

# **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.

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