger over coffee in the sitting room, and Jason and Kala could go amuse themselves around the farm however they saw fit.

With a last half-hearted warning to behave from their father, and kisses goodbye to the four adults, Kala and Jason headed out the back door. Due to the length of the vacation, they'd brought the pets with them in special carriers. Captain Bonnie was better left at the farmhouse, but Bagel and Gazeera would enjoy some time outdoors. So as Kala and Jason raced each other through the cornfield, the beagle chased along behind them barking happily, and the iguana clung to Jason's shirt for dear life.

Laughing, Kala put on a burst of speed that left the corn rippling in her wake, her hair flying out behind her. She slowed before she reached the end of the field, eyes sparkling, listening to Bagel baying and Jason running. Other than the two of them, all she could hear was a hawk calling overhead, a rabbit thumping in alarm somewhere nearby, and the low rustling of the corn moving in the breeze. This - along with Grandma's cooking - was one of the main reasons Kala loved visiting the farm. It was *quiet*, and the sounds she did hear were either

peaceful or intriguing. None of the constant brawling roar of city life, engines and car horns and people shouting.

She sighed with relief and wandered out of the cornfield. A bird sang in the hedgerow before her, and Kala slipped through the gap into the meadow on the other side. The grass there was up to her waist, mingled with prairie wildflowers almost as tall. Kala waded into it almost primly at first, like a fussy lady entering a pool, then the whispering noise it made as she moved goaded her into another run.

Now she hit her top speed, which would never be believed by anyone except those members of her family who were in on the secret. Faster than a greyhound, faster than a racehorse, Kala hit cheetah speed and topped it easily, the grass hissing as she passed. Nowhere near her father's velocity, not yet, but faster than anyone else. Even Jason.

The thought of her twin was the only thing that could slow Kala down when she was drunk on running. She came to a halt and peered over the grass, squinting along the trail she'd left. He was just leaving the cornfield miles behind her, and she dashed back up to him merrily.

"Jeez, Kal," he complained. "Someday somebody's gonna see you, and it'll all be over."

"Oh, come on," Kala sighed, flopping down in the grass. Bagel pounced on her belly and licked her face, making the girl groan and shove the dog away. "God, Bagel, your *breath*. Ugh! Anyway, it's deserted, Jason. No one will see me. No one has yet."

Jason sat beside her, not even winded. He was faster than any human being alive, but still played tortoise to Kala's hare. No, his strength was simply - strength. And the acute vision that matched her uncanny hearing. They were developing a touch of the other powers as they got older, but it was clear that the twins each had their own specialties and probably always would. Fate had arranged for them to complement, not duplicate, each other.

"It's still a risk," Jason said stubbornly. "It's not just us, either. If we blow the secret here, Dad's cover is gone, too."

His sister rolled her eyes dramatically. "For the love of *God*, Jason! Besides, like nobody would see anything amiss with you and Dad juggling tractors." Her smirk spoke volumes.

"That's different," he told her. "Dad's here to keep an eye - and an ear - out for other people. Same as he is when he goes racing with you. *Then* it's safe - when it's just us, it's not."

"Oh, *please*," Kala sighed gustily. "Jason, don't be such a worrywart! I can *hear* that no one's around, and you can *see* that they're not. We're still safe as long as we're together - c'mon, isn't that our motto?"

"It should be," he replied stubbornly. "But how am I supposed to keep you safe when you're halfway across the county?"

"My big brother, the protector," Kala sighed, grinning at him. Gazeera chose that moment to leap awkwardly off Jason's shoulder and stalk through the flattened grass to Kala. The lizard was huge now - six feet long from his blunt nose to the tip of his scaly tail, and weighing almost twelve pounds. But Kala chucked him under the chin like a baby and crooned to him. "Gazeera thinks I can take care of myself, at least a little," she said sweetly to the massive iguana. "Yes he does. Don't you, you big ol' dinosaur? Who's a big green salad-eatin' machine? Who is?"

"I'm gonna heave," Jason complained. "He doesn't think any such thing, Kala. If anything he'd want me to be *more* protective of the person who keeps letting him out and feeding him baby carrots under the table."

Kala just sighed. "I came back, didn't I? When I realized how far away I was getting, I came back. So that ought to satisfy your protective instincts. You and your lizard, too. So *live*

a little, will ya?"

"Fine," Jason agreed, rumpling her hair in that way he knew she hated. "C'mon, let's go see what the Carmichael kids are doing."

"If they've heard we're in town, little Cathy's probably agonizing over what dress to wear right now," Kala teased.

"No more than Dustin's standing in front of a mirror trying to get his hair to lie flat," Jason shot back, making Kala blush.

"Yeah, well, it was Wade who started the Carmichael obsession with the Lanes," she retorted. "At least Dustin's my age - I'd hate to have to deal with someone as young as Cathy mooning over me."

"She's twelve," Jason said, "and at least I don't encourage her."

"I don't encourage Dustin," Kala said loftily. "Besides, Cathy has such a huge crush on you that any time you look remotely in her direction, it counts as encouragement." She rolled over onto her stomach, rubbing Gazeera's neck spines as the lizard looked dazed with bliss. She only paused to dramatically throw the back of her hand over her forehead in a mock-swoon. "The poor girl can hardly speak when you're around, Jason. Then again, it's no surprise." She made her voice breathy in an imitation of the girls that had lately started fawn over him, fluttering her lashes. "Every girl in this town gets all *a-flutter* over Mister Kent's *handsome* boy, with his *sexy* Eastern accent and his great ... big ... *lizard*..." With that, she rolled her eyes backward in a staged faint.

As predicted, Jason pounced at her in outrage, but Kala scrambled to her feet with a shriek of laughter and took off. The sudden movement made Gazeera hiss in irritation, and drew Bagel back from sniffing at a gopher hole to yap at them all.

By the time they finished chasing each other around yelling insults and decided to be friends again, both twins were ready to head off in search of their friends from town. Most of the kids around their age knew them reasonably well, and in general they were friends. A very few turned their noses up at the Lane-Kent family, disapproving of their city ways, but that was a prejudice inherited from their parents. The twins, in turn, had inherited enough of their mother's confidence to consider it the snobby kids' loss, and enough of their father's civility not to go around reminding everyone of that fact.

Jason and Kala cut across meadows and fields, heading toward Smallville proper. The Carmichaels lived close to town but not actually in it, and the trip was fairly easy for the twins and Bagel to make on foot. Gazeera had to be carried, but then he practically lived on Jason's shoulder anyway.

They turned up in the Carmichael's yard to find Wade underneath a car, as usual. This time it was a beat-up Oldsmobile whose primary color was Bondo. "Hi," Kala called out cheerfully. "Anybody answer to the name of Carmichael 'round here?"

Wade slid out from beneath the car and grinned up at her. He had some sympathy for his little brother - although Kala was presently just a skinny kid in jean shorts and a tank top, he'd seen her mom, and he had the feeling Kala would grow up to be a heartbreaker. "Well, if it isn't our favorite two-times-the-trouble-makers. Are you both back to stir up more mischief in our sleepy little town?"

"Nah, we're just walking our dog," Kala said. "And our lizard."

"My lizard," Jason said proprietarily, rubbing Gazeera's cheek. The iguana just blinked sleepily.

"Whatever," Kala sighed. "Anyway, we just wanted to drop by and say hello. How's everything been?"

They talked to Wade for a while, during which time Cathy came out and shyly hid behind the Oldsmobile, staring at Jason. Strangely, Dustin never showed up, and Jason finally asked if he was around.

Wade sighed heavily. "Well, Dustin's kind of blue right now. He's up in his room sulking, as a matter of fact."

"Sulking? Dustin? There's something I never thought I'd hear," Kala said, leaning against a toolbox. "I knew there had to be something mentally *wrong* with him if he was friends with Jason, but..."

Jason's elbow caught her in the ribs, and Wade began to explain. "He'd been saving money to buy this baseball card he saw for sale up in Kansas City. Had just over half of what he needed to get it, too, and along comes the new kid in town. Bill Evans finally got custody of his son, and Billy Junior moved here a couple weeks ago. He was living with his mom up in Hartwell before, and he didn't know anybody here." The young man paused there.

"What does that have to do with Dustin?" Jason asked.

"Junior's a jerk," Wade said finally. "A bully and a cheat. He strutted around the place like a little prince for a while, and everyone was sayin' how he should be taken down a peg. He managed to make a couple friends - the biggest boys in his class, but not the smartest, if you get my drift. Well, then he turns up in the Ellzeys' back field - the one we all use for a target range, cuz Ellzey don't mind - with a brand-new .22 rifle. Junior starts challenging the other kids to a shootin' match, and of course they all jump in to see if they can beat the new kid. Seemed like Junior was just an average shot - until they started bettin' real money. Then he got better all of a sudden."

Jason and Kala wore identical scowls, and Wade nodded. "Dustin bet all his money - all twenty-seven dollars - on five shots at a hundred yards. He's a darned good shot - hit all five of his cans, but one was only clipped. Junior drilled all five of his straight through the center, and when Dustin wanted to go again or call it a draw, Junior's friends got ready to beat him up. So Dustin had to go home broke, and Mom and Dad are saying he should've known better than to gamble."

Kala muttered something under her breath that no girl her age who'd been born in Smallville would've said. Wade's eyebrows went up; he knew where she'd learned language like that, though Mrs. Lane-Kent would've swatted her for using it.

"Well, if you think he won't throw me out, I want to go up and talk to Dustin," Jason said. "Maybe I can cheer him up."

"If anybody can get him out of his funk, you and that monster on your shoulder can," Wade said easily.

"Not me," Kala said. "I mean, I'm sure Dustin doesn't want me to see him all down and miserable. Jason, if you want me to, I'll run home and ask Mom if you can stay for dinner here."

"Sure," her brother replied, watching her eyes. She had *something* planned, and Jason just hoped Kala had sense enough to include him.

Kala said her goodbyes and headed home with Bagel at her heels. The little dog was starting to get a bit tired; her grandfather might've been capable of hunting all day even at six years old, but Bagel was a city pup, a house dog, where Barkley had always had the run of the fields. As soon as they were out of sight, Kala picked Bagel up and went back to the farm at a

fraction of her usual speed.

"I'm home," she called out as she stepped through the screen door into the kitchen, setting Bagel down. The dog went gratefully to her water dish and started slurping up a big drink.

Meanwhile, Martha turned away from the oven with a tray of cookies, still steaming slightly. "Well, hello, darling. Have a macadamia nut cookie."

"Mmmm, thanks. Mom's gonna love you," Kala said, taking one carefully and juggling it a little. It couldn't *really* burn her, but she felt the heat uncomfortably.

"It's her favorite, I know," Martha said, trying to sound put-upon. "Why else would I make these highfalutin' cookies when everyone else in the house will eat chocolate chip and be happy?"

"You're awesome, Grandma," Kala chuckled. She knew better. Not to mention the fact that her grandmother had acquire a taste for them herself.

"No, it's just a favor for my daughter-in-law," Martha said as she started to place the cookie on an entertaining plate. Then she realized that the girl was alone. "Where's your brother?"

"At the Carmichaels'," Kala replied, nibbling the cookie. "He wants to stay for dinner."

"With that lizard?"

Kala had her mouth full, and could only nod with a grin. Martha just sighed. "Go ask your parents, dear. They're in the living room."

The teenager wolfed down the last gooey delicious mouthful, and headed that way. She tended to move quietly, and so she managed without making a noise to walk up behind the pair of them where they sat on the sofa. Her father probably would've heard her heartbeat, but he was presently distracted...

Kala rolled her eyes. The two of them were cuddled together in one corner of the couch like a couple of high school kids, Mom's head resting on Dad's shoulder, and he was twining a lock of her hair around one of his fingers. From the way they were nuzzled up together, they had either just kissed or were about to kiss - probably both.

Parents, Kala thought, then took a couple steps backward before clearing her throat. Mom and Daddy broke apart, turning around with wide-eyed guilty expressions just like teenagers.

"You guys can kiss," Kala told them, snorting with amusement. "I'm not gonna be traumatized or anything. I mean, I know you didn't exactly find me in a cabbage patch."

"Kala..." Lois began.

"I just need you both to come up for air long enough to ask you a question," her daughter continued nonchalantly, leaning on the back of the sofa. "Can Jason stay at the Carmichaels' house for dinner? Dustin's really upset, and he needs a friend with a Giant Lizard of Doom right now."

That provoked a snort of laughter from Lois. "I don't see why not," Clark said, and Lois shrugged agreement.

"Cool," Kala said. "I'll call and let him know. Then I'm gonna go help Grandma make cookies and let you to get back to necking. Forget I was here."

As she left, Lois murmured in a bare whisper, "That child is entirely too self-possessed."

"Wonder where she gets it from," Clark said, kissing Lois' cheek. "Weren't you a lot like that when you were a teenager?"

"I had to be," Lois replied, nestling into his side again. "My dad made my life hell growing up."

"Well, maybe Kala thinks she has to live up to your example," Clark said softly, nuzzling her hair. "Either way, since she's distracted, would you like to get back to necking?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "With our luck, any minute now your mother's going to wander in here and cast dubious looks at us..."

Clark kissed the bridge of her nose. "We've been married for eight years, remember? I doubt she cares. Besides, don't we have to watch her and Ben together?"

"Good point. Fine. Kiss me, then, hero," Lois replied. Caught up in the slow, loving kiss, neither of them heard their daughter laugh softly from the kitchen.

The very next day, Kala and Jason managed to meet Junior. He was a year older than they were, heavier than Jason but not so tall. And at that very first meeting, before they'd even exchanged names, his gaze dropped straight down the v-neck of Kala's hunter-green sleeveless top and remained there.

She immediately made an okay-sign behind her back, warning Jason off. It would be just like her sweet, adorably overprotective brother to jinx things when the game was barely begun. Next, instead of telling Junior off the way she always did, she sauntered up to him with her hands clasped behind her back, face tilted down and eyes shyly peering up.

"Hi," she said softly. "I'm Kala Lane-Kent. You're Junior Evans, right?"

"Guessed it in one," he replied. The eyes he dragged back up to meet hers were a muddy brown, sharp and cunning but not necessarily *intelligent*. Kala smiled ingratiatingly at him, but on the inside she was growling the way she did after her lessons in Kryptonian history. Something about Junior's arrogance, the way he looked down at her like she couldn't possibly have anything between her ears besides fluff, reminded her a lot of Jor-El.

Then again, she'd also seen plenty of men look at her mother that way, even now. And Lois had her own ways of dealing with them, which Kala had watched and noted. At the moment, she chose to mimic Lois' most disgustingly infatuated mock-simper, playing up to Junior shamelessly. Worse than that, she spent the whole day in his company, avoiding her friends and hanging on the local bully's arm.

Kala's behavior shocked the Smallville teenagers senseless. Jason was constantly pelted with questions about it, all of them boiling down to *Has she lost her mind?! And since she hadn't confided her plans to him, he could only grow more peevisish as the day went on, replying to the inevitable queries with growled monosyllables.*

Finally Jason looked down at Gazeera where the iguana was clinging to his shirt, stupefied by the sun and the dozens of affectionate chin-scratches he'd gotten. "I really hope your Auntie Kala has some brilliant plan up the sleeves that shirt doesn't have," he murmured, knowing his sister could hear him perfectly even though she was three blocks away and inside the general store. "Otherwise I'll have to assume that Junior Jerkface there somehow managed to suck all of the common sense out of her head."

Moments later Kala walked by him, her arm linked through Junior's, and she punched her brother's shoulder playfully. "Smile, Jason!" Kala trilled, her voice so syrupy it made him nauseous.

"Oh, 'cause *that* was reassuring," he muttered.

Several townspeople had called the Kent farmhouse to warn Clark that his daughter had been hanging around with unsuitable company. So when Kala got home that evening, her father was waiting for her on the front porch swing.

The look he gave her was one she knew well - a little better than she wanted to, at least recently. It was the expression of 'we need to talk', and Kala had been seeing it quite a lot since she turned twelve. Daddy didn't need to say a word to her; she dropped down on the swing beside him, folded her long legs up underneath her, and faced him.

"I'm not madly in love with Junior Evans, if that's what you've heard," Kala said, pouting just a little. Really, he ought to know she'd have better taste...

"Well, that's a relief," Clark told her, ruffling her hair affectionately. Kala protested and swatted lightly at his hand, but they both knew she'd slap Jason senseless for the same move. Or a stranger... Clark chuckled at the thought. "So if you're not in love with him, why are you hanging around him, princess?"

"Daddy, I'm fourteen. Nobody falls in love at fourteen. I swear I'm not going to moon over him all vacation, okay? Cross my heart."

"So what is it? What nefarious scheme involves making yourself the supposed girlfriend of the town bully?"

Kala wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue. "Eeeuurgh! Are people really saying that? Gross! He's ... he's ... he's got all the charm of Mr. Lombard, and all the brains of a roadkill possum! Yuck!"

One eyebrow crept up. "All the charm of Mr. Lombard, hmm? I heard Junior was a bit over-friendly."

"*Daddy*," Kala groaned, making a disgusted face. "I would've broken his wrist just like Mom if he tried any of *that*. Eww."

"You are your mother's daughter," Clark sighed, and didn't see the shadow that flickered across Kala's eyes at the words. "Kala, munchkin, that would be a lot funnier if I didn't know you could - and *would* - actually do it."

"I wouldn't have to," Kala said. "Jason's been lurking around me all day. If Junior tried anything funny, Jason would flatten him." She considered, and added, "No, he probably wouldn't. He'd feel too guilty afterward. But he might punch Junior once, and that'd be enough."

"Is that what this is about? Do you want your brother to beat him up?" His voice sounded faintly disappointed, and she wilted away from it.

Kala gave him a wounded look. "I wouldn't do that, Daddy!" She slid back away from him slightly, and her voice was clearly hurt. "If I wanted Junior beat up, I could do it myself. And I will - but without *hitting* him anywhere besides his over-inflated pride."

"Why, Kala? Why do you have to knock the neighborhood bully down a notch?"

"It'll make Dustin feel better," Kala replied before thinking it through.

He kept his very serious gaze on her a moment longer, and she huddled up into a little ball on the edge of the swing. This was one of the few times when she wasn't overjoyed to have Superman for a dad. It meant that, in situations where other parents might've given her their blessing and watched the bully hit the dirt with glee, Kala had to think about her motives and the ethics of the situation. Sometimes it just wasn't fair...

"Kala, I trust your judgment," Clark said slowly. He slid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. "I know you wouldn't deliberately do anything to disappoint me."

She snuggled against him, burying her face in his shirt, and sighed. "Do you have to be Superman *all* the time?"

The next day, Jason came home early and went looking for Mom. Kala had been, if anything, even *more* obsequiously devoted to Junior Evans. The bully was now throwing veiled insults in *Jason's* direction. It would be absolutely and totally unfair to pound Junior into the dirt, even though he was actually a few pounds heavier than Jason. Jason knew he could've knocked the boy unconscious with one finger - and he wouldn't start a fight over a mere insult.

Now, if that brainless piece of pond scum actually touches my sister, I may have to pick him up and shake some sense into him, Jason thought darkly. Lois wasn't in the kitchen, but he got a glass of iced tea for himself as he went by. He found his mother in the living room, watching TV, and walked up behind the sofa to talk to her.

Mathilda, Bagel's mother, was curled up on the sofa right beside Lois. She was nine years old, her muzzle gray and her joints stiff, but she still ruled over the pack of younger dogs that had invaded the household when Martha and Ben got married. Bagel herself, of course, was right in Lois' lap, curled into a neat black and tan and white ball.

"Hi, Mom," Jason said, leaning over the back of the sofa to pet the matriarch as well as their own dog. "I see you're putting up with hardships. Must be rough, forced to share the sofa with *two* dogs, one of whom you claim to despise."

"Yeah," Lois replied, utterly deadpan. "I don't know how I cope. At least this god-awful anniversary present isn't yapping. But I don't know how Martha tolerates this smelly creature on her nice furniture."

"Aw, Mom," Jason teased, unable to resist. "Since you quit smoking, you're not *that* bad."

Lois automatically swatted her son's shoulder. "Jason! I thought you said you were the *good* twin?!"

"You know better," he replied, dodging her as he came around the sofa. He had to pick Mathilda up and shift her to one side, but he managed to make room for himself on the sofa to sit beside his mother and lean against her shoulder for a hug.

His mother hugged him tightly. She knew that soon he'd feel he was too old to be fussed over by her and enjoyed it whenever she could. Even now, more than half-grown, they were both still her babies. "What's wrong, sweetheart?" Lois asked, smoothing his hair. That unruly curl in front seemed a bit hereditary...

Jason sighed. "Kala's up to something, and she won't tell me what. And everybody in town thinks she's gone crazy and wants me to do something about it."

"Does this have anything to do with that little creep your grandmother was telling me about?"

He groaned in reply. "Junior Evans. I wish we'd never heard of him! Wade told Kala that Junior won Dustin's baseball-card savings in a rigged bet. Ever since then, Kala's been playing up to Junior. It's *gross*! And it's *mean*, too! He's always staring at her and making little comments, trying to hold her hand and stuff, and she *knows* Dustin's got a crush on her! He just feels *worse* seeing the girl he likes fawning over the bully who tricked him. Plus, Kala's acting like a complete featherhead. If I didn't know her, I'd say she was like a brainless clone or something."

Lois hugged her son, rubbing his shoulder while he vented his frustrations. When he fell silent, she asked, "Do you think Kala has a reason for acting the way she is? A *good* reason? Because you know your sister's no idiot."

"Probably," Jason admitted. "She's a sneaky little creep sometimes, but she *is* smart. I mean, she's my sister and all - she inherited the same brains I did."

"Oh? So you think you're smart now?" Lois teased gently, tickling his side.

Jason made a protesting noise. "Mom! We're *your* kids! Of course we're smart! Quit it!" "That's my boy," Lois said with a voice full of maternal pride. "When in doubt, compliment Mom. Your father taught you well."

"Dad's pretty smart too," Jason said. "Between the two of you, Kala and I practically had to be born brilliant. So I guess she *has* to have some kind of Grand Scheme in progress."

"And if she's not telling you what's up, do you think that's because she's just being a 'sneaky little creep' or because it's important that you don't act like you know something's up?" Lois went back to rubbing Jason's shoulders while she waited for him to answer.

For long moments, Jason was silent, considering. "Probably the second," he said grudgingly. "But I don't have to *like* it!"

"No, sweetheart, you don't," Lois replied somewhat regretfully. "But you've got to give Kala some free rein. She already talked with your father, and even though she didn't outline her plans to him, he's comfortable letting her go ahead with whatever this is. Kala promised no one's going to get hurt, and she specifically promised that she won't beat up the Evans kid or provoke you into beating him up. So, ethically, your dad's okay with it."

"And you?" Jason asked.

Lois sighed, shrugging. "As for me, I want to know what she's up to just as much as you do! But she won't tell, and Clark already told her to go ahead before I could insist on being informed."

"Skunked again," Jason sighed back companionably.

"Yeah, I know," Lois kissed his forehead, smiling down at him. Her beautiful boy just grinned back with brilliance that broke her heart sweetly. They were growing up so fast now. "Love you."

"Love you too, Mom."

The twins' third day in Smallville began with a huge breakfast. Lois stuck to her usual toast and jam, but Jason and Kala stuffed themselves, much to Martha's amusement. With their allergies finally gone, they tried to make up for lost time, especially at the farm. Martha's cookies and turnovers and pastries were just too good to resist.

After breakfast, Kala slipped out of the house. Scowling, Jason went to get Gazeera and followed his sister. He really hoped she would put her plan - whatever it was - into action soon. The summer would be ruined if he had to watch her act like a lobotomized version of herself much longer.

The first person Jason met that day, however, was Dustin Carmichael. The boy was standing by the fence that marked the edge of the Kent property, scuffing his sneaker into the dirt. "Hey, Dustin!" Jason called, glad to see someone *sane*.

"Hi," Dustin replied. His woeful expression perked up a little at the sight of Gazeera, riding majestically on Jason's shoulder. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Not much," Jason replied. "Looking for my sister."

Dustin's face fell. "She's with *him*," he said. "Of course. Don't know why she likes him."

"I don't think she does," Jason replied. "Gazeera's kind of heavy. You want to carry him for a while?"

Dustin perked up again. "Sure!" The two boys got the lizard settled on Dustin's shoulder, his long claws hooked into the shirt. At first Gazeera looked a little alarmed, but Dustin petted him and fussed over him until he settled down and clung there happily.

Jason smiled; that was one sure way to cheer Dustin up. Nobody else in town had ever

gotten to hold Gazeera before. "So let's go find Kala," Jason said. "I think she's going to pull the rug out from under Junior soon, and I want to be there when she does."

"You really think so?" Dustin asked hopefully.

"C'mon, Dustin. Junior's got the IQ of a Chia Pet. Kala can't be serious about him - and if she is, I'll check her into the loony bin myself."

It didn't take the two boys long to figure out where Junior and Kala were: out in Ellzey's field, along with Junior's friends and some other kids from town. They hurried to get there too, arriving just as Junior started loading his rifle.

Kala threw them both a warning glare when they walked up to the group of kids loitering around. She arched her eyebrow just like her mother, and Jason grinned; finally, whatever this was would be *over*.

"I'm the best shot in town," Junior was saying, while one of his cronies who had lost the last round trotted out to the Ellzey's fence and started lining up cans. "I've been winning contests all summer."

"Really?" Kala simpered. "But I heard Dustin was a really great shot."

Junior scowled. "Well, yeah. He *was*."

Jason grabbed Dustin's arm before the other boy could march over to Junior and start a fight. "Not with my lizard on your shoulder," Jason muttered.

Junior just chuckled at the two of them. "Hey, Dustin! Nice shoulder ornament you got there."

"That's my brother's iguana," Kala said. "He's really cool. Watch." Kala called Gazeera's name and bobbed her head, provoking a frenzy of head-bobbing from the iguana. Fortunately, he didn't lose his hold on Dustin's shirt - from the look on the boy's face, though, his claws had gone through the fabric and into Dustin's skin.

"Kala, watch it!" Jason yelled. "Don't get him stirred when he's hanging on someone!"

"Oh, don't get your knickers in a twist, Kent," Junior said. "Hey, do you know how to shoot?"

"I don't need to shoot things to make my point," Jason replied. "And I don't gamble, either, so don't ask if I want to make a bet."

"Touchy," Junior commented. "Watch this, Kala." He swung the rifle up to his shoulder and fired off five rounds, knocking every tin can off the fence.

His friends applauded, and Kala put her fingers in her ears, wincing at the sound of the shots. Jason had a moment to pity her; his own ears were ringing, and he knew her pained expression wasn't faked. Junior just grinned at her. "Pretty good, huh?"

"Wow," Kala said. "That *is* good! Can I try?"

All of his friends laughed. Dustin was back to moping, and he would've left if Jason hadn't been determined to stay. Junior handed her the rifle, patiently showing her how to use it. When Kala took it gingerly, holding it away from her body, Jason started to snicker.

"Shut up!" Kala called angrily.

"Aw, he's just jealous," Junior said. "Now, you think you can hit all five?"

"I don't know..." Kala looked at the cans set up on the fence worriedly.

"Sure you can," Junior said. "Hey, Steve! Betcha five bucks Kala can hit all five cans."

"You're on," said the boy he'd called to.

"Junior, don't waste money like that," Kala said. "I've never shot at a can before!"

"Beginner's luck, baby," he said, patting her shoulder. "Now take it nice and easy..."

Jason felt his stomach roil as Junior 'helped' Kala aim the rifle, a process that involved

him putting both arms around her. Kala didn't even elbow him, just giggling inanely. She squinted as she lined up the rifle's sights, taking a very long time to aim and fire.

The first four shots struck cleanly, but the fifth was just a little bit off the mark. The can wobbled on the fence rail, but it didn't fall. "Darn!" Kala yelled, pouting.

"That's okay," Junior said. "It counts as a hit."

Dustin's face slowly turned brick red. Jason grabbed his arm hard enough to make the other boy wince. "Let it go," he whispered.

"I want to try again," Kala insisted.

"Okay," Junior said. "You're pretty good - besides being just plain pretty. Let's make it a little more challenging. C'mon, try shooting from here."

He walked back another twenty paces with her. By then, some more of the local kids had shown up, drawn by the sound of the rifle. Seeing Kala with the gun in her hands, their interest piqued.

Kala was looking distinctly nervous as Junior's friend Steve grudgingly set up the cans again. "You can do it," Junior said patronizingly. "As a matter of fact, I'll bet ten dollars you can hit at least four."

"You're on," Steve said as he passed them. "She barely hit five from closer."

"Shut up," Kala said indignantly. She brought the rifle to her shoulder again, but when she pulled the trigger it only clicked. Jason burst out laughing; she'd forgotten to reload it!

"Jason! Stop being a dork!" Kala yelled while Junior reloaded the gun for her. He saw the gleam in her eyes when she turned toward him, and laughed even harder. Kala stamped her foot and added, "Okay, fine, laugh at your own sister in front of *everybody*. Just be a great big jerk, see if *I* care."

"Okay, here you go," Junior said, stifling a snicker of his own as he handed the rifle back to her. "Remember, hold your breath, and squeeze the trigger, don't pull it."

Kala frowned with concentration. This time, she knocked four cans down, but completely missed one. "That's still pretty good, right?" she asked.

Junior collected another ten dollars from Steve, then looked back at Kala appraisingly. "Sure it is. There's something to beginner's luck after all. Wanna try again?"

"Sure!" Kala said. She began to look nervous, though, when he walked her back another twenty paces. She bit her lip as she faced the row of targets.

"This is pretty far, even for me. All right, who thinks the little lady can hit all five cans?" Junior asked. This time, not even Steve took the bait.

Junior was opening his mouth to ask if anyone wanted to bet against four cans, but Kala interrupted. "I can do it," she said. "I'll knock all five cans down."

"I'm not sure," Junior said.

"Betcha ten dollars I can," Kala said. "And I'll betcha another ten *you* can't. Haven't seen *you* shoot from this distance yet."

Dustin's eyes went wide, and Jason started to snicker again. "Jason, quit laughing at her!" the other boy hissed.

"You two hush!" Kala yelled. "I can so hit all five cans! Just watch!" She was clearly angry, her hair coming loose from its ponytail, and that display of temper decided Junior.

"Fine, I'll bet I can hit all five, and you can't," Junior said. "But if you lose both bets, you owe me twenty dollars."

Kala replied, "Done," and Junior took his rifle back. She stood to one side of Junior, watching as he lined up the sights. She happened to be wearing a tank top that day, and she

crossed her arms behind her back as she studied the line of cans. Jason saw Junior's eyes flick toward her after he took the first shot, glance and linger.

She seemed oblivious. Junior was taking his time, placing each shot carefully. On the fourth, though, Kala took a deep breath as he aimed. That distracted him enough that the shot merely winged the can, and it wobbled for a long moment.

Then it fell, and Jason scowled. So did Dustin and the rest of the kids; they had all been holding their breath waiting for Junior to get his comeuppance. The bully just grinned, lining up his sights for the final shot.

Kala wasn't done, however. This time, she put her hands in front of her and stretched her arms and wrists while he aimed. Then, just as he started to squeeze the trigger, she put her arms behind her back and stretched again, arching her back. The tank top rode up a few inches, showing her bare belly.

She'd timed it perfectly. Junior had actually fired when he caught the glimpse of pale skin out of the corner of his eye, and he couldn't help but turn to look. That turn moved the rifle just enough to spoil the trajectory of the bullet as it left the muzzle. The final can was untouched.

"Gotcha!" Kala trilled. "You missed one!" The rest of the kids actually cheered, especially Jason and Dustin. Even Gazeera bobbed his head, but that might have been because Dustin was clapping so hard.

"You messed up my shot," Junior grouched.

"Oh, fine," she sighed. "Be a whiner, then. I'll go double or nothing on the other half of the bet."

"I'll take that," Junior replied. "But if you lose, it's twenty - and a kiss."

Jason stopped laughing. Before he could say anything, Kala had stuck out her hand and shaken with Junior. Then he gave her back the rifle and stood beside her.

Everyone fell silent. Surely Junior would cheat somehow - probably wait until Kala's last shot, then blow in her ear or something. And none of them, not even the ones who had snubbed Kala and Jason, wanted Junior to win.

Kala reloaded the rifle and grinned at Junior. Then she turned to Jason and Dustin. With a wicked smile, she blew a kiss at Dustin. "Wish me luck!"

While Dustin was still staring in jaw-dropped shock, Kala brought the rifle smoothly to her shoulder. Junior barely had time to react to the way she suddenly seemed to know *exactly* how to handle a gun, and then Kala fired five shots in rapid succession.

She managed not to flinch in spite of the noise, and when it was over, all five cans were on the ground. "That's thirty bucks you owe me," Kala said, and the fawning tone was completely gone.

"You lied," Junior said, his face going red. "You said you never shot a gun before. Obviously your dad taught you to shoot."

"I said I never shot a .22 rifle," Kala corrected. "And my daddy doesn't need a gun to make his point any more than my brother does. I've shot my *mother's* .357 magnum before, though. *She's* the one your parents used to call 'that Eastern gal' back in the day. Ask Wade about her sometime, he'll tell you some tales."

Junior still didn't look cowed, so Kala turned toward him and glared. "Pay up - I didn't cheat you any more than you cheated Dustin, or anyone else." She saw the bully's brown eyes flare with anger when he realized why she'd been playing up to him, and Kala grinned sassily as she handed back the rifle. "Yeah, this was all about Dustin. He's my friend. And I'd rather

kiss him than you, anyway - Dustin's much better looking, and *he's* not a cheat."

Jason thought Dustin might faint at that remark. But he quickly had more important things to worry about. "*You* cheated, and you're a snotty little citybred *girl* from out of town," Junior said, grinding out the word 'girl', making it an insult. "Just about what Dustin deserves, anyway. I'm not paying you."

Kala didn't back off. "Oh yes you are," she replied sharply. "Don't make me kick your ass for welshing on a bet."

The profanity made a couple of the other kids whistle at Kala's boldness. For one second, Junior looked as though he might haul off and smack Kala for her temerity. But Jason was suddenly beside them, without anyone seeing quite how he'd gotten there. "Don't raise a hand to my sister," he said quietly.

Several of their friends had begun to form a loose circle around Junior. He and his pals were outnumbered. Reluctantly, he handed over the cash.

Kala immediately turned and gave all thirty dollars to Dustin. "Don't thank me," she said. "Friends look out for each other, right?"

"Yeah," he replied, grinning sheepishly.

For a moment the two just looked at each other, and then Kala leaned in and kissed Dustin quickly. Another round of whistles and applause broke out among the watching kids, and Dustin blushed an amazing shade of crimson.

Jason was still glaring at Junior, ignoring everything else that was going on behind his back. "Don't even think about going to our parents," he said. "Dad will approve, reluctantly, and Mom will flat-out cheer. Plus, she's just mean enough to tell all the other grownups that you got beat by a *girl*."

The other boy could only glower, and then shove through the ring of teenagers surrounding them. "This won't be the last of it!" he called, trying to sound threatening.

"I'm hoping it won't!" Kala replied. "I kinda like beating jerks at their own game!"

"My sister the vigilante," Jason muttered, shaking his head. "Mom's gonna kill you for even allowing the possibility of kissing him."

"Ick," Kala replied. "Please, Jason, we just ate breakfast an hour ago! I'd sooner kiss Gazeera."

Jason just rolled his eyes. "I don't care what you do, just as long as I have my sister back for the rest of the summer. One more day of the idiotic little twit you were pretending to be, and I would've had to kill you just to put you out of your misery."

"C'mon and try, Lizard-boy," Kala taunted affectionately, walking over to her brother and hugging him. As they filed out of the field, Kala kept her arm looped around his shoulder.

"You missed me. You know you did. You thought I was totally out of my mind, didn't you?"

Jason grinned, sliding an arm around her shoulders to hug her while they walked. "Kala, I *know* you're out of your mind. What else is new?"

Dustin was tagging along just behind them, still smiling with a dazed look on his face. Their teasing seemed to bring him back to the present a bit, and he added with a smile, "Yeah, well, considering your mom is 'Kent's *Eastern* woman', it's no surprise you're both crazy. Wade says it's a good thing your mom's gorgeous, that kinda makes up for it."

The twins looked at him over their shoulders and grinned before bursting into laughter.