

Snow Ball

A Novel By
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ONE: COLD AND CLEAR

Velma and Naomi sat in their usual spot, the back left-hand booth at the IHOP in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Naomi, the Canadian, was a native of Winnipeg, and the American, Velma, lived in Sheboygan Falls.

Naomi was the taller of the two at 5' 7". Her long, dark brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail and secured with a white, fake fur scrunchie designed to match the fake fur trim on her sweater. Her blue eyes had a slightly bugged appearance but she had creamy white, freckled skin and very high cheekbones and so was still a fairly attractive woman.

Velma stood about 5' 4" and had a tendency toward plumpness. She wore her shoulder-length, medium blonde hair cinched up in a clip. She too had enviable skin, though her almost black eyes were certainly the lovelier between the two of them.

Both spoke with the nasal, vaguely Scandinavian-sounding twang and singsong cadence so common to the region. Naomi's husband Peter and Velma's husband Walt ran a business together with some other associates on both sides of the border. Peter acted as the Canadian point of contact and Walt was his counterpart in the U.S. for their particular part of the operation. Velma and Naomi met twice a month in this same restaurant to exchange pictures of their kids, to plan joint family vacations and to carry packages to one another's husbands.

Naomi took another sip of her diet Coke. "So I says Peter, I says Peter, I don't think that's right. No, I don't, and I can't go along with it."

Velma smiled wide with excitement and anticipation. "And what'd he say?"

Naomi triumphantly speared a syrup-sopped piece of French toast. "He didn't say one word. He marched right back into that store and gave the four dollars back to the clerk, and told her she made a mistake counting out his change."

"Oh yah?"

"Yah. And do ya know what, Vel? Do ya know what happened?"

"No," breathed Velma, leaning in, eyes as big as saucers.

"Do ya know, that girl just broke down and cried."

"No!" Velma exclaimed, leaning back and picking up her coffee cup. "Yah?"

"Yah! It turns out this girl was already on probation, ya see, and her boss told her she'd be fired if there were any more problems with her drawer."

"Oh, jeez," Velma sighed. "And how could Peter know?"

"Yah, that's just what I told him. I says Peter, I says Peter, ya just never know. It was only the four dollars to him, sure, but to this girl it was keeping her job."

"Yah," Velma nodded gravely, sipping her coffee. They sat in silence for a few minutes, Naomi finishing her French toast and Velma finishing her omelet, both contemplating Peter's unknowing heroism. Finally, Velma set down her fork and said authoritatively, "Ya know Nomi, we've really got a coupla swell guys, don'tcha think?"

Naomi beamed. "Oh, yah. Yah. The best, is what I say."

Velma giggled. "Except when it comes to carpet cleaning!"

Naomi laughed behind her napkin, trying not to spit out her last bite of breakfast. When she finally choked it down, she put her napkin back in her lap and laughed, "Do ya know, I tried for another week afterward and I still couldn't get the stains up."

"Didja try Biz?"

"Yah, yah," Naomi nodded. "I tried that new stuff too, that Carpet Brite, but nothing worked. In the end I made Pete rip the carpet right out and buy me something new."

"Oh, but isn't that expensive?" Velma clucked.

"Yah, but what could I do? I didn't want the boys to be seeing that, ya know, not that they go down to the laundry room too much, but still, it was the principle of the thing. I says Peter, Peter if you're going ta go makin' a big mess here in my laundry, well then by golly you're going ta clean it up."

"And did he?"

"Sure," Naomi said smugly. "I says to him, I'll help you get the body wrapped up and out ta the van, I says, but I am not going to spend my Tuesday morning scraping that man's brains off my Maytag, mister. Not while my soaps are on." Velma nodded her assent. "And do ya know," Naomi continued, "in the end it took two coats of paint, a new carpet and plenty of bleach, 'cause wouldn't ya know it, I had my whites going just then, but in the end Peter cleaned it all up himself."

"Seems only fair," Velma sniffed. "I know a lot of the dads these days want ta work from home—"

"Telecommuting, I think they call it," Naomi interjected.

"Yah, sure. And that's fine, you know, if they have a home office where I can just shut the door and forget about it, but for all his promises ya know Walt still hasn't bought that freezer like he keeps saying."

"No," Naomi protested, shaking her head ruefully.

"Yah. So ya know where he—"

"No! Not in the—"

Velma nodded. "Right next to the chops and roasts. Just last week I sent little Stevie out to the garage for a rib roast I needed to thaw out, and ya know, I nearly served a man's left butt-cheek to my family that night."

Naomi burst into laughter. "No!"

Velma giggled a little. "Okay, well not really, because *I* knew what it was right away, but it could happen."

"Did Stevie—"

"No, no," Velma said. "He was never the wiser. But I made Walt clean out the freezer that very night and I told him I will not have everything on God's green earth side by side with my ground beef and popsicles, ziplock bags or no!"

"I agree, I agree," Naomi answered. "There's times when a woman's got ta put her foot down."

Velma nodded, reaching for the check. "My turn!" she chirped brightly.

"Yep, it is," Naomi agreed, delving into her purse for her compact and lipstick. "Got something for me, then?" she asked absently.

"Yah," Velma said, rummaging through her own handbag. She pulled out a Chanel cosmetics box and put it on the table in front of Naomi.

Naomi opened the box and pulled out a round, black, plastic powder canister. She carefully removed the lid and the puff, then held the open container of pure heroin out to Velma and joked, "A little light for my skin tone, don'tcha think?"

"Oh, that's rich! You are such a cut-up!" Velma chortled.

Naomi closed the canister and put it back in its box. "How many more?" she asked, placing the box on the table next to her purse.

"Just the one case, ten boxes," Velma sighed. "Hard to believe it's the last time."

"I know, I know," Naomi nodded. "But ya know, I think the boys are right. Pharmaceuticals are the way ta go now, what with the Prozac, the Viagra, the Phen-Phen and all. That's where the big money is, and it's less dangerous too."

"Yah, I know you're right. I guess I'll just miss the romance of it, ya know. The whole 'drug cartel' thing, it was so glamorous. Ya see that stuff on the news and ya feel like you're *somebody*, ya know? I'll betcha a dollar we don't get invited to the Vincenzo's Christmas party this year."

"Yah, yah, that's probably true," Naomi nodded, taking her friend's hand in her own. "We're not like them anyway, ya know. Those Italian wives don't get involved in the business

side, they never want to talk about it. Their husbands keep `em in the dark and they don't ask questions."

"Still, it won't be the same. Mona, Natalia and Sonia are all so classy and high fashion. We won't have anything ta dress up for anymore."

"But just think, no more lying to the kids, no more hosing down the Suburban at three in the morning," she grinned and went on, "no more butt cheeks in your freezer..."

"Yah," Velma sniffed. "I guess you're right. It's a new time, right?" She smiled weakly. "Ya know, Walt's even trying to get one of those web sites up now. Is that crazy?"

"Ah, you know Walter," Naomi shrugged. "Always has to have the latest thing." She stood up and grabbed her purse and powder box, pointing at Velma's coat and adding, "Hey now, that's a really smart coat ya got there. What is that, from Nordy's?"

Velma smiled, flattered. "Yah, got it at the pre-season sale last weekend. Ya like it?"

"Oh yah, it's just super on ya."

"Well isn't that nice for ya ta say, Nomi!"

"Didja notice if those Ferragamo boots I want have been marked down yet?"

Velma shook her head. "No, not yet. But'cha know, Thanksgiving is coming and there's always another big sale the day after."

"Yah, I'll have to come down an' take a look see then."

"I can get a sitter an' we can both go, whaddy think?"

"That sounds great, just great Vel." She reached into her purse and fished out her keys.

Taking the hint, Velma dug out her own keys and sighed, "Well hey, lemme get that carton outta the Suburban for ya then."

TWO: THREE FEET OF HARD PACK

Twenty-some years ago, in the small town of Pine Creek, Cinder's adoptive parents had their first full night of sleep since bringing the baby home. The Mackays were a middle-aged couple of modest means and few ambitions, but they did aspire to pass the family drugstore business down to a new generation even though they were unable to have children of their own. Somewhere in their late forties, they decided a child was long overdue.

Their pastor put them in touch with the Baptists for Babies and they began saving up the money to adopt. Their drugstore was the only one in town; it was debt-free and had supported their household just well enough through the years, but it was hardly a cash cow. With great misgivings, they decided to take a small mortgage against the property to pay for Cinder's adoption expenses and to set up a nursery for her. Cinder's Momma and Daddy, Lucinda and Edward, loved that baby girl so much that some days it seemed their hearts might burst from sheer joy.

Cinder was raised half in the drugstore and as is typical in such towns, she was helping out at the counter and in the stockroom as soon as she'd mastered basic math. Many of her classmates were likewise learning the ropes at the grocery, library, gas station and on their family farms, so Cinder didn't feel resentful about her lot. If anything, she was happy to be part of a business which was so critical to the survival and well-being of her town.

She grew to be an agreeable, appreciative and helpful young woman, known and liked by everyone in the small community her parents' shop served. She also grew prettier as she grew up. Blonde, blue-eyed and slender, Cinder was more than pretty enough to catch the eye of Luke Torley, captain of the football team and the most handsome boy in town. Green-eyed, black-haired, burly Luke was far from smart, and in fact some might consider him a bit slow. Given the few others her age she had to choose from Cinder fell for gorgeous, guileless Luke without much resistance.

He seemed a good hearted boy, and dimwitted or not he was so attractive and loved her so completely that Cinder could hardly help loving him back. Whatever she wore, to him it was the most fashionable and flattering ensemble he'd ever laid eyes on. Whatever she cooked, why,

Martha Stewart herself couldn't do better. However she fixed her hair and makeup, in his eyes no celebrity or supermodel could hope to compete.

Like the town, like the store, Luke's love for her was a constant, a harbor of the known and comfortable. They went steady all through their Junior and Senior years of high school, and when he proposed to her on their graduation day no one was surprised. He already had a good job lined up at the Argent Actuator plant just outside of town and his late Uncle Roy had left him a small house a few blocks from Cinder's parents' house.

Roy was killed while trying to do his 'human blow torch' gag for some friends who were spray-painting a car in his garage. Unfortunately, at the precise moment Roy struck the match which was intended to ignite what was sure to be a lengthy and noisy passage of gas (he'd been eating chili all morning to prepare), his friend Moe Polly, holding an open mason jar of turpentine for clean-up work on the edges of the windows, turned around to see what Roy was giggling about. The combination of the open flame, the turpentine, the large cloud of highly flammable spray paint mist, a few canisters of spare gunpowder and three pair of oily coveralls resulted in a fireball so big that the whole town saw it and most of the county heard it.

The detached garage was blown off in the accident but the rest of the house suffered only minor damage. Luke spent every weekend of his last year of high school building a new garage and fixing up the rest of the place so it would be ready for his bride; he never doubted that she would accept his proposal.

For her part, Cinder had known all her life that her duty would be to take over the drugstore someday and she was already accepted to a pharmacy school in Chicago. She also knew that living in Chicago while she attended college was never part of the plan. Her parents couldn't afford it and she'd become too secure in her small cocoon of Pine Creek to think of leaving it, however temporarily. Her past visits to Chicago, for a family outing to a ball game or to do some holiday shopping, were brief and carefully chaperoned by her parents.

She felt nothing in particular about Chicago, unlike those among her classmates who planned to move there as soon as possible. When Luke presented Cinder with a ring and a proposal, eyes shining, bent down on one knee like a courtly gentleman, she accepted him completely and without hesitation. They married the next month. Cinder's horizons were too limited to think that she could hope for anything more than a good looking, devoted husband, a successful family business and a five-room house to call her own. She was already the envy of many of her former classmates and couldn't imagine wanting anything more than she had.

It was only twelve weeks or so of newlywedded bliss before she had to start her college courses in Chicago. Cinder relished all the small jobs she needed to do to make the little house a home for herself and her new husband. She painted, sewed drapes and other linens, arranged

and re-arranged the furniture with Luke's help. No matter how many times she asked him if he could please move the armoire back to the other wall, he only smiled and said, "Sure, darlin'."

Luke was enjoying his job at the plant and was already setting his sights on a Shift Supervisor position. Luckily for him, the job required more muscle and stamina than it did brains. With her brawny, virile man and her tidy house in order by the end of August, Cinder felt as if she had an early start on a completely blissful adult life. Then it was time for school, and Chicago.

The city exposed her to new people, things and ideas. She purposely tried to close herself off from making acquaintances or exploring new possibilities while she was in the city, feeling herself firmly rooted back in Pine Creek and believing there was no sense in getting herself all involved in things she'd have to leave behind when she graduated.

Chicago seemed full of color: colorful buildings, colorful sounds, colorful people wearing colorful clothes. It intruded on her tranquility, beckoning her to linger a bit after classes were over, to get a cappuccino and have a chat with her classmates or wander through one of the galleries near her campus. It seemed so glamorous and extravagant to her, the idea of just wandering the great halls to view works of art for hours on end.

Back home, folks were hard at work and wouldn't be done until nightfall. Her parents didn't expect her to work as many hours as she had before she got married, because now she had a husband and home to care for on top of going to school. Still, she knew they needed as much help as she was willing to give. Her father had suffered a heart attack the previous fall and though he survived it, he'd become a frail old man by the end of winter. They never said so, but Cinder knew they were waiting anxiously for her to finish up her studies and get her license so she could take over for him.

She tried to ignore the pull of the boutiques, salons and theaters lined up to greet her all around the parking lot next to her college, but as the weeks meandered on into months and polite small talk with other students began to blossom into friendship, she allowed herself to become part of the city crowd for at least a few hours each day.

The trouble began innocently enough. When Cinder's classmate Erin urged Cinder to join a study group after school at a nearby coffee house to prepare for their upcoming midterm, Cinder thought it sounded harmless. She phoned her mother to warn she would be late getting into the shop but would be there in time to close and was reassured that it would be no problem.

And so she went, feeling included, happy, and enjoying this respite from the obligations of Pine Creek. She and her friends settled into a large booth and laid out their books, flash cards, pencils and calculators and got right down to work. At some point during a particularly drawn-out discussion of whether or not all the chemical salt derivatives were likely to be part of the exam, Cinder's attention began to wander.

One of the coffee house employees was heatedly discussing a movie with a patron who was sitting at the bar. Cinder could see both of the men out of the corner of her eye, but was more interested in what they were saying than how they looked.

Her parents' religious beliefs had precluded going to the movies, based on a belief that most of them were sinful and even the ones that weren't still helped to support a sinful industry. Since Pine Creek had no movie theaters it was never much of a hardship for Cinder. Most of the town's residents were of the same mind as her parents, so there was no division of haves and have-nots among her peers where movies were concerned.

Now that she was older and becoming incrementally more daring day by day however, television, magazine and billboard ads for the latest films began to capture her attention and curiosity. She hadn't actually been to a theater in Chicago yet, but she'd thought about it more than once.

The movie being discussed by the men at the bar was *Amnesty Gray*, a fact-based story about black sharecroppers in Georgia who had to go to the state supreme court to keep town officials from forcibly taking their farms from them in the forties. Cinder wanted to see the movie, finding nothing sinful about its subject matter no matter how many reviews or advertisements she saw and imagining it might even be educational.

Walking past the theater where it was playing day after day, she still couldn't muster the courage to go in. So instead, she hungrily absorbed the talk from the bar, leaning in, then moving to the edge of the booth, then trying to appear casual as she told her friends she was going to get a refill and took a seat at the bar.

The coffee house employee, Clark Norris according to his nametag, excused himself and came over to take her order. Cinder registered his brown hair, brown eyes, average build and average, slightly pockmarked face as she requested a decaffeinated mocha, then stayed in her seat to continue listening, pretending to leaf through a magazine.

The customer argued, "It was a good movie, don't get me wrong, but I think the screenplay didn't tell the story too accurately."

Clark retorted, "Accuracy is completely overrated in cinema. The writer and director are trying to get a point across, and if that means some characters become composites and some others disappear completely, then so be it. Dramatic license is entirely forgivable if it helps to drive home the point of a film and thereby open a door in the mind of the viewer."

Open a door in the mind, Cinder thought to herself. She liked the expression.

Clark went on. "Did you know, for instance, that Rambo is actually an adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*? How else could you get that caliber of literature in front of so many eyeballs?"

"I don't know about that," the customer shrugged. "Now you're sounding like a propagandist, like you're in favor of trash culture, revisionist history."

"People vote with their money, right? Propaganda is the tool of the fascist, and fascism will never get a strong foothold in a country with a strong movie industry because the voice of the proletariat will always be reflected in the box office grosses. The New Deal? Industrial Revolution? Bullshit; it's all about Industrial Light and Magic now."

Cinder had no idea what Clark was talking about; she assumed it was because she'd never taken a class in World History since she was pretty sure 'fascism' and 'proletariat' had something to do with the Germans. Cinder returned to the booth and her studies, but remained preoccupied. She wasn't used to being around people who were as thoughtful and passionate about things as her classmates and this Clark seemed to be. She wondered if a few doors in her mind needed to be opened, and suddenly felt very childish and stupid.

Here she was, a grown woman, a wife and even a businesswoman, fearing that the sky might fall if she did something as commonplace as going to the movies. Her mind was made up; tomorrow, she would go straight to that theater after class, buy herself a popcorn and a Coke and see *Amnesty Gray* for herself. And that's exactly what she did.

She told her parents about her plans when she got to the store that night, not wanting to deceive them. Her father only glanced over at her mother, then excused himself to go lock the back door.

"Is it so wrong?" Cinder asked. "Is it so terrible for me to see a movie about an actual historical event, something I could learn from?"

"Cinder," her mother answered, looking away as she busily arranged and re-arranged a display of cold remedies, "you're grown now, you're not a child anymore. It's not my place to tell you what's right and wrong. You already know what we've taught you."

"But you disapprove?" Cinder pressed.

Her mother looked up from her crate of cough syrups and replied, "Whether I do or not, it doesn't matter. I know we've raised you up into a fine, good woman and you can make these decisions all on your own. Sometimes folks need to see something for themselves, and if that's what you need to do I'm not going to stop you."

Luke raised no objections at all, though he did ask if Cinder would still be home early enough to get dinner ready for him on time. To him it wasn't so much a matter that it was a woman's place to do the cooking as it was a question of his own gross incompetence in the kitchen, combined with the lack of available take-out. He'd always been only too happy to wash and dry the dishes afterward, and didn't even mind sweeping and mopping the floor so long as Cinder was the one wielding the spatula.

Satisfied that she'd given full disclosure and now had nothing to hide or fear, Cinder headed off to the city the next morning with ten extra dollars in her purse and an unfamiliar

sense of adventure. She found it hard to concentrate in class as her mind kept wandering back to the television and print ads for *Amnesty Gray*.

When she finally took a seat in the darkened auditorium, the next two hours were a revelation. This movie was so much more beautiful and thought provoking than anything she'd seen on television, and it really did open a door in her mind. Neither she nor anyone she knew was a racist so far as she could tell, but there were no blacks living in Pine Creek and the movie gave her a new appreciation of what it meant for these sharecroppers to be black in America. The movie also focused on themes of loss, particularly what it means to lose one's connections to home and family, and those parts of the film touched Cinder very deeply and personally.

Most of the farmers and small town folk depicted on the screen were hardworking, noble people, bringing to mind so many of Cinder's own friends and neighbors. As the closing credits began to roll, Cinder gave a spontaneous burst of applause. Then she wiped her eyes, blew her nose and walked out to the lobby. Clark Norris, who'd also just seen the movie and witnessed Cinder's emotional outburst, tapped her on the shoulder as she pushed the lobby door open. "So you liked it then?" he asked, smiling.

Cinder was caught completely off guard. "I...uh, yes. It was wonderful," she breathed, then hurried to leave.

"Wait," Clark said. "I'd love to talk to you about it, if you have the time."

Cinder checked her watch. She still had an hour or so before she'd need to get on the road, but she didn't feel right about this. Embarrassed, she responded, "That's very nice, really, but I'm married and I—"

"It's okay," Clark interrupted, smiling. "I wasn't asking you out on a date, I just thought you might like to discuss the film."

He seemed sincere and Cinder didn't feel any romantic attraction to him, so she decided to take him up on the offer. They walked over to the coffee house and found a few of Cinder's classmates there. Cinder made a point of sitting with the group so there would be no misunderstanding about any relationship between herself and Clark.

A very spirited discussion of movies followed, and while Cinder didn't have much to say about motion pictures she was able to hold forth admirably on the subject of storytelling in general, having been an avid reader of the classics all her life. She confessed to being a non-movie goer and was surprised when no one remarked on it, apart from one girl who noted that the stage play was the truest form of entertainment anyway. The hour flew by and Cinder regretted having to leave.

If Cinder's mother expected Cinder's first foray into a movie theater to be her last, she was mistaken. Cinder was always among the first to take in a new weekday matinee from then on, and found Clark only too happy to play any DVD she rented on the coffee house's small

television set so long as he could keep a running commentary about the quality of everything in the film, from the sets to the acting to the lighting and sound. Luke, never much of a moviegoer himself, didn't mind this new hobby of his wife's, and in fact he enjoyed hearing the stories from the movies retold over dinner.

"He put it in this box, like a little treasure chest, and buried it where he thought no one would ever find it," Cinder explained.

"The octopus-head guy?"

"Yes, Davey Jones."

Luke shook his head and smiled, scooping up another large forkful of mashed potatoes. "Man, I don't know how you keep it all straight."

"It's not hard to follow," Cinder reassured him. "He was in love with Calypso, the goddess of the sea, and for her he agreed to be the captain of the Flying Dutchman. He would have to ferry all the souls of people who die at sea to the afterlife, and he could only step onshore to be with Calypso once every ten years, but he would be immortal."

Luke raised his eyebrows.

"He would never die," Cinder clarified. "But the first time he was able to go ashore, Calypso wasn't there."

"That bi-," Luke began, then caught himself. "Sorry, hon. I mean, that *witch*."

"Well, yes," Cinder responded. "It turns out she actually was kind of a witch, like she could do spells and tell the future. Anyway, Davey Jones was so upset about Calypso that he cut his heart out and put it in the box so that he wouldn't have to feel anything anymore."

Luke looked down at his own chest. "Whoa, that is a hardcore dude."

"He stopped taking the souls to the afterlife and became a vicious pirate, and because he didn't keep his promise to Calypso, him and all his crew became cursed."

"What the hell is that about?! Calypso shined him on, bigtime, and he's still s'posed to keep his promise to that lyin' skank?!"

"Well, she was a goddess and he was a mortal, so-"

"I don't care if she's goddamn Pamela Anderson holdin' a cold beer, she gypped that dude."

Cinder took a deep breath. "Okay, you're right. So like I was saying, they were all cursed and started kind of turning into sea creatures."

"What?"

"Like, one of them started growing crab legs out of his back, they've all got barnacles and seaweed growing on their heads and faces-"

"And *that's* how Davey Jones got to be an octopus head?! That's totally messed up. He does all that stuff for Calypso for ten years, all he wants is a little lovin'. She flakes out on him,

puts the hurt on 'im so bad the dude cuts his own goddamn heart out, and then she turns his head into an octopus so he can't even get with anyone new?"

"I don't think it was exactly like that," Cinder replied slowly.

Luke shook his head. "Whatever. So how'd he get back at her?"

"Luke, the movie isn't really about that, it's more about that Captain Jack Sparrow, and Elizabeth and Will."

Luke waved his fork dismissively. "Nah, screw them. I wanna hear more about the octopus-head guy."

Cinder sighed. "Okay. Um..." She quickly tried to piece something together for Luke's peace of mind. "In the end, there's this big battle in a giant whirlpool. Calypso is on the ship with Captain Sparrow and Will and Elizabeth, so Davey Jones fires every cannon he's got to sink the ship."

"Whooo!" Luke hooted, pumping his fist. "Take that, you skank!"

"As the ship goes down, he just manages to get Calypso and take her back to the Flying Dutchman."

"And he made her cut out her own heart and turned her into an octopus head?" Luke asked hopefully, eyes as bright as a child's.

Cinder considered a moment, then shrugged. "Yep, you guessed it!"

"Damn, that sounds like a kick-ass movie. If it comes on the TV, I'm gonna watch it. What's it called again?"

"Uh, Davey Jones and the Curse of Calypso."

He nodded appreciatively. "Damn."

Cinder's parents knew and disapproved of Cinder's continuing preoccupation with films but didn't say anything about it to her, feeling that first it was not truly any of their business and second that it didn't appear to be interfering with her work, school or marriage. They were wrong on that last count, however.

Cinder tried not to think about it, but she couldn't deny the fact that the more time she spent with Clark and her other more worldly associates in Chicago, the more she began to feel she'd made a mistake in marrying Luke. She still loved him, but more in a motherly way than a romantic way. Luke seemed to her such a little boy, harmless, helpless, and unquestioningly devoted to her, but just majestically dense. Where Cinder's city friends were well-read and opinionated, Luke was simple and malleable. If her friends were wine and cheese, Luke was beer and pork rinds.

Trying to engage him in a conversation about anything outside the scope of his work or their town was pointless, because invariably he'd bring the discussion to a screeching halt by laughing, "I dunno. Guess I don't much care about that kind of thing."

His beautiful face and body gradually began to lose their appeal, though Cinder continued with their conventional lovemaking as much to try and persuade herself as him that she could still be a good wife. Her interest in Clark was growing day by day and while Clark couldn't compete with Luke at all in the area of physical attractiveness, it was Clark's mind that had begun to fascinate her.

Clark wrote and staged plays, and sometimes spent a year at a time working in a foreign country just to be able to visit world-famous galleries, monuments and historical sites. For inspiration, he told Cinder. In reality, it was more a matter of fleeing from bad debts and leading-lady pregnancies. He had many interests and a seemingly endless supply of amusing, if mostly fabricated, anecdotes about his experiences in the theater at home and abroad but his number one ambition was to become a professional writer of either novels or screenplays, or maybe both, he wasn't sure yet. He tended to view each new person he met as a potential character in his latest opus and each new experience as a possible plot point.

He started out trying to write completely original material, but one day while watching the news he had an epiphany: if the truth really *is* stranger than fiction, it would be much easier to simply chronicle true events and people, then change just enough of the details to pass it off as fiction. Why slave away and wrack your brain trying to write believable dialogue when you can just take dictation, he figured. He learned early on in this new crusade that people aren't typically anxious to have their lives chronicled for public consumption however, and so didn't let Cinder know what he was up to. He could disguise her true identity easily enough once he got down to writing about her, he figured.

He was glad Cinder was married because it left him free to enjoy having a fresh, naïve audience and subject in Cinder while not having to worry about an undesirable romantic attachment from her. She was pretty enough certainly, but in spite of his near poverty and lack of meaningful education or employment Clark fancied himself a sophisticated, jetsetting type of person and would never stoop to a love affair with anyone as provincial as this girl.

As for Cinder, the lack of sexual chemistry was mutual. She didn't daydream about lazy afternoons of lovemaking with Clark, but she did imagine herself talking to him about culture and politics for hours on end, traveling with him to see the exotic places he'd told her about, attending plays and operas and the symphony with him. To Cinder, Clark represented the bigger world writ large, everything that was missing from her bucolic existence back in Pine Creek, and she desperately wanted to be a part of that bigger world. She believed that so long as her interest in Clark was purely intellectual, regardless of her waning affections for Luke, she was safe from the threat of infidelity.

Cinder managed the balancing act of school, the pharmacy, Luke and Clark admirably right up until the day of the accident, and things only got worse from there.

* * *

Her parents went to nearby Kellyvale one day a few weeks before Cinder's graduation, to visit with an old friend of Edward's. There was an awful storm brewing and Cinder asked them to consider making the trip another time, but the occasion was an anniversary party and Lucinda wouldn't feel right about missing it when they had no other plans. They made it to the party and had a wonderful time but the drive home proved more treacherous in the dark than it had been in daylight. Theirs was the sixth car in a ten-car pileup, preceded by a flatbed tow truck and followed by an eighteen wheeler. At least it was all over for them in an instant.

The community rallied around Cinder immediately, and her Uncle Thomas and Aunt Shirline flew in from Minnesota to take care of all the arrangements. She could've delayed her finals and licensing exam on account of bereavement but she didn't want the pharmacy window closed any longer than absolutely necessary. She could still keep the shop open to sell over the counter remedies, candy, cosmetics and the like, but she wouldn't be able to take over as pharmacist until she had her license and she didn't know of anyone who could fill in until then. Busying herself with study helped her to cope with her devastating loss, and of course Luke was a protective and blunt rock when the number of visitors or tasks on Cinder's to do list became too much to bear.

Luke took some time off from work to take care of Cinder and for a short while she felt as if her old crush on him might be returning to stay. He was so thoughtful and gentle, offering to help with whatever chores or errands he could while leaving her enough privacy to focus on her upcoming exams. Cinder started to think that maybe it could work out for her and Luke after all, even if he wasn't her intellectual equal. After all, men had been marrying dumb women for centuries and no one had a problem with that. It might be enough for her to have a loving and sensitive husband and if that were so, she would need to give it a fair chance. She decided that continuing her friendship with Clark could only dilute her new resolve to keep things together with Luke and so decided to tell Clark that after graduation she wouldn't be coming back to the city for regular visits as they'd originally planned.

Clark was disappointed, but not very. He'd hoped to get to know Cinder better and to hear more about her Mayberry RFD existence in order to get that kind of character and that kind of place detailed in his notes, but in truth he was already beginning to lose interest in her. She was an appreciative listener, true, but he'd told her most of his stories and she didn't have any of her own to tell.

She mentioned the recent death of her parents and Clark thought this twist might add some juice to Cinder's tale, but she seemed to be handling the whole thing far too well for it to be at all interesting on the page. And so he bid farewell to Cinder, never expecting to see her again but tucking his notebook away just in case she should reappear someday with something more intriguing to offer.

Cinder passed her licensing exam and began filling all the on-hold prescriptions the day after she received her papers. She felt the absence of her parents more acutely than before now that there wasn't so much activity to fill up all the hours in a day. She would be in the middle of typing a label and some small detail would call Edward or Lucinda to mind, reducing her to a quaking mess of tears. She did a good job of hiding these mini-breakdowns while she was at work, but Luke was such a great comforter that she didn't even try to cover up her sadness while she was at home with him. Luke was content to hold Cinder in his massive arms and quietly rock her, hugging and soothing the tears away. Grief stayed for many months, receding eventually but never really going away completely, helping to cement a new bond between Cinder and Luke.

Cinder's feeling of being all alone in the world made her think it might be time for she and Luke to start their own little family. Things were going well down at the plant for Luke—he got that promotion he wanted some eight months previous—and her parents had left them enough life insurance money to pay off the mortgage on the pharmacy, Cinder's student loans and Luke's truck loan. Remembering how recently she'd felt nearly indifferent toward Luke, Cinder decided to mull the idea over herself for a while before bringing it up to him. He wanted kids, she knew that, but she didn't want to bring any children into their lives unless she was absolutely certain their marriage would last. About the time Cinder was ready to talk to Luke about getting pregnant, they learned the Argent Actuator plant would be closing in three months.

Argent was the major employer in Pine Creek and the surrounding area, so this came as a major blow not just to Cinder and Luke but to the entire region. Even some national news outlets were reporting on the situation in terms of its being just one more example of how plant closures can lead to the destruction of whole communities.

While income from the pharmacy was at that time enough to support Luke, Cinder and a child or two as well, many families would be relocating and business would undoubtedly taper off quite a bit as a result. Since they had no outstanding debt, owned their home and their cars free and clear and still had a modest source of income, Luke and Cinder were in a good position to stay afloat even if Luke were unemployed for an extended period. And they probably would've been all right if Luke hadn't taken things so hard.

Luke's family were among the first to relocate. His Daddy had worked at Argent all his adult life but at the age of fifty-two, he wasn't near enough to retirement age to collect a full

pension. He needed to keep working, and there was no other work to be had in Pine Creek or the neighboring towns. It broke Luke's heart to say goodbye to his Momma and his little twin sisters, and each member of his small circle of friends and family seemed to take a piece of that heart with them when they left. He wanted to go with his family to Denver but Cinder couldn't yet divest herself of her sense of obligation where the pharmacy was concerned.

It had been less than a year since her parents' passing and she knew it had been their cherished dream for her to carry on in their place with the family business. She was losing lifelong friends too, as one by one they moved on to better prospects elsewhere. The drugstore and Luke, these were the only things Cinder felt she could still count on, yet it seemed like she couldn't have both. She felt pulled in two directions; on the one hand was her desire to see her parents' dreams fulfilled and on the other was the wish to see her husband and marriage happy again so she could become a mother without reservation.

Luke's depression deepened as the date of the plant closure loomed. Cinder tried to reassure him, to build up his confidence so he would go into Chicago to look for work, but nothing could rouse him from his bleak silences. The first few times he went out and got really drunk with buddies on their way out of town, Cinder was happy just to see him out and about. It seemed perfectly normal and healthy to her that a man in his situation should seek the solace of alcohol for a few hours, and he always came home happy and full of optimistic banter about their future.

She didn't begin to worry about it until the last of Luke's friends was gone and he just kept right on with the farewell party. He'd be out every night and passed out in the living room every morning---on the mornings he managed to get back home at all, that is. If he could've held on just a few more weeks he would've received a respectable severance check, but his chronic absenteeism finally got him fired. This, of course, he saw as yet another occasion for a celebration. It was Cinder who got him signed up for unemployment, driving him into Chicago and then literally dragging him to the counter to sign the papers. A clerk at the unemployment office gave Cinder some literature about Alcoholics Anonymous and she took it, knowing full well it would end up in the trash back home.

As they turned on to the highway to go back to Pine Creek, Cinder wondered if Clark was still working at the little coffee house and remembered how happy she'd been before her parents died. It seemed so long ago now. Luke just wasn't the man he used to be; she was finding it harder and harder to keep caring about him when he seemed not to care about her anymore. She could see now that his opulent love for her had always been the only thing holding them together, that she never really reciprocated his feelings. She loved being loved, that was all.

Weeks straggled on into months. Luke became a useless, if happy, drunk and Cinder continued to toil alone, bored and frustrated, at the drugstore. She couldn't be angry with Luke

because she blamed herself for his unemployment and alcoholism. If she hadn't so stubbornly refused to leave the store they might be nicely settled in Denver by now, Luke with a great new job and Cinder with a baby on the way.

She finally decided to put the store up for sale and at first, this news made a world of difference in Luke. He began to make plans for them, to start looking through want ads mailed by his parents and to pack up the attic and garage. Just having something to occupy himself was enough for a while—though not indefinitely. Cinder wasn't sure they would be able to reclaim the small piece of contentment they once shared together, though she knew nothing would change until their circumstances did.

It shouldn't have surprised Cinder when the store didn't sell. After all, who would want to buy an ailing business in a dying town? The drugstore still generated enough income to pay the grocery and utility bills, but not much more. Owning the shop was no risk to Cinder since she'd inherited it, but asking a new buyer to invest in it was ridiculous. They couldn't afford to move without the small nest egg they'd hoped the sale of their home and the store would provide, and whether they stayed or moved Cinder knew a baby was out of the question for the time being. Maybe forever. Her plan had always been to keep working, bringing her baby into the shop as her mother had done with her, while Luke continued working his way up the laborer ladder at Argent.

Such a scenario wasn't feasible in a chain drugstore, or even in a small pharmacy owned by someone else. Pine Creek was small and quiet, and the customers didn't mind having a baby behind the counter and many were even happy to help out with a diapering or feeding if things got too busy at the cash register. Things would be different in a bigger town or city where nobody knows anybody else, and supporting their whole family on a single, blue collar salary would be more of a strain than Cinder could bear.

She concluded that she and Luke were hopelessly stuck. She could ask herself why a hundred times, but the answer was always the same: because this is what she chose. She chose to stay in Pine Creek, she chose to marry Luke, she chose to keep the store open after Argent closed up shop and every morning since then she chose to go on living the same life in the same way.

Just thinking about it made her feel about ten years older than she was, and living it made her look that way. Her brave, pretty face lined with the marks of perpetual disappointment, her faded blue jean eyes at once distant and desperately hopeful, her charming blonde bob irregularly striped with gray, Cinder already looked and acted much older than her twenty-six years should've demanded or allowed. Her life in a static holding pattern, she felt sapped of all energy.

Luke didn't give up on selling the drugstore as soon as Cinder and she decided not to burst his blissful bubble of enthusiasm. Still, Luke saw the writing on the wall soon enough and went back to his former career as a drunkard. He was always out late before, but now he even started staying out all night, or for days at a time.

Cinder worried about him a little the first few times he didn't come home, then he'd turn up, passed out in some bar or friend's house in a nearby town and needing Cinder to come pick him up. After a few more of these episodes she stopped worrying, or even caring about Luke being gone for so long. If anything, she was happy to have the quiet and privacy his absence afforded.

She started going into Chicago on the nights Luke was out, treating herself to a movie and a cappuccino just like the old days. She asked after Clark and was told he was still working at the coffee house, though still on the day shift, while Cinder was at work. "Oh well," she thought. "Maybe we'll see each other again sometime." Sooner than she thought, as it turned out.

* * *

Eight days after Thanksgiving, Luke went missing again. They'd closed the drugstore for a few days and driven all the way out to Colorado to spend the holiday with Luke's family. He'd come back feeling despondent, so Cinder knew a bender was on the way. When Luke came home with a case of beer and two bottles of tequila one night, Cinder didn't ask any questions. She collected her purse, coat and gloves and left for Chicago without a word. The first snowfall of the season started coming down about ten minutes into her trip and she thought it was a lucky thing Luke would be getting hammered indoors tonight.

The movie was long and not very good, but Cinder ran into a former classmate at the coffee house afterward and they stayed there, talking and laughing, until closing time. It was so nice, having someone to talk to. She'd almost forgotten how much joy can be had in the span of an hour or two spent with a like-minded friend. The snow fell heavily and steadily the whole time Cinder was in the movie theater and at the coffee house, and she had to put on her chains for the drive home. Visibility was terrible so she went very slowly, not getting home until sometime after two a.m. She was so tired that she didn't stop to look around for Luke, but just fell into bed fully clothed and exhausted.

She woke around six with a full bladder and got up to empty it, noting the thick blanket of white outside and thanking God that no one expected her to trudge into town to open the store when the snow was this deep. Her car was buried nearly up to the hood anyway, so she

wasn't likely to be going anywhere until it melted off a bit. In her drowsy daze, she didn't think to check around for the prostrate form of Luke and instead went right back to bed for two more hours of sleep.

When she got up her first mission was to make some coffee and fry herself a couple of eggs. Fully fed and caffeinated, she strolled through the house looking for Luke. She looked behind the couch, in the tub, in the basement laundry room, in the closets and under the bed, but didn't find Luke in any of the usual places. His empty beer bottles were strewn all over the house and the two tequila bottles, both half empty, were precariously balanced on the narrow shelf over their hearth. Cinder sighed, then finished her coffee, showered and spent the next two hours cleaning house.

The previous night's snowfall didn't diminish at all with exposure to sun, and in fact a new dusting came down in the early afternoon. Cinder noticed that Luke's truck was parked off-kilter at the side of the house and figured he must have called someone to come pick him up for some intensive partying away from his disapproving wife. He always liked to park his truck in the garage before a big snow; he'd be upset if it rusted.

Afternoon stretched into evening and evening into night, and still there was no sign of Luke and still there was more snow falling. The next morning Thomas Early came by to plow the streets and was nice enough to do Cinder's driveway too. No, he said with a sympathetic grimace, he hadn't seen Luke in town lately.

With the streets clear Cinder was able to get into town and open up the store, so that's what she did. She had maybe three customers all day but kept busy restocking shelves, updating her holiday displays and going over her inventory. Luke wasn't at home when she got there and hadn't left a message on the answering machine either. Common enough these past few months, Cinder thought as she fixed herself a sandwich.

She didn't feel up to the long, cold trip into the city that night so she built a fire, turned on an old movie and fell asleep in the easy chair, wrapped up to her chin in a quilt. She woke with a start at around four in the morning, calling for Luke. There was no answer. The fire had gone out hours ago and the room was very cold. She turned up the thermostat, set her alarm and went back to sleep.

The next day, the third day, Luke still didn't come home and though the snow had finally stopped falling the weatherman on the channel six news warned that Chicago and outlying areas were in for several more weeks of freezing temperatures around the clock. Now Cinder was beginning to worry.

She phoned Sheriff Adler Sharp to see about filing a missing persons report. Adler was an old friend of both Cinder and Luke's families and he knew all about Luke's fondness for drink

and carousing. Adler wasn't anxious to fill out a lot of paperwork when it was likely as not Luke would drag his sorry self home, hung over and full of apologies, at any minute.

"Aw, come on now Cinder. You know that boy's just got himself good and drunk and passed out again somewheres or other. He's been gone for a few days before, and he always comes back, drunk and stinkin' of it."

"I know, I know. But with the snow and everything..."

"Don't you worry now, girl. He'll show up. Always does."

When two more days passed with no call and no sign of Luke, Cinder insisted that Adler file a missing persons report and asked him to fax it out to all the other police agencies in the county. He complied, but still believed Luke was probably safe and sound and just too ashamed to come home.

"Boy like that," Adler said as he watched the papers flow into and out of the fax machine, "has got about as much sense as a pile of bricks. Nice home, good woman to come home to, and all that boy does is drink himself stupid. Pretty damned simple to begin with, that Luke is, but he sure ain't makin' no efforts to improve on the situation."

"Well," Cinder replied, "it's not all his fault. He just hasn't been the same since the plant—"

"Listen here," Adler interrupted, "plenty of folks round here been left much worse off than him when Argent closed, and you don't see all a' them acting a fool like your Luke does. Any able-bodied man worth his boots can get a new job. Any man that wants to, I mean."

Cinder didn't try to defend Luke any further. She took her copies of the police report and went back to the store. She had stopped loving Luke as a husband long ago, so her worry for him was now more of a familial sort. As much as anything she was just curious to know what he'd found to keep himself occupied for so long and with so little money to spend. Around two, bored, uneasy and alone in the store, she decided to call Clark.

* * *

Back at the station, Adler reviewed the missing persons report with disgust. "Damn drunken fool!" he spat. He'd watched his little town unravel before his eyes over the past year. The Sharps had inhabited this valley for generations, since the pioneer days, and Adler loved the place. His Daddy and Granddaddy had been Sheriff before him and he was proud to hold the post but found it pretty dull. Not much need for law enforcement in a town like Pine Creek, he'd discovered. Virtually all the citations he wrote were for strangers, just passing through on their way into or out of Chicago, and there weren't many of those.

Adler toyed with the idea of running for Mayor for some time before the plant closed, but his shrinking responsibilities made him think more seriously about it now. He could be the bachelor Sheriff of a tiny, dead town for the rest of his days, laughable and powerless, or he could run for Mayor of Pine Creek and from there mount a campaign for County Supervisor. County Supervisors usually attracted the attention of many fine ladies during their term, and often ended up running for Congress. Well-married Congressmen could become Senators or even Governors.

At fifty, Adler was about the right age to start campaigning but he faced stiff opposition from the incumbent, the aging but beloved Heck Bradley. Just as the Sharps had always been lawmen in Pine Creek, the Bradleys had always been administrators. Heck was content to judge cookery at the annual town fair and hand out diplomas at high school commencement ceremonies, having no desire to attend county board meetings or take on any kind of active role in bringing new business to the valley.

"Why Adler," he remarked once when Sharp asked him about it, "that would be just plain old politicking. Pine Creek d'udnt need t' get involved in any o' that county business. I leave that mess to them politicians, keep us Creekers out a' that."

So long as Pine Creek was productive, content and safe, Heck's office was secure. Adler saw in the Argent plant closure an opportunity to take advantage of Heck's diminishing approval rating. Elections were still nearly a year off, giving Adler plenty of time to start stumping, but he'd yet to declare his candidacy because he felt he needed either a strong platform or reputation and he had neither.

He tried to talk up some petty acts of vandalism that occurred around the time of the plant shut down, making them out to be the work of dangerous thugs from the city who'd come looking for trouble but instead found a hardnosed cop who wasn't going to let them get away with it. He knew the broken windows and missing plant equipment were actually the handiwork of the teenaged sons of some departing workers, and was just as certain no one else would find out.

His preposterous tough on crime, law-and-order stance was appreciatively acknowledged by the more gullible and timid citizens of Pine Creek at the time, but months passed without so much as a parking violation since then. All he had on the books was this Luke Torley case; he was in no rush to circulate the news, sure as he was that Luke would be home before the day was out. When the week was out and Luke still hadn't come home, Adler began to wonder if there might be more to this story after all.

* * *

Sitting at her desk in Chicago, Bailey Weems was thinking about a different story. Bailey, formerly Monica Gross of Spokane, Washington, hadn't clawed her way to the middle of the National News Agency just to get this crappy human interest story about the fate of small towns in the midwest. Rosalind Chase, now an anchor at the Atlanta affiliate of NNA, had done a story the previous year about the alarming number of factory closures in small towns surrounding Chicago and the effect these closures were having on the towns the factories supported. Her piece was called "Death of the Heartland", and her news director intended it to be an installment series from the beginning. Now that Rosalind had moved on to bigger and better things, Bailey was stuck with her leftovers and not at all happy about it.

This was the year she'd intended to do her big investigative report on the hidden calorie content of vitamins, toiletries and cosmetics. "Is Your Toothpaste Making You Fat?" was supposed to be her breakthrough piece of journalism, the story that would bring her nose to nose with the FDA in a pitched battle to require nutritional content labels on all incidentally-consumable products, the scathing exposé that would put her on the map. But now she was saddled with this lame Heartland story. With all her other, ongoing reportage of day to day events in and around Chicago she could only handle one "big" story at a time and her news director had made it clear the FDA skirmish would have to wait.

Her assignment was to do a series of follow-up interviews in the towns affected by plant closures, a 'counting the human cost' kind of thing. True, it would give her a regular and repeated presence in the evening broadcast, but it would hurt her more than help her if the interviews came across as dull or repetitive. She needed an angle for the story, something to give it more spark and interest, something to make it more appealing to her most desirable, upwardly mobile, city-dwelling demographic of women. She'd heard that women's issues were going to be hot with the Pulitzer committee this year and figured there must be a way to inject more estrogen into this Heartland piece.

It was frustrating for her to pick up where Rosalind Chase left off. Since she was a girl, little Monica Gross dreamed of being a news anchor. Diane Sawyer was her idol. She wrote for both her high school and college newspapers. She interned at the Chicago Trumpeter during summer breaks. It was there that she decided to change her name, noting that the most successful women reporters seemed to have a slightly masculine sounding first name combined with a slightly odd sounding last name. Her byline became Bailey Weems and she had her name changed legally later that year.

It was difficult to get her stories into print, even after she graduated and joined the Trumpeter staff as a regular contributor and assistant editor of features. She was shocked and disappointed to learn that the business of journalism was still very much a male-dominated

arena. The few women she found working there were concentrated in the Home, Community Kaleidoscope and classified advertising sections. Even the Arts and Literary Supplement sections were fully staffed by men. The one woman Bailey found to emulate was Whitley Crider, editor of the Business section and sometime NNA commentator.

Whitley taught Bailey that being a woman in TV journalism meant being a better, more daring reporter than any of her male counterparts and looking gorgeous all the time. Women reporters were held to a higher standard of both relevance and physical beauty than men, Whitley said, and Bailey should consider herself a target in the crosshairs wherever she worked. Whitley warned that if Bailey wanted to be an anchor on NNA someday, she better be prepared for at least ten years of hard work in obscurity, gradually building a network of appreciative peers and very slowly earning the respect of one or two well-placed mentors, all in the hopes of getting some small scrap of face time on the evening news. Whitley was the first of those mentors, and Rosalind Chase was the second.

Rosalind promised to bring Bailey along with her when she finally got her boost from the newsroom to the anchor desk, though she never really intended to do anything of the sort. In Bailey she saw a young, talented, ambitious, needy disciple ready to follow her into the very maw of Hell if it meant getting an assistant producer credit. She mined Bailey for ideas, used her as a gofer and editrix, and generally saw to it that Bailey was always too busy to come to the attention of higher ups because she realized Bailey's skill and charisma would easily overpower her own. Rosalind assured Bailey that the straightest path to a plum spot was traversed in doing the anonymous tasks no one else wanted to do and remaining very modest about her work; after all, Rosalind reminded her, no one likes a braggart.

The truth was that the only way to get noticed in a place as bustling and Machiavellian as a newsroom was to go for the brass ring at every opportunity and broadcast even the tiniest accomplishment as if it were tantamount to parting the Red Sea. Bailey worked very hard for Rosalind and took Rosalind's every word as gospel. If anyone tried to warn her to watch her back, Bailey shrugged off their skepticism of Rosalind as little more than professional jealousy. When Rosalind left, and left Bailey in the dust, Bailey was the only one who hadn't seen it coming.

There were many in the newsroom who saw and appreciated Bailey's natural ability as a reporter and on-camera personality regardless of Rosalind's attempts to hide this lamp under a bush. She was very well positioned to ascend the reporting ladder quickly and gracefully, but she didn't know it. She felt angry, bitter and cheated when Rosalind's lies were finally uncovered. She concluded that if there was a lesson to be learned here, it was only this: trust no one, but use everyone.

It wasn't that she wanted to be a grasping, selfish bitch, but now that she could see that what she thought was a cooperative, supportive work environment was really a piranha tank, she felt being a faster, more cold-blooded piranha was the only way she could hope to compete. She could compartmentalize, she could separate her personal from her professional life and still be a decent human being. She was sure of it. Pretty sure. Most of the time.

Seeing this swift change in Bailey, co-workers were quick to distance themselves. Much as Bailey now hated Rosalind, there was no truer acolyte to the example Rosalind had set. Everyone around her knew Bailey would realize her dreams of being a national anchor eventually; it was all they could manage to keep out of her destructive path while still staying on her good side. The news director, Graf Boronsky, looked upon this transformation as propitious. He'd lost a pet shark in Rosalind and needed a replacement; Graf built his reputation on finding and promoting new talent, often manipulating circumstances and stories to advance his personal agendas while cleverly hanging all responsibility on the reporter. The facts, he believed, are never as important as the perceptions.

So he would advance stories that a DA was denying a past criminal record or that a governor could not be reached for comment on allegations of fraud if it suited his purpose to call someone's character into question. He was very good at subtly planting seeds in the minds of his favored staffers and then sitting back in feigned surprise as the story broke.

Of course there were often requests for a wrist-slapping when his own superiors started to get a little nervous about fallout from these hastily assembled pieces of reportage, but Graf would only call the offending staffer in for a private, hearty chuckle at the cowardice of the network suits. He would advise the reporter not to compromise the sacred duty demanded by freedom of the press, then they would agree to let everyone else think a stern warning had been given.

Graf handed the Heartland story off to Bailey only because it was unfinished business he was anxious to be done with. He'd originally intended to use the Heartland series as a tool to smear Illinois Congressman Bill Watts, thinking he could guide Rosalind's story along a path which would implicate Watts in a shady profit-taking scheme. Watts owned stock in several of the corporations involved in plant closures and Graf hoped to paint a picture of a venal politico trying to make a fast bundle at the cost of poverty in his constituency. This would create a media juggernaut for Graf while clearing the way for his preferred candidate in the upcoming elections.

Ultimately, his plot proved to be an utter failure and an embarrassment. Rosalind took Graf's bait initially, but soon learned that Watts' percentage ownership in the various outfits in question was very small. Moreover, Watts had gone on record to oppose plant closures at shareholder meetings and when he learned the closures would proceed anyway, he promptly sold

off his stock in each instance. Rosalind began to see that the only conspiracy afoot was the one being perpetrated by Graf, through her. She knew he had Watts' opponent in his back pocket and would be pulling for him in the next election, but she hadn't thought Graf was capable of shooting craps with her career this way.

She was disappointed and disillusioned, not because she expected Graf to take a higher moral ground than this, but because he was so obviously orchestrating things in such a way that she would be the fall guy if a question of impropriety ever arose. She had to prevent that from happening, and then get the hell out of his newsroom as soon as possible. She knew Graf couldn't come right out and order her to slant the story in direct contrast to the facts without risking exposure as a muckraker, so she finished the first installment on her own, politely, even sweetly, refusing Graf's suggestions that she dig deeper into this or that detail.

The first refusal could've been construed as a simple matter of opinion, and the second as artistic differences, but when Rosalind failed to take Graf's advice for a third time he knew she was on to him. Like a pair of caged tigers, they circled one another warily from then on, both working toward the same goal of getting Rosalind on to her next assignment though for completely different reasons. There was an unspoken understanding between them; if Boronsky helped Chase get the next anchor slot available she would keep her mouth shut. If he did not, her abilities as an investigative reporter were more than adequate to unmask him. So on she went to Atlanta, to the great relief of Graf and the equal disgust of Bailey.

Graf's instructions to Bailey were to put this series to bed in two more installments, with as light a touch as possible. Lots of pictures of rusted out factory buildings disintegrating in the snow, interviews with displaced local yokels, montages of doe-eyed, raggedy urchins subsisting on instant oatmeal and macaroni and cheese, boo hoo, national shame, a new third world right here in America, et cetera, et cetera.

Bailey couldn't understand Graf's insistence that she treat the story as a virtual puff piece, given the gravity of the subject matter and the fact that her capabilities would be woefully underused with this approach. She was determined to reshape the Heartland series into something more like hard news. Hard news that affects women. Hard news that affects women aged 25 – 49 who have annual incomes between forty and one hundred thousand dollars. Now *that* would be a story.

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