Daimler dreams

by

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I turned my back to the wind and struck another match, but this one, too, was blown out. I flicked it away from me and stared across the street, at the river as it wound along, choppy and brown. I put my unlit cigarette between my lips and remembered, for some reason, how unimpressed I had been with the river the first time I had seen it. I had been six years old and my father had pointed it out to me from the window of a rusted out Ford pick-up. That pick-up had taken me from the quiet marble halls of Union Station over the river and west. If I had been driven past the lake, that first day, my impression of the city may have been different.

“Lois, you need a light?” Sam asked. I tore my eyes from the river long enough to see him standing in front of me, his arms loaded with files.

“I’m not going to ask you for one,” I said. “It looks like you’ve enough to keep you busy.”

Bells clanged and the Michigan Avenue bridge separated in the middle and each side rose to let a steamer through. I couldn’t see what color it was because the bridge was in the way. I didn’t care.

“It’s not a problem,” Sam said, setting the files down on the step we stood on. “I was going to have a cigarette myself.”

“What’s in the files?” I asked.

He had a lighter that he cupped in his hand, but he lost the fight with the wind, too. He sighed. The steamer let out a long, low whistle.

“No wonder they call it ‘The Windy City’,” Sam said.
He took a step closer to me and struck the lighter again. A flame trembled for a moment and was put out by a gust that blew some grit into my eye. I blinked and, in my sightlessness, kicked over the stack of manila folders.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” I said, more feeling them go over than seeing it happen. I knelt down, still blinking, to help reunite the folders with their contents.

When my vision cleared, I saw that I was scooping stories of murder trials off of the Daily Planet front steps. I handed a fully stuffed folder up to Sam.

“Are you bringing these out to – ” I began, just to make conversation, but I was stopped by the name written on the top of the next disheveled folder.

_Goldman_. A cold sweat broke out immediately along my spine and under my arms. The contents hadn’t been disturbed too much; the only thing that was out of place was the edge of a glossy photograph. A picture of the farm, maybe, or of the staircase, or of – her.

“Actually, Paul wanted me to take some of these upstairs. He’s covering the Krzytof trial and wanted to see if anyone involved had been involved before. In that sort of thing.”

Sam took the Goldman folder from me and picked up the rest of the stack. “I just came out for a smoke on the way up.”

“Why would he think anyone involved with Krzytof would have a history?” I forced myself to ask. I was aware of my cigarette, crushed and still unlit on the stair below me.

Sam dropped his voice. “Remember the Packing Plant Slaughter last year? Apparently they found a slug in Krzytof that matched one of the ones they found there. It looks like the mob is involved, but we’re not sure. A lot of things have changed now. They got subtler since Big Al went south.”
I swallowed. "Yeah," I said. Subtler." But the Goldman case didn't have anything to do with the mob. Maybe Sam had picked it up by accident. Maybe it wasn't any of my business.

A flock of pigeons left the roof of the Times building and settled on our side of the street, picking at the mulch around the poor trees that were trying to survive in their city-allotted, fenced in, three square feet of soil.

"What are you working on today?" Sam asked. He had, apparently, given up the idea of smoking as he was holding the files to his chest.

I turned from the pigeons and the street and walked in through the Planet's enormous arched front doors. Sam followed.

"An odd little movie called *The North Star,*" I said when the heavy oak and glass doors had sighed shut behind us. "It's a scream."

I slid back into the hard chair behind my sharp metal desk and faced the typewriter again. I had nothing to say about *The North Star* and, as usual, nothing in the office offered me any inspiration. Clark was at his desk, across from mine, and he tossed something between a grimace and a smile my way before going back to whatever he was working, no doubt quite productively, on. I had a fleeting urge to get up and distract him – to spill some ink over the pages he had written or push his typewriter off of his desk – but I stayed where I was and looked at the almost completely blank sheet of paper in front of me. It was so hard to get started. But everything was hard, for me, on a day like this, where the sky held rain and the past crept up out of unexpected corners.
If I wrote more about the propaganda aspect of *The North Star*, the boss would say I was being too political and not patriotic enough. We can’t let wartime slip by without supporting our boys in Germany, he would say. Limit your politics to that. If I speculated on why the director of the film had done some of the bizarre things he had done, or if I wrote about the photography or script, the boss would come up with some other reason why that wasn’t acceptable. I found my eyes swiveling back to Clark. He was ignoring me again. Of course.

Unless I wanted to work on another film, Farley Granger was my only option. Writing about leading actors was my least favorite out. It made me feel like I was writing for a fan magazine. I winced and typed, “Farley Granger, the leading man, is a promising young actor”. Fabulous. Now he would be given a role in some other low-budget production because Lois Lane, Film Critic and Superman’s Girlfriend, had said that he had promise.

Five o’clock came and I had written a bad draft of a bad column. I resisted the urge to throw away the day’s work, pulled it out of the typewriter and threw it in my outbox for the evening crew to pick up and proof, and dug my hat and gloves out of one of the big drawers on the left side of my desk. Clark’s shift was over at five, like mine. He was standing, busy running the brim of his hat through his fingers, around and around. He stood beside his desk, tense, in profile. More than anything he had the air of an animal, waiting, listening to something that was approaching but still unseen.

“Are you doing anything tonight?” he asked tersely, without turning to face me.

“You’re asking me?” I said, even though I knew he was. I was the only one, other than Jimmy and the boss, he talked to.
He nodded and started towards the back exit, walking briskly, and still not truly acknowledging me. I pulled my hat on and followed him out and down the back stairway, through the maintenance corridor that let to the lobby, past the marble tiling, potted palms, and evening receptionist, and to the front steps of the Planet. The Times building glowed white from across the street. I should have gotten a job there.

"I'm having dinner with Carmen," I answered Clark. This time he followed me and I walked toward the river. It smelled faintly of sewage and crawled along brown, lapping at the cement and stone that contained it. I dug a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of my purse, shook one loose, and stopped on the grating of the bridge to light it. This time I was successful the first time. I leaned against the railing and focused on the monument to Old Fort Dearborn, gray in the fading light. Important things had happened in Metropolis. Important things still happened here; we had Superman. I dropped the match and it fell between the holes in the grating we were standing on. Clark was still with me, like he always was, stopping when I stopped on the way to the El but always putting space between us.

"When will you be back from dinner?" He watched the cigarette smoke between my fingers. I watched him, but there was nothing to see.

"I can be flexible, if you're going to get around to asking me for a date."

He turned red and walked away from me with long strides. I followed him again and followed the curve of Wacker along the river. The El station was just ahead and a train bound for the Loop pulled away. I could barely hear it from where we stood.

"All I wanted to know was what you were doing," Clark said. "I wasn't going to ask you for a date."
“Why not?” I asked, because I always said something like that, “Is it because of Superman?” I bit down and tasted cigarette paper. A copy of the front page of the Times blew across the street, across our path, and over into the river.

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose not. It’s none of my business what you don’t do and why.”

We walked the rest of the way to the Chicago/State stop in silence. Streetlights came on and a boy on a bicycle rode by us, close and fast enough that it felt like a gust of wind had caught the edge of my coat. I walked up the stairs to the El in front of Clark, dodging the water that dripped from above and being careful not to catch my heels in the torn spots in the grating. On the platform, I found a spot on a bench between a babushkaed woman carrying a floral printed shopping bag and a man in a black bowler hat carrying an umbrella. Clark had disappeared. Pigeons pecked at the platform and the red line train rumbled towards us, and we waited for it.

At the Belmont stop, I shoved through the crowd down the narrow stairway and forced my way out of the red one-way turnstile that kept us commuters from overflowing Belmont too quickly. Gilly’s was three doors down from the white cement El station and Carmen was at her usual spot at the bar when I got inside. She had the full attention of both the bartender and a man in a navy blue suit and green tie who sat on the stool next to her. Of course, Carmen had champagne blonde curls and crimson fingernails, and, according to her, everyone always said that she looked like Betty Grable. Betty Grable in about five years, I thought, wedging myself into an empty space at the sticky wooden bar. The bartender barely glanced at me when he moved away from Carmen to get her a refill. If she was an aging
Betty Grable, I was a B-grade Lauren Bacall, and I was considerably less flashy and friendly than Carmen.

“Am I late?” I asked her, leaning across the corpulent woman who sat between us.

“You’re never late,” Carmen said, taking a cigarette out of her painfully dainty white clutch. The Blue Suit lit her up as the bartender came back with her drink.

He was tall, dark, and handsome, and I had been conditioned to wonder why he wasn’t in uniform. Not that I cared, personally. I caught his attention long enough to order tonic with a slice of lime. It was getting more difficult to stand at the crowded bar without touching it. Even the brass rail felt unsanitary against the sole of my shoe. Gilly’s always made me shudder, but Carmen and I kept coming back.

“Are you going in to the dining room?” I heard the Blue Suit ask Carmen over the din of the music and cheap laughs.

“We came here for dinner,” she replied.

I thought it was a stupid response. The bartender pushed a glass towards me and I took it, setting my money down without looking up at him. Carmen and I made a path through the after-work crowd and into the restaurant. We were seated and waited on by a boy who was too young to be charmed by Carmen’s matching lips and fingernails. He had a lazy eye and a Polish accent and I had never seen him there before.

Gilly’s was stickier than usual. There was a smear of something that might have been gravy on the plastic tablecloth, and I wondered if it had been left because the busboy was too busy to notice or if he was, as was more likely, too preoccupied with the problems of adolescence to care. My menu lay unopened in front of me. I didn’t want to touch it. Carmen fidgeted with her menu, with her drink, with the ashtray that was still full from the
last patron. She had something to say and I would hear it before long, and I would more than likely hear more than I needed to about it.

“"I met a man today,”’ she began.

Hearing about the men she met wasn’t my idea of a good time. Her talk about men made me want to throw myself into the lake, even though it was dirty and icy cold.

“"Have you seen *The North Star*?” I interrupted desperately. She wouldn’t have. But it was worth a try.

She bit her lip and shook her head. “Stan and I were going to go see something last night, but we couldn’t agree on what. You know how he is. We went dancing instead. I was going to call you, but there wouldn’t have been time for you to get a date, too.”

I fished the lime out of my drink and squeezed it. The waiter should be back to take our orders any minute. I saw him, out of the corner of my eye, pouring water at the table next to ours.

“I mean, I didn’t know if you could contact Superman at such short notice,” Carmen said.

“I suppose not.” I was starting to tune her out, which was rude and unfair. I was treating her like Clark treated me, and I wondered if he felt the same way about me as I did about Carmen. It was unlikely, considering the circumstances – but the circumstances weren’t really so different. I saw Carmen almost every night, too.

The waiter approached us and took our orders. He poured water in our glasses, splashing it on the table. A few beads of sweat clustered on his upper lip, and I felt bad for him. I wouldn’t wish a job at Gilly’s on anyone.
“Do you want a cigarette?” Carmen asked. She opened her purse and found her cigarette case empty. It was always empty when she offered me a cigarette. I supplied both of us. I put my lit cigarette in the ashtray. A stream of smoke curled up and Carmen’s eyes followed it.

My back was to the windows that overlooked Belmont. Carmen stared past me and outside. I wondered if there was anything to see other than the usual tired crowds making their way to or from the El. The El was the only reason people came to Gilly’s. It was the most conveniently located restaurant in all of Metropolis.

“This man I met,” Carmen began again, all caution.

I waited for her to continue, but she didn’t. Then the waiter came and asked us if we would like a dinner cocktail. I told him no and we ordered our food, the same thing we always got. Chicken and baked potato for me. Steak and mashed potatoes for her. She was tense and I was, in the back of my mind, uneasy about the Goldman file, and my head was starting to throb.

Our food came and I attacked my baked potato with the hostility that unease bred in me. Carmen cut and chewed tiny bites of her steak, and miserably took a sip of her water. In a moment, if! was any judge, she would put down her knife and fork and start telling me either about the man she had met that day or about whatever it was that Stan had done that demonstrated absolutely and without fail that he would never marry her.

She laid down her knife and fork. “Lois,” she said.

“Carmen?”

“The man I met today.”
“He’s going to be a substitute for Stan, you just know it, and he’s going to want to marry you?”

“That’s not funny. Now listen. I don’t know – I think it might be bad. I’m not sure. I didn’t think anything about it at the time, I mean, I didn’t see anything wrong with it. It’s probably all right. I don’t even know if it was you in the picture.”

She stopped and looked down at her plate. I looked at her plate too. The gravy that covered her plate was starting to congeal.

“Picture?” I asked carefully, an unpleasant sensation starting in the back of my neck. It was probably nothing, but I couldn’t know for sure. Not after seeing the file. Not after waiting for – seven, eight? years for something like this.

“I was at the lunch counter this afternoon, you know, the one downstairs in the Times building, the one we usually got to? And there was this man there. I’ve never seen him before. He had a picture and asked if I knew the girl in it. She sort of looked like you.”

I had put down my own knife and fork and now folded my hands under the table where she couldn’t see. I squeezed my fingers together.

“And how, may I ask, did the topic of pictures come up?”

“He sat down by me and asked if I could help him. He was so pathetic – sores on his face and skinny – I felt really bad for him. I’ve seen bums, but this guy - well. So I said I would if I could. I thought he needed lunch or something. A drink, cigarettes, bus fare. The usual things, you know what I mean.”

“And then he took out a picture?” I couldn’t feel my fingers. But I could hear a ringing in my ears that wasn’t from the El or the evening crowd.
"He asked if I knew the girl in it. It was pretty old, I think, and the girl had curly dark hair. She looked like you, a lot like you – and I remembered you said that your natural hair color was black so I thought –"

"I never said that," I said sharply. I couldn’t have. It would have been too dumb, too sloppy.

"Didn’t you? I thought we were talking about natural hair color and you said it took the beautician a long time to get your hair from black to red the first time."

"I might have said it took her a long time to get it the right shade of red," I recovered. Carmen frowned, thought, and shrugged. I frowned, too. I was uncomfortably warm and our conversation wasn’t progressing in a manner that I liked. But Carmen wasn’t sharp. I was still all right.

"So you saw a man with a picture that looked a little bit like me," I said. My stomach felt too heavy for my body in spite of the reassuring things I was parading in my head. "And now you’re telling me you think you did something bad. Why would you think that identifying a picture would be bad?"

"I don’t know." She fought to avoid eye contact. "It was the way he thanked me afterwards. It was the look on his face, I guess. Sort of crazy. I don’t know. It scared me."

My mind raced back, but I couldn’t remember how long my father’s sentence had been. Only that it had seemed too short. Then I tried to think of other possible reasons that a non-regular at the lunch counter would have for looking for me, bringing a picture for identification that was at least eight years old. There weren’t any. I tried to swallow, but without much success.

"Are you all right?" I heard Carmen ask.
Sure. It could have been my father. It could have been a thousand other people. There were thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people out there. It would be all right. It had to be. Nevertheless, I pushed my plate away.

“I think I need to go home,” I told Carmen. “I’m not feeling well.”

“Did I do something terrible?” she asked in a little-girl voice.

“No,” I lied. Almost lied. I didn’t really know one way or the other.

I left money to cover my dinner with Carmen and called a cab, even though my apartment was only five blocks away.

Chapter two.

I had turned on all the lights in my apartment, closed all the drapes, and thought about turning on the radio, but instead checked the locks on my door and went into the kitchen. I lit the burner and put on some water for coffee. I watched the flames under the kettle, but they didn’t tell me anything.

A crash on my balcony made all of the muscles down my spine contract. I froze by the stove, forcing my thoughts into a coherent pattern – even if my father was out, he wouldn’t believe that I was Lois Lane. Even if he did believe it, he wouldn’t dare come to my apartment. And even if he did dare to come to my apartment, he wouldn’t land on the balcony.

The only person who knocked at my patio doors was Superman. I pulled the blinds aside and there he stood, in all of his spit-curled glory. I yanked the door open, adrenaline still running, fear mellowing into irritation.
“Are those tights the only clothes you have, or are they just more comfortable than they look?” I snapped, stepping aside so that he could enter. I was tired of the tights. I was tired of the thump on my balcony. I was tired of Superman. I wanted him, just once, to come over here and be Clark Kent.

He closed the door behind him and rearranged the blinds. The kettle shrieked; I hadn’t even measured the coffee. I kept my back to Superman but I felt him standing there, behind me. He radiated something – not the self-assurance that I had found in some people, or the charisma – more a raw power that everyone was aware of. It was unnerving, but not entirely unexpected. After all, he was Superman. What bothered me was that I could feel it even when he was wearing his tortoiseshell glasses and press card. But Clark Kent was the man nobody noticed, which meant that I was the only one who noticed his aura, and that made me wonder if I was just plain crazy. Maybe Superman wasn’t super after all. Maybe he and all of his antics only existed in some corner of my mind. Maybe I was really in a room with bars on the window and Dr. Van DerMeer would come in and give me a shot of something nice to calm me down and help me sleep.

“Are you making coffee?” Superman asked.

I could feel him watching me. He knew I was making coffee. I wondered what else he knew about me.

“Do you want some?” I asked. “How have you been?” I knew he would tell me he had been all right. There was no point in asking him anything.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Sit down and tell me all about your day,” I said. I got a sugar bowl out of the cupboard.
“I had lunch with the Mayor.”

“Did you wear those tights?”

“Why do you ask me so many questions about my tights?”

“I think it’s strange that you wear them all the time. I suppose they’re aerodynamic, but not entirely suited for lunch with the mayor. What did you talk about?” I brought the sugar and coffeepot to the table. I got out coffee cups and sat down.

“He’s worried about the amount of crime in the city. He had thought it would be over when Big Al was indicted, but it was only sleeping. Everyone knows that. But there’s a new threat, now.”

“Don’t tell me he has kids who are interested in the family business.”

He raised his eyebrows, quizzically, but let it go. “No. Do you remember Sterling?”

“Hollywood Sterling, the man with the golden smile?”

“He was released today.”

Hearing about people being released from prison stirred up all the fears that were usually content to stay in the background. I wished I had been able to see the photograph Carmen identified – to know if it was -

“What did he get sent up for?” I asked, sitting and taking a slow, shaky sip of coffee.

“You remember the South Shore Meat Packing Plant? The massacre there last year?”

“He did that?”

“I caught him leaving the building.” There was just a hint of pride in his voice.

“I remember now.” Hollywood Sterling had been the first person Superman had put behind bars. Public opinion was grateful. The jury had had a difficult time indicting Sterling
because there wasn’t a shred of evidence to convict him, but he was convicted anyway based on past actions and the probability that he had been involved.

“The mayor said today that it was too short of a sentence. He said that we should have made more of an example of him.” Superman stirred sugar into his coffee. I heard the muted thunder of the El as it ran people from there to here, here to there. I usually didn’t hear the El anymore. Superman probably ignored it.

“Wonderful. I wonder what Sterling did to upset him like that? I don’t remember any of the others – you know, the ones whose fingerprints were found all over the place and whose slugs were found in the bodies – being convicted.” I had, in my own generally neutral way, been on Sterling’s side during the trial. I remembered that, then, I had felt guilty for not siding with Superman and all of the upright citizens of Metropolis.

“What he did to upset the mayor,” Superman said, patiently, as though I were a stubborn child, “was to be a gangster. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that crime has to be punished. You wouldn’t want it the other way, would you?”

“I just remember a distinct lack of evidence at the trial.” I wasn’t going to say anything else on the subject. I didn’t want to have that conversation again.

I concentrated on Superman’s hands, trying to remember where I had seen the ink stains on them earlier that day. We both lapsed into a reasonably comfortable silence. It would have been all right except that, the more time I spent with him, the stranger mundane things, drinking coffee or pauses in conversation, seemed. At first, especially, I was always watching him, trying to find out what made him tick. After a year, I was still in the dark. I would never know him, and knowing him was just starting to lose its importance.
"Did you have dinner tonight?" I asked. "I did. Carmen and I went to Gilly’s. It’s just up the street and sometimes the food is edible. You should try it sometime. It’s exactly the sort of place Carmen and I would go to. Seedy, but not seedy enough to be interesting."

"Seedy?" Superman’s manner switched from that of an all-wise master of everything to a well-meaning but slightly confused traveler who was suddenly out of his element. Those shifts were not uncommon and always amused me. He wasn’t so all-powerful, after all.


Superman nodded but didn’t understand. He would never be seedy so it didn’t matter to him. I didn’t press the point; I never did when it came to talking about human nature. Someday, though, I would have to, if only to see how much he really did understand. For now, I sat and let him sit. He studied his coffee cup and drank his coffee without appearing to taste it. I had started him on coffee. I was proud of that as if, in some way, I had influence over Superman. I laughed at myself because of that.

"Do you want some more coffee?" I offered.

"No, thank you."

"What else did you do today?" I had a feeling him telling me that, in his other identity as Clark Kent, he had written a page-one story about Occupied France and walked to the El with me was out of the question. Still, sometimes I hoped.

"I have to go, I hear something," he said. Surprise.

"Your visits have been getting shorter and shorter."

He didn’t respond to that. He stood up.
“I’ll see you tomorrow night and we can talk more then. There’s something I have to go take care of now,” he said.

“If I’m here tomorrow night,” I said, but we both knew that I would be.

I watched him go to the door, leave it open, and leap off my balcony. What would happen if he fell, even just once? Was that possible? I got up, shut and locked the door, and took a box of cigarettes out of the drawer by my sink. I lit it and held it between my fingers, watching it burn. I was being wasteful. I was personally responsible for harming Allied troops. I sat down again and poured some more coffee, looking down at my cup. It had been mom’s – pink rose china. Pretty, but cheap. She had told me that it was a wedding present from one of her friends in Brooklyn. This was the only piece left. The rest had been lost in the move or smashed and mended and smashed again until mom and I had put too much into it to care anymore.

The coffee inside the cup was lukewarm. I knocked the column of ash off of my cigarette into Superman’s empty cup and took a drag on what was left.

The office was in an uproar about Hollywood Sterling’s return to Metropolis, so I wasn’t surprised when the boss called me in the middle of my efforts to find a matinee for that afternoon that I hadn’t already seen. Carmen sat on the edge of a chair scribbling on a steno pad. She smiled briefly at me as she left the office.

“Lois, Lois, Lois,” the boss said and looked at me the way he looked at all of the women in the office.

“Is there something you need?” I asked.

“Undoubtedly you’ve heard about the release and imminent return of Sterling.”
He glanced at an eight-by-ten on his desk. I looked at it too. It was of a man with a fabulous smile and a dark fedora tilted rakishly on his head. I had seen him in person, once, while covering a Superman story. He had been walking on the other side of the street from the building that was burning, not pausing to look at the blaze, with his hands in his overcoat pockets.

"Undoubtedly," I said.

"We're doing all we can to capitalize on it. The mayor is worried. The people, as I'm sure you're aware, are worried. I wouldn't be surprised if the mob itself is worried. Rumor has it that he was allowed to be arrested because they were afraid he was getting too big."

"Too big," I said. The windows in the office faced the lake, which was placid but an ominous gray. In this part of Metropolis, everybody who was anybody had a window that faced the lake. It was hard to avoid, as the lake was big enough for everyone to share, but it was still regarded as a sign of status. I watched the waves toss around a yellow sail.

"Lois, stop looking out the window and listen to me."

I turned my attention to him, still seeing the lake in my mind's eye, the waves getting bigger every second until one of them washed Metropolis away, marina, planetarium, skyscrapers, and all.

"We're trying to sell papers. We're using him to our advantage. Now, for this week, drop whatever pictures you're working on and find some about gangsters. Or prison. I don't care as long as you can slant it so that it plays on the interest in Sterling. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.
He waved his cigar at me in a gesture of dismissal. I gave the lake a good-bye look and left the office without saying good-bye to the boss. I slid back into my chair and watched Clark type. He was always typing something, or chasing some impossible story, or ducking into a phone booth and turning into Superman and saving the city from whatever Act of God was threatening to wipe it out so that better people could start over. He had prevented seven fires in the last six months alone. There had been days where I hated him for it.

"Have you seen City Without Men?" I asked Clark. It was the only prison release movie I could think of offhand. I thought of my father before I remembered that thinking about men being released from prison was not something Lois Lane did. I decided to take the gangster film route. Clark looked up and across the aisle between our desks at me, as if I had interrupted his work. His act was good. It might even have been too good to be an act.

"What?" he said.

The windows behind him faced the city. He didn’t have a lake view. He could see the Times building, with its big white walls and clock. I didn’t have a view at all, so I shared his, wondering every day how different things would be if I had taken a desk at the Times and could look over at the Daily Planet, wondering what a job there would be like. If I had worked at the Times, I wouldn’t have met Superman and that, I was sure, would have been a blessing. In the year that I had known him he had gone from colleague to friend to insidious part of my life and I didn’t know where it was going to go from there. He wasn’t going to want to love me, but he would expect me to always be in my kitchen, waiting for him in case he needed anything. And, since he was the supreme being in Metropolis, I would have to wait if I didn’t want to be crushed in his anger.
“Do you want to see a movie with me tonight?” I asked. I wasn’t worried about being crushed by him now. And, I was firmly convinced, Clark Kent would make far better company than his strangely suited alter-ego.

The appearance of confusion dropped away and was replaced by the real thing.

“Why?” he asked.

For some reason, it reminded me of his early days at the Planet and any of the fear or hostility I had been feeling towards him dropped away. I used to take him up to the roof for lunch breaks to show him where everything was in the city. We would stand against the railing and he would point to something and ask me about it. Like the Water Tower, its elegant stone frame barely visible from our roof. When I told him about the fire and that the Water Tower was one of the only things left, his body tensed, and I thought he was going to cry, and that’s when I knew he was Superman. I liked him. I liked him a lot, and then he started avoiding me. About the same time Superman started coming to visit.

“Why not?” I said, even though there were plenty of reasons. But I had liked him. A lot. And I hadn’t stopped liking Clark Kent just because I didn’t like another part of his personality…

“You have Superman.” He was totally, completely serious. No smile. No touch of irony. Not that he was capable of it.

“It would be nice to have some human company for a change,” I said. “Someone in a suit, maybe. Come on. I think Bullets or Ballots is around here somewhere. It should be. It’s a big city. With lots of theatres. Theatres that play things that have been out for a couple of years.”
“I don’t know what you mean by ‘human company,’” he said. “You have Superman. Anyway, I’m busy tonight. Nice of you to offer, but I’m a busy man, you know.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are. Terribly busy.”

“You don’t know anything about it.”

“I know a lot about being busy, but I still manage time for friends.”

It was probably best this way. The less we saw of each other the better it would be.

We both had too many secrets. I went back to my contraband copy of *The Metropolis Times* and its listing of theatres.

There wasn’t anything for me to do at the office, so I decided to pack up and go home. There I could call to be sure of show times, make myself some lunch, and finish *The Trial*. And I wouldn’t have to look at Clark and his spit curl and the gray foggy city behind him.

“I’m going home, Clark,” I said, but he didn’t look up.

I got out my purse and hat and gloves and pulled on my raincoat. It had been nice enough when it was new, but now there was a rip starting under the left sleeve and the belt was fraying. It didn’t matter. It was still warm and it was the only raincoat I had.

“Are you going to lunch?” Clark asked. He stopped typing.

“I’m going home,” I said. “I just told you.”

“I thought I heard you say something.”

My cheeks burned and I told myself I didn’t like him at all, and never had.

I crossed over to the Times building and took the sidewalk that ran down its south side, with the dirty river to my left and various coffee and jewelry – even though this wasn’t
jeweler's row - shops to my right. I usually walked down Wacker to the El, but the last time I had gone that way was with Clark. And it was nice to vary the route home. Someday I might even take the bus, but every city had a bus. The El, and the way it dominated the skies of Metropolis, was one of the only things I really loved about the city. This flimsy train that soared and rattled over my head every day, whose roar was always in the background, that shuttled me from one place to another without any questions or concerns. I could see the tracks from where I stopped to let a nanny pushing a stroller pass me. One of the children she was with stopped long enough to amazingly find a rock and throw it into the river. It disappeared with a clean *thunk* and the child ran away shrieking. I watched her disappear as I took a cigarette out of my purse. The El rumbled by and I felt it in my chest. When I had been that girl's age, I was living in Brooklyn and I was familiar with the dark, stinking tunnels of the subway, taking the green four into Manhattan with mom, holding onto her hand so that I wouldn't lose her in the crush of bodies. I lit my cigarette and flicked the match toward the river, but the wind caught it and blew it back across the sidewalk and into a bed of foliage.

I crossed the river at State and climbed the rusty steps to the El platform. They had been painted yellow when I first moved to Metropolis, and at seventeen-and-a-half, I thought that yellow wrought iron stairs were about the nicest thing that I had ever seen. The paint had chipped and faded and rusted through and I wasn't sure if whoever was in charge of these things was going to bother to repaint them, or leave them to the mercy of the weather. I dug a token out of my coat pocket when I was on the platform and dropped it in the slot over the turnstile and pushed my way through. The turnstiles were still green, green for go, I supposed. The train was fairly empty, but that made sense. Most people didn't take public
transportation to get lunch. Most people didn’t have a boss who, in spite of his enormous flaws, was accommodating enough to let them leave the office when that’s what they needed to do in order to get their work done. I supposed that it would be a good idea for me to consider myself lucky.

Nobody else in my car got off at Belmont. The stairs here had never been painted yellow and the turnstile at the bottom was sticky and had so many coats of dirty white paint on it that it didn’t turn easily. I forced my way through and walked past Gilly’s. It was closed, the faded green curtains shut. I walked past the funeral parlor. A man in a black suit and silent movements opened the door and went in. Sandwiched between Gilly’s and the funeral parlor was a hotel, but I never paid any attention to it. I crossed Clark; the policeman watching over that corner was nice enough to stop a dirty green sedan for me. A little girl made a face at me from the front seat. She was about the same age as the girl with the rock by the river.

I turned left at Halstead and wandered along the cracked pavement, enjoying the quiet of it. The trees along the sidewalk were starting to turn; some yellow, some red. It still didn’t seem real that I had been able to get an apartment here, among the quiet, expensive brownstones and trees that had been planted more than a few months ago. The only problem I could see was that there was no parking – I had given up my wreck of a car shortly after moving in. I loved my apartment, but missed being able to drive. Sometimes I wanted nothing more than to get into a car and get as far from Metropolis as possible. But that didn’t make sense. There wasn’t anywhere else to go.

I turned off of Halstead and my building was right there, the walkway covered with yellow maple leaves. It was too early for the leaves to all fall like that – there hadn’t been
any on the ground in the morning. It didn’t matter, really, except that it was strange and rather beautiful. I unlocked the main door to the building and walked up three flights of stairs to my door. I opened the living room window, even though the wind was cold, and leaned my face against the screen to get a better look at the bare maples that stood in front of my apartment. I liked the sound of traffic; I liked the sounds of the baseball stadium in the summer, I liked to hear the El. I moved away from the window, rubbing the screen mark on my forehead. On my way into the kitchen, I stopped to adjust the only picture in my apartment – and eight-by-ten inscribed photograph of Edward G. Robinson. He had mailed it to me along with a nice letter thanking me for my thoughtful treatment of his pictures. It made me prouder than anything else I had. I liked that he respected my work. If he were my father, I thought, he would be proud of me.

I boiled a couple of eggs the way mom had shown me, cooked potatoes the way she had, and called around to find something suitably gangster-related to appease the boss. My lunch got cold. *Bullets or Ballots* was gone, which was for the best since I had written about it a couple of times already. Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* would work, but it was playing in the Loop. The Loop theatres always seemed so garish compared to the ones on the North Side. I didn’t want to go back, anyway. It was a fifteen-minute ride on the El, which wasn’t bad, but I wanted to stay in my own neighborhood where I could be relaxed.

A man sat behind me on the El who had also been sitting behind me at the theatre. He had crunched popcorn rhythmically throughout the picture, effectively distracting me from both the newsreel war footage and the movie itself. I was more than happy to get off at Diversey instead of Belmont and catch a bus to Carmen’s hotel. She lived on Broadway,
right at the bus stop. If I knew her, she would be in the lounge that occupied the bottom floor of her hotel. There it was – red and pink neon glared through the windows and onto the pavement, casting eerie colored shadows. The taillights of the bus disappeared around the curve of Broadway, leaving me alone with garish lights and the garish crowd inside. I took a deep breath. I pushed open the door. I unbuttoned my coat, and realized that I had broken a cold sweat.

“Lois?” a voice behind me said. I turned and saw Carmen, her hair shiny and impeccably styled. “Honey, you look terrible,” she said.

She took me by the elbow and walked me to the bar, ordered a scotch and soda, and I followed her back to her table. Stan was there with two empty glasses in front of him.

“If it isn’t Lois,” he said.

“If it isn’t Stan,” I said, and pulled up an empty chair from another table.

It was damp and uncomfortable inside my coat, and Stan’s presence wasn’t going to make me feel any better. I got out a cigarette and lit it while Carmen handed over the drink she had ordered. The man on the El – had I not looked at his face simply because I didn’t want to be conspicuous, or because I was afraid? It was silly, I told myself. Dr. Van DerMeer would agree. The man wasn’t following me. A lot of people in a city this size go to the movies. A lot of people pick up the El red line at Belmont. A lot of people could stay behind the same stranger all day and not even notice they were doing it.

“What were you up to tonight?” Carmen asked. “I tried calling you. We were going to head out to Gilly’s.”

“But we decided to stay in,” Stan said.
"I had to catch a gangster picture for my column this week. Mr. White wants to cash in on the mob mania." I almost had to shout over the noise in the lounge.

"We had a nice evening," Stan said. "We ordered from Fortune House and then came down here."

"And I’ll bet you caught The Shadow on the wireless and then listened to Dance Band Favorites," I said. It sounded a little bit nastier than it should have.

"What’s eating you?" Carmen snapped. So we were both edgy. I wondered what had happened with Stan.

"She’s probably just avoided a masher and it’s shaken her up," Stan said, dissolving into hysterical laughter. He composed himself immediately.

"Stan, you’re brilliant as usual," I said. "I’m just tired."

"You should probably get some rest. I know that I wouldn’t be able to juggle being Lois Lane on too little sleep." There was a note of bitterness in Carmen’s voice.

I was concerned with what she meant by 'being Lois Lane’, but it wouldn’t have done any good to ask.

"I suppose you’re right," I said, noticing that I was paying too much attention to the door and the people coming and going.

Chapter three.

Sunday evening was turning into night. I could always tell because the lights in the top room of the brownstone across from my living room window would go on. I don’t think anyone ever used that room. I had never seen anyone in it or any shadows against the shade, but the light would always go on about an hour after the streetlights did. Not that I spent my
time watching my neighbors. I had a habit of standing at my window, clearing my mind of troubling things, and following the curves of the ornamental stonework on the brownstone with my eyes. I heard a bark and looked down; a man in a Homburg was walking a skinny black dog on the sidewalk below. The dog stopped to sniff a tree and it was then that I noticed the car parked beneath the streetlight. It was in a no parking zone, but it wasn’t the kind of car that would be towed, no matter where it was parked. It was big, shiny, absolutely beautiful and just as absolutely unrecognizable. And it hadn’t been there five minutes ago.

Someone knocked at my door. It was a quiet knock, but insistent, and I went to answer it without thinking who it might be. I was too tired to be thinking clearly. I just wasn’t myself. Unlocking the deadbolt, I pulled the door open as far as the chain would allow and saw a man standing in the hallway. He was tall and elegant and I didn’t know him, but I had seen him before.

“You can open the door all the way, Irene,” he said. “There’s something I need to talk to you about, and I’d like to come inside to do it.”

Having someone call me Irene was, apparently, all it took for my legs to start shaking, my lungs to grow tight, and a horrible ringing to start up in my ears.

“You have the wrong apartment,” I said and shut the door. I leaned against it and tried to breathe. It was too difficult to stand, though, so I made my way over to the couch. I had barely sat down when I heard the doorknob turn and looked over the back of the sofa to see a black gloved hand reach in through the opening and unfasten the chain, not without a certain elegant competence that I noticed and would have been impressed by had I been watching a film.
I made myself as small as possible and wondered if I was going to die, or wake up.
The door closed and footsteps came in my direction. Someone sat on the sofa next to me, but I kept my head down on my knees. I remembered that if I protected my head, I might be all right.

"I'm not going to hurt you," the man said. "I just want to talk to you. About your father."

I assumed that he would keep his word and curiosity overwhelmed the urge to disappear, so I looked up. It would be impossible to explain what happened when our eyes met. I felt something like an electric shock. I couldn't tell what he felt but he took off his hat and just stared at me for what felt like a full minute.

"It's not possible," he said.

He reached into an inner pocket in his overcoat, which was a soft gray and cut so beautifully that it hurt. Everything about him was like that. He didn't seem real, but I knew who he was. He had taken a picture out of his pocket and his eyes moved from the picture to me and back again.

"You're Sterling, aren't you," I blurted.

"And you --" he glanced back down at the picture and then turned it to face me.

"Irene Esther Goldman," he said. "Age seventeen."

I took the picture but kept my knees tight against my chest. He was right. It was me, at seventeen, with a mane of curly black hair and skinny arms and a tentative smile. My first impulse was to get up and run, to get on the El and go to Union Station and get on a train that would take me somewhere where nobody had ever heard of the Goldman case and stay there,
safe. Instead, I looked back up at Sterling. His eyes were the color of the lake at night and were studying my face with a strange intensity.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” I said, surprised at how steady my voice was. I handed the picture back. “If you’re looking for Irene Goldman, she’s not here.”

My old name left an unpleasant taste in my mouth. I felt more completely exposed than I ever had. It was only a name, I told myself, and tried to smile convincingly. I knew that he wasn’t going to buy it. Someone who would believe me wouldn’t have been able to work himself into a position where the mob itself was worried about him.

“You’re Lois Lane,” he said with an air of incredulous finality. “I know you. I read your column.”

“And I’ve read about you.” I hugged my knees tighter to my chest.

“I’m sorry. It’s rude of me not to introduce myself.” His voice cleared and he seemed to have recovered from whatever had been troubling him a moment before. “I’m Niven Sterling,” he said. “I know your father.” His voice grew thoughtful again. “But I didn’t know about you. He said – Well, I suppose you know what he would be likely to say about you.”

I did know. And it wasn’t the kind of thing I wanted repeated, ever. “I’m not Irene anymore,” I him. “I’m Lois Lane, film critic –”

“And Superman’s Girlfriend,” he said, finishing up my notorious by-line. “I understand the nom de plume. It’s kind of catchy, really. But why have it on your mailbox? Why –”

“Because I am Lois Lane. There is no Irene Goldman. She’s dead.” Now I wanted to take a shower. I wanted to wake up.
“All right,” Sterling said.

He had fascinating gray eyes. Maybe that was why I wasn’t more concerned about having him in my living room.

“My father – ” I began. It occurred to me that it wasn’t quite right to think of him as my father. Irene’s father.

“He’s sick. He was sick when I met him. He told me a story about you framing him for murder and then trying to shoot – ”

“I didn’t frame him for anything.” My body uncurled on its own. “I didn’t have to.”

“And he asked me to look you up and see if you would subscribe to a spot of blackmail. I wouldn’t usually do anything like that, but he was so broken-down by the time we were released – ”

“I’m not giving him anything. He can die in the gutter for all I care.”

The venom in my words surprised both of us. So my father was out. Irene’s father was out. Like it or not, Irene’s father was mine. And Irene wasn’t as far beneath the surface as I would like to think.

“I’m not asking you for anything,” Sterling said gently.

“Then why are you here, Mr. Sterling?”

“Niven, please. I’m here because I had to see if the Lois Lane that Jack claimed as his daughter was the same Lois Lane that I – ” He let that hang in the air and took his time getting out a cigarette and lighting it.

It bothered me that I was starting to relax. This complete stranger had come into my apartment, torn away everything I had built up between myself and my world, and I was
sitting here, riveted to the cigarette between his fingers, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. And he, of all people, knew everything.

“If you weren’t the Lois Lane,” he continued, after exhaling a cloud of blue smoke, “I would have politely asked for some money on Jack’s behalf and left, assuming that what he had said was mostly true. But if you were who you, well, are, I would have felt confirmed in my suspicion that Jack wasn’t telling the whole truth. The same person who could write with such depth about – ” he stopped again, his eyes having wandered to a spot above my head. He got up and went over to the table where I kept my phone and picture of Eddy Robinson.

“He inscribed it to you, personally,” Sterling said. He read, “’Thank you for your work, it is greatly appreciated and I wish you the best of luck in all you do.’”

“He sent me a letter, too,” I said, not sure whether I liked the way Sterling’s presence made me feel or not. “He said that he’s glad to see at least one critic approaching Hollywood thoughtfully.”

“You – what you have to say about films – ” he returned to the sofa and studied me again. “You wrote about all of Robinson’s pictures. You added depth to them where it wasn’t immediately visible. You changed the meaning of some of them – for the better. Now, tell me. Why Edward G. Robinson?”

What surprised me is that I knew exactly what he was asking.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“No. No, of course not.” His tone was thoughtful, as if he was plumbing human nature.

We sat in silence long enough that it started to chafe. I didn’t want to ask him to leave, but I wanted to be alone to sort through what had just happened and to have a chance
to feel like Lois Lane again. I didn’t feel like anybody at the moment. And, even though I
should have been terrified, I could have quite easily made us a pot of coffee and been relaxed
enough to drink it.

“Do you remember what you wrote about Double Indemnity?” he asked. He had a
faint British accent. “I haven’t seen it yet. It was released while I was inside. But I was
interested in the point you made about the real story being off-screen, the story of Neff’s
relationship to Keyes, and how that dynamic was the thing that cast a shadow over the entire
picture, was the thing that made the viewer feel suspense. You said that, without that
element, the audience wouldn’t care whether Neff got caught or not.”

“I remember something like that.” He had a better memory for my columns than I
did.

“Irene,” he said, as though it were a very beautiful word. “I like the way you think. I
like the questions you ask. And I believe that your father lied about you. I suppose it’s
unfair that I wouldn’t have been as flexible with you if you weren’t - ”

“So you don’t think I framed him?” I interrupted, starting to feel more confused than
anything. I couldn’t believe it. I was using the pronoun “I”. And I was letting him call me
“Irene”.

“I’m not sure what I think about that whole situation yet. But I do think there’s
something more to it than what I heard. You wouldn’t want to tell me, I suppose – ”

“Talking about it isn’t my first choice.”

“It’s all right. The story is on file in the library.”
He stood up. The cigarette had smoked, unheeded, between his fingers and was mostly ash. Somehow he had managed not to disturb it. I took the ashtray off of the coffee table and held it out to him; he ground out the cigarette in it.

“I should be going,” he said. “I don’t want to be in your way if you have something to do.”

I walked him to the door. He put his hat on. Everything about him was unreal, and, what was more unnerving, I liked him.

He paused, his hand hovering over the doorknob. “I would like to see you again. Unofficially. I’d like to talk to you. Find out what makes you – you.”

And with that, he was gone. I double-locked the door and ran to the window. A few seconds later, I watched him get into the big shiny car and it pulled out of the glow of the streetlight without a sound.

Chapter four.

I found myself in the kitchen making a pot of coffee. I wondered about two things: first, why I had reacted as mildly as I had to Niven “Hollywood” Sterling, popular public enemy number one, waltzing into my apartment and telling me that he knew all about Irene Goldman; and secondly, why Superman hadn’t crashed through one of my windows, taken Sterling by the scruff of his neck, and saved the day. The first question was rather complicated and may have to wait until my next meeting with Dr. Van Der Meer. But the question of Superman – I was staring at my kettle, waiting for it to boil, but I hadn’t lit the burner. Disgusted with myself, I got the matches out of the drawer and struck one, burning my thumb.
The question of Superman. Who was he? What was he? Where was he? And what did he care about? I had already decided that he didn’t care very much about the needs of the individual. Even with super-speed and agility, there was no way he could take care of every single person in Metropolis who was about to wreck their car or have a pot fall on their head or some such thing. It was reasonable, from a pragmatic point of view. But another problem would arise, for him, if he started to care about the individual. Instead of simply allowing his actions to be governed by social rules, he would have to think – why is this man stealing a loaf of bread? What is this man really doing at this meat packing plant? Was this woman justified, after all, in shooting her father? From what I had observed, he wasn’t capable of asking such questions, let alone of finding answers to them. Superman’s first, and most serious limitation: lack of compassion. Or lack of empathy? Lack of feeling? Lack of – humanity? That thing about him, whatever it was that I disliked so much still caused me to pity him. And I was not someone to pity someone for their lack of humanity.

I got out my canister of coffee and felt an inexplicable and not completely unpleasant chill as I remembered the man sitting on my couch, telling me that he liked the questions I asked. He was a very nice man, with nice clothes and a nice voice and a charming smile. And he knew the one thing about me that nobody else in Metropolis knew. I leaned against my counter and took the lid off of the coffee. I wouldn’t have to pretend, with him. I wouldn’t have to be concerned with making the one slip that might give everything away, I could – I couldn’t believe that I was seriously thinking about the benefits of spending time with a supposed killer who was a friend of my father’s and who had broken into my apartment. Irritated with myself, I dumped some coffee into the pot without measuring. I was being stupid. I had met the man once. Everything I knew about him was negative. I
was completely fascinated by him. Maybe there was more to him than his extracurricular activities and it was time for me to practice seeing the big picture.

The last time I had been stupid was when I thought a change of identity could keep my father from finding me. I left my coffeepot on the counter and sat down at my table. My kitchen, Lois Lane’s kitchen, was bright and clean and I wondered how much longer it would last. And then something crashed on my balcony and I got up to let Superman in out of instinct.

“Hello,” he said when I had opened the patio door. He flashed his million-dollar smile, the one he used for the papers, but it failed to impress me, especially tonight.

“I have some coffee,” I said. I left the doors open. The only thing outside of my kitchen was the courtyard, and sometimes it was nice to hear people coming and going. With Superman there already, nothing could happen to me anyway.

“Are you all right?” Superman asked.

“Did your super-sonic hearing pick up some kind of distress call from my direction? Are you monitoring my vital signs and finding my adrenaline a little high? Why wouldn’t I be all right?”

“I was only asking,” he said mildly and sat down in his usual chair. “You don’t seem to be yourself. You’re flushed and you seem excited about something.”

I put my hands to my face and noticed that my cheeks were hot. I hoped I wasn’t bright red and poured him a cup of coffee while I decided what to say. Should I tell him? Would he know if I was lying? If he could detect lies, though, Sterling wouldn’t be the only one in Metropolis who knew about Irene.
“I had a visitor,” was what I decided on. I brought Superman his coffee and hated the fact that I always waited on him, taking care of him, like a wife.

“A friend of yours?” An ill-concealed note of suspicion crept into his voice.

“Not really,” I said. “He was –”

“He affected you strangely.”

“He was a friend of my father’s.”

“That’s nice.” He relaxed a bit.

“Listen,” I said, because I had been wondering and wanted to change the subject, “do you really hear people when they’re in distress? Like when a man is about to hit his wife, do you hear her screaming for him to stop? Do you hear everything that happens in the city?”

His forehead creased and he looked down at his fingers, flexing each one of them. He swallowed. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply.

“There are too many people,” he said.

We were quiet for a long time. I got up and poured coffee for myself. The melody of a forgotten song came into my head, Helf ikh Mamen, the song mom and I would sing when we hung up the laundry together – I found myself humming it.

“That’s nice,” Superman said. “Where is it from?”

“My mom taught it to me,” I said, feeling how foreign it was for the past and present to overlap. It had to happen sometime. Dr. VanDerMeer had warned that they couldn’t stay separate forever.

“I’m glad that your family is important to you. And I’m glad that you have family friends that come to visit. A friend of you father’s, you said? I’ll bet it was nice to see him.” He was wistful.
“Not really. Actually, I—” I hate my father was what first sprang to my lips, but that wouldn’t be an appropriate thing for Lois Lane to say. Or to think.

“Did your father come, too?” Superman asked.

“He just got out of prison,” I heard myself say. Sterling’s visit had, apparently shaken me up more than I thought. I bit down on my lip and my desperately tried to remember what I had told Clark about my family.

“I thought you said he died. In an accident.”

“I might have said that,” I conceded, weakly. “He was in—Joliet. It’s been a long time.”

It couldn’t be long enough. It struck me as blackly humorous that I had spent eight years building a persona to have it start to unravel in a matter of hours. Well, it wouldn’t unravel any further with him. He knew what it was like to keep a secret. I was sure he wouldn’t pry into mine. I drank some coffee, and so did he. He watched me, out of the corner of his eye, and it made me nervous because I never knew what he could see.

“In prison for what?” he said.

I had to answer. When he used that tone of voice, I knew that he was capable of making people obey him.

“The jury ruled manslaughter,” I said carefully, hating my father as I said it.

My cheeks burned even more, but Superman actually relaxed. He looked slightly, cautiously, relieved.

“Manslaughter is when someone accidentally kills someone else,” he said.

“Of course it is. But this was a murder case.”
He dropped and caught his coffee cup in the same instant. He didn’t spill a drop. He did things like that all the time and I was still always amazed.

“So he isn’t dead.”

“All right. I’m sorry.”

“You lied, though.”

“I didn’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to talk about it now. Can we please just forget about my father? Tell me what you did today. Tell me how you learned to fly. Anything. Only not about me.”

I could salvage it. He may be many things, but he wasn’t the type of person to press an issue if I wanted it dropped. Lois Lane could be saved yet. I smiled my biggest and best smile for him. It would be all right. All he wanted was to be the hero. And he could be if he dropped the subject of my father.

“Why don’t you tell me about your family?” I suggested.

For a moment, as I watched, he ceased to be Superman. He wasn’t even Clark Kent. I caught a glimpse of something underneath all of that, a depth of misery and loneliness that I hadn’t thought him capable of. It was only for a second. But for that second, it was something like looking into a mirror and seeing Irene Goldman at seventeen.

“I didn’t know my parents,” he said tightly.

He closed his hand around his coffee cup and I heard it crunch. Coffee and crushed stoneware bled through his fingers. I watched it helplessly. I could, in a real and literal sense, feel his pain. For several moments, the atmosphere in the kitchen was unbearable.

“I read the last story you wrote about me,” Superman said. He looked down at his coffee-stained palm as if he had never seen it before.
I realized that I had been holding my breath and let it out as quietly as I could. An orange gingham dishtowel lay draped over my sink, so I took it and placed it over the spreading puddle of coffee on the table. I would have to wait for it to dry in order to be able to clean up the broken cup.

"Have you read any of my columns?" I asked. My voice was fake. I tried to remember if Clark had read any of my columns for me at the office, but couldn't. He never had shown an interest in what I was working on.

"I read one about an insurance agent who helps a wife kill her husband for some money," he said, watching me sop up the coffee.

"Double Indemnity," I said automatically. I looked Superman full in the face and realized that it wouldn't do me any good to ask which of my Double Indemnity columns he had read. He wouldn't remember. He probably didn’t think anything of the questions I had raised, and I wondered if he asked any of his own.

I had never decided whether or not Carmen was a close friend, I reflected as I looked at her back. She usually walked down Michigan slower than I did, stopping to gawk at each of the items in each of the shining windows that we passed, but today I was the one that was lagging, attempting to study the faces of everyone around me, looking for my father. Why had he sent Sterling to blackmail me instead of coming himself? Sterling, who was like – he was like Citizen Kane, brought to life. No matter how I decided to feel about him, to think about him, I was going to change my mind a short time later.

I almost stumbled into Carmen, who had stopped in front of Tiffany's. Even though it was still only September and the wind wasn’t coming off the lake, she was wearing her
mink coat. I would have told her that it was too warm for mink. She would have told me that a girl in mink is always lovely, no matter the season.

“Look at that,” she said, looking over her shoulder at me and pointing at a necklace nestled on blue-green velvet. “Have you ever seen such perfectly matched pearls?”

“Sure,” I said. “At a five-and-dime.” But I looked anyway. The pearls seemed to glow among the harsher glitter of diamonds. They were beautiful, of course. I got out a cigarette, but didn’t light it.

When mom and I had first come back from Brooklyn to the farm, she had taken me into Metropolis to do some shopping. We stopped in the dime store to pick up some dishtowels and I fell in love with a string of plastic pearls that sat inside the glass case up front. Mom left me there with the shopkeeper, who was an old man with an enormous white moustache and round spectacles. He spoke to me in Yiddish and gave me some hard candy and when mom came back, she had money to buy me the toy necklace. ‘Don’t let your father see it,’ she had said to me in the truck on the way back to the farm. I forgot to take it off before he came in from the fields and he yanked it off my neck and threw it into the stove. Much later, mom told me she had returned the coffee to buy that gift. I turned my back to Tiffany’s and stared across the street, in the direction of the lake, which was blocked by Evans furs and various other places for us to spend money we didn’t have. There was no lake view here and Lois Lane didn’t need to remember this far back. I didn’t need to dwell on the images, the memories that kept cropping up. The sun glowed vigorously, for once, down on the yellow chrysanthemums potted in front of Tiffany’s.

“Don’t you think so?” Carmen asked, impatiently. “I don’t know why I bother. You aren’t even listening to me.”
“Of course I am,” I said.

“I said,” Carmen repeated, raising her voice slightly, “that whenever I see a woman wearing pearls I think that somebody must love her very much.”

“Maybe too much,” I replied, unable to shake thoughts of mom.

“Lois, honey, you know we can tell each other anything,” Carmen said, having softened but still not turning from the window. “Now what’s bothering you?”

“I’m sorry.” My thoughts had been alternating between Sterling and the Goldman farm since he had left the night before. Carmen would, of course, want to hear all about what was bothering me. I wasn’t about to tell her.

I turned back to the pearls. Obviously Carmen wasn’t finished window-shopping yet, and there was something about the pearls that drew me in. I was trying to figure out what that might be when I was aware of someone close behind me. I turned, but nobody was there. There was only a tall man in a tan raincoat, an umbrella on one arm, and a greyhound on a skinny leash walking away from us. Carmen was staring after him, too. People just didn’t walk their dogs on this part of Michigan.

“Would you look at that,” Carmen said.

I kept my thoughts to myself. From the back, the man with the greyhound had looked like Sterling. He had the right amount of elegance. Niven Sterling was, I realized, an extremely dangerous man.

“I had a diamond ring once,” Carmen said, moving away from the window. “It wasn’t an engagement ring, really, but it was pretty. There was a bigger diamond in the middle with a cluster of smaller ones all around it and I wore it all the time. You should have seen it.”
“Assuming from your use of the past that you don’t have it anymore?” I concentrated on the disappearing tan raincoat. I couldn’t take my eyes off of it. Nothing good could come of that, so I forced myself to study the pale stones of the water tower, instead. It loomed ahead of us, tall and elegant, like the figure that was rapidly disappearing. I focused my steps toward it – half a block, one more storefront, then Chicago Avenue.

“Suddenly you’re in a hurry,” Carmen panted, appearing beside me. There wasn’t any traffic, so we crossed the street.

“I wanted to see the water tower,” I said. “It gives one a sense of continuity with the past.” Which, I realized, was the one thing I was most anxious to avoid.

“Stan and I used to come here a lot.” Carmen walked up the front steps and I followed her. We both sat down and lit cigarettes.

Michigan, from my vantage point, was bustling but managed to stay quiet. A bus pulled up at the stop in front of Evans. It was amazing to me, how many people found the time and resources to shop now.

“He would tell me about his time in Paris and about the other boys in his unit. That diamond ring I had – I had to hoc it. And the way things are with Stan – I don’t think I’ll ever have another one.”

She sighed and the sigh caused me to look at her face. There were lines around her mouth that weren’t usually visible.

“There are other men,” I said. “If you’re unhappy with the way things are going with Stan –”

“You think it’s that easy? That I can just go find someone else? I’m not as young as you are. And I’m only a secretary.” Her words were measured and tight. She was calm, but
I realized that I had said absolutely the wrong thing. She took a desperate drag on her cigarette.

“Or, maybe I’ve just always known the wrong kind of men,” she said.

“What kind would be the right kind?” And I remembered, quite inappropriately, Sterling’s comments about my column.

“You should know.” Carmen shot me a pair of dark blue bullets.

“I don’t know very many men,” I said. I knew one who was dashing and dangerous and would spell certain ruin for anybody. And Clark – Superman – whoever he was - didn’t count, really, as a man.

“You know who I’m talking about.”

The wind picked up a page of a newspaper and blew it into the branches of one of the poplars that stood in front of the water tower. Papers were always flying around the city, front page stories and sometimes Betty Grable smiling over her shoulder. The poplars hasn’t started changing yet, and this paper was lost in the green of their leaves. Michigan Avenue was always the last place to change. It stayed green and vibrant until the last moment. Maybe that was why this was the wealthy area. People wanted to live and shop in the perpetual summertime. Metropolis, even on Michigan, was far from that, but Michigan was a lot closer to Los Angeles in terms of glamour than any of the other streets around. I flicked ash off of my cigarette. A cab blasted its horn at another cab, which screeched its tires around a turn. Carmen was waiting for a response.

“Superman?” I replied because I did, indeed, know.

“It figures,” Carmen said. “We were both there. But you had to be the one standing in front of the fire engine.”
“It wasn’t like he had to save me,” I said. “I heard it coming. I was getting out of the way myself. There’s very little that’s more embarrassing than having a total stranger pick you up and bodily move you from one place to another. People who saw that probably think that I’m too stupid to know what to do when I hear sirens.”

“You shouldn’t care what they think. You have Superman because of it. You don’t seem to pay any attention to that fact, and just keep asking for more.”

I didn’t want to get into it again, so I stood up and dropped my cigarette, which was still smoking. I should be more careful with fire. Carmen followed me down the steps and across Michigan. We stopped on the paved median, cabs whizzing by.

“It’s not fair,” she said shouted over the traffic. “You don’t even want to get married.”

“I don’t want anything except a theatre with a new feature every week and some paper to write on.” That wasn’t true, and it sounded hollow when I said it.

“No, you don’t. I’m not bright but I can tell that you want a lot more than most people can have. So stop trying to pretend with me, all right?” She grabbed me by the elbow, half pleading, half angry.

“Of course we all want things that we know we can’t have,” I said. There was an opening in traffic and we ran for it. The El didn’t run close to this part of Michigan so everybody here took cabs or drove. Some days crossing the street was more of an effort than writing a column.

We had about a block to go, towards the lake, to get to the gallery we had set out to find. Some artist friend of Stan’s had an exhibition there, and I would have to look at his art and be polite and ask questions. I hoped his art would provoke questions. If he was typical
of Carmen and Stan’s friends, it wouldn’t be any good. I decided to slip away from the show early and go to the lakefront. I would buy a paper cup of coffee and watch the gray or brown or blue waves lap up against the pilings and cement that formed this part of the lake shore. I was sure it wasn’t like that before the fire. And I wondered, often, what it should be like, and whether all the cement was added to keep the lake in its place so that the people that were unwise enough to settle near it wouldn’t have to worry.

Chapter five.

The knock at my door should have been Carmen’s, but it wasn’t. It was too quiet, too insistent. I tugged the zipper on my dinner dress the rest of the way up and went to see who it was.

Filling up the crack between the door and frame was a sophisticated tan raincoat, which was itself filled by a not unattractive man who was best known to the press as a new and marketable public enemy. He smiled at me, and his smile was dazzling.

“I came to talk to you,” he said.

“My father didn’t send you to ask for more money?” There was no way I would admit, even to myself, that having him outside my door thrilled me.

“So I used your father to get to you. A bit of blackmail on my part, I suppose.” He shifted his weight. “This is nice, but are we going to spend all evening conversing through a crack in the door?”

My hand shook just enough to make unfastening the chain difficult. I was a little bit afraid, a little bit excited, and dying to find out if Niven Sterling was as interesting as I thought he would be.
He stepped in, hands in his pockets, umbrella hooked over his arm. He glanced around my apartment amiably, his eyes settling for a moment on Eddy Robinson before coming to rest on me.

"Why don’t you sit down?" I offered, just to be polite.

He leaned his umbrella against the wall by the door and seated himself on my sofa. I hadn’t noticed before how faded it was. I sat, awkward, in the armchair, nervous as a new parent, unable to think of anything to say.

“You didn’t bring your dog,” was what came out. It was a horrible way to start a conversation.

“So you saw us on Michigan? I thought about saying good afternoon to you, but you were with a friend.”

“We went to see a gallery show. At Eastman’s, on Chicago.”

“Did you go to see Burlini or Link?”

“Link. He’s a friend of my friend’s boyfriend.” I winced. That was an awkward sentence. “I wasn’t all that impressed. Landscapes have never appealed to me.”

He nodded, looking me in the eye. I liked that. Mom always said that good eye contact and a good handshake were two signs of a good person.

“That’s understandable,” he said. “Most landscapes rely too heavily on direct representation.” He paused. “Would you like a cigarette?”

“That would be nice.”

He unbuttoned his coat quickly and precisely, and took out a silver cigarette case. He clicked it open and held it out to me. His cigarettes were long and wrapped in colored paper. I took a green one. He took a red one and, in what seemed like one movement, put away the
case and snapped a lighter for me. I leaned forward into the flame until the end of my cigarette burned.

“I would be interested to hear what you thought of Burlini’s work,” Sterling continued.

I expected him to go on but he didn’t. It was my turn to talk.

“It was interesting. It kept me from running out on the party too early.”

“What was interesting about it?”

“Partly I think it was the significance he gave to everyday objects.” I thought of a string of plastic pearls, a cracked china cup, a picture of Eddy Robinson. “Every subject of his paintings was mundane, but the more I looked at them, the more they seemed to take on life and meaning. I don’t know. Maybe I’m crazy.”

“You don’t think you’re crazy.”

“I might be.” He might not know about the time I spent at Elgin, and I didn’t want to bring it up. His eyelids lowered a fraction and I remembered I was expecting Carmen.

“You know,” I said, “I have a date tonight.”

“With Superman?” The way he said it made it very clear that he knew I didn’t go on dates with the Messiah of Metropolis.

“With Carmen and her boyfriend. And a friend of theirs. Another lonely, insipid bachelor who likes redheads.” I felt myself blush. I had no reason to. I had even less reason to be sitting there talking to him. If I knew what was good for me, I would show him to the door. But I couldn’t. He understood about film. He understood about Eddy Robinson. I couldn’t leave him entirely uninvestigated.
“And when is this date?” he asked, tapping his cigarette against my ashtray and raising one eyebrow, giving me an up-from-under look.

“Carmen should be here to pick me up any minute.”

“You sound like you can’t wait.”

“Well, I don’t like her boyfriend, and I’m not very wild about the lonely, insipid bachelors they tend to throw my way.” I shouldn’t tell him that. I should be eternally grateful to Carmen for offering me this out.

“How would you feel about having dinner with a satisfied, interesting bachelor instead?” His lips twitched as if he were about to smile.

“Are you offering me dinner, Mr. Sterling?”

“Niven, please. I like my name. I miss hearing it sometimes. It’s always Mr. Sterling this, Mr. Sterling that, Hollywood Sterling, Mr. Sterling, Sir. It gets old after a while.”

“All right, Niven,” I said, taking a deep breath. I was on first-name basis with a gangster. Wouldn’t Clark be thrilled about that. Of course, Superman knew the mayor, so that made us even.

“I don’t want to keep you from your date, but if you’re not anxious to keep it, I would be more than willing to offer you a way out,” Niven said.

Having dinner with him would be extremely stupid, but the opportunity was irresistible. Here was someone I could talk to.

“Well, let me call Carmen,” I said. I left my cigarette in the ashtray and went into my bedroom to use the phone. I caught Carmen just in time.
“Before we leave, I have something to give you,” Niven said when I came back into the room. “Come here.”

I went and sat on the edge of the sofa.

“I spent today rather productively,” he said. “I went to the library and looked at all of the articles I could find on the Goldman case. I didn’t learn very much that I didn’t already know. One thing — but it was the most important. I learned who died. I saw her picture. Your mother — ” He stopped and swallowed. A couple of creases formed between his eyes and his lips grew thin.

I looked down at my hands and saw that they were clutching my skirt.

“Your mother was a lovely woman. You look like her. You have the same smile. I know it doesn’t do any good — I know there isn’t anything I can say — but I’m sorry. Jack never told me. If I had lost my mother, especially — ” He stopped and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know you well enough yet to get into this.”

Nobody had ever told me I looked like my mother before. Ever. Nobody I knew had seen a picture of her. Nobody knew that my father had murdered her. Sometimes I thought she only existed in my imagination.

“Do you really think I look like her?” I asked, and felt a warm glow spread across my forehead and cheeks. I looked like mom, and that made me happy.

“I do.” There was a pause and we regarded each other quietly.

“What else did you do?” I asked, not really caring because, in some small way, for a moment, I had gotten mom back.

“I went to the Art Institute. I caught up on their new exhibits — there weren’t many, but I’ve only been gone a year. I thought about you. I caught a matinee of Shadow of a
Doubt. I read your column on it, by the way. I went into the galleries along and off of Michigan – that’s where I saw the Burlini/Link exhibit. I wanted to do something for you, you see, something nice – I had thought about it while in was in prison, a way to say thank-you for your columns, and after meeting you and finding out about your mother – I wanted it to be special. A gesture of appreciation, of – I’m not exactly sure what, yet.”

His eyes became intense, inscrutable, a darker gray than before. I had no idea what to say or do, or even if anything was expected of me.

“I think it may be a bit much, and I hope you won’t misinterpret it,” Niven said, withdrawing a long, blue-green box from somewhere. He flipped open the lid and held it out to me.

Inside the box was a string of perfectly matched pearls that had, a short time ago, been in Tiffany’s window. There was nothing for me to say. I ran a finger over them and they were cold and smooth.

“I couldn’t possibly,” I said.

“You know, they just wouldn’t look right on me and Tiffany’s won’t take them back. You don’t want to waste them, do you?” He placed the box on my knee. “Please. I can’t give you a job where you can devote yourself exclusively to film and not those wretched Superman features. I can’t make you feel like you don’t need to hide anymore. I can’t change the kind of a person your father is or bring your mother back – but I can do this. You deserve more. But I saw the way you looked at them in the window and thought that they might bring you some happiness. Please.”

He was sincere. He was sincere and he was intelligent and generous. I took the pearls out of the box.
“I don’t know what to say,” I said.

“‘Thank you’ would do.”

“Thank you.”

I hefted the pearls and managed, in spite of my unsteady hands, to clasp them around my neck. They felt comforting against my skin.

Niven took the box off of my knee and closed it, setting it on the coffee table. There were two cigarette butts in the ashtray, one green and the other red. I was awake and breathing, but nothing around me felt real.

“Would you like some dinner, then?” Niven asked gently. “I know just the place.”

*****

The car that rested against the curb outside my apartment was more than a car – it seemed to breathe. It was long and lean and the hood was straight and the cloth top curved just enough to be organically beautiful. It glowed a soft indigo and waited for Niven. There was no way that it hadn’t been created especially for him.

He went around to the driver’s side door and unlocked it, but didn’t get in. He held the low door open for me.

“I had it made in England,” he said. “Right hand drive, you know.”

I went around the front to get in. Light bounced off of a slender chrome bumper and the headlamps and fog lamps, and highlighted the trim around the grille.

“1938 Daimler,” Niven said, clearly as proud of his car as he would have been of a child. “Winston Churchill was getting his made at the same time.” He closed the door after me, and it closed substantially.
The seats were white leather, trimmed in a darker color that I assumed matched the
body. The dash and glove box were burled wood. Niven slid in behind the wheel, which
was covered in white leather. He pulled on a pair of black gloves before inserting the key
into the ignition and turning. The engine caught and purred, there was a surge of power
throughout the Daimler, and we floated away from the curb.

"Winston Churchill?" I said.

"Sometimes he and I would go check on our cars at the same time. He’s a nice chap,
really. Great sense of humor."

I absolutely couldn’t picture Niven and the Prime Minister of England sitting looking
at cars and swapping anecdotes over tea. I couldn’t picture it, but I believed it. I probably
would have believed most anything about Niven.

"Daimlers are still hand made. When I was over there, I liked to go in now and then
and watch the men work. They’re real artists, but their work isn’t appreciated nearly
enough."

"As is often the case." I agreed. The Daimler was a piece of art. And I was afraid to
relax too much in it, because I didn’t want to upset the balance it had achieved on its own.

"I loved England," Niven continued. "Partly because the people there have a better
handle on some things than we do. They’re willing to take time for things; all the time they
need to do it right. Like building a car, or tailoring a suit or making shoes, brewing beer,
taking tea. I have to say that our films are better, though. Especially since Hitchcock left."

So what I knew about Niven was steadily growing – he liked Hitchcock, he
appreciated quality over quantity, and he had spent time in England.

"How long were you there?" I asked.
"In England? A while, several years ago. A little over a year, actually, from November of '37 through April of '39. I was working in New York when I left – Hoover’s boys were after me and we all decided it would be better if I got away for a while. Before I came back to the States, a well-meaning party informed me that I was no longer wanted out East and would risk a bullet in the brain if I came back. So I moved to Metropolis. And I haven’t regretted it."

We had been going north on Halstead; he turned left onto Addison. The delicate crown of lights over the ball field glowed in the evening light. A few leaves of the ivy were red. Last year, all of it had gone red before being blown away in preparation for winter.

"There’s a place on Southport I think you’d like," Niven said. "I lived in this neighborhood, actually, when I first got here. In one of the brownstones over on Irving Park. You might have seen it, the red sandstone one with the peacock window on the second floor." He nodded towards the enormous stadium as we passed it. "I spent a lot of time walking to Wrigley that first summer."

"You like baseball?"

"It’s all right. What I liked was the stadium and the walk to and from. I was still getting to know the city, then. Wrigley is so much a part of it that I couldn’t leave it unexplored. When the baseball season starts, I’ll take you there and show you around the inside. There are some sort of secret rooms that you might like. Used for storage and what not, but interesting, and most people don’t know about them."

I looked over my shoulder at the stadium and saw a group of men in army uniforms walking towards the row of bars that lined the block of Clark catty-corner from Wrigley Field. The nearest one was made out of brick and had ivy on it. Carmen and Stan went there
sometimes. Again, I tried to think of something to say to Niven. Of what to ask him. There was so much to talk about – New York, England, films, first impressions of Metropolis, the Gaugin paintings at the Art Institute, my mother – I was overwhelmed. We had turned left onto Southport before I said anything.

“The Music Box is around here,” I said. “That’s where I catch most of the films I write about. You never know what you’re going to find playing there.”

Niven glanced at me and pulled the Daimler into a spot in front of Andy’s Triple ‘A’ Cleaners.

“That’s where I go, too. Our paths must have crossed there.”

No, I thought, I would have remembered him. I watched him turn off the Daimler and carefully remove the key. He took his cigarette case out of his pocket and checked its contents.

“Excuse me,” he said, reaching across me for the glove box. I studied the neat row of buildings on the block – mostly houses, then the cleaner’s, a small grocery, and one with its lights on that I assumed was the restaurant. Something brushed my leg and I looked down. Niven picked something up off the floor, smoothed it with a sigh, and put it back in the glove box. The glove box closed with a gentle click. I couldn’t quite tell what had fallen, but it looked like a photograph.

“You can hold onto these,” Niven said, handing me a small, flat tin. “I always keep some spare in the car.”

I opened it and it was full of cigarettes, some colored, some brown, some monogrammed and white.
Niven and I had cups of espresso in front of us. He poured a liberal amount of sugar into his and I considered doing the same. I had eaten all my dinner. I had eaten a roll with margarine. I had counted seven tables besides the one we were seated at, and watched the headlights of three cars pass by the windows.

"I missed this while I was inside," Niven said, picking up his espresso cup with the tips of his fingers. "The coffee they had in there – awful. It was watery and lukewarm, at best. Jack wouldn’t even drink it, and he was the only one who didn’t complain about the food."

"He never drank coffee." I ran a forefinger across the white tablecloth. "That was for women, he said. I remember him drinking iced tea and Jack Daniel’s."

"I know. He seemed to always have some under his mattress. Whiskey, not tea."

Niven took a tiny, careful sip of espresso and set the cup back on the saucer soundlessly. "I suppose we were pretty good friends in there. He was old and angry and sick, and I felt bad for him. He would sit in the library with me while I read, telling me about his Irene and how if it weren’t for her, he would still be out planting his fields in the spring and harvesting them in the fall. I think that he really believed it, you know. After being inside so long, one’s mind starts to weaken. Or, rather, can start to weaken. He kept telling himself that it was your fault until he believed it, and somehow that helped him get through his sentence."

He dropped his eyes from mine to the carnation that sat in the middle of our table. I tasted my espresso. I had forgotten how strong it was compared to regular coffee, and reached for the sugar.

"I didn’t completely believe him about you," Niven continued. "I didn’t not believe him, either. I just listened and told him that I would help him out if I could when we got
back to the city. He would need something to live on and would never ask you himself. But when he told me the other day that you were calling yourself Lois Lane – and when I read the papers this morning – ”

“You changed your mind about me?” The espresso was much better sweetened.

Niven leaned back in his chair and took his cigarette case off of the table. He took his time lighting one for himself, the offered me one and took his time lighting that. He looked at me, then at the pressed aluminum ceiling, then back at me through a cloud of smoke.

“No,” he said, as though it wasn’t quite the right word, but he couldn’t think of another. “The picture I had of Lois Lane based on your writing hasn’t changed. Intelligent, curious, observant, wise, humorous, compassionate – all things obvious from your treatment of the films you discussed. I had no picture of Irene. She was just a name, possibly a stoolie, possibly a scapegoat. I knew she had lived in Brooklyn and could drive the truck at fifteen. It didn’t make much of a difference to me that you had had two names.” His voice was hesitant. He took another drag on his cigarette, a blue one this time. “But when I was in the library, reading about a frightened girl calling the police because, she said, her father had just murdered her mother, it seemed as if Lois and Irene blurred together and everything that made Lois Lane the critic that I so admired and loved to read had come from this. Tragedy – can either destroy somebody or make them infinitely better. So – my thoughts toward you didn’t necessarily change. They were and remain pleasant. But they are, possibly, deeper than before.”

His eyes burned and I tore mine away with the greatest effort. My heart was going at about sixty miles and hour. The tip of my cigarette glowed red, and the green paper was charred around the tip. I put it out trying to knock the ash off. Niven was – he was
confusing me. He had already sufficiently upset my idea of what a mobster should be, but this – it was too much. It was like coming out of the office to a warm spring afternoon and finding that the lake was blue and calm and clear.

“You don’t have to trust me,” Niven said suddenly. “I wouldn’t. If I were in your place, if I had heard the things you’ve heard. But listen.”

He leaned forward and tilted my chin up so that I had to look him in the eye. He was serious and spent a long time studying me.

“You were one of the things that kept me sane inside. Your columns kept me thinking, kept reminding me that there was some other world than the one I was in. There is nothing – nothing – about you that I would want to hurt. And I wouldn’t let anyone else cause you any more pain. You’ve had more than enough. You – will be safe with me.”

I ignored the tightness I felt in my throat and tried to smile.

Chapter six.

I had never been more unhappy about writing Superman features along with my column than I was then, as I stared at the back of Clark’s head from the backseat of the Daily Planet’s black Plymouth sedan. Jimmy was driving and we had just witnessed Superman saving a large number of people from a fire at O’Malley’s Pub on Dearborn. As usual, Clark had disappeared as soon as we got to the scene and I had stood just beyond the police line, not even bothering to wave my press card. As usual, Jimmy ran off to take exclusive pictures and I stood among the sensation seekers, this time thinking about Saboteur and wondering if I would be able to convince Jimmy and Clark to stop at the Warsawa Deli on the way back to the office so that I could get some plum preserves and matzo meal. As usual, Superman had
come flying out of the building, depositing survivors with the ambulance crews, and several
two. As usual, Jimmy took too many pictures and I got irritated waiting for it
all to be over. And of course I would have to put my column aside and devote my energy to
typing up whatever story Clark told me (he was the real informer on the Superman stories)
and I would slap my by-line on it. Superman’s girlfriend, indeed. Nobody else had their
rumored affairs plastered all over every single thing they had written.

“Lois,” Jimmy said, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. “Do you and Superman
ever go flying over the city?”

Jimmy, on top of being disgustingly perky and always refusing to stop and let me do
erands on company time, had the irritating habit of always asking me about Superman. It
was getting harder and harder to come up with answers that satisfied his curiosity, and I was
feeling especially unwilling to talk about it. I guessed Niven’s sudden and dynamic
appearance had something to do with it; that, and the fact that the boundaries between who I
was and who I seemed to be were wavering made me disinclined to talk about anything.
Especially Superman.

We were driving on State, under the El tracks. What sun there was was overhead and
the road was striped from the structure above. Looking at its shadows, I found it hard to
believe that something that looked so flimsy could support those trains. I could hear a train
somewhere down the line, and, all at once, it was rushing over us, making the car vibrate, and
kicking up the dust and litter in the street.

“Well, does he?” Jimmy asked.

“No,” I said. “He doesn’t take me flying. He doesn’t even take me on the El. We
never go anywhere.” And we hadn’t gone anywhere since day one. There was no way we
could unless we stepped over boundaries, and there was no way I was going to do that unless he did it too. And he never would.

“Really?” Jimmy demanded, shocked. “Don’t you ever want to go out?”

“I would love to,” I said. “But I have to admit, Superman hasn’t ever seemed to care about what I want.” Of course he didn’t. Clark seemed to care about those things underneath his meekness and sharpness. It was too much trouble to figure out which one was the act.

I was gratified to see Clark stiffen. He turned to look out the window and I could tell that his mouth was tight.

“Maybe,” he said, “Superman is afraid that your being seen publicly with him would make you a target for the wrong people.”

“Because,” I said, “nothing about Lois Lane and Superman is publicized in the Daily Planet.”

“Are you and he quarreling or something?” Jimmy asked.

“Why would you think that?” I snapped.

“You sound like you’re angry with him,” Clark said.

It was about lunchtime, and Clark had been glancing across the space between our desks for at least an hour. I had spent that time typing what would be our Superman exclusive and pretending not to notice Clark. Finally, he stood up, walked over to my desk, and opened his mouth as if he was going to say something. But he didn’t. I positioned myself between him and my typewriter so that he wouldn’t notice my lack of progress on the Superman story.
"Are you out of paper?" I asked. "Do you need another typewriter ribbon?"

"No." He shuffled his feet and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I was wondering if you wanted to get some lunch."

He was setting a precedent. I was tempted to stand on my chair and shout to everyone on the third floor that Clark Kent was inviting me to have lunch with him.

"You’re asking me to have lunch with you?" I asked, quietly, instead.

"I’m not asking you to have lunch with – Superman."

"I brought a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, an apple, and oatmeal cookies."

"That’s not very much."

"It’s fine for me."

"I thought maybe we could go across to the lunch counter and get something hot. You’ve been working hard all morning."

"That’s rather thoughtful, Clark."

It was, really, especially for him. From what I knew of him, which, granted, wasn’t much, he was completely unable – or, maybe, unwilling – to see and acknowledge the needs of others, and he was completely devoid of self-reflection. So it was truly amazing that he may have taken my comment in the car and, after reflecting on it, decided that it would stand to reason that I would want to have lunch out of the office. And it was remarkable of him to take the initiative to be the one to take me out for lunch.

But, even though Clark was the last person in the world I should doubt, I was suspicious of his motives. Just because he had never invited me to lunch before didn’t mean that he couldn’t start sometime, but still –
“Hot food sounds good,” I said, thinking of chicken noodle soup. “What I’m wondering about, though, is why you’re asking me to eat with you.”

“You need to eat, and so do I, so I thought we could eat together today. Superman wouldn’t mind, would he?”

“Oh course he wouldn’t,” I said. “But let’s not go to the lunch counter. There’s a coffee shop just around the corner of the Times building, and the view is much nicer.”

How much did Clark Kent and Superman overlap? What did he think about? Did he sleep? I wondered, too, if he really smiled, and if he did, whether he smiled because he was happy or amused or because if he didn’t, he would cry.

He flashed a Clark Kent smile at me. I supposed it was as real as any of my Lois Lane smiles. I decided not to bother with a hat and gloves and just slipped on my coat while Clark stood at my desk, impatiently. We took the elevator downstairs and shared it with one of the girl reporters who always gave me a headache. She ignored Clark and launched directly into giving me her opinion about Hitler and the Jews and what Superman should be doing about it. I clenched my jaw to keep from replying. Clark and I got off at the lobby, but she kept going down to archives.

The wind hit me right in the face when I let myself out of the Planet. The wind in Metropolis was like that; it was either threatening to tear you off your feet or it just wasn’t there. I held the door for Clark and we were stopped by a beggar with a sagging, yellowed face and dark glasses.

“You look like somebody I used to know,” the beggar said to me in an almost familiar voice.
Clark reached for his wallet, but I grabbed his arm and dragged him across Michigan. A cab honked its horn at us. We stopped in front of the Times building and Clark put his wallet away. I looked for the beggar, but couldn’t see him. The gothic detailing on the Planet took on an ominous cast.

“I was just going to give him a little bit,” Clark said. “He might have spent it on drink, but we don’t know that.”

“It wasn’t about the money.”

I took Clark’s arm again and led him down and along the sidewalk by the river. It might not have been my father, after all. Even if it was, it wasn’t a good idea to run like that. We reached the blue and white sign that said “Sunny Day Coffee Shop” and I reflected that there wouldn’t be many sunny days until the spring.

We took a booth by the window and a waitress brought us coffee and their half-page menu. The river slogged by outside the window, dragging itself along like a wounded animal. Maybe the river was what made the lake look brown on some days. Maybe if it wasn’t for the river, and the people polluting it, the lake would always be blue and calm and I wouldn’t be nervous every time I saw a white sail bobbing on it.

“You knew him,” Clark said, stirring sugar into his coffee.

There was no really good way to answer that. No matter what I said, I would have to explain something, and I wouldn’t be able to come up with a very satisfying explanation on such short notice. Anything I said would be questioned and I would be in danger of exposing myself more than I wanted to.

“Maybe,” I said. There was a coffee stain that looked like a Rorschach blot on the table by my silverware. I scraped at it with my thumbnail.
“Has he asked for money before and been offensive about it? Did he threaten you or something?” Clark was looking out the window. Maybe he was just making conversation and really didn’t care. Maybe he was afraid of what I would tell him.

“I just didn’t like him. He was sinister,” I said. I had already mentioned my father and his time in prison; if pressed, I could tell the truth and it might not have any of the repercussions I feared.

“Do you think you knew him?” Clark persisted. He had never been so curious. It was possible that he had sensed some of the threat, some of my uneasiness about seeing the beggar. I didn’t know what he could sense and what was beyond his powers.

“All right,” I said. If he wanted to know so badly, there wasn’t that much harm in telling him. Lots of people, even Lois Lane, could have fathers who were recently released from prison. And a lot of those people had probably said that their father was dead.

“All right,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Remember me telling you about my father?”

From the way he tensed and brought his eyes to meet mine I knew I had said something wrong. Of course – I had told Superman about my father. Inwardly I kicked myself. That’s what I got for letting my guard down. And from the look in his eyes, I could tell that he knew I had let my guard down, that I knew I had told him about my father and that I hadn’t just forgotten about letting poor overlooked Clark Kent in on some secret.

“Excuse me,” he said, his voice barely audible.

He didn’t look at me again. He left the coffee shop and walked down the sidewalk by the river, towards the El rather than Michigan. The wind abruptly stopped howling outside
and it felt like everything in the city shifted, settled, and then went on about its business as if nothing had happened. As if I was the only one that felt it.

“Is he coming back?” an abrasive voice asked. I looked up to see the waitress with a pen and pad ready.

“No,” I said, with a funny little high-pitched laugh. I rubbed at the spot on the table some more. Of course he wasn’t coming back. I had knowledge about him that I shouldn’t have had, and I went too far with it. I let him know I knew. Knowing was one thing, but bringing it out into the open like that – it wouldn’t do any good to tell him I hadn’t meant to. The damage was done.

“Well then,” the waitress said with exaggerated patience. “What are you going to have?”

I had to eat. My appetite, in fact, was unaffected. Something seemed quite indecent about that. I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and counted seven stains on the waitress’ apron. She probably wondered if I was nuts. I did, too.

The only one in front of the Planet when I got back was Sam. He sat on the top step, rolling a cigarette around in his fingers. I sat down next to him and got out my matches.

“Did you see Clark come this way?” I asked him, striking one. A cloud of dust blew over us, but I shielded the flame in time.

Sam shook his head as he lit up. I tossed the match away.

“Nice day, isn’t it,” I said.

“They’re telling us to expect rain again. There’s a storm coming in off the lake.”

“The storms always come in off the lake.”
There was no reason for me to sit out there and chat with Sam. I didn’t want to smoke. I had a Superman feature to finish. I stood up, dusted off my skirt, and went inside, making myself as unobtrusive as possible. I avoided looking at Clark’s desk as long as I could, but it didn’t matter. He wasn’t there.

The phone was ringing when I got back to my apartment and I hung up my coat before I answered it. It was probably Carmen and I had probably forgotten a date. It was Carmen. She was going out with Stan, and he had seemed a little out of sorts, could I please come along and ease the tension? She didn’t sound like herself. He must have been really out of sorts. Of course I could come along, I told her. I didn’t like the thought of leaving her alone with Stan, and I didn’t really want to be alone.

It was a good time for coffee, so I went into the kitchen to make some. I would need to get some more coffee grounds soon. I would learn how to make espresso, I decided. It was good; I should have been drinking it all along.

The phone rang again. It might be Carmen thanking me for my support but canceling because Stan wants to be alone with her. It might be someone trying to sell me a subscription to the Times. It might be Superman, telling me he never wanted to see me again, in this life or the next.

“This is Lois Lane,” I said into the receiver.

“This is Niven Sterling,” came the reply. There was a pause. “Are you – all right?”

“Why do all you people keep asking me that?”

“I’m asking because you don’t sound all right.”
I thought for a moment. I had crossed Clark’s uncrossable boundary and I didn’t know what the effects of that would be. Even though I wasn’t really happy with our relationship, I had disturbed the dynamics of it and that was upsetting. I was worried about Carmen. And I was almost sure that I had seen my father. I had sounded all right to myself, though. Then I realized that I was talking to Niven and that my palms were sweating.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello to you too. You’re probably wondering why I called.”

“I was, yes.”

“I wanted to know if you would like to see *Murder, My Sweet* with me. I read your column on it, of course, and found a listing for it over in Lincoln Park. It’s playing at eight o’clock.”

“I have a date,” I said, and I said it somewhat blandly. “If you had called a little bit earlier –” I let that hang. Yes, if he had called a little bit earlier, I would have been free and able to go see a movie with him. But I didn’t need to tell him that.

“With your friend and her boyfriend and a lonely, insipid bachelor?”

“With Carmen and Stan. No friend of theirs this time.”

“I’d imagine that it can be awkward being the third wheel in a situation like that.”

“Stan makes it awkward sometimes. But Carmen always wants me there, so it’s not so bad.”

“Would it be better if you brought a friend along?”

I took the phone away from my ear and held it against my shoulder. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. If Niven came along, it would certainly make my evening more interesting, but it might not be an appropriate step to take –
"You can come along if you’d like to," I said. I made a face. It seemed as if I said a lot of awkward things to Niven.

"You don’t sound completely convinced that you want me along."

"Maybe it’s the connection."

Pauses over the phone always seem longer than they really are. This one felt like it lasted a week.

"Do you want me to pick you up at your flat?"

"Seven o’clock would be fine," I said and hung up the phone gently without waiting for a reply. Niven was either the greatest thing to happen to me in years, or else he was going to be a lot of trouble. Part of that depended on how I played it, though. I left the coffee to get cold in the kitchen and went to change my dress. I took a blue jacket and skirt out of my closet, found a matching silk blouse, pre-war, of course, and found that I took more care than necessary putting on my lipstick.

Niven parked the Daimler himself in the lot behind The Berghoff. He pocketed the key and, in reaching up to straighten his hat, knocked the visor with his elbow. Something fell down; something black and white and shiny. I picked it up and handed it back to him, but not before I noticed that it was an inscribed photograph of Edward G. Robinson.

"It isn’t made out to me," he said, putting it back. He got out and came around to open my door. "He signs a bunch of them, and his secretary sends them out as a response any time he gets a letter. Most of his mail, his fan mail, doesn’t get read by him."

Niven locked my door and offered me his arm. I was a little too quick to take it.
“You know,” I said, “Carmen and Stan must really have been fighting if they’re here. They usually go to Gilly’s or some other place like that.”

“Gilly’s is the place on Belmont, by the El?”

“That’s the one.”

I was glad that Niven was there. He was ideal moral support for facing Carmen and Stan, especially if they hadn’t been on good terms. Especially since at those times, even more than others, Stan tended to direct large portions of his venom at me.

“Is there anything I should know about your friends before I meet them?” Niven asked, pausing in front of the Berghoff’s revolving doors. “I don’t want to offend, if at all possible.” His eyes sparkled and his tone was wry. I got the idea that, with him, almost everything had an ironic edge.

“Carmen is lovely, gullible, and easily hurt,” I said, and found that it was true, although I had never thought of her in that way. “Stan drinks too much and makes a lot of things miserable for Carmen. He and I don’t get along.”

“So he must not be very perceptive.” Niven motioned me through the doors and into the black-and-white tiled foyer.

The first thing that I noticed was the crowd, well-dressed people, young and old, listlessly waiting for a table. The second thing was the monstrous bar - made of dark wood and mirrored and decorated with a mural of a couple of women and some animals. I couldn’t tell if the women were angels or shepherdesses, and the animals could have just as easily been sheep or goats. It didn’t appeal to me. I liked the Berghoff for its sense of stability and tradition, but its decoration had always confounded me.

“Let me go check our coats,” Niven said.
He thought of everything. I unbuttoned my buttons and he helped me off with my coat and disappeared. I watched for Carmen. She had said she would meet me here. I made my way up to the bar and had no sooner secured a stool and opened my purse when someone put a hand on my shoulder. There was Niven, holding his silver cigarette case out to me.

“You checked the coats already?” I said.

“Hey, beautiful!” Someone shouted over the crowd, and it attracted several clucks from the fur-wearing middle-aged women who hovered near me.

It was Stan. He swaggered over to me, martini in hand, Carmen following with dark eyes. Judging from the way he walked and the fact that he had called me beautiful, he was probably on his third or fourth. He swayed and Niven steadied him and his drink before either one spilled all over the floor.

“Take it easy there,” he said brightly.

I slid off the barstool and held my cigarette high so as to avoid burning anyone.

“It’s like Gilly’s after work in here,” I said.

“The coat check girl told me that someone is having an anniversary party here tonight,” Niven informed us. “That’s why. Apparently, there are some important people here.”

“The Metropolis Royalty?” I said, for the first time realizing that Niven himself fit into that category.

“I’ll go see if I can get us a table,” Stan said with an attempt at a bow. I flinched.

“You do have a reservation?” Niven regarded Stan with something between amusement and disdain.

“I didn’t know there was going to be a party,” he replied.
“Come on. I’ll show you a trick.” Niven put a hand on Stan’s shoulder and steered him away from us and through the crowd.

“Hi Lois,” Carmen said. I had almost forgotten that she was standing with us.

“Thank you for coming.”

“I hope it’s okay that I brought a friend.”

Carmen’s look and demeanor contrasted sharply with the atmosphere. If Niven didn’t get us a table soon, I was afraid that she would collapse onto the floor and refuse to get up again.

“Are you all right?” I asked Carmen.

“Irene?” Niven’s voice said somewhere nearby. “We have a booth.”

I felt the blood drain out of my face and waited to feel furious with him. Instead, a quiet voice in my head told me that it was all right, Irene was, after all, my legal name.

“Irene?” Carmen said. “Sorry, pal, this one’s Lois.”

Niven led Carmen and I through the bar and into the dining room.

“Oh,” Niven said once the noise had died down, “Lois. Right.”

“And you think I have strange boyfriends,” Carmen whispered, sliding into the booth next to Stan. Niven sat down first so that I was sitting across from Carmen.

She looked like she was about to cry. I may have imagined it, but there appeared to be some swelling under her right eye. I made introductions and nobody responded when I introduced Niven. In all honesty, I wouldn’t assume that the man one of my friends brought as a date was the infamous Niven Sterling just because they shared the same first name. It didn’t matter very much anyway. Only Lois Lane wouldn’t be inclined to be seen in public with any type of gentleman mobster.
“In Paris, I drank French champagne,” Stan said, suddenly, leaning across the table and staring Niven in the eye. “Every night. I was the darling at the best clubs.”

“I’m sure it was wonderful,” Niven responded, his tone neutral and polite. He didn’t look away.

“I was in France,” Stan repeated. Then he pounded the table with an open hand, making a passing busboy jump. “Where were you stationed?”

Carmen’s eyes got big and round and she leaned forward to whisper something to me, but Stan gripped her by the shoulder and pulled her back. He was like that, especially when he was drinking.

“I spent some time in London,” Niven said coolly, keeping the corner of his eye on Carmen and I. Stan visibly relaxed.

In the long pause that followed, we looked at our menus. Niven lit himself a cigarette.

“I need to go powder my nose,” Carmen informed us. “Lois, could you come with me?”

Her eyes told me that I should, so I took my purse and followed her. We almost collided with two matronly types speaking German who were leaving the restroom as we went in. Carmen leaned against the wall lined with sinks and closed her eyes. The restroom attendant politely went to another corner and began folding hand towels.

“I’m afraid of him when he’s like this,” Carmen droned. “He starts off being a little bit nit-picky about something like my hair – he noticed roots the other day and just about had a fit. So. Then he gets angry – really angry – about all sorts of things that he never even usually talks about. Like men who get out of prison and are given jobs or the wages bus
drivers are paid or the fact that people still take their yachts out on the lake. I know that it’s been hard for him since being sent back from the front – his arm still doesn’t work properly – but I don’t – ” she shook her head from side to side, meaninglessly. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take.” She opened her eyes and her lashes were damp. Her mascara had started to run. “I can’t talk to him about it or he would get very angry. I can’t leave him. And I can’t let him see me cry.”

She turned to a mirror and dabbed under her eyes first with her fingers, then with a handkerchief.

“How long have you been seeing him?” I asked. It was something I should know, but I found it almost impossible to keep track of other people’s lives.

“You know that. About two years, maybe more. Since I started at the Planet. You know, I’ve gone out with others during that time. You remember Fred, the plumber? But Stan has always been there. At first, especially – he was so wonderful. I guess you could say he really swept me off my feet, and I haven’t recovered.” She smiled girlishly through her tears, which were sliding down her cheeks, bringing mascara with them.

I reached for my cigarettes, and found the tin that Niven had given me out of his glove box. I lit one, taking a puff and passing it over to her.

“And you’re afraid of what he might do if you do recover and decided to leave him?”

She nodded. I nodded with her. I had nothing to say that would help her. A violent shudder shook her all the way down to her feet and she bolted for the toilets. The sound of her vomiting made me sick, and my hands were icy. I didn’t even feel the cigarette between my fingers. Carmen returned, pale, and with her hair in disarray. The restroom attendant didn’t seem to see any of this.
“I drank too much,” Carmen apologized, and washed her mouth out. “Sometimes I can’t help it.” She produced a comb and ran it through her hair, arranging her curls. “Do I look all right?”

“You’re pale.”

She sighed. “Of course. There would be something.”

“Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

She shook her head. “You know Stan. That would just make it worse and he would show up at your apartment. You know he doesn’t like you anyway.”

We took one last look in the mirror and preened ourselves and went back out into the restaurant. Niven was looking in our direction. He caught my eye immediately and raised and eyebrow. I didn’t know how to respond so I looked bleak.

“Are you feeling all right?” Niven asked Carmen, as we all rearranged ourselves.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“I know there’s been a nasty cold going around. If you don’t feel like staying –”

Niven let his offer trail. I couldn’t help being impressed by his insight and diplomacy.

“Are you sick, honey?” Stan asked.

“I’m all right,” Carmen insisted sharply.

Niven handed each of us menus.

“We waited for you to order,” he said. “And I didn’t want to presume to order for either one of you.”

“Lois never orders steak,” Carmen said. “She tries to pitch into the war effort wherever she can.”

“It’s not that so much –” I began, but Stan interrupted.
“She’s a good patriot,” he said.

“I’m not interested in patriotism.” I folded my menu. “I’m interested in seeing Hitler stopped.”

“As we all should be,” Niven said.

We parted company with Carmen and Stan on the sidewalk, and then walked around back to get the Daimler. Niven let me in and got in himself, started the engine, and leaned back in his seat, resting his hands on the steering wheel.

“I don’t like him,” he said at last. “I can see why Carmen brings you along.”

“I don’t like him either. He’s not too crazy about me. Carmen’s crazy about him, though.”

“She’s also afraid of him.”

“She’s afraid to do anything about it.”

He nodded and slipped the Daimler into gear. “Sure. But he’s not for her. She needs somebody kind.” A frown marred his forehead. “Did you see the way her face was swelling?”

“I tried not to.”

“It’s going to be black and blue tomorrow.”

I shuddered, remembering all of the times I had seen mom’s face like that and, later, the times that I had called in sick at school because I couldn’t think of another excuse for having another black eye. I looked out of the window and noticed again how dark the streets in the Loop were at night. It was absurd that I was here, a successful film critic with a whole new life, riding through the Loop in a handmade English car with Niven. In some way, I was
like a character in a Kafka story. I wondered how long it would be before I woke up as a beetle.

"Would you like to stop somewhere for coffee?" Niven asked, breaking my vague train of thought. He slowed, almost stopped, in front of Merkin’s dim blue neon sign.

He glanced at me and then back at the road and sped up again. We passed the bakery and coffee shop and coasted down State, which was empty and dark except for the theatre marquees which were visible from blocks away. One of the reasons I didn’t like being in the Loop was that it shut down, mostly, at six o’clock. That was when things were just starting in Wrigleyville and Lakeview, and whatever the people at the office said, that was the real heart of Metropolis.

I loved the way the Daimler smelled, like leather and machine oil and rainy evenings. I settled back into the seat, enjoying it, Niven, and the weight of the pearls around my neck—none of which I should have at my disposal. I was there with borrowed credentials, and the funny thing was, they were borrowed from myself. Niven glanced over at me again and I was reminded that he had devastating gray eyes.

"Coffee somewhere else?" he asked.

"Coffee?" I said, stupidly.

"We haven’t had an opportunity to talk about films yet. I’ve seen High Explosive."

"I’m sorry."

He laughed. "Condolences appreciated, thank you. You know, I do want to see Murder, My Sweet. I can’t imagine Dick Powell doing anything other than comedy. You mentioned something about it in your column."

"I said he made the transition well."
“You said some other thing, too.”

We had turned left on Michigan and I saw the Art Institute out Niven’s side window. There were no lights on it.

“You said that it was a remarkable thing to do, to put Powell in a crime picture because it would force the audience to see their happy-go-lucky star in another context, and thus see him another way. You said that the American audience has a notoriously hard time separating the role from the actor. And because of that, Powell’s role in this film could work to cause the audience to consider human complexity.”

I remembered saying something along those lines. I also remembered thinking that it wouldn’t make sense to anybody. I nodded. I wanted to go home.

“I’m not sure if the director or producer thought of that,” he continued. “But you make a good point. I think you’re right, and I think that not only would the audience see, as it were, a darker side to Powell and the characters he’s played, but a softer side to the hard-boiled detective.”

We crossed the river and I instinctively looked over at the Planet. It fought with the Times building for dominance over its section of the grid. It was prettier, but not as big, not as white, not as clean. A bird, or a bat, flapped around the garish globe that topped it. There were lights on on the second, third, and fourth floors.

“He’s not so hard-boiled in this picture.”

I wondered where Niven was going to cut over to Clark. I would have taken Chicago, and turned again at whichever residential street had the most lights on, and I secretly hoped he would do the same.
"I used to sneak into pictures as a kid," he said. "It wasn't very hard to do. Everyone else in our neighborhood paid – there was plenty of money to go around. No one thought to be on the lookout for the kids like me. I saw everything that came to town, sometimes twice, but never thought about it. It got me out of the house and away from my family. Then – the summer before I started college, I was on a job with a couple of other boys. The first real one I was sent on. The man we were supposed to shake had a copy of Close-Up with him. I'd never read anything like it."

"I've read it, too," I said, and was inordinately pleased to hear the soft click of the Daimler's signal at Chicago.

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We hadn't settled the question of coffee, I realized when I was in my apartment, watching the Daimler drive away. I let the curtain fall back into place. Dr. Van Der Meer was right – I couldn't avoid Irene forever. Being with Niven, it was easy to let myself be whoever or whatever I was. As much as I enjoyed it, it couldn't last. I had put too much effort into building a life as Lois Lane, and there wasn't room in that life for Niven Sterling, media darling. And then, of course, there were the ethical problems surrounding Niven's profession. I sat down on the sofa and lit a cigarette in the dark.

Chapter seven.

I got off of the train at Chicago Street in Elgin. Like Metropolis, Elgin had a river. Theirs was cleaner and wider and flowed faster than ours, and was dotted with rowboats and canoes. Supposedly, Big Al had considered it an extension of the city, but that wasn't something I could fathom. Elgin had a watch factory and a sanitarium, and, even if it did
have a river, there was no real point of comparison between it and Metropolis. It was quiet, clean, far from the lake; it had a skyscraper, but it also had mansions and enormous trees. I had been in its library and to its park and was amazed at how organized and sane everything there was. It would be a good place to live, if I had the money, if I had a family, and if I wanted to leave the chaos of Metropolis.

I left the brick and sandstone station behind and made my way to Elgin’s State Street, trying not to dread the long uphill walk to the sanitarium. It wasn’t a very long walk, I told myself, and it was lined with trees and those stately mansions. It was healthier to walk than call a cab. But it was also always warmer and sunnier outside of Metropolis, to the point where it still felt like late summer, and I knew that I would be sweating and exhausted when I reached Dr. Van der Meer.

A nurse in crisp white took me down the corridor into Dr. Van der Meer’s office and left me there without a word. The good doctor sat behind his copy of Harper’s, a stream of pipe smoke disturbing the still air in the office. The curtains on his window were open, but the window itself was both closed and barred.

“Good morning, Irene,” he said, putting his magazine aside. “Did you have a nice trip out?”

I had removed my jacket on my walk from the station, so I hung it on the coat rack and took a seat in the armchair that faced Dr. Van der Meer’s desk. I had always found him pleasant; he had a round ruddy face, brown eyes, and curly hair that had both grayed and thinned over the eight years I had known him. He had also replaced cigarettes with pipes and published a book and several articles on traumatic neuroses.
“I miss driving,” I confessed. “The walk from the station isn’t any too easy.”

“How true. Have you considered taking a cab?”

“Sure, but aren’t you always telling me that physical health is important to my psychological well-being?”

A smile creased his eyes. He poured a glass of water from the carafe on his desk and passed it to me.

“Speaking of your psychological well-being,” he said.

“My father is out of prison.” I toyed with the glass, not really sure what to tell him.

“Have you seen him?”

“I think so. Outside of the Planet, he was asking for money. Or, someone who might have been him was asking for money. Carmen identified me to him from a picture he showed her and, of course, told him that I was Lois Lane.” I took a drink of the water.

“Carmen met your father?”

“At a lunch counter. So he knows now.”

“And have you seen him any other times? Have you spoken with him?”

“He sent Niven to ask me for money. Niven Sterling – they knew each other. But anyway, Niven didn’t want any part of blackmail. He – ” I blushed. I couldn’t help it. It didn’t matter, though, because Dr. Van der Meer would have been able to hear it in my voice anyway. “He liked my columns and read them every day while he was inside.”

“So we have a lot to talk about then.” He emptied his pipe into and ashtray and leaned forward with his elbows on the table, lacing his fingers together. “Let’s start with your father. How did you feel when you saw him?”
“I got away as quickly as I could. I wasn’t really afraid, but I didn’t want to be anywhere near him.”

“And how do you feel about him now?”

That didn’t require any thought, and the answer hadn’t changed. “I hate him.”

“And did seeing him bring back any memories? Bring anything to the surface?”

“Well,” I said. I settled myself in the chair. Dr. Van der Meer waited. “Of course I remembered. I remembered him with his hands around mom’s throat. I remembered aiming the pistol and pulling the trigger and knowing that it was too late for mom. I remembered her body falling down the stairs, I remembered being covered in my father’s blood and smelling gunpowder. I remembered covering mom with my coat from the coat rack and calling the police. None of that is news to either one of us. None of it is breakthrough material.”

“And none of that is anything that you’ve been repressing.” His bushy eyebrows went up, thoughtfully. “After seeing him, after thinking about it, what did you think about?”

“I haven’t been thinking about it. Remember, Doctor? Lois Lane is a film critic without a past. I’ve had too many other things come up, anyway. Like Niven. Do you realize that I’ve gone out with him twice? And that I enjoyed it, both times?”

“All right. Let’s talk about Niven, then,” Dr. Van der Meer said. In a moment, he would get up and go to the window. Then he would sit down again and refill his pipe.

“What do you want to know about Niven?” I took another drink of water. Elgin water had a distinctive flavor, something like river water that had been boiled. For all I knew, that’s what it was.

Dr. Van der Meer got up and went to the window.
"Why do you like spending time with him? What is it about him that you find attractive?"

"I can talk to him about film or art or almost anything I want to, he appreciates things that most people wouldn’t even notice – like, for example, the amount of work that goes into tailoring a suit – and he’s very perceptive in his relating to other people. Also, he knows about everything – he knows about Irene – and it makes it a lot easier for me to be around him because I don’t have to keep worrying about making a slip that’s going to give me away.” I took a deep breath, realizing that I had let the words rush out like I was a child making excuses.

"Were you planning your Niven speech on the train?" Dr. Van der Meer asked, sitting back down and reaching for his pipe. He smiled his good-natured smile. "You always did like to prepare your defenses ahead of time."

"I thought it would be best if I put it into words for myself," I said vaguely. "And I have to admit that I think you’re right about the difficulties inherent in having a secret identity."

A picture of Clark leaving the coffee shop came to mind. He hadn’t even stopped to put on his hat.

"I’m lonely," I said. "I’m afraid that I’m going to lose everything I’ve built as Lois Lane and, really, I haven’t gained anything by it."

"Do you know what’s interesting about you, Irene?" Dr. Van der Meer said suddenly, putting his pipe down. "You have your own way of dealing with your traumatic neuroses. Even from the beginning, you weren’t like my other patients – you neither dwelt in your past nor completely disassociated yourself from it. But for the past eight, nine, years,
you’ve sat across from me and talked about what happened with your mother or how you’re feeling about your job or whatever it is that we’re talking about, and it doesn’t affect you at all. Your voice inflection doesn’t change. Your expressions don’t change. You may as well be talking about somebody else.”

“But I do disassociate myself. Hence Lois Lane. Remember, we talked about it in the beginning and you told me that it wouldn’t be healthy to live my life as though this never happened?”

“But you don’t deny that it happened. I suppose I’m talking more about denial than disassociation.”

One of our pauses followed where we were both trying to judge what the other was thinking. We had never really known how to take the other person. I always left his office feeling better for having been there, but that might have had more to do with the fact that I could talk openly with him. In that way, Niven could easily replace my doctor. If that were to happen, I wondered, would these sessions be more profitable? Or would they be more profitable if I simply stopped being so stubborn?

“So what do you think about Niven?” I asked. “How dangerous really is it for me to associate with him?”

Dr. Van der Meer smoothed an eyebrow with the forefinger of his left hand, then looked at the finger in the light.

“If it helps you to come to terms with who you are, by all means, find somebody to talk to. Tell Carmen about your past. Go meet somebody – come to see me more than once a month. Go to confession.”

“I’m Jewish,” I said, and it felt strange saying it.
“That’s what I mean.” He gave me a smug look. “You’re quick to remind me of that, because I know. But, if it’s so important to you, why Lane? Why not embrace that part of yourself in your new identity?”

“Because –” I began, and then realized that I actually didn’t have an answer for that.

Dr. Van der Meer leaned forward and put his palms facedown on the desk, very carefully. He nodded slowly, trying to conceal the excitement in his tired eyes. After eight years, the question that I couldn’t answer immediately. Maybe, he was about to tell me, this was going to lead to the breakthrough.

“You don’t know,” he said, looking me in the eye. “Maybe you should find out.”

“What about Niven?” I said, to change the subject.

“Why are you avoiding talking about how you feel about your Jewishness?”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” I said. “I want to talk about Niven.”

“Professionally, I think that having somebody to talk to is wise. Personally, Niven Sterling is the last person I would choose to be that for you.”

Because Dr. Van der Meer had collared one of the orderlies into driving me back to the train station, I was able to take an earlier train back to the city and still have plenty of time left in the day to bake some muffins and take my time with dinner before I had to start my round of the theatres. I could probably fit two pictures in tonight; I called around while my carrot muffins were baking and found that The Lakeside was playing Valley of Vengeance and Gaslight back-to-back. It was about time for me to do another Western.

I was stacking my muffins in a bowl when there was a knock at my door. Considering the loneliness of my situation, it would have to be either Carmen or Niven. I
carried one of the muffins, still warm, with me and took a bite out of it while I unlocked the
deadbolt. I pulled the door open as far as the chain would allow and there, hat in hand, stood
Clark. I stopped chewing. I almost choked on a raisin.

“I thought I should stop by,” he said.

I swallowed, unfastened the chain, and opened the door for him. My stomach felt
heavy, but it was too awkward for me to just stand there holding a muffin. I took another
bite and immediately wished I hadn’t. Clark glanced around my apartment and his eyes
settled on my picture of Eddy Robinson. He stared at it, fidgeting with the brim of his hat.

“There was some gossip at work about the two of you being friends,” he said.

“Oh.” I swallowed my second bite and decided not to eat anymore. “We’re not,
really. He did say that if I ever made it to Hollywood, I needed to look him up. But that’s
not going to happen.”

I was embarrassed to be with Clark – that was it. I felt as if I had intruded on
something very private and, now that we both knew what I knew, we wouldn’t be able to
ever see each other the same way. I tried to put myself in his place. If he had called me
‘Irene’ one day, what would I do and what reason would I have for going to his apartment,
uninvited? There was nothing to do but wait and find out. I went into the kitchen and Clark
followed me. I handed him a muffin out of the bowl, but still avoided eye contact. He went
to the window, pushing the curtain aside. It was another rainy Saturday, which would make
what green was left in the courtyard brighter. He didn’t seem to be interested in the
courtyard – he stared straight ahead and let the curtain drop after a moment. Then he took
his usual seat at the table and seemed to remember the muffin. He studied it, took a bite, and
chewed slowly.
“I thought I’d take some of these to Carmen tomorrow,” I said, just to break the silence and, maybe, ease the tension. “Things haven’t been going too well for her lately.”

“I don’t think things ever go well for her,” Clark replied. “She’s always unhappy, and I can’t understand why. She has her own place to live, and she’s got friends. And a job that she can leave in the evening and not have to think about again until the next morning.”

I wanted to shout to him that I was sorry, but no amount of penance on my part could undo my indiscretion. I thought about making some coffee for him, but didn’t know if that would be a good idea. Besides, having him dressed normally and acting like Clark Kent while sitting in Superman’s place was unnerving.

“That doesn’t have anything to do with her job or anything material,” I said, glad that Carmen was there to take the focus off of me. “She wants to be loved. She doesn’t feel that she is. She wants to be married, to be settled, and she’s never had the opportunity for either and now she thinks it’s too late.”

“She’s always got somebody. Every time she talks to me at work, she has a date. Every time you tell me about dinner with Carmen, she has a date and one for you, too. I don’t understand. To have free time, and someone to spend it with – I don’t know what more anyone would want.” He took another bite of his muffin and it was clear that he didn’t like it.

“Company doesn’t equal love any more than free time equals pleasure. You should know that, Clark.” I should know that too, I thought. I did know it. I ran some water in the empty muffin pan just to have some reason for not sitting down.
“But if you have enough company, you learn to love the -” The muscles in his jaw bulged and he shook his head, the way Carmen had done in the restroom at the Berghoff. I wondered if the gesture meant something, after all.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” I said. I was sorry about everything. I was sorry that he didn’t know what love was.

“What are you sorry for?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“I crossed a boundary. The way I see it, if somebody has something – a secret, something from their past, maybe, or something that makes them so different from anybody else – a something that they can’t quite come to terms with, and don’t want to share with anyone else, that it should be theirs. And if anyone else senses it, they should keep it to themselves. Out of respect. I thought about telling you I knew before, but I realized that it would be in very poor taste.” I realized that I was getting choked up, remembering Clark: the way he had looked when he left the diner, the way he had been when he first started at the Planet. How hard it had been to know, and to wonder if by knowing, I could somehow bridge the gap that had always been between us – it didn’t matter now, I told myself. There was no bridge.

“I came to tell you that I thought about telling you about Superman before,” Clark almost whispered, forming his words as if they were fragile. “I couldn’t, though. Even though I knew you wouldn’t be disappointed –” He picked his way through his words carefully, and then raised his eyes to my face. “I mean, I knew you liked Clark Kent. That you wouldn’t be disappointed about that, about me. But I thought that if I told you, it would ruin something. And I didn’t want you to have to know that – that Superman is trapped.” He stared at a spot between my eyes. “Trapped in the same kind of life as everybody else.
Almost. There’s a lot – that I endure every day – that I didn’t necessarily think you needed to know. One of those things was seeing you, every day, sitting across from me and wondering whether I would give myself away when I went to see you that night.”

“Clark,” I said, lowering myself into a chair. “Or, Superman – which is it? Who are you, really?” I smiled weakly. I still had part of a muffin in my hand. And if there was a time to tell Clark about Irene, this was it. “Are you Clark Kent, rescuer of stray cats and helper of little old ladies who want to cross the street?” Is what I said instead.

Clark raised his eyebrows and shrugged, a little of his good humor returning.

“Or, are you Superman, champion of good and destroyer of evil? Who are you when nobody – not even the mirror – is watching?”

He didn’t answer right away. I didn’t blame him; it wasn’t a question I could have answered, either. I hadn’t answered it in eight years, even though I had an answer for everything else.

“I don’t know the answer to that,” he said, finally meeting my eyes. “Maybe you can help me find out. Maybe we can stop being so alone.”

I stared at him with my mouth open. Then I closed my mouth and stared at him some more. I remembered Niven talking to me – for just a moment, really – about my mother, and wondered if, maybe, outside intervention was what we all needed. I had Niven, Clark had me. Dr. Van der Meer would have said that my next step would be to tell Clark and we could all go to synagogue together and then I would be able to sleep at night.

“I can’t find out who you are if you don’t know,” I told Clark.

“I’m only asking for your help.”
"I don’t know if I’ll be much help to you, honestly.” I set my muffin on the table. It was squished and my fingers felt sticky from it. I was easy to figure, compared to Clark. But then again, deep inside, I knew who I was. And Dr. Van der Meer knew that I knew, which is why I avoided talking openly with him.

"Please?” He looked so miserable and alone that I wanted to keep him with me forever.

"I’ll do what I can,” I said, wishing that I could make the world all right for him.

"You sound doubtful.”

"Well, last time I tried to help someone, it didn’t go very well.”

"I don’t believe that.”

I got up from the table to throw my mangled muffin away and Clark stood up, too. Lines of doubt formed around his mouth and the corners of his eyes and creased his forehead. He didn’t belong here. He deserved to be a hero in a comic book instead of a real, authentic good-guy in the middle of a hard-boiled crime film. He needed to know a nice girl, not a double-dealing would-be killer who cultivated friendships with gangsters on her days off. He noticed me shaking my head and started to say something.

"This is no life for you,” I said under my breath, turning away from him.

Carmen’s hotel was a lot nicer than the one I had lived in while I was still a copyeditor, before I could afford the apartment. Her lobby was clean, with clean curtains that were always open during the day to let in what there was of the autumn sunlight. The desk clerk was nice, and everything was quiet and sleepy on Sundays. It was much nicer,
really, than it should have been considering the neighborhood and the shadiness of the businesses surrounding it.

There was, however, no elevator in the hotel, so I took the stairs. Carmen was still in her dressing gown when she answered my knock. Her face was puffy, as though she had been awake for several nights in a row, and there was a purple smudge that faded into a jaundiced yellow at the edges under one eye. Looking at it made me flinch. She noticed.

“Íhaven’t really been sick,” she said, locking the door behind me. “I just look like I have.”

I stood there just inside the door with the muffins I had brought for her. “Did you keep ice on it?” I asked.

“I put some on when it hurt.”

“If you keep it iced, even when it doesn’t hurt, it makes the color go away faster. And the swelling. But I suppose you knew that.”

“I guess I—” She looked me over suspiciously. “Thanks,” she said.

I got the impression that she didn’t trust my advice in the matter, so I dropped it and held out the muffins to her.

“Carrot muffins,” I said. “Mom used to make them.”

“I love carrot cake,” she said, putting the bowl on a side table next to a pink lamp.

Carmen led the way to her sofa and I followed, taking off my worn raincoat. I perched on the edge of my seat and got out a box of cigarettes from my pocket. I lit one using the crystal lighter Carmen had on her table; I flicked it on and off a few times before putting it back down. I liked the slight smell of lighter fluid and the way the flame jumped at my command.
“I should get a lighter,” I said.

“I thought you said you prefer matches.”

“That doesn’t mean that I don’t like lighters, too.”

There were some days where making polite conversation was an absolute chore. Especially polite conversation with Carmen. I sat back and sank into the cushions behind me. This was exactly the kind of sofa Carmen would have if she had bought it herself – too soft and upholstered in a romantic garden print. I stuck the cigarette in my mouth and breathed through my nose.

“Lovely morning, isn’t it?” she asked, after we had both finished our cigarettes and she had lit another.

“It’s like any other,” I said. “It’s all right if you like morning.”

“Don’t you?”

“Some days.”

“So tell me about the man you brought to dinner the other night.”

I hadn’t expected her to be so forthright in asking about Niven. I had hoped that she wouldn’t, because I had said all I intended to say about Niven already, and I had said it to Dr. Van der Meer. It wasn’t the kind of thing I could talk to Carmen about. I lit another cigarette, stalling for time. I leaned back even further into the cushions behind me. The less I said about Niven the better, if for no other reason than Carmen would, eventually, figure out that this was the same Niven causing a buzz at the Planet.

“He’s a fan,” I told Carmen.
"I didn’t know you had handsome, rich fans. Where did you meet him?” It was obvious from her interest that she hadn’t made the connection yet. With her, these things could take a while.

"He just found me one day."

"That has to be flattering."

"It’s something, that’s for sure."

"I bet he’s crazy about you.” Carmen leaned forward conspiratorially.

"He’s crazy about my column.”

"Don’t kid me. I’ve been around too long not to know the signs when I see them. Stan even says he’s crazy about you.”

"Stan also says that chopsticks were invented in New York in 1934.”

"Come on, Lois. You should know by now that you can tell me anything.”

One of Carmen’s more endearing qualities was that she trusted everyone and took things at face value. Unfortunately, this was also one of her more annoying qualities. I shook my head.

"I have nothing to say about him. Really. Case closed.” I wished that she would just leave me alone, but that was too much to ask from Carmen.

"You’re getting awfully defensive,” she said, prodding my knee with a finger. “You can tell me. There’s nothing wrong with rich, interesting men. And don’t think I don’t know chemistry when I see it.”

"Chemistry? Carmen, really.” I leaned forward to knock the ashes off of my cigarette and wondered what I had done with the ones that Niven had had in his car. “I don’t even know him,” I said.
She shook her head. She may drop it for now, but she wouldn’t really let it rest until it told her that I was crazy about Niven and didn’t know what to do about it. My lack of boyfriends always bothered her, but then my so-called involvement with Superman bothered her, too. And whatever she thought was going on with Niven bothered her. She wouldn’t be happy with my love life until she was happy with her own, which wasn’t going to happen, in my opinion, until she had broken things off with Stan and found somebody who treated her respectfully.

“Well,” she said, “at any rate, it probably does Superman some good to see that he isn’t the only one. It’s about time for him to start getting serious.”

“There’s nothing to get serious about.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” Carmen prodded.

“Absolutely nothing you’d regret not knowing. I said that the case is closed. I have nothing more to say.”

“You talk like a cop.”

“I get it from the movies.”

“Well.” Carmen raised her penciled eyebrows and disposed of the end of her cigarette. “Are you still up to lunch and grocery shopping? There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Other than the men in my life, I hope.”

She nodded, and frowned. “I’m not entirely sure how I feel about it, though.”

“Are you going to tell me now, or while we’re counting up our ration stamps?”

“I’ll tell you now. All right. Stan wants to get married.”

“What? You didn’t say yes, did you?”
“Just because the two of you don’t get along doesn’t mean that you can’t be happy for me.” She paused long enough to look at me accusingly. “He loves me. And if he’s finally ready to get married – ”

“Do you love him?” I stared at the bruise on her face.

“I love him enough,” she said simply.

She got up and went into the bathroom. I heard water running for a second. I thought about getting myself a muffin, but my stomach was in knots. Carmen reemerged, dressed stylishly, hair perfect, pancake makeup covering the discoloration on her face.

“Do I look all right?” she asked. She always did, but she never seemed to realize it.

“Fine,” I said. “You’ll want to take an umbrella. It looks like it’s going to rain.”

We had taken the brown line to Montrose, and headed north to Smith and Alven Groceries. Carmen carried her umbrella smartly under one arm and I pulled up the collar of my raincoat.

“It’s hard to believe that Mrs. Smith is still running the place,” Carmen said. “She gave me my first job, you know.”

I thought about my first job. I had done janitorial work at the Metropolis College for Women. I started to comment on it, and then realized I didn’t know what I had told Carmen about my employment history.

“That was a while ago,” I said, to be on the safe side.

“I was thirteen. It’s been a long time, but not as long as it seems,” she snapped.

I always forgot how sensitive Carmen was about her age. I dropped it. We passed a sandwich shop that had particularly good grilled cheese and I suggested we stop.
“He asked me last night,” Carmen said, apropos of nothing, when we had placed our orders and sat down at the counter. Her voice shook a bit. “It wasn’t really a proposal, I guess, because he didn’t have a ring or anything. But he said that he wanted me to think about it.”

I remembered the grim line of Niven’s mouth when he said he didn’t like Stan. I remembered how frightened Carmen had been in the Berghoff’s restroom.

“He asked you to think about it?” I parroted.

“You know. He didn’t expect an answer right away. Which is really polite of him – I don’t know if I could have given him an answer last night. I would have said yes, I’m sure, but I’m still shook up over – this.” She gestured to her face.

Maybe that was why mom married my father. Because he didn’t give her time to think about it. Because he said he loved her and she believed that love was all she needed. Did mom have someone to talk her out of it? Did she have anyone else? As far as I knew, her only family was in Brooklyn. And she was in Metropolis, all alone. If there was something I could say to Carmen to get her to consider – maybe if I could tell her about mom

“What do you know about Stan up to this point?” I asked. Maybe if she really thought about it, she would start to see the danger of marrying Stan. I knew I shouldn’t kid myself, though.

“Well,” she said, impatiently, “he has a job and a brother that’s still in France. He grew up in Metropolis. His father worked as a meat packer on the South Side. He enlisted in the Army right away and got sent home because of his wound early on. He wants to marry me.”
“He drinks too much,” I continued for her. A surly man in a denim shirt and paper hat dropped our sandwiches on the counter in front of us. “He’s rude to your friends, he’s rude to his friends, he hit you.”

“He didn’t mean to do that. He won’t do it again.”

“How could he have not meant to hit you?”

Carmen ignored my question and asked the surly man for ketchup. He grunted and pointed to the bottle that sat on the table in front of us. I gave up on her and took a bite of my sandwich.

There was a note stuck in my doorframe when I got back to my apartment with my groceries. I managed to juggle the bags of food and my keys, and still manage to remove the note without anything falling or spilling. I put the groceries on my table and unfolded the piece of paper.

_Irene, it said, I stopped by to see if you were in and up for a walk in the park. I’m taking the dog there now. I’ll stop back on my way home and ask you for a dinner date. If you would like to avoid this, be sure and be out around three o’clock._

It was signed, of course, by Niven. I checked the clock and it was a quarter after two. I had time to put my groceries away and leave again, but I didn’t have anywhere to go and it would be nice to talk to him again. I had ignored other points of Dr. Van der Meer’s advice, and I could ignore what he said about Niven as well. I broke the color capsule in the margarine and wondered where Niven lived that he could just ‘stop by’ on his way to the park, assuming Lincoln Park was the park in question.
I mixed the color into the margarine, until it almost looked like real butter. I cut open the package and packed it into a butter mold that mom had bought while we were still in Brooklyn. The purchase of that butter mold was part of the fog of my earliest memories. I put the mold and margarine into the refrigerator. Margarine amazed me. It was an almost perfect imitation of the real thing— the color might be a little too good to be true, but aside from that— until you tried to eat it on toast.

I heard a knock over the running water and turned off the faucet. I left the odd assortment of vegetables in the sink and went to the door, drying my hands on my apron as I went. I didn’t bother with the security of the chain this time and there, in the hall, face-to-face with me, stood Niven, in a navy blue wool coat with a gray sheared lamb collar. His dog stood patiently, shining in the light of the hallway, attached to Niven by a skinny leather leash. Every time I saw him, I was speechless for a second or so. He just didn’t seem real. I told myself that he was, but I didn’t know how to feel about that.

“May I come in?” he asked, when I didn’t invite him.

“I’m sorry. Of course. You can bring your dog in, too.” I backed up to let him through and shut the door behind him. I was suddenly embarrassed by my worn housedress. Unlike Carmen, I never dressed up to do grocery shopping.

“We had a lovely walk,” Niven said, sitting on my sofa and removing his gloves. “I wish you could have been there. The sun cut through the clouds at points and the way the trees lit up— the sunlight on a cloudy afternoon has a different sort of quality than it does at other times.”
He unclipped the greyhound’s leash and the dog walked over to me, politely sniffing my hand.

“She wants to know if you’re friendly,” he said.

I patted the dog on the head and she looked up at me with soft brown eyes. Her tail wagged diffidently. I scratched behind her ears and her tail wagged faster.

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“She doesn’t have one. I never quite got around to that, I’m afraid.” He removed his hat and smoothed his hair. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“Suggestions?”

“To name her.”

“You want me to name your dog?”

“I don’t see why not. I don’t think I would give her the right kind of name, and I would be honored if you would – ” he gestured with his gloves.

“That’s going to require some thought,” I said.

He unbuttoned his coat and took out his cigarette case. His dog went and sat on the floor near him, resting her chin on his knee. I leaned in the kitchen doorway and smiled to myself.

“All right,” he said. “Have something for me when I pick you up for dinner. Is seven o’clock all right?”

“Dinner?”

“You did get my note, didn’t you?”
“I didn’t know that reading a note obligated me to have dinner with you. I’ll have to be more careful about what I read from now on, won’t I?” I should also turn around, go back to rinsing vegetables, and forget all about Niven.

“Of course you’re not obligated to do anything. But I thought that presenting you with the idea in so charming a manner would make it irresistible.”

“Well, I do have to eat tonight.”

“Then I’ll be back for you at seven.” He stood up, clipped the leash back on the dog, and buttoned his coat again. He took a step closer to me and tipped his hat.

“Aufwiedersehen,” I said.

“I wish you’d stop calling me Irene,” I told Niven. “That’s not my name anymore.”

He held his glass where it was, halfway to his lips, and then put it back down, slowly.

“But it’s who you are,” he said quietly. “Everything that happened to Irene has made you the person sitting across the booth from me in the crowded confines of Russian Tea Time. I can’t ignore that.”

“Well, I can. And I’ve been doing it quite successfully. Besides, someone might hear you call me Irene and get suspicious.”

He nodded and eyed me narrowly. Then he took a precise sip of his gimlet and placed it back directly in the center of the napkin it had been resting on.

“People would, most likely, assume that Lois Lane is a pen name,” he said. “I feel uncomfortable now applying it to you in private life because I feel it puts up a barrier that I don’t want. It’s a subject that we apparently need to discuss, but I would suggest doing so somewhere private.”
I ran my finger down the side of my glass of tonic, disrupting the condensation. He was right on all counts. He was right about these things the same way that Dr. Van der Meer was right, and Niven’s rightness was a little harder for me to brush off. I appreciated his unwillingness to get into an argument in public. He was, obviously, a man of breeding.

“Has Carmen called it quits with Stan, yet?” he asked, scooping pickled mushrooms onto a rye cracker.

Even though it wasn’t any of his business, I was inclined to tell him everything. The complete history of Carmen and Stan, for example, how many months it was before I could close my eyes and not see mom’s broken body at the bottom of the stairs, my frustrations with Clark, my fear of getting involved with anyone. Niven’s eyes seemed more green than gray tonight, less like the lake at night and more like the lake far out from the pier, when it was laying still, waiting. A woman in a booth nearby laughed sharply, and her braying didn’t fit into the quiet, elegant atmosphere of the restaurant. Everything – water being poured into glasses, the muted conversation, silverware clinking – seemed to stop for a moment because of the intrusion.

“Oh, Carmen,” I said.

“Is she all right?”

“Why wouldn’t she be?”

“There’s a little tremor that your voice picks up when something isn’t all right. I just heard it. Ergo, one would assume that something is wrong with Carmen.”

I creased the napkin that lay in my lap and was amazed at how much he noticed. Superman, with his super-human senses, had never been so observant.

“Stan asked her to marry him yesterday,” I said.
Niven’s eyes darkened and his face clouded. “And he told her that he didn’t mean to hurt her and would never do it again?”

“Don’t they always?” I remembered my father apologizing to mom, in the beginning, bringing her flowers and begging her not to go to New York again.

“Always.” Niven reached for another rye cracker, but took his drink instead. “Does she need some protection? Should I send someone around to keep an eye on her?”

He opened his cigarette case and handed me a brown Russian. He lit us both up and pushed the nearly empty plate of mushroom relish in my direction.

“Carmen and Stan,” he began, “is really none of my business. All right. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t frustrate me. I see something like this – a man who terrorizes his lover, or his children, or anybody he supposedly cares about, and I feel that something should be done about it. If he lets her leave him, he’s going to find someone else and treat her the same way. It occurs to me that I could put a bullet in him, but that wouldn’t solve anything for Carmen. And it wouldn’t sit very well with you.”

My lips felt cold. He had to be kidding about killing Stan. Sure, I had thought of it too, I couldn’t fault him for having the thought cross his mind, but if he would actually do it – for all I knew, he had perpetrated the warehouse slaughter.

“You’re kidding,” I said, hoarsely.

He blew a thin stream of smoke into the space between the booths and tables and his eyes sparkled.

“Of course I’m kidding,” he said. “But it’s probably in very poor taste to kid about things like that.”

“Especially if you’re with somebody who might take you seriously.”
My fingers were cold now. As though he sensed it, Niven looked at my hands and smiled sadly.

"I do apologize," he said. "I’ll spend more time thinking before I speak in future."

Our waiter, wearing a red waistcoat, brought our dinners to us on a silver cart with big white wheels.

Chapter eight.

I sat with my feet on my desk, ankles tightly crossed, typewriter in my lap, wondering why I had wasted my time and was now wasting readers’ time with Prairie Chickens. It seemed like none of the new pictures I had been to see were worthwhile, and the boss wouldn’t like it if I wrote about Double Indemnity again.

I closed my eyes and thought. Prairie Chickens was a good movie for this public. Families could see it together. I wouldn’t get nasty letters from parents telling me that the movies I encouraged their kids to spend their money on were too violent or immoral or whatever the catchword of the day was. The problem was, there wasn’t anything to say about it beyond a basic review. I wasn’t the movie reviewer. I was the critic. I had to be brilliant, and I definitely wasn’t feeling brilliant.

"Hey, Clark?" I said, hoping he was at his desk. I couldn’t see over the typewriter and my feet.

"What?" he replied.

"I need some ideas for my column."

There was a rustling and he appeared at the edge of my field of vision.
“Have a seat,” I said, pointing to my desk. “I’m stuck here. I need you to give me a brilliant idea.”

“I can’t help you with that.”

I gave him my sweetest smile. “Come on, Clark. Sure you can. Did you see Prairie Chickens? What did you think about it?”

“No. Why don’t you write about another one of the films? One of those ones you’re always writing about?”

“Like Citizen Kane? You know how much the boss would like that.”

I tapped on the keys of my typewriter, and we both thought. I thought about Niven and wondered how close he and my father really were. I didn’t know what Clark thought about.

“You could talk to someone who has seen the movie and get their opinion on it,” he said. “That might help.”

“It could, for sure.” An idea occurred to me, one so simple that it was amazing I hadn’t thought of it before. “Or – Clark – what about an interview?”

“An interview? With who?”

“Movie people. A director, a producer. Eddy Robinson.”

“I suppose.”

“What do you think, though?”

He shrugged and picked up a manila envelope I had lying on my desk, looked at the postmark, and put it back down. “If you’d rather – ”

“I don’t want a qualified answer. I want a straight yes-or-no, would you, Clark Kent, theoretically be interested in reading an interview with somebody who makes films.”
“It would be all right,” he said, but I didn’t think he cared one way or another. “But I would rather see what you had to say about it.”

“Thank you, that’s very flattering. I didn’t think you read my columns, though.”

“I don’t, really, but if I had the time to…” he trailed off. He continued to sit on my desk, as if he was waiting for something. I went back to my typewriter, even though my mind was made up not to write any more about *Prairie Chickens*.

“Is that all you wanted to talk to me about?” Clark asked.

“That’s it.”

“So what movie are you going to do instead?”

“I’ve decided to do an interview today, if I can manage it.” I just said I wanted to do an interview.

“I thought you weren’t going to do that. I said –”

“I only asked for an opinion. I didn’t ask you to make a decision for me.”

“But if you weren’t going to listen to my opinion, why did you ask me?”

“I just needed someone to talk to to help me think,” I said. “You don’t like the idea. I do. So I’ll try it and see if I like it as much once its done. You know, when people ask you for an opinion on something, it’s not the same as their asking you to tell them what to do. If I want you to tell me what to do, I’ll let you know.” I couldn’t believe him.

“I think I misunderstood you, then.”

“I can see that.”

“I misunderstand a lot of things.” He left the edge of my desk and I pulled the paper out of my typewriter. A moment later, he offered, “Lois? Do you want a sandwich or anything?”
“Love one,” I said, and tried to smile at him around my typewriter, but it was too much in the way.

“So I talked to Edward G. Robinson’s press agent today,” I told Carmen.

She was lounging on my sofa with a pillow behind her back and her shoes on the floor. We were waiting for Stan to meet us at my apartment so that we could all walk over to Gilly’s together. Clark was coming too; I needed to have someone other than Carmen with me if I was going to deal with Stan, and I felt it owed it to Clark to invite him along to something that wasn’t work-related. And, anyway, maybe with the boundaries shifted, we could be friends again. Carmen had been mildly surprised that I wasn’t bringing Niven, but, as it didn’t affect her personally, she didn’t care.

“Do you know of anyone else he handles?” she asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Robinson’s agent?”

She nodded.

“Probably a lot of other Paramount people. Anyway, I got an interview for tomorrow. You should read what I whipped together for today. Nothing more than a review, really. You remember Prairie Chickens?”

“Wait a second.” Carmen propped herself up on an elbow so that she could look at me. “You had to go through an agent to talk to Robinson? I thought you two were on pretty friendly terms. That he had asked you to come out to Hollywood and be in pictures or something.”

“Where did you here that? He sent me a letter after I did the series on Double Indemnity. That’s it.”
“I think you should interview Cary Grant. If you do, give him my love. And, Lois, could you get me a cigarette?”

I got up and got one out of the box that was on the coffee table about two feet from where Carmen was lounging. I handed it to her, but I had to go into the kitchen for matches. Her voice followed me, accusingly.

“You’re so lucky,” she said. “You meet and talk to exciting people. You get to follow Superman around. You have Superman chasing you. You have your own apartment and almost everyone in the city knows you by name. Me, the most interesting thing I can do is buy a new dress.”

I struck a match on my thumbnail and brought it to her. I didn’t say anything because my arguments never did any good.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she continued, taking a puff of her cigarette. “Not here. Maybe if I had been able to go to New York, or Hollywood, I could have been an actress. I could have been somebody.” She dropped back down and stared at the ceiling as if all of her lost possibilities were etched up there. “That’s it. I’ll quit my job here and go be in the movies. If I’m not too old.”

“Sure, if you want to,” I said, knowing she wouldn’t do any such thing.

“Hey, Lois.”

“What?”

“Do you think you could get me into the movies?”

“I’m just a critic. A Midwestern critic, at that.”

“But you know people.”

“I don’t know anyone important. Other film critics. Professors.”
“What about the man you brought to The Berghoff? He looked important.”

I shrugged, but since she wasn’t looking at me, it didn’t matter whether I shrugged or not. She had no idea about Niven and how important he actually was. The phone rang, and I hoped that it was Stan, backing out because he was already too drunk to make it onto the bus and to my apartment.

“Hello?” I said into the receiver.

“Niven here,” the voice on the other end said. “You forgot something the other night.”

“In your car, you mean?” I turned to see Carmen sitting up, her eyes fixed on me with sudden interest.

“You forgot to give me a name for the dog.”

I nodded. I had put naming the dog out of my mind almost as soon as it was mentioned. I thought, avoiding Carmen’s questioning stare. I had an inspiration.

“All right,” I said. “Have you seen To Have and Have Not?”

“They actually let us watch that one inside.”

“Call her Slim.”

There was a long enough pause that I wondered if we had lost connection. I took that opportunity to give Carmen a saccharine smile.

“I like that,” Niven said. “It’s good. I think it fits her, except that she’s better behaved.”

“Is that all?”

“My, but you’re abrupt. I suppose it could be, unless you’re free tonight?”

“I have a dinner engagement. With Carmen and Stan.”
“And one of their friends?”

“No.” I wanted to invite him along, but shuddered to think of him, Clark, and Stan together.

“We still have to see *Double Indemnity.* Shall we plan on doing that sometime soon?”

“That sounds good. I’ll talk to you later, then.”

“Cheerio,” he said, and hung up.

I hung up too, gently, and glanced at the picture of Eddy Robinson. He looked very serious in it, like he was pondering the significance of what he was doing with his life.

“Who was that?” Carmen demanded, on the prowl for some news about my private life.

“Nobody,” I said, disappointing her. I was starting to ponder the significance of my own life, and I was already coming up short.

*****

The four of us walked into the wind down busy but poorly lit Clark Street and Stan absolutely ignored Clark until we got to Gilly’s. After making us wait at the bar while he downed a scotch and soda in record time, he took it upon himself to make introductions. It would have seemed, to a casual observer, that Stan was a man of great joviality and that the three of us that weren’t Stan were only there because of him. Finally Carmen, weary of his meaningless humor, suggested that we find a table.

“That’s an excellent idea,” I said. “I’m hungry.”

For reasons of his own, Stan shot me a particularly disdainful look and put an arm around Carmen’s waist, walking her up to the dining hostess who stood uncertainly with
menus in her arms. She was happy to say that there was indeed a table for four available.

Clark and I followed after Carmen and Stan. Clark’s face was gloomy and there were traces on an unpleasant train of thought between his eyes.

“Are you all right?” I whispered. For all I knew, he might have been listening to someone’s cries for help and trying to decide whether and how to sneak away and answer.

“There’s something wrong with Carmen’s boyfriend,” he whispered back.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“He hasn’t done anything. I can’t do anything, either. That would be up to Superman, anyway.”

I let it go. This was not the place to talk about either Superman or Stan. We were seated at a table in the middle of the floor; the waiter with the lazy eye came and poured water for us, then vanished. I noticed the way that Stan was watching Carmen, as if he owned her, and the way that Clark sat, huddled and seemingly unsure of himself. It was, possibly, his first dinner date with women. I was sure he had been out before with some of the other reporters, swapping stories from the field over highballs or coffee.

Cannen caught my attention, too. Listlessness was written all over her; her hair was limp, she slumped, and her eyes lacked sparkle. We hadn’t spoken about Stan since she told me about his proposal, but I had the feeling that the whole situation was weighing heavily on her. I had a sudden, irresistible urge to get out of there. So I stood up and pulled my coat back on.

“I’m feeling a bit dizzy,” I announced. “I need to go out for some fresh air.”

“Good luck in this city,” Carmen said.
Clark half rose to follow me, sat down again, made up his mind, and came along. I pushed through the crowd at the bar and out the door. We stood on the sidewalk, just outside the dull glow of a streetlamp, and I leaned against the space between Gilly’s front window and the entrance to the hotel. There was a mission across the street, fronted in white tile, with a solid door and a tiny showcase-type window that displayed a blue neon cross in front of a placard that read *Come all ye who are heavyladen, and I shall give thee rest.*

“Are you all right?” Clark asked, patting my arm. Every social gesture he made was awkward, but I found it hard to believe that he had actually spent all of his time alone in this ocean of people.

“I feel fine.” I tried to sound reassuring. “I just hate being around Stan. He’s rude, he’s vulgar, and he seems to have the entire population of Metropolis believing he’s a prince. When I first met Carmen, they weren’t serious, and I assumed he would fade away.”

Belmont was crowded, not with the after work El crowd, but with the cocktail hour crowd. Most of the places were north of where Clark and I stood, and couples passed us without even noticing. Nobody went into the mission. That made me sad, and the El thundering so close by made my sadness acute. And the fact that I had nobody to share it with made it unbearable. I forced myself to think about Carmen and Stan, to think of all of the reasons I had to dislike him, to feel the sting of anger instead of the ache of depression.

It was in a break in the crowd, a moment of relative quietness, that something horrible occurred to me, something that I had known all along and left stranded in my subconscious.

“He reminds me of my father,” I told Clark, a confidence for what I stole from him. The blue glow in the mission window flickered. “He’s just like him. I remember the first time I –” I did remember the first time I saw him, standing in the Amtrak waiting room, hat
in hand, big flashy smile and a flower for mom. But I hadn’t trusted him. Neither had she; the bank account she built up in my name proved that.

Clark and I stood close together against the wall of the hotel. I realized that I was gripping his lapels and loosened my fingers, smoothing out his coat.

“Your father killed somebody, you said,” Clark said.

“If she marries him —”

“Why don’t you tell her what happened with your father?”

“I can’t. She thinks he’s dead. And she might not understand — at any rate, it’s not that easy. To give someone the right advice and know they’ll take it.” I could certainly speak from personal experience on that one.

“Why would she marry Stan, though, if you told her about your father? Wouldn’t she realize that it’s better to leave him than take that chance?”

“It happens all the time,” I said, remembering mom. “A woman marries a man who she knows is dangerous, and hopes she can change him. Then she has a baby, and realizes just how bad the situation is — too bad for the child. So she leaves, but when she’s away from him, the bad memories start to fade, and he begs her to come back, promises that it will be different — so she goes back. I don’t know why. I suppose it’s some kind of so-called love. Or maybe, on the woman’s part, she just hopes she can save her man. I don’t know. It’s not something I can explain, but Carmen’s not going to leave Stan just because I tell her it’s for her own good.”

The way Clark looked at me let me know that, not only did he find my hypothetical story somewhat off-topic, he had more than an inkling that it wasn’t hypothetical. I should tell him, and now wouldn’t be a bad time — but it wouldn’t be a good idea. He probably
wouldn’t understand, since I didn’t have a crusade against evil that I was protecting with my lie.

“We should probably get back in there before they start wondering about us,” I said.

I wondered how long it would be before it occurred to him to ask me what I was hiding.

*****

As soon as I hung up the phone after talking to Eddy Robinson, I had an overwhelming urge to call Niven and tell him about it. However, I didn’t know his phone number or where he lived and didn’t think it would be the brightest idea to ask the operator for information about him. On top of which, I had to write up the interview in time for the evening edition, which didn’t leave much time for dallying now.

I managed to get it right in the first draft. I almost never did that, and took it as a good omen; I absolutely breezed through the corridors to the copy editors’ section, dropped my finished gem in their inbox, and breezed back to my desk, stopping for my coat and hat. Clark was covering a boat race, so he wasn’t in the office; I looked out the window behind his desk at the sliver of lake that was visible. It was gray but glassy — too quiet for sailing, but give it a while and it would be too choppy to be safe.

I decided to take a walk down to Navy Pier before going back to my apartment. I walked down Michigan to Grand, and stopped in the Greek coffee shop for a cup of coffee to go. I would need something to keep me warm at the lakefront. I watched my feet on the pavement, occasionally glancing in the windows of the restaurants and offices I passed, until I heard the roar of a plane overhead — then I looked up to watch it gracefully curve towards the lake and pier for a landing. When mom and I first came back from Brooklyn, my father
had taken us to the pier to go roller skating. Mom had been a natural at it; at the strangest
times, I would see her in her favorite blue dress, swishing around the rink as though she were
born to fly. It was hard to believe that where she had skated so beautifully was now filled
with bunks, that if I went in there to try and find her, I would find boys, children not much
older than I had been when I had lost her, waiting to be shipped away to, possibly, lose
themselves. Another plane hummed overhead. I reached the lake shore, claimed and empty
bench, and took the lid off of my coffee.

The lake had already started to come to life. The sun peaked through the perpetual
cloud cover and turned the water green in places. Tiny whitecaps dotted the lake as far out as
the end of the pier, and broke on the shore. The wind ruffled my hair with a pleasant
familiarity, and I hoped everything held steady until Clark’s boat race was finished. Sailing
on Lake Michigan was a crazy venture. So was flying over it. The water was icy, and
deadly dark – we could only guess how many boats and planes and people lay rotting
underneath. Every day, it seemed, we were reporting a new tragedy that the lake was
responsible for. I took a long, hot sip of my coffee and thought both of Niven and his lake-gray
eyes and Clark and his uncanny presence. Neither seemed quite human.

Shouts from the pier distracted my thoughts from going nowhere, and I saw the glare
of a fire about halfway out. The brightness of the fire made me realize that it would be dark
by the time I got back to my apartment if I started back now.

I had taken off my coat and shoes and turned on the wireless when the phone rang. I
stopped to light a cigarette before I answered it, because I hoped it would be Niven and I
wanted to stall disappointment. I picked up the receiver and a cool, educated voice with a
hint of English accent returned my greeting. For the day, at least, things seemed to be going my way. I told him to pick me up for dinner and, if he was still interested, *Double Indemnity* – that I had some good news. I was just taking my dress off to change for dinner when there was a knock at the door. Apparently, I thought as I zipped back up, I was very popular.

Clark stood there in the hallway, hat in hand, looking pleased with himself. He was wearing a brown overcoat with nice lapels. It was nice, but not breathtaking. I took down the chain and let him in, hoping that he hadn’t come for a serious talk.

“You’re happy about something,” he said.

I couldn’t help but grin, even though I felt silly for being so excited over talking to a movie star.

“I had my interview with Eddy Robinson today. You’ll have to read it. It was a one-draft column.”

He nodded appreciatively. “I take it the interview went well?”

“It was wonderful.”

“I’m glad to hear that. What’s your news?”

“I don’t have any news.”

“Something has to have made you happy.”

“My interview.”

“I wanted to see if you wanted to get dinner or something.”

If he was inviting me to go out somewhere with Clark Kent, our dynamics must have shifted favorably. I almost wished that I didn’t have plans with Niven, but not enough to cancel them.

“I’m actually going out tonight to celebrate,” I said.
“Celebrate?”

“The interview.”

He nodded. Assuming that I read him right, he was feeling rejected.

“Look,” I said, deciding to make it better. “There’s a double feature playing Saturday morning. A horror movie and a western. Would you like to go see that with me?”

“I’m not as free as you are to spend an afternoon at the theatre.”

“It’s not the afternoon. It starts at ten in the morning.”

He glanced around my apartment as if he expected to find hostile people watching him. He made a vague noise in his throat and shrugged.

“I’ll see you at the office tomorrow,” he said. He turned and left the apartment without saying goodbye.

I wondered about Clark. Then I dressed for dinner.

“So?” Niven said when we were situated in the Daimler. “You have something to celebrate?”

“It’s something you would appreciate,” I told him, remembering Clark’s reaction with some displeasure. “Have you read the evening edition yet?”

“Not yet. Why?”

“My column – I had an interview with Edward G. Robinson.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. He just smiled to himself.

“Edward G. Robinson. What is he like, really?”

“Oh, he’s swell,” I said. I couldn’t believe I was using the word ‘swell’. “He’s read a lot. He seems to know a lot about almost everything – he had clear and interesting answers
to all of the questions I asked him. He said that *Double Indemnity* may be his favorite film he’s done.”

“You spoke with Edward G. Robison.” Niven laughed. “And you say he’s swell.”

“The conversation I had with him today was one of the best conversations I’ve had with anyone. He actually understood my questions – and why I was asking them.”

“That’s how he would have to be,” Niven pointed out.

We soared past the quiet brownstones along Halstead, past Wrigley Field, past the smattering of traffic on Clark Street. We had turned onto Waveland, going back to the place on Southport, I assumed, before Niven said anything.

“It’s funny. How much importance we attach to people we don’t even know.”

“You mean movie stars, political figures, that sort of thing?” I asked, even though I knew exactly what he meant.

“Specifically, Eddy Robinson. Does it strike you as strange that both of us, without consulting the other, have adopted him as some kind of symbol? For my part, I can’t figure it. On the one hand, it makes sense – here he was, a Hungarian Jewish kid who came to the U.S. – Hungarian Jewish kids come here all the time, I’m sure – but now he’s Edward G. Robinson. He can be anybody he wants to be.”

*Robinson.* It wasn’t any more Jewish than Lane. He was in show business, though. I wondered what he would do if I asked him –

“We seem to give him some kind of importance that he hasn’t really earned or a role to fill that isn’t necessarily his,” Niven was saying.
We passed the Music Box; *Double Indemnity* was playing there now. The black letters of the title were silhouetted against the gloving marquee. Niven glanced at me, to make sure I was listening, and continued.

"It helped me to pass the time in prison, creating a role for this stranger to fill. Deciding what he could or could not be like in private life." He slipped the Daimler into the same space it had occupied the last time we ate here, in front of the cleaner's. "I did the same thing for you, too," Niven finished, turning off the engine.

I ignored his last statement. I wasn't sure how to interpret it, anyway.

"Most people are content to let their matinee idols just be matinee idols. You seem to have to analyze everything."

"When you're inside, you have a lot of time to think. Some people think about what they're going to do when they get out. Some people analyze things."

"And you analyzed."

"And thought. About myself, what I was, what I would have to do in order to stay sane in prison. I came out all right."

We got out of the Daimler and, once inside the restaurant, Niven hung our coats on the coat rack that stood just beyond the door. Niven led the way to a table in the back corner, one of three that wasn't occupied.

"You were the thing your father focused on in prison," he continued, handing me a cigarette. "You became a symbol for everything he had suffered over the years, and for what he would continue to suffer."

"By suffering, are you implying he has a conscience?" I said, letting him give me a light.
“Not the way you have a conscience. It’s no secret to you, I’m sure, but your father doesn’t operate the way most people do.”

The same old man who had waited on us last time brought menus, filled our water glasses, and disappeared. If my father didn’t have a conscience, I realized, he would suffer a lot less than he ought. The thought of his suffering being mitigated by anything at all made me angry.

“The mushroom ravioli here is quite good,” Niven said. He put his menu aside and snuffed out his half-smoked cigarette.

“Mr. Robison is tough, but he doesn’t always have to be tough,” Niven said suddenly, putting the jar of sugar back on the table. “If he’s walking down the street, or having dinner, nobody looks at him and assumes he has a gun under his arm or in a pocket. That’s because he’s Edward G. Robinson. He’s not Bruce Corey unless he’s on screen.”

I took the sugar and poured some into my own espresso. I wondered if Niven was going anywhere with this train of thought, and I hoped the waiter came back soon with my tiramisu.

“Most people seem to understand that an actor has a job. He’s a killer or a lover because he’s paid to be, and he leaves his role behind him at the studio. In real life, he may be a bookworm or something – anything but the exciting man he plays.”

“Naturally,” I said. “In real life, I’m not Superman’s girlfriend.”

I hadn’t intended to say that. It had never even occurred to me to say anything like that before. I wondered why I had said it now, but I only wondered for a moment as I
watched Niven capably and carefully sip his espresso. To hide the awkwardness I felt, I decided to put on some more lipstick. And then our waiter came with dessert.

“You know,” Niven said, fixing me with his eyes, “I never thought of you as Superman’s girlfriend. I always assumed that your by-line was something put together by the publicity department. As far as I’m concerned, Superman doesn’t even exist.”

I ran my fork across the top of my tiramisu, obliterating the dusting of cocoa powder.

“Maybe he doesn’t,” I said. “Maybe we see this man in blue tights and assume that he has some otherworldly power. He might be a file clerk for a bank somewhere with delusions of grandeur.”

Not a file clerk in a bank. And I knew that his power, whatever it was and wherever it came from, was real. Sometimes, though, I said things like that to make myself feel more secure.

Niven raised an eyebrow and dug his fork into the cheesecake that was in front of him. “No file clerk with delusions could do what he does. The man is like a hurricane.”

“Then maybe he’s Nietzsche’s übermensch with delusions of humanity.” I stirred enough sugar into my espresso to make it syrupy before I realized what I was doing. More to myself, I said, “How does a man like that survive?”

“Apparently,” Niven said, putting his fork down, “the world is at war over this. The idea of the super-man. Hitler believes that the world would be—” he paused and seemed to be searching for the right words. Disgust twisted his features momentarily. “A more productive place, a better place, for people like him, if his Aryan super-men were in charge. In order for that to happen, he has to exterminate a million other people. Hitler and his
super-men survive by destroying anything that doesn’t measure up to their impossible standards.”

“I don’t think that Superman survives by making up theories about superior races.” I was uncomfortable with discussing Hitler and Superman together, but I could see Niven’s point.

“Maybe not, but he is working on ridding Metropolis of the people he believes to be morally inferior to himself.”

I re-crossed my legs and kicked Niven under the table in the process. My clumsiness embarrassed me, but I knew that it didn’t have to.

“So,” I said, “you’re suggesting that he deals with his super-ness by punishing those who are inferior just for being inferior?”

“In so many words, yes. But doesn’t everybody do that? Some way or another? Whether you exclude a certain type of person from a social club or are purposely witty and caustic in conversation, you have to admit — ” he let his thought trail off and turned his attention back to his cheesecake.

I considered. I studied his cool, even features. Next month, I might ask Dr. Van der Meer what he thought about people punishing each other for being different. I wondered if he had any theories about Superman’s psychological makeup.

“I don’t think that Superman has the ability to consciously so anything unkind,” I told Niven.

“Punishment isn’t necessarily unkind,” he said.
“Not if the person being punished deserved it.” I thought of my father. “But people are persecuted — socially punished — for having less money or education than someone else. That is unkind.”

“It is to you and I, yes. But imagine that you were so vastly superior to everyone else in every way that you can’t relate to them. How do you think you would handle that? Could you accept it, and try and operate on their level, or would you start to resent them and act accordingly?”

I had to admit that there were times when I resented Carmen for being Carmen. And I squirmed when I realized how condescendingly I treated her. But I still couldn’t imagine Superman being so petty. He was too good.

“I don’t think he operates like that,” I said.

“You know him better than I do. After all, he only arrested me.”

Niven had a slight dimple in his right cheek when he smiled or repressed a smile. I turned my attention back to my tiramisu and kept it there until we had both finished dessert.

We decided to walk to the theatre since it would be silly to drive the Daimler all of four blocks straight down Southport. Most of the streetlights were burned out, but it didn’t matter since the businesses that were still open had their own lights on and that created enough of a glow for the few people who were still out to walk by. The damp concrete listlessly reflected what light there was, and I listened for sirens from Clark Street. Niven took my hand and threaded it through his arm, then took out his cigarette case, removed two cigarettes, put them between his lips, and paused under a flickering streetlight to light them. I watched the flame spring to life and then die with a nice clean click. He handed me one of
the cigarettes, a yellow one, and I took it, inhaled a lungful of smoke, and blew it straight in front of me.

“Nice night,” Niven said. Our footsteps echoed on the sidewalk.

“I suppose,” I said, even though I had thought the same thing when we left the restaurant.

“Don’t like making small talk?”

“Not really.”

“I don’t, either.”

The end of Niven’s cigarette glowed red and a man in a bulky coat pushed past us, perhaps in a hurry to meet someone at the restaurant. It struck me again how funny it was to be on my way to see *Double Indemnity* with a man like Niven, but I didn’t feel like laughing.

“Do you know what I think?” he said.

“No.” But I wished I did. The Music Box’s marquee was about a block away.

“I think I’m going to make it my personal responsibility to see you happy.”

Blood pounded in my ears for a second, and then I recovered.

“I don’t think you need to do that,” I said.

“I don’t need to do anything. But I want to. You deserve it.”

As absurd and arrogant of a statement as it was, it was really touching. I was glad that he wanted me to be happy. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he actually succeeded.

“I’m plenty happy,” I said, but neither of us believed me.

We finished our cigarettes under the shelter of the marquee and tossed the butts into the street. We went into the lobby with its green brocade wallpaper, and the girl who took Niven’s money didn’t look at him twice. He handed me my ticket and we went into the
theatre. It was reasonably empty; *Double Indemnity* was already gone from most of the first-run theatres and the only people who still wanted to see it were people like us. I hit Niven with my elbow while I was taking off my coat, and it made me feel clumsy and awkward. I felt more and more like a schoolgirl when I was with him, and I made a mental note to make a point in my next column that feeling like a schoolgirl was, more often than not, rather unpleasant. But in spite of my adolescent misgivings, Niven wanted me to be happy. I had, for a moment, the same feeling that I had had when he told me I looked like mom. It thrilled me, in a quiet way, that there was somebody out there who understood. I knew that it had never occurred to Carmen that I might be unhappy. It would never have crossed Clark’s mind, either, especially coupled with the thought that he might be able to do something about it. Dr. Van der Meer knew as much as I did how I felt, but he wasn’t much comfort.

Niven nudged my arm slightly and whispered, “This is the first film I will have seen since getting out.”

“Really?” I whispered back. “I’m surprised.”

“I’ve been busy. Getting my affairs back in order, going back to work, taking time to visit my mother.”

It had never occurred to me that he would have parents, too. He existed on his own.

“I’m glad I’m seeing my first film back in Metropolis with you,” he said.

I was completely happy when the lights went down and the newsreel came on. Local news came first – Niven’s release from prison being the headlining story. There was grainy footage of him being escorted into a police car, immaculate in a dark suit, wearing an expression of shock and outrage with extreme grace and dignity, showing off his shiny handcuffs to the man behind the camera. Superman stood in the background, arms crossed.
over the “S” on his chest, talking to the chief of police. They were so engrossed in their conversation that neither of them, even for a second, looked at the camera. Our Action News Narrator gave the details of the arrest and pointed out Superman’s part in it, and then went on to reassure us that Superman would be keeping a close eye on the newly released Public Enemy to be sure to catch him in time before he commits another heinous crime.

Niven didn’t react to his name or the footage of his arrest (apparently, there had been none of his release). I supposed he was used to it, and wondered how one becomes used to fame, especially fame of that sort. Niven was fascinating.

The lights in the lobby had a yellow glare. The lobby of a theatre was the only place I had ever seen that kind of light, and if I worked in the lobby of a theatre, I would go home every night with a headache. Niven and I stood close to the wall across from the concession stand, in front of a poster for Lady in the Deathhouse, which would be appearing soon. I was letting one of Niven’s red cigarettes burn between my fingers and Niven was watching the faces of the people who left the theatre after us.

“It’s always the same,” he said, escorting me out of the lobby when we were the only ones left. “They’re either intrigued by what they just saw or afraid of their own reaction to it, but very few of them seem to understand.”

“You may be making a generalization,” I said, following him out of the lobby. “There are more than two ways to feel after watching a film.”

“Of course there are. But most of those ways can be put in one of my two categories. The differences are subtle.”
I dropped my cigarette on the sidewalk and didn’t stop to grind it out. I took Niven’s arm and we walked slowly, without talking, back to the Daimler. At the bus stop across the street, I saw someone who looked a lot like Clark. We passed him, and he didn’t see me.

Chapter nine.

Carmen was undecided about Stan, and her indecision was causing her grief, which made her more bitter towards me than usual. Clark was acting strangely, even for him. Things had been going well until the night he stopped by and I had a date with Niven. Now, he was going out of his way to avoid me. I was feeling unfulfilled by my job and my life didn’t seem to be amounting to much. Niven was becoming an almost overwhelming presence in my life, and I was feeling threatened by that. I considered my options, decided against drinking myself into oblivion, and put on my coat and hat to go to the zoo. The zoo was a good place to go when I wanted to be alone, because children and caged animals wouldn’t interrupt my solitude with well-meaning but unwanted attention. I left my apartment but realized I had forgotten something; I went back into the kitchen and got a book of matches (from Gilly’s) out of the drawer by the sink.

I bought a paper cup of coffee and a bag of peanuts from the red and gold pushcart that sat outside the East Gate Pavilion. I thought I would join the crowd of mothers watching their children ride the carousel. The music coming from it was bright and soothing, and the colors and shapes of it were pleasing. The coffee was still too hot to drink, I knew from experience, so I left the lid on it and shifted it to the same hand as the bag of peanuts. I stopped shy of the carousel crowd and removed a box of cigarettes and the matches from my pocket with my free hand. I tried to open the cigarettes, but only succeeded in dropping the
box on the gravel walkway. Before I could bend down to pick it up, it was handed to me by a tattered gray glove.

"You should be more careful with your things, Irene," a grating, straining voice said.

My heart stopped and I brought the figure in front of me into focus. He was shabbier and thinner and shorter than I had imagined all these years. He stood stiffly – as though his spine was fused together – and his face was the color of jaundice, with crusty sores around the corners of his mouth and his nostrils. But his eyes were still the same – bottomless and filled with disgust for everything they turned on. Instinctively, I took a step back. The sight of him made me ill – Niven had said he was sick, but I wasn’t prepared for this. My father’s face cracked into a truly ugly sneer.

“So you thought you could get away from me,” he said, closing the space between us.

There was a high-pitched humming in my ears and I couldn’t find my voice. Not that there was anything for me to say. I was almost supernaturally aware of the coffee I was holding. I could feel the individual fibers in the cup, and tell that the liquid inside was cooling. I had never noticed the way a paper cup fit into my hand before. I risked a look down at it; it was exactly the color of the gravel at my feet.

A baby started crying directly behind me. I heard small feet crunching on the gravel, and the carousel music changed to “And the Band Played On”. I heard a bus brake outside of the gates. And I didn’t take my eyes off of the cup in my hand.

“Can’t even look at me, can you?” my father demanded.

So I looked him in the eye. It nauseated me to do so. The skin under his eyes was blistered and gray. My head cleared and a voice that sounded something like mine said,

“So you found me.”
“You didn’t make it very difficult.” He inspected me the way he would inspect a piece of machinery. He spat on the gravel, just missing my feet. “I can’t say you’re much of a find,” he said.

“What do you want?” I asked. I glanced out over my father’s head and wondered if I had gotten that much taller since I had seen him last. A couple of ravens perched in one of the trees that surrounded the carousel. They looked pretty against the backdrop of red leaves. I wondered what the other guests at the zoo thought about this exchange between my father and I, and if they even noticed it.

“I want you to look at me when I’m talking to you.”

“I don’t have to look at you if I don’t want to.” I didn’t realize I was speaking until the words were in the air. I had never experienced anything like this before.

I saw my father move in slow motion, but was unable to react. He grabbed my arm just above the elbow with a stronger grip than I would have thought possible, and shook me hard enough that my pack of cigarettes went flying and coffee flung out of my cup, over my coat, and onto the ground. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw a sailor stop. My cigarettes had landed against the iron railing around the base of an enormous oak. My father had managed to twist my arm into an unnatural position that had me bent over, eye-level with a little blonde girl in a blue coat who was walking with her mother toward the carousel. I could feel my arm bruising.

“Whatever quarrel you have with the lady,” a voice said as I felt my father’s fingers being pried loose, “can wait until later.”

I straightened up and my spine crunched back into place. The person who had come to my rescue was the sailor I had seen out of the corner of my eye, and up close he was
scared but determined. While he managed to stare down my father, I shook out my arm, decided no harm had been done, and turned my attention to the carousel. It seemed to be spinning faster than it should.

The sailor couldn’t have been more than twenty. He reminded me of Clark, and I was willing to assume that Clark at twenty was exactly like this boy – idealistic and willing to intervene in strangers’ arguments. And yet my father backed down. He turned away from the sailor and to me.

“You listen,” he said, grabbing my lapel. “You can’t escape what you did to me. And if you think getting friendly with Sterling is going to help you, I have news. He’s my friend. And he knows about you as well as I do.” My father thrust his face into mine and his breath was rancid. I wanted to vomit.

“I’m not interested in your advice,” I said, looking down at his stomach and remembering leveling the revolver at him. “And,” I lied, “I’m not interested in what you know. It doesn’t matter now.”

I turned and walked off. My vision was black around the edges, but I took a deep breath and kept going. Running feet crunched over the gravel behind me, and I turned in panic. The sailor stood at my elbow, slightly flushed, holding my cigarettes. He held them out to me.

“Sorry about that,” I said, taking them. “He wasn’t too happy to see me.”

I noticed that I still had the bag of peanuts under my arm. I opened the cigarettes and continued walking; I had one to my lips when I realized that the navy boy was walking beside me.

“Are you all right?” he asked.
“I’m fine.” My legs, however, were shaking uncontrollably. Walking was difficult. I handed the boy a cigarette and lit it. I lit mine, too.

“You’re – Lois Lane, aren’t you?” he asked. He held his cigarette at an awkward angle.

I nodded.

“I thought so. But I didn’t see Superman come to your rescue, and I wondered.”

I stopped at the elephant cage, to have something to look at so that I could avoid wondering about Superman myself. I put my cigarette in my mouth and dug out a handful of peanuts, which I handed to the sailor.

“I read your column,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“I like your Superman stories a lot more, though. I don’t understand a lot of what you say in your columns.”

“Neither do I.” An elephant lumbered over to me and I held a peanut on my palm, flat, out to him. He sniffed and flapped his ears, and gingerly took the peanut.

“I save all of your Superman stories. Even since the first one. What is he like?”

“Superman?”

The boy nodded. He held the peanuts in one fist and the cigarette in the other hand had a long column of ash on it. I had to smile. He didn’t look like he should be a sailor. He should have been in a university studying chemistry or history.

“Listen, you’re going to burn yourself on that thing if you don’t put it out,” I said, nodding at the cigarette. “Just drop it and step on it.”
He did as he was told. I held another peanut out to the waiting elephant and took the cigarette out of my mouth, flicking off the ashes.

“Superman,” I said. The boy waited. I didn’t know what to tell him. “Superman is more like an electrical storm than anything else. He can do whatever he wants to. But he doesn’t plan what he does. He doesn’t really think about what he does. Or has to do. He just acts.”

The boy frowned. I could tell my answer wasn’t satisfactory.

“Really,” I said, and was surprised that I said it gently, “the less you think about Superman, the better.”

“But I thought—” he let it hang in the air.

“So, are you back on leave?” I asked him. The elephant rolled its eyes at me. I held out another peanut.

“I haven’t even left yet. I go out the day after tomorrow. I’m meeting some friends here today. We’re going to see The Mad Doctor of Market Street later.”

“You’re really nice, you know that?” There was something touching about the kid’s purity. He seemed more untainted by the dirtiness of Metropolis than oblivious to it. I liked him.

He didn’t even try to hide his blush. “Thank you. My mom raised me to be nice. She told me that it would help to make the world a better place. I want to do that, so I’m nice to people.”

“Superman would like you. You two would get along, I think.”

He positively beamed. The elephant nuzzled my sore shoulder and I noticed that his tusks had been cut short.
“Do you really think so?”

Before I could assure him that I did, indeed, I heard someone yell ‘Tom!’ and the boy turned.

“Those are my friends,” he said, waving at a boy in a letterman jacket and a perky little brunette in a brown coat and mary janes. She waved back.

“Enjoy the movie,” I said.

“It was nice meeting you,” he said, and ran off.

I was glad that he had been too polite to ask me about my father. I fed the rest of the peanuts in the bag to the elephant and patted him on the trunk. His skin was tough and the little hairs sprouting from it were wiry. It felt exactly the way I expected it to feel, and that surprised me. It occurred to me then that I had stopped expecting things to be what they seemed – maybe that was why I was able to get on with Niven so easily.

Back at my apartment, I decided to call Carmen and see if she wanted to get some dinner. I was hungry and wanted company.

“I’ve been trying to reach you all afternoon,” is what she said when she picked up the phone. “You never seem to be home the days that you leave the office early.”

“I leave the office early because I have other things to do,” I said. “Do you want to get some dinner?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m having dinner at my hotel tonight. A little party.”

“Fine. What do you want me to bring?”

There was a static-filled pause. At the end of it, she said, “An engagement party.”
I sat on the floor before my knees gave way. It wasn’t that I was surprised by the news, but I was nonplussed by it. I opened my mouth to ask why, but realized that she wouldn’t have an adequate answer to that.

“Well, aren’t you supposed to squeal and congratulate me and ask about my ring or the wedding date or what kind of china I’m going to pick out?”

“I don’t squeal about anything,” I said. “Especially china. You said yes?”

“He really loves me.”

“Didn’t he leave you black and blue a short while ago?”

There was a sharp intake of breath on her end. I had gone too far, and I knew it.

“We’re going to work out all of our differences. You’ll see.”

We lapsed into silence again. I got up, carried the phone to the window, and moved the curtain aside to look out. The sky was bleak. It was gray, just gray, without a sign of rain or sun. I was crazy. I liked gray days. Leaning against the window frame, I noticed again the pain in my shoulder and pictured my father handing me my cigarettes. There were no patrol cars in the street below and there was no Daimler waiting underneath the streetlight.

“Are you coming or not?” Carmen asked. “I’d like it if you could at least pretend to be happy for me.”

“What time do you want me to be there?” My reflection in the window pane didn’t look like me. It was distant and pale.

“If you could come by now and help with the appetizers, that would be nice.”

Stan was on Carmen’s sofa swilling a cocktail. He was looking particularly expansive, with his hair lacquered and neatly waved, his tie loose and his collar unbuttoned,
and the cleft in his chin catching shadow. He looked like a Hollywood leading man, and really did seem pleasant. He had been exactly like this when I first met him, and it had taken a little while for his image to wear thin. He raised his nearly empty glass to me and smiled warmly. I saluted him with two fingers, dropped my coat on Carmen’s bed, and went into the kitchenette. She was spreading margarine on slices of white bread.

“I’m just having you and a couple of the girls from the Planet over. I don’t think you know them, they work over in switchboard. It was Stan’s idea.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t want to go out.”

“He said he spent enough on the ring. He can’t afford a party.” Carmen held her hand out for inspection. A reasonably large diamond sparkled there. I examined it dutifully.

“It’s pretty,” I said.

“So are your pearls.”

I touched them self-consciously. I shrugged. She had probably noticed them before—they were, after all, noticeable—and I wondered why she had waited until now to mention them.

“Anyway,” she said. “I thought it would be nice if we put slices of cucumber on the bread and cut the crusts off. I don’t have money for caviar or anything.”

“Most people don’t,” I said, opening her silverware drawer and digging out a knife to cut cucumbers with. I dug the knife into the waxy skin of the one nearest me and carved it off in long strips.

“I’m really very happy,” Carmen assured me as I sliced the cucumbers paper-thin.

I nodded. I hadn’t asked whether she was happy or not, but it didn’t matter. We weren’t fooling each other at all.
“Stan?” she called, and went into the other room. I heard the radio go on. I arranged translucent cucumber slices over margarine and stacked more white bread on top of that. With a solid whack of the knife, I cut the crusts off of the sandwiches and cut them into triangles, like mom had done for me when I had peanut butter and jam as a child. It would be a good idea to keep the sandwiches chilled, and I wanted to see if there was anything else for dinner, so I opened the refrigerator. It was filled with a roast chicken and a deli box that held potato salad.

“So when did Superman give you the pearls?” Carmen asked, bringing Stan’s glass back into the kitchenette. She dropped a few ice cubes into it and disappeared again. I heard her giggle sharply and she returned with smudged lipstick.

I ran my thumb along the edge of the knife blade, which desperately needed to be sharpened.

“I think it’s nice that we both have new jewelry,” she prodded. “I didn’t want to say anything about the pearls before, because I thought you’d tell me when you were good and ready, but I have to know. They look like the ones we saw in Tiffany’s.”

“They are,” I said curtly. I ran water in the sink to wash the few dishes that had accumulated.

“Are they – you know?”

“Are they what?”

“Do they mean anything?”

“Of course they mean something.” What they meant was the question. And I had to subdivide that into what they meant to me and what they meant to Niven.

“Are you getting engaged too?” she snapped, grabbing a dish towel off of the table.
We looked at each other. There were red spots in her cheeks and her eyes were damp. It was the look of defeat. I probably looked mildly surprised.

“It’s nothing like that,” I told her. “They were a thank-you gift, for my column. From a fan. I barely know him.”

“That’s some fan,” Carmen said, relaxing a little.

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Stan was wildly popular with the girls from the office. I didn’t know any of them, but they all knew who I was and treated me with deference. It made for an awkward social gathering, and I found myself retreating more and more into the position of observer. A cake was delivered shortly after we had finished eating, and nobody but me seemed to notice the knock at the door. I tipped the delivery boy with my own money and took the cake into the kitchenette. If I was any judge, Carmen’s guests would have another cocktail or two, make merry, and then, in about an hour, start to wonder about dessert. There was no reason to start coffee now.

Stan was holding an uncomfortable Carmen on his knee. She was holding his drink on her knee and trying to carry on a conversation with another one of the secretaries. Stan was flirting with a filing clerk named Rosemary, who was clearly feeling awkward about his attention but enjoying it just the same. She wasn’t the kind of girl to get a lot of male attention, positive male attention, anyway. One of Stan’s favorite games was to find girls like that and tease them. Most of the time, they didn’t catch the underlying cruelty in his attitude, which made it more amusing for him. Rosemary didn’t catch on, but Carmen, as always, did. She raised her eyebrows at me in a gesture of helplessness.

“Rosemary, come and help me with the dishes,” I said quietly.
Her bulgy eyes darted from Stan to me, and back again. Obviously, she was confused.

"Come on, Lois, don’t break up the fun," Stan demanded. "I was just telling Carmen what lovely friends she has. Look at the way Rosemary’s eyes catch the light."

He winked at me. He knew I was on to his game, and I was welcome to play. Rosemary lit up; if she had been a puppy, her tail would be wagging. Carmen covered her face with a hand and sighed a tiny, exhausted sigh. The other girls in the room listlessly swirled melting ice in their cocktails and there was a moment of awkward party silence.

"I’ll get more cocktails for everyone," Carmen announced, standing up.

Stan slapped her backside as she walked away. He slapped her too hard to be joking, which was a common gesture of his when she had done something to upset him. As far as I knew, she hadn’t done anything tonight. I saw her back stiffen, but that was the only response he got whatever he had been looking for. She collected empty glasses and the girls went back to their empty chatter and Stan went back to tormenting Rosemary. I made myself as unobtrusive as possible in my straight-backed chair.

It struck me again, how unbelievable it was that I was there, in Carmen’s hotel, surrounded by people who knew who I was and respected me. I wouldn’t have been there if mom hadn’t brought me back from Brooklyn. It wouldn’t have even occurred to me to leave the farm and become Lois Lane if it wasn’t for my father – and, of course, the press and their wonderful treatment of my situation. If I had never started dabbling in film, writing reviews for the paper now and then – if I hadn’t have been promoted to columnist – Niven may have had quite a different reaction to me when my father sent him my way. As it was, Niven was – he – I felt guilty thinking about Niven. I was staring at a print of flowers Carmen had on
the wall, trying to exorcise him, when I heard Carmen say, in a tone I had never heard her use before,

“That’s enough, Stan.”

I jerked myself back to reality and took in the scene. Rosemary was crying, the others were hushed and tense. Carmen stood between Rosemary and Stan, her mouth set, white lines around the corners of her lips. Stan had stopped mid-laugh – his face was red and shiny, his mouth hung open. He closed it slowly and stood up. Nobody said anything for a moment.

“Do you want some coffee, Rosemary?” Carmen asked, the strain evident in her voice.

Rosemary nodded. I went into the kitchenette to get the coffee ready. I put some water on, and heard one of the girls ask Carmen to see the ring again. I slipped back into the living room to keep an eye on things, because they were about to boil. Stan was still red. His face was still shiny. A vein twitched in his forehead.

“All right,” he snapped, standing and spilling his drink. “Party’s over.”

Everybody scurried into the bedroom, got their coats, hurriedly thanked Carmen, and scrambled out the door. Carmen followed me back into the kitchenette, her breathing shallow and rapid. The water was boiling up. Her coffeemaker was glass, with gold tone trim and a black handle. Carmen’s lips were bloodless.

“You.”

I looked up from the coffee to see Stan standing there, staring down at Carmen. He took one step forward.

“You don’t disagree with me. Not here, not out, not ever.”
“You were making her cry, Stan.” Carmen backed into the wall across from the stove and next to the table. She was cornered.

Before I could react to the look that Stan gave her, he belted her across the jaw. She fell against her dinette table, knocking over a vase of flowers. She stood up and smoothed her hair, but she was shaking.

“You’re not going to touch her again,” I told Stan. It was what I should have told my father as soon as I was old enough to understand these things.

“She’s mine,” Stan sneered at me, “and I don’t remember telling you that you could interfere. That’s all you’ve done since she’s met you. Interfere. I should have put a stop to it a long time ago.”

Carmen actually whimpered. My back was to the stove and my hand instinctively closed around the handle of the coffeepot. I could feel the heat from the burner on my wrist.

Stan took a menacing step towards me and stared into my eyes. He looked exactly like my father for a moment. I hoped Carmen would have the good sense to get out of the room, but she didn’t, and Stan whirled away from me and socked her in the mouth, flinging her into the table again. The vase rolled to the floor and broke.

“You see?” Stan shouted at me.

As he turned back to Carmen, my body reacted. My arm brought the coffeepot against the side of Stan’s head. It made a sound like a melon being thrown at a wall, and then there was the unmistakable shattering of glass and the slosh of hot coffee crashing onto the floor. Stan thumped down and didn’t move. Coffee soaked him and me, and was dissipating around my shoes. I still held onto the handle of the pot. Carmen looked up at me,
deathly pale except for the blood in the corners of her mouth and on her lips and the red lump rising on her jaw.

"Is he dead?" she whispered.

I kicked his body, but there was no response. I rolled him over, panic rising in my gut. What if he was dead? He still had a pulse; I found I was able to breathe, shrugged, and dropped the handle of the coffeepot. I was flooded with relief and had the urge to scream. I edged out of Carmen’s kitchen, leaving her staring at Stan, and left the hotel, barely aware of the dampness of my dress.

Chapter ten.

There was a familiar thump on my balcony and I got off the sofa to investigate. I opened the patio doors to see Superman. Seeing him again in his blue tights was disappointing; I had hoped to be dealing with Clark Kent from here on out.

"It’s been a while since I’ve seen you," I said. That wasn’t entirely true. I had seen him at the office, but he hadn’t spoken to me or acknowledged me since I had gone out with Niven. It must have been him at the bus stop, and I cursed myself for not stopping to say hello.

He came into the kitchen without saying anything and pulled his cape around his body before sitting in his usual chair. I started water for coffee.

"I heard about Stan," he said.

I sat down at the table with him. His body language was unfamiliar tonight. The closest I could figure was that he was somewhere between angry and sullen.

"Surely you didn’t come to offer condolences," I joked.
“I wanted to see you,” he said, looking away. It must have really hurt him to say that. I was beginning to think that his real weakness was the fact that he needed other people.

“I assume you want coffee.” Although it probably wasn’t truly safe to assume anything. He was so different. Tonight he wasn’t Clark Kent. He wasn’t Superman, either.

“As long as you don’t give it to me like you did Stan.” The edge in his voice took me completely off-guard. “Carmen said he’s in the hospital.”

Carmen hadn’t told me that. But she hadn’t spoken to me since the party, either. I lowered myself into a chair.

“I didn’t mean to really hurt him,” I said, not sure whether I was telling the truth.

“Why did you do it?”

“I had to.”

“You could have called the police. It’s their job to take care of that sort of thing.”

I couldn’t stifle a sharp, sarcastic laugh. The first thing the police had done when they arrived at my house was to cuff me and read me my rights, stepping over mom’s body to do so. Sure, they would help Carmen.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“Have you ever called the police for anything like that? You shouldn’t. They don’t care about us. They’re paid to act, not care.”

I got up to turn off the burner. I didn’t want coffee and I didn’t think it would matter to Clark one way or another. I opened the cupboard out of habit and there was mom’s teacup inside. I ran a finger over the cracked glaze.
“Not all policemen are like that,” Clark said. He was upset. Negative comments about the police force – or anyone else in a position of authority – bothered him to no end. “Most of them aren’t.”

“Between Carmen and I, we’ve had almost every reason you can think of to call the police. And how many times do you think that we saw justice?” I shut the cabinet. It was louder than I had expected.

Clark didn’t have a response for that. I sat back down at the table and hoped that he didn’t pry too much. I couldn’t stop thinking about mom in relation to Carmen and Stan, and it wouldn’t be any good for me to talk to Clark about her. He would probably tell me I was overreacting and then stop speaking to me because I hadn’t told him the truth about my childhood before.

“Maybe the people who devote their lives to these things are wiser about them than you are,” he said.

I was unable to react for several seconds. I think my jaw dropped as I stared at him. Then I had the overwhelming urge to scream.

“Clark,” I finally managed, “I don’t think you have any right to say something like that.”

“I don’t think it’s fair of you to assume that men in authority don’t know what they’re doing.”

We stared at each other in the pause that followed. I felt my face heat up.

“I didn’t say they didn’t know what they were doing. I said that they didn’t care.”
“I care. I’m helping to make things all right,” he said, as if it were something he had taught himself to say and then forced himself to repeat. “Carmen said that you hit Stan because he attacked her. If I had been there, I would have stopped him.”

That didn’t make any sense. I wondered if he was driving at something or if he was just talking.

“But you weren’t there,” I said. “I did what I had to do.” I remembered all of the times I had done nothing to help mom. “Carmen is all right. And if Stan is in the hospital, it’s his own fault. Consequences of his actions, you know?”

“The proper consequences of his action would be for him to end up in jail. When people like him see what happens when evil is punished and good triumphs – ” he stopped, possibly because of the incredulous look on my face.

“People like Stan don’t do things because they have to,” I said. It was a theory I had developed based on my father. “It’s not just ‘their way of doing things.’ It’s their way of interacting with the world around them. They’re cruel all the way through, and there’s nothing that psychiatry, jail, or the love of their fellow man can do for them.”

“They’re bad people,” Clark said. He really believed it, but knew that it didn’t make a whole lot of sense to say at the moment.

“Sure,” I said. I was tired. “And cruelty is the worst kind of badness. But can we do anything about it? Can we change the way someone is?”

“I don’t – know.” He glanced at me, at the window, and at his hands. “I don’t know. We have prisons.”

It was exactly the kind of thing Superman would say. Of course there were prisons and of course he locked people up in them. It was his solution for everything. but tonight he
had seemed to be thinking about it a bit more. That was something I had always wanted from him – to have him consider and understand what it was like to be human. Most of the time, it seemed that there was no point in even hoping for that.

“So you’re telling me that if evil is separated from good, and punished, it will cease to be evil? That it won’t exist? Come on, Clark. Think about this for a minute.”

“I’m not saying that evil will disappear, even if it’s dealt with properly. I only think that if it’s dealt with in the right way, we won’t have to worry about it interfering with our way of life.”

The passion with which he usually said that sort of thing was gone. He looked like he was as tired as me.

“So you’re saying that prisons are good and useful institutions?” I continued, just to be talking.

“Don’t you think evil should be punished?”

“I think that there are people who are like Stan who should be stopped, but no amount of punishment or help or whatever is going to make the situation any better. And I think that there are some people who do things that don’t follow the social norms, and they should be given an opportunity to reform.” I thought again of my father, and I realized I never wanted him to reform. I wanted to be able to go on hating him. I pictured the way he had looked at the zoo, and was gratified.

“Let me correct myself,” I said. “I think that people should pay the consequences of their actions. We all have a bad streak. Some of us can learn not to let it rule our lives. But I don’t think that anything that can be done is ever going to change human nature.”

“Why should we need to change human nature? Why not focus on training it right?”
I wondered if it was that Clark was willfully blind to the flaws in humanity, or if he was just naive. I also wondered why he was so listless tonight, seemingly completely empty of the drive and enthusiasm he normally brimmed with. He was probably just tired, too. I didn’t want to continue our conversation, but it would be better to continue this one than to risk letting Clark change the subject to something less tolerable. At least this was something that I had plenty to say about.

“I don’t know how many people you’ve associated with,” I said. I took a napkin out of the basket on the table and unfolded it. “I don’t know what kind of people your family were. Maybe they were exceptionally good people. But they still had the capacity for evil. I do. You do. Without it, we wouldn’t be complete.”

Superman narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t buying it. I hadn’t expected him to. I let it go, got up, and turned the water back on. I really did admire his firm convictions, but they drove me crazy. He was driving me crazy. I wanted him to be somebody I could talk to, and he wasn’t cooperating. Of course, I had to admit that he had become exponentially more frustrating since I had met Niven.

“I saw you leaving the theatre the other night,” Superman said to my back as I stood at the stove.

“I thought it was you at the bus stop, but you didn’t say hello to me,” I said carefully.

“I saw who you were with.”

So Niven was no longer a secret. It wasn’t much of one in the first place. By the end of the week, the tabloid rags would be talking about Lois Lane being seen in public with Niven Sterling. It would probably boost the Planet’s circulation – everyone would simply have to read my column to see what I had to say for myself. The boss would love it.
“So,” I said, stretching out the ‘o’, “you didn’t talk to me because of who I was with?” That was childish, even for him.

“I – ” He stopped and actually looked at me for a long time, very serious. “Put that man in prison for a good reason,” he finished, but we both knew that wasn’t what he had in mind to say.

“I’m sure you did, but he served his term and it out now.” I didn’t like where this was going. The kettle squeaked and I turned off the burner.

“He’s still a gangster. And you – you went to a movie with him. And you were smiling.”

“We went to see Double Indemnity. I had a nice time.”

Red spots appeared in his cheeks and started to grow. “I don’t like you associating with him,” he said.

I bit the inside of my lip. I wanted to lash out with the full power of my sarcasm, but it wouldn’t do any good. I should just ask him to leave and call it a day.

“I don’t think you have any say in the matter.” I shrugged. I left the water in the kettle on the stove. We wouldn’t be drinking any coffee.

“How can you like somebody like that?”

I was surprised that his tone wasn’t accusing. He sincerely wanted to know what made Niven attractive to me. If I had a week to explain, he wouldn’t be able to understand.

“Well,” I said. It would be rude of me to not at least try. “He’s interesting. Fascinating, actually, because he asks questions about things and is the kind of person to go out and find the answers. He’s interested in the things I’m interested in – how many times do you find someone who wants to spend their evenings talking about films? I’ve always
wanted to be with people like that. That was one of the main reasons I wanted to go to college.”

He frowned and pursed his lips. “But you did go to college. You went to Northwestern, didn’t you?”

Of course. Lois Lane had gone to Northwestern for two years. I had actually spent half a semester at the Metropolis College for women. I cringed inwardly, aware that he was watching me closely.

“I mean, that’s why I wanted to go. Some people go because their parents expected them to. Some go because they want to be a doctor. I just wanted to be around other people who thought like me.”

He was trying to decide whether or not he believed me. I had to change the subject before the kitchen got any more uncomfortable.

“So.” I grabbed the dishtowel that was sitting on the drainer. “Carmen told you about Stan?”

I wadded the towel up and then spread it out again.

“I met her coming into work and she looked worn. I asked her what was wrong and she told me that you had put Stan into the hospital and that she had been with him all night. She said he was unconscious and needed stitches.”

I dropped into a chair. I twisted the towel around my hand. I had meant to hurt him, sure. But I hadn’t wanted to permanently damage him.

“I had no idea,” I said.

“I think she knows that. She was upset, but I don’t think she was angry at you.”
“I wouldn’t blame her if she is. Mom would have been.” She would have been, but I realized before it was halfway out that it wasn’t something I needed to tell Clark.

“Your mom?”

“Never mind.” If I had broken a coffee pot on my father, she would have been angry — but she would have been sad and hurt as well. I could never handle hurting her. Maybe that was why I had put up with my father. Maybe if I had — but it didn’t do any good to replay the ‘what-ifs’. Dr. Van DerMeer told me that. What’s done is done and I have to learn how to live with it without letting it have control over me, is what he said.

“I should call Carmen,” I told Superman.

“You might want to wait for her to call you.”

“I should apologize. I would like her to know that I really thought I had just knocked him out for a few moments. And that I should never have left her alone with him.”

“It was an accident. You don’t have to blame yourself,” he said, suddenly gentle.

He was acting like Superman, in some ways, but there was something about him. he was different tonight. It made me nervous, but it also made me wonder if he was less secure hiding behind his blue tights and plan to save the world than he let on. If that was the case, then it was possible that he would be flexible enough to accept me — possible, but, I reminded myself, not probable. Of course, Irene Goldman might be just the thing to bring us together.

“You shouldn’t have to be afraid.” It was a sudden statement, and it startled me. He leaned across the table, his eyes focused on mine. “I don’t want you to be. I can take care of you.”

“I know you can,” I said. “But I’ve gotten into the habit of doing it myself.”
“Is this your handiwork?” Niven asked, handing me a folded copy of the *Metropolis Times*.

I fastened my seatbelt and took the paper. An article about an ex-GI being in the hospital because of an accident with a plate-glass window took up about two quarter-columns and had a small picture of Stan to go with it.

“What?” I laughed because I couldn’t think of anything else to do. A plate-glass window. I was relieved that Carmen was obviously not going to press charges against me, but she could have come up with a better story than that.

“What do you mean, ‘what’? Am I mistaken in my assumption?” He reached inside his tweed sport jacket and then handed me his cigarette case. Today he looked like an English country squire.

We glided to a stop behind a bus. I noticed again how dirty this part of Clark street was. A boy of about ten in a porkpie hat was hawking newspapers, the *Daily Planet*. *Extra*, extra.

“Why would you link this up with me?” I asked Niven. It didn’t really matter how he knew, though. The simple fact that he knew was unnerving, but it didn’t surprise me. If Niven told me that he was really a spaceman from the future, I would only be a little surprised.

We passed Lincoln Park and I could see the lake to my left. It was sitting there, relaxed, biding its time. It was green today, which they say is good if you want to go sailing. A gust of wind stirred the water. When the lake was green and rippled like that, it looked like old stained glass. The kind in the windows of First Presbyterian. The kind in the windows of the synagogue that mom and I went to in Brooklyn.
“Do you really want to know how I linked it up with you, or would you rather puzzle it out for yourself?”

“You’re teasing me.”

He gave me a slow smile and his dimple showed. “Can you light a cigarette for me?”

I pushed in the lighter button in the Daimler’s dash. It popped out again and I held it to the end of a long brown cigarette.

“For one,” he said, after taking a long drag, “it wasn’t an accident. That story his girlfriend told doesn’t fit at all. If it was an accident, she wouldn’t have had to make up a story like that. I’ve had enough practice with cover-ups to be able to recognize one. If it wasn’t an accident, it stands to reason that someone attacked him. I’m sure he’s the kind of person to have a lot of enemies here and there, good old boys who have had one too many and want to take it out on him, but his girlfriend wouldn’t be taking him into the hospital if this was the result of a brawl. Some cop would have found him somewhere or something like that. Ergo: she was with him when it happened. I’ve met her. And I know from that meeting that she’s not capable of anything like this. So somebody else was with her, someone who had a reason to incapacitate him. Who, other than you, could it be?”

I was finished with my cigarette, so I tossed it out the window. It bounced in the street, and drew a sharp look from one of the well-dressed locals. We were nearing the Gold Coast, and the apartments here were white like the Times building and broader and higher than the ones where I lived. Everything was new, or had been, a few years ago. A Pierce Arrow passed us.

“He was hurting her,” I said.
“I’m not suggesting that you put him in the hospital because you don’t like the way he wears his tie.”

“Incidentally, I don’t like the way he wears his tie. He looks like a slob most of the time. And it was a coffeepot, not a window, that I hit him with. But I didn’t think it would put him into a coma.”

“Of course not. But he’ll come out of it. It happens sometimes. Other times, you’ll hit a guy in the head and it won’t do anything. Or it kills him. It depends on where you hit him, mostly.”

I didn’t like the thought of Stan dying, but I wasn’t worried about it at the moment. There was a break in the apartment buildings and the lake sparkled, flat and empty as far as I could see. It was breathtaking, but entirely different than the ocean. When mom had taken me to the lakefront for the first time, as we were approaching it, I searched for the ocean smell and hoped, desperately, that I would look at Lake Michigan and see the waves of the Atlantic. Mom had told me that it would make me feel like home. It didn’t. It had frightened me then, and it still made me uneasy. I opened the glove box to get rid of the newspaper, and a stack of glossy eight-by-tons spilled out. I collected them and Niven glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

“What is all of this?” I asked, turning one of them over. It was another publicity still of Eddy Robinson with his signature across the bottom. I flipped through the rest of the pages. They were all the same thing.

“Those.” Niven looked at the papers in my lap, then back at the road. “Those are replies to letters.”
I put them back in the glove box along with the newspaper. I had been afraid to write to Eddy Robinson. I had been afraid of having nothing more than a drawer full of publicity stills to show for it. Dr. Van DerMeer said that I was afraid of being rejected by another father-figure. I thought it was psycho-babble, but there was probably some truth to it. We stopped at a stop sign by First Presbyterian with its beautiful windows.

"I live around here, you know," Niven said.

I pictured him in a penthouse in one of the gleaming buildings, where everything was fresh and hopeful. It fit, but I would have rather seen him in his brownstone with the peacock window.

I rolled down my window a little bit more and leaned back in the seat. I liked Clark street until we passed the church. Then it turned into just another downtown thoroughfare, not peppered with marquees like State or with the bridge and warring newspaper buildings like Michigan. Clark was strange like that. It went from being home to the overgrown and crumbling – pre-dating the fire, even – Jewish cemetery and Wrigley Field to home to the privileged to – to small offices and convenience stores. Nothing. It was the most schizophrenic street in Metropolis. It didn’t even follow the grid.

“How long did you say it’s been since you were at the museum?” Niven asked, breaking the comfortable silence.

“Ten years, maybe. Too long.”

“Someday I’ll take you to the British Museum. Everybody should see it. I’d like to go back as soon as the war is over.”

I tried to imagine what it would be like to go to England, with its smooth green lawns and rivers and pastures. I thought that London would be more like Metropolis than
Brooklyn, but beyond that, I didn’t have much of a conception of it. I would like to see it. Someday.

Niven eventually maneuvered the Daimler into the museum parking area. The museum was imposing; it had a lake view and white sails dotted the lake. Of course they did. We were within walking distance of the yacht club, of which Niven was probably a member. We got out of the Daimler and walked inside.

“It’s nice that you could get the day off,” Niven said, handing me the museum map that the guard had handed him. “Most people are such slaves to their jobs.”

“What about you? Your job got you thrown into prison for some time.”

I crossed the marble tiles floor to the mastodon skeleton that stood near the back of the Great Hall. Niven followed me. Our footsteps echoed, but were drowned out by the chattering of a school group taking a field trip. They must have been in third or fourth grade. I had been in my first year of high school the last time I was here, on a field trip for my biology class. A boy I knew slightly had tried to kiss me in the stairwell and I had felt out of place among all of the beautiful things in glass cases. I didn’t feel out of place now. I felt good.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” I said to Niven.

He smiled, warmly. Hollywood had mislead the entire population about the appearance of gangsters. Niven was neither sinister nor smarmy. He had a good dentist, a better tailor, and didn’t sound like he had been educated in an alley in Brooklyn.

“Sometimes, just for a kick, some of us would take a bus into Manhattan and sneak into the museum. It was a rich boy’s thrill, you know? There was a painting in the Met that I especially liked. A Bosch. Twelve years old, and I would just stand and look at it while the
others caused a row. I was the only one who didn’t get thrown out at one time or another. They’re all lawyers and businessmen now. And look at me.”

It wasn’t a difficult task, looking at him. But I looked at the schoolchildren around the mastodon instead. Little girls with braids and little boys wearing too much Bryll Cream. It was easy to tell which ones came from the city and which ones came from further out. I imagined how I must have looked the last time I was here.

“Would you like to see the Egypt display?” Niven asked.

We crossed to the other side of the Great Hall, left behind the kids from in town and out, and headed up a narrow spiral staircase.

“I love the smell of museums,” Niven said from behind me. “It’s a little bit like the smell of a library.”

“Musty and close,” I said. The railing was made out of brass. It was cold and slippery with fingerprints. I slid my hand along it, even though I didn’t like touching other people’s sweat.

The top floor of the Museum of Natural History was held up with iconic columns and lit by enormous skylights made out of green glass. If the sun had been shining, it would have felt like being underwater. It was eerily silent up there after the clamor of the Great Hall. Potted palms and other vaguely tropical plants marched neatly down the middle of the open space. The lake had been green today, and this must be what it would be like to drown in it.

“I feel like a fish,” I said, and immediately realized how stupid that sounded. It made me laugh, a little, self-conscious giggle.

“A fish?” Niven asked, arching an eyebrow. “Would you mind explaining that?”
I went to one of the pillars and ran my hand between the grooves in it. Then I leaned against it so that I was facing Niven. The cold marble chilled me through my dress.

"I was thinking about what it must look like up here with the sun shining through the glass. With the plants – and the green lake – it made me think of being underwater."

I was relieved to see that he understood. He came to stand in front of me, tilted my chin up a bit, then took a half step back and examined the effect.

"I wish I had a camera," he said. "I’d like to have a picture of you standing there, just like that."

For the time being, at least, everything was perfect and I didn’t have to go anywhere. I could stand on the upper floor of the Field Museum with Niven smiling at me all day long if I felt like it. I could watch the clouds come and go through the skylight. I could forget all about Superman and my farm in Smallville and my job at the Planet. I smiled.

"It’s better when you smile," Niven said. "But you don’t do it often enough."

"Come on." I pulled away from the column and he followed me. "Let’s go find the Egypt exhibit."

Niven caught my hand as we walked between the plants. I was startled at how cold my fingers were compared to his.

I stared at the phone. It was black and shiny and seemed to grow with each passing second. It was taking on the mythic proportions of childhood fear. Like the well at night or the things that lived under the bed. I gave the phone the evil eye. That didn’t do anything except make it blurry. When I picked up the receiver, it was slippery enough to let me know that my hands were sweating. I placed it back on the cradle and wiped my palms on my
skirt. Niven had told me I could call him anytime at Delaware 1701. I would rather be
contemplating calling him. But I would also rather light my dress on fire.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, hoped I was dialing the operator, and when she
came through, asked her to connect me with Carmen. I heard Carmen’s phone ring. It rant
sixteen times and then I hung up. She might be at Gilly’s. She was probably at Mercy
Hospital. It wouldn’t be a good idea to ask Niven to come with me. I had just said good-bye
to him, and suspicious-type orderlies might get suspicious seeing him so close to Stan with
his questionable injuries. I drummed my fingers on the table that held the phone. I read the
inscription on my picture of Eddy Robinson and hoped that he was as nice in person as he
was on the phone. I couldn’t think of anything else that I could reasonably do to stall, so I
picked up the phone and dialed Clark’s number. He wasn’t Niven, but he would do, I
thought, and then hated myself for thinking that.

Unbelievably, he agreed to meet me at my apartment and showed up outside my door
much faster than he would have if he had taken normal forms of transit. We walked together
to the El station on Belmont, stopping along Halstead at a florist for a bouquet for Carmen.
Clark and I didn’t say much to each other, and I could tell he didn’t really want to be going
on my errand with me, but that made it mean more that he came. We could be friends.
Things hasn’t changed that much, and if they had, it was surely for the better. I was starting
to lose the twinges of unease that gnawed me when I imagined the future, a future that he
was always, for some reason, dominating. I was starting to be really glad that I had brought
him instead of Niven. Clark was a good man. Once he had Superman figured out,
everything would be fine. Maybe I could even tell him about Irene. Maybe he would leave
me alone about Niven.
We hadn’t said more than four words to each other by the time we got to the hospital; we were both too wrapped up in our own thoughts. But Clark offered me his arm when we walked into the reception area, and he asked the woman at the desk for Stanley Andersen’s room. I hid behind the flowers I had brought for Carmen and they made me sneeze. Clark and I followed the receptionist’s directions down a hall tiled with antiseptic white tile that was made yellow by the overhead light. It was as close to the light in the lobby of a theatre as I had seen anywhere. Our footsteps echoed the way Niven’s and mine had in the museum, and behind some of the doors we passed were the muted sounds of suffering. I flinched and walked closer to Clark, careful not to bump into him.

“Thank you for coming with me,” I finally said. “It makes me a lot less nervous.”

“You’re nervous?”

“Imagine that, right?” The laugh I forced sounded forced in the corridor. I shut my mouth quickly.

We reached the door of number eight. It was open slightly and no sounds came from inside. I pushed the door open another inch or so and saw Carmen sitting in a stiff metal chair by Stan’s bed. His eyes were closed and his chest rose and fell regularly. I cleared my throat conspicuously and entered the room.

“He’s not awake,” Carmen said, without looking up.

“Has he woken up at all?”

“Not yet. The doctors aren’t worried. They said that he’s not really in a coma – that his body is just resting and he’ll be all right.”

“I know. He’ll be fine.”
She shook her head, still not looking away from Stan. Her shoulders trembled and she pulled a wadded handkerchief out of a pocket in her jacket.

“I’m so sorry, Carmen,” I said and sat on the edge of the bed, avoiding seeing Stan. “I’m sorry about what happened, and I’m sorry I left you alone there.”

“Oh, I know you’re sorry. You didn’t mean to send him here. You were just trying to help.” Her face was blotchy and drawn.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said. “I didn’t want to see him hurt you. My mom —” I shouldn’t say anything about mom. But I had already started to. “My mom was in a similar situation,” I said. But it didn’t matter. Carmen didn’t hear me.

“We love each other, but I’m afraid of him. And afraid for him.” She wiped her handkerchief, which was already wet, across her nose.

I glanced up at Clark, who was standing just outside the doorway. He could put out raging fires and hold up collapsing buildings until everyone had gotten to safety. He could cross the city in seconds. Nobody knew where he came from or who he really was — he was the closest thing to a messiah this city would ever see — and yet he was absolutely powerless to fix the tragedy in room eight of Mercy Hospital.

“I thought he was going to kill me,” Carmen mumbled. “Everything was black while we were in the kitchen. All I knew was that I tasted blood in my mouth.”

“I was scared, too.” I had been there. I knew exactly how she felt.

“When he comes out of this, he’ll probably want to find you, you know.”

“I’m not worried about that now. I have protection. What worries me is that he could hurt you again.”
Carmen’s face was battered. She didn’t look like Betty Grable now. She wasn’t even pretty.

“I have to marry him, you realize,” she whispered.

“Why?”

“I can’t break the engagement. Not after this.”

“Were you going to before this happened?”

“I was going to prolong it. I want to get married, and I want to do it now, but – ”

“If you feel like that, maybe you shouldn’t marry Stan at all.”

“Who else is there, though?”

We sat in silence for a long time. I took stock of the machines hooked up to Stan that buzzed in various corners of the room. It resembled the room I had stayed in while at the sanitarium. It even smelled the same, stale and sterile. But I didn’t have buzzing machines, only bars on the windows and tranquilizer shots and Dr. Van DerMeer to talk to me about my family and my violent tendencies and how I was going to cope with the real world. I had been glad to leave. But I had been glad to be there instead of in prison, and I had been grateful that the judge made it a private ruling. He had said that the press had had enough fun with me during the trial for him to give them anymore. I imagined that the papers would still be commenting on it if they knew I had been send to Elgin.

“You must be tired,” Carmen said.

“I was just thinking.”

“You can go if you want to.”

“I don’t have anywhere to go.”

She yawned.
“Do you want me to go?”

She shrugged.

“I should anyway. I don’t want to be here when he wakes up.”

She waked me to the door. Clark had disappeared somewhere, back to the reception area, I assumed. I handed Carmen the flowers.

“Thank you for not telling the papers about me,” I said.

“I couldn’t. You might have saved my life.”

“Nothing is easy, is it?”

She took the flowers and went back to her spot by Stan’s bed.

I met Clark down the hall, leaning against the wall between two doors. His hat was in his hand and his forehead was creased.

“I find myself wondering how many of these people I could have saved,” he said quietly, falling into step beside me. “This place is filled with needless suffering.”

I wanted to ask him if the ‘place’ he was referring to was the city or the hospital, and what made one kind of suffering needless but, apparently, another kind all right. But those weren’t the kinds of things we could talk about.

“If you live in this world, you have to suffer in it,” I said.

He put his hat back on and didn’t respond. He wouldn’t have agreed with me, anyway. I followed him out of the hospital, trying to ignore the feeling that Dr. Van DerMeer called blackout fear. It was the feeling I got when I thought I was about to lose everything, when the stress of keeping up Lois Lane was starting to get to me.

The bright lights of the twenty-four hour coffee shop next to the hospital leapt out at me. I had passed it – and the hospital – every time I went shopping on State, but I had never
ventured inside. Now its tacky color scheme and abandoned counter was exactly what I needed.

“Clark, let’s stop,” I said, grabbing his arm.

He stopped and looked down at me. The top half of his face was shadowed by his hat, but his mouth was thin and tight, drawn down at the corners. On someone else, I would have interpreted it as displeasure. But he seemed to be more in pain than upset.

“I have things I need to do,” he said.

He had people to save. He had to get back up on his white horse and eliminate heartache from the vocabulary of Metropolis. He would do that by stopping car wrecks and diving into the lake to bring back its dead. He would spend the night putting out fires, but nobody – especially him – would be any happier for it.

“I would really like you to have coffee with me,” I said. “I don’t want to be alone right now.”

I didn’t add that I was feeling vulnerable. That piece of intelligence wouldn’t have affected him, anyway. Clark tipped back his hat and I could see his eyes, but they wouldn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know.

“I can’t,” he said. “I would like to – I would really like to.” He tilted his hat forward again. “But I can’t. You should understand why.”

His tone was mildly accusing. It was because of things like this that I could never be Superman’s girlfriend. Or Clark Kent’s. I could really dislike him at the slightest provocation, but even so, he was the best friend I had ever had. Maybe that was why I had the urge to punch him in the eye and run home.
“All right,” I said. “I’m getting coffee alone, then. I hope you have a good evening.”

I pushed open the door of the coffee shop and went inside. When I looked back out the window for Clark, he was gone.

I got a table instead of sitting at the counter, and shuddered at how I was feeling. I needed someone to talk to. Badly. I got out a match and lit it, then realized that I didn’t have a cigarette to use it on. I watched it burn until it was too close to my fingers and dropped it into the ashtray on the table. A waitress with dark circles under her eyes came over with a pot of coffee and I ordered eggs and toast as well.

I knew I had fifteen cents in my purse and I knew Niven’s phone number. I had a good idea that he wouldn’t fail me, and I weighed that against my other good idea that he was a stick of dynamite. That didn’t seem to matter so much. So Niven was a little to the left of the law, but as far as I knew, he hadn’t killed anyone and he didn’t have the cruel streak that I had seen in many of the city’s more upright citizens. I tried, for a second, to dislike him, but it didn’t work. So, while waiting for my coffee to cool, I deposited a nickel in the payphone by the kitchen entrance and called him.

I was feeling disconnected and stabbing at the cold yolk of one of the eggs on my plate when Niven came into the coffee shop. He didn’t just come in. He made an entrance. The waitress with tired eyes even looked up from her newspaper.

“Eating alone?” he asked, pulling out one of the chairs opposite me.

“If I were actually eating, I would be. But after I ordered, I didn’t feel hungry, and then my eggs got cold. I don’t like cold eggs.”

“Nobody likes cold eggs. What brings you out here? There’s an excellent place over on Sheffield that you could walk to.” He unbuttoned his tan raincoat and took off his scarf.
"I went to the hospital to see Carmen."

His face froze. "And what is Carmen doing in the hospital?"

"She’s all right. She was there with Stan. He still hasn’t woken up."

The waitress came by to pour some coffee for the handsome stranger. She poured it out of a glass pot with a gold-tone handle. I stared out the window while she tried to flirt with Niven, and half expected to see Clark watching me disapprovingly from the bus stop across the street.

"How did that go?" I heard Niven ask me. I turned my attention back to him.

"She didn’t want me there. She’s glad she’s not in his position, but she doesn’t understand why I did it. But I couldn’t explain it to her without telling her how I let mom die."

I realized at that moment that Niven was a better person to have sitting across from me than Clark ever could have been. I swallowed some coffee.

"I think that I would have killed him if I had to," I said.

"If it was what you had to do, it would seem to be the right course of action. I don’t know if Carmen would see it the same way, but you wouldn’t have much of a choice."

"And then I would be a killer."

"We all have the potential to kill."

Niven sipped his coffee, winced, and put the cup down.

"Would you please pass the sugar?" he asked.

"Anyway, she thinks she has to marry him now," I said, handing over the sugar bowl.

Niven took the lid off, inspected the granules inside, didn’t quite make a disgusted face, and pushed the sugar away.
“Does she think she has to marry him because he’s injured?”

“Maybe. I think it’s similar to the way —” out of habit, I stopped, racing to think of something to insert there that wouldn’t sound contrived. But Niven nodded, waiting for me to continue, and I remembered that it was safe to talk freely with him. “Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I think she feels the way mom did. It was like she was obliged to stay with my father because there was something wrong with him. She kept telling me that he wasn’t a bad person, that he was just sick and needed our patience and love. She was especially insistent on that point after he had been — violent with one of us. The only time she doubted his innate goodness was when he —” I took a sip of coffee. Drinking it slowly, I could tell it was burnt. I didn’t want to go on talking about my father. I wouldn’t go on. Nobody needed to hear all the reasons I had to hate him. I recalled the way he had looked in the zoo and didn’t feel a shred of pity for him.

“If Carmen feels the same way about Stan as your mom felt about your father, it wouldn’t matter that he’s in the hospital. I’m sure she’s sensed before that there’s something not quite right about him.”

“Where did you go to school?” I asked. It was a strange time for that question to pop into my head.

“Harvard. Where else would my mother let me go? I ended up majoring in philosophy because it was the major that best fit my credits. When I have time, I’d like to do some graduate work around here.”

I nodded, suitably impressed and realizing that it was becoming more and more impossible to even want to sever my ties with Metropolis’ underworld. It didn’t matter very much at the moment as I had other people’s problems on my mind.
“She would have married him no matter what,” I said. I pushed my plate of cold eggs aside and leaned my elbows on the table. “I don’t think she really wanted to. She liked him well enough and was scared enough of being an old maid that just liking someone and having them propose was enough of a reason to get married. But she’s the kind of person – like mom was – who believes that once you give your word for something, you do it. Even marrying someone. Even going back to them when you know it’s dangerous.” One of the things I never admitted to myself was that I was angry with mom for leaving Brooklyn. As the time passed, I could better and better understand the weight of my grandmother’s grief as she said good-bye at the train station. If it wasn’t for her stupid sense of honor, mom would still be alive.

“Then the good news is that putting Stan in the hospital doesn’t affect the outcome of Carmen’s situation,” Niven reassured me.

“I don’t know.” I dropped my chin into my hands. I wanted to cry and I had a headache building behind my eyes. “She seems really shaken up about all of this, and I can’t help but to wonder if – maybe – she’ll come to her senses and realize that she needs to get as far away from Stan as possible. Leave the ring and a nice note of apology. Did I tell you that mom took me to Brooklyn when I was a baby?”

“To visit family?”

“To get away from my father. We came back here when I was six. But I would tell Carmen not to come back.”

My headache was starting to make my ears buzz. I closed my eyes and rubbed them, feeling light-headed and a little bit sick to my stomach. I needed to go home.
“Are you all right?” Niven asked. I felt his hand on my upper arm. “Would you like to go home?”

“You’re very perceptive,” I mumbled.

Niven pushed his chair back across the linoleum floor. He pulled some bills out of his wallet and dropped them on the table without counting.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he said, doing a very good impression of Bogart.

The Daimler felt like the safest place in the world. In a daze, I watched State Street go by, Marshall Field’s with its big green clocks, the theatres, the few people in evening wear standing in tight groups, laughing and smoking together. Everything was deserted and hushed. And with night falling earlier and earlier, it wouldn’t be long before I would feel like I was violating the city’s privacy just returning home from work. I already felt like we were intruding, even though we were separated from everything by steel and glass.

My eyes were burning well before we turned onto Clark Street. I couldn’t ignore the fact that I was exhausted and helpless. It wasn’t just Carmen. Niven was an issue. So was Clark. And being able to talk about mom was having some kind of effect on me that I couldn’t describe. Besides that, my father was out of prison and I would have to deal with the possibility of him continually showing up. He might shoot me. He might blackmail me. He might just make my life a living hell. By the time Niven pulled up in front of my apartment, I was in tears. Niven turned the engine off and I started to sob. He didn’t say anything. I felt, more than saw, him hand me a handkerchief. I cried, amazed that I was capable of so much emotion. Finally, I lost my breath and collapsed with my head against the window. I hiccupped.

“Tired?” Niven asked.
“That took a lot of energy.” I blew my nose on the already soaked handkerchief. It made even more of a mess. “I must look terrible,” I said, beginning to be embarrassed for crying like that in front of someone.

“Let me see.” Niven raised my chin. “Your eyes and nose are swollen and your cheeks are wet.” Another tear rolled down my face and he caught it. “But you still look beautiful.”

“That’s nice of you.”

“Do you feel any better?”

I considered. “Not really. A little bit less tense, maybe. But not enough to make it worth mentioning. I’m supposed to feel fine now, aren’t I?”

“Most people claim to.”

I started to hand back the handkerchief, but thought better of it. It was too wet to put in my purse, and I didn’t think it would be proper to throw it into the street, so I sat and held it. Niven took it from me, rolled down his window, and pitched it out.

“Normally I wouldn’t do that,” he said. “But at this point, it’s the only solution.”

“I suppose,” I said, wiping another tear off my face. They kept coming, even though I was relatively calm.

“Would you like something to eat now?” Niven offered.

“I’m not hungry.”


“A raincoat?” I asked.
“A raincoat it is. If you can spare a couple hours in the morning, I’ll take you to my tailor and see what he can do for you.”

“I already have a raincoat,” I said, rather touched by Niven’s desire to cheer me up. But still, I didn’t need another raincoat. Even though mine was coming loose in some of the seams and has a small hole under one of the arms.

“So my tailor will make you a new raincoat.”

“All right,” I said. “If it makes you happy, I’ll let your tailor make me a raincoat.”

“If it makes me happy? You’re the one that needs cheering up.” He smiled at me, but grew serious almost immediately. “I know that I might be pushing you, and I’m sorry. I keep telling myself to give you plenty of space – I’m connected with your father, who you have good reason to hate; I’m connected with the mob, which isn’t exactly a white mark on my record. I don’t even know if you like me or not. I have a pretty good idea that you do, but I could be misreading you. I know I like you. You’re strong and brave and know enough to ask questions and seek out the answers. I hate seeing you suffer. And I think I’m getting a little carried away. I’m sorry.”

“Buying me a raincoat is getting carried away?” I asked, keeping my tone light. “Remember these?” I pointed to the pearls.

“It’s not that. I don’t consider giving gifts to people getting carried away. Part of it is, I don’t want to impose myself on you and it’s very difficult not to. I——” he wiped another stray tear off my chin. “Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?”

“I think I’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep.”

“Good. If you call me when you wake up, I’ll take you to the Drake for breakfast and then to my tailor. He’s right down the block from the hotel.”
“I’ll leave a message with the boss’ answering service that I’ll be late tomorrow.”

“Would you like me to walk you upstairs?”

“I think I can manage.”

“I know you can. You can manage anything. But I’m very glad you called me tonight.”

I got out of the Daimler, thinking that Clark would never be glad about me calling him. Then I dismissed thoughts of Clark altogether.

Chapter eleven.

Niven dropped me off at the office after I had visited his tailor, and I walked in feeling like a million dollars. Clark actually looked up from what he was doing and watched me settle in at my desk.

“Did you have a rewarding evening last night?” I asked. “Rescue any pets out of burning buildings?”

“Are you feeling all right?” he asked.

My head still hurt and my eyes were still visibly swollen, but I nodded. I didn’t especially not feel all right.

“You’re late today.”

“I don’t even have to be here. As long as my column is turned in on time.”

“You’re usually here.”

“I had some errands this morning.”
I realized I was irritated with Clark, and had no desire to continue our conversation. I started flipping through the stack of mail on my desk. I was always surprised at how much mail I got. It seemed like too much for just a columnist.

"I'm going on assignment this afternoon," Clark said. "I'm going to interview Sterling. Mr. White wants to follow up on those stories he ran a few weeks ago."

A warning bell went off in my head. "You mean see what he's doing and ask him if he's gone straight and whether or not he was involved with that bank job last week," I said.

Clark nodded. "He wanted me to tell you to come along because this seems like the sort of thing Superman might show up at."

"You think Superman would show up at an interview?" I said, wishing I could enjoy the irony of this conversation.

"Superman did put him in prison in the first place."

"I thought Superman only showed up when there were people in peril."

"There will be, if Sterling is left loose."

I went back to my mail, but not before I noticed that Clark had his hair slicked back and was wearing a red paisley tie like the one Niven had worn when we went to see Double Indemnity. I started to say something to him about it, and then I realized that whatever his reason for aping Niven, it wasn’t something he would want to talk about in the office. I ripped open and envelope with a Los Angeles postmark. It was a letter from a PhD at UCLA that I had been corresponding with. He was interested in film theory and had given me some insights that I had incorporated into my columns. This letter looked like it was going to respond to my last column about Citizen Kane (that was a film I couldn’t leave alone) and
discuss the influence of Jung on Welles’ work. I would have to give it some attention and thought, so I put it aside to read later.

“So, Clark,” I said, after sifting through four letters that were taking me to task for using big words and writing about smut, “did the boss really tell you to take me along, or was that your idea?”

“He told me to take someone and I suggested you. He said that it was perfect because this story would be a good tie-in to the Superman features. And he did say that Superman might even show up, so it would be good to have you there just in case.”

“Brilliant.” My tone got a raised eyebrow from Clark.

“We could get some lunch before we go,” he said.

“Sure.” I was still full from breakfast, but I was feeling too antsy to be in the office, let alone to get any work done there. I tossed the letter from dr. Roberts and the ones I hadn’t looked at yet into my purse. I hit a few keys on the typewriter just to look busy. I sat back in my chair, crossed my legs, and watched Clark, hard at work as usual.

“What are you doing, Mr. Kent?” I asked him. His industriousness — among other things — was irritating me. “You’re always doing something. What is it?”

“I’m correcting this article.”

“That’s what copy-editors do. I should know. I was down there long before you started working here.” I really disliked Clark at the moment, and I knew I had to shut my mouth or I would say something regrettable.

“I know it’s their job. But I like to save them as much work as possible.”

“I bet you have perfect spelling, Mr. Kent.”

His face grew thoughtful. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever found a spelling error.”
“And how are you with historical data?”

“I can tell you over lunch. I’d really like to finish up here.”

“And when are we going to lunch?”

“When I’m finished here.”

I didn’t have anything else to say. I felt giddy, but not the excited giddy I felt sometimes when I was around Niven. I was nervous. I could tell by the way the blood pounded in my head. I didn’t know what was going on with Clark and what he was up to with this interview. I didn’t want him to talk to Niven, and I certainly didn’t want to be there when he did. But I was afraid to leave them alone together – I got the feeling that Clark was just waiting for Niven to do something that would land him back in jail. Clark looked strange with his hair slicked down. I missed the spit curl. It was funny and wholesome and fit his personality. I hoped he changed his tie before we went to Niven’s. I turned back to my typewriter. I didn’t know what to think about Clark right now at all.

We took jimmy and the blue company Plymouth to Niven’s penthouse on Delaware and Clark. I was trying to find it amusing that my first visit to his home was under these circumstances, but it wasn’t working out. Maybe if I knew for sure that Clark wasn’t going to rip open his suit, reveal blue tights and a bright red “S”, and pounce on Niven, I would be able to take it in stride. Jimmy dropped Clark and I off at the entrance of Niven’s building and I saw him park the car in the church’s parking lot. It was the only car there.

Jimmy had brought four cameras. Clark had brought a notebook and his press card and hadn’t changed his tie. I had brought a sweater. Niven’s doorman called up to the penthouse to tell Mr. Sterling that he had guests. Then we were ushered into a mahogany
paneled elevator and sent up to level “P”. There was a tiny hallway and a door waiting for us when the elevator ride was over.

Niven opened that door and stood in the doorway in his shirt sleeves, wearing a tie at half-mast. I was relieved that the tie was neither red nor paisley. His cool eyes swept over us coolly, taking in Jimmy’s cameras and Clark’s tie. When Niven looked at me, he grinned and opened the door wide.

“Nobody told me you were coming,” he said. “Shouldn’t you be working on your column?”

“Ahh, but you see, Superman might show up here so I need to be around to get the story. If there is one.” I glared at Clark and walked through the door in front of him. “I never understood why the boss wanted me to cover these things,” I said.

“Because it’s cute to have Superman features written by his girlfriend,” Niven said, closing the door behind us, “and no other paper can make that claim.”

The living room had a wall of windows, through which I could see the lake – choppy and dull brown. A single yellow sail bobbed on it, almost out of control. I was afraid it would tip over, so I looked away. The rest of the living room was all sleek and urbane, something like a Hollywood mansion of the 1920s. Niven led us to a green leather couch and we all sat down in a row, like ducklings. He took a black armchair for a moment, then stood up again.


“Irene?” Jimmy asked.
“That’s my – middle name,” I lied, glaring at Niven. “He seems to prefer it to my real name.”

Clark flicked his eyes in my direction, and I wasn’t sure what the look was supposed to mean. If anything. He may have been trying to determine whether there was any significance to be attached to Niven’s pet names for me.

“I would like some coffee, please,” Clark said, straightening his tie.

“I’ll put some on, then,” Niven said. “You’ll have to excuse me. It’s my valet’s day off.”

“I can make coffee,” I said, standing. I was starting to sweat. “I don’t need to be here anyway.”

“Fine. You make excellent coffee.”

“I’ve never made coffee for you.”

“Haven’t you?”

“Never.”

Clark was bursting to say something, but wisely restrained himself.

“So you two know each other?” Jimmy cut in. A grin stretched his face tight. He didn’t want to be there anymore than I did.

“Apparently they’re great friends,” Clark said with asperity.

I followed Niven into the kitchen, and found the air was easier to breathe in there. He let out a sigh and leaned against one of the green marble countertops. I let out a matching sigh and leaned against a matching countertop facing him.

“Do you know what this is all about?” he asked. There were lines in his forehead.
“No. I got into the office and was going through my mail when Clark told me I was coming along. This was all his idea. Clark’s. I don’t know what he wants or what his intentions are. But I’m not very comfortable with the situation.”

“I like his tie.”

I laughed, to ease the tension. “I think he got tired of looking like the soul of American wholesomeness and wanted something a bit more – elite. He ditched his usual hairstyle, too.”

“He may be bored with the way he looks. It happens all the time. But if I were to hazard a guess, I would say it has more to do with insecurity. He’s carrying a torch for you.”

“You have to be kidding.” I felt the blood rush into my face and pressed my hands to my cheeks.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed the way he looks at you. And he’s here, and his attitude towards me isn’t that of an unbiased journalist seeking the truth. You’re more than just a pretty colleague to him.”

“You wouldn’t guess that if you saw us interact. Stop by the office sometime and you’ll see what I mean.” Clark didn’t even treat me like I was a pretty colleague. “Where’s the coffee?”

“In the cupboard, over your head.”

“I’ll get it made and bring it right out.”

“Don’t be long,” he said, and turned to leave, but came back to me. He absently pushed a loose lock of hair off my forehead.

“Niven?” I said. Having him that close to me made me nervous.

“Irene?” Niven replied.
I couldn’t think of anything to say for a moment. I tried to take a step back, but the counter was blocking me.

“Be nice to Clark,” I said. “I think he’ll want to needle you a bit. He’s never like this. I mean, I’ve never seen him like this. But I don’t see a lot of him.”

There was one of those seemingly very long, awkward pauses.

“I should start on the coffee,” I said, turning away from Niven and reaching to open the cabinet.

“You’re in luck,” he said. “You picked the right one.”

The coffee was in a tin on the lowest shelf, right in front of me. Niven slipped out of the kitchen, and left me alone to find my way around.

Nobody had moved when I returned to the living room. It had taken me longer than it should to make the coffee, as I couldn’t find cups and a tray right away, and the more time I spent in the kitchen, the more flustered I got. I was positively flushed when I put the tray on the coffee table. But everyone was deathly silent. They probably hadn’t said anything the whole time I had been gone.

“We’ve been having a raucous time,” Niven said. “Wish you had been here.”

“You didn’t start the interview?” I directed this at Jimmy. He was the only one in the room without something at stake, and might actually be sensible about the whole thing.

I tried to observe Clark without him noticing, but it was hard to do. He was looking right at me and through me at the same time. He wasn’t happy. None of us were.

“Well,” Jimmy said, “we didn’t want to start without you.” His eyes darted uneasily.
“It’s all right,” Niven said. “But I would appreciate, now that we have refreshments, getting this underway. I have some important engagements later this afternoon.”

Without taking his eyes off of me, Clark opened his notebook and produced a pen from somewhere.

“All right, Mr. Sterling,” he said. “To start with, how did it feel to get out of prison?”

I noticed that Slim was sleeping at the base of the window wall. I went and joined her, pulling the sheer curtain aside so that I could see the city. We were higher up than most of the buildings, and the dull sunlight managed to reflect sharply off the lake. Some waves were kicking up on the part of it I could see, and I imagined how cold it must be under that uneasy surface. I leaned against the window, hearing, but not listening to, the pleasant cadence of Niven’s voice. It rolled, like the ocean. I remembered myself as a child, standing on a beach on Long Island looking out and being amazed that all I could see was water.

_Imagine what the world looked like to Noah_, mom had said, holding onto my hand. Her fingers were soft and the sand under my feet was warm. The sand on the lakeshore was always cold, damp, and rough.

“Lois?” Niven’s voice cut through my hazy thoughts. “Did you want some coffee?”

I turned back, and he was holding a cup out to me. I joined my colleagues on the couch. It was considerate of Niven to drop ‘Irene’ for the moment.

“And your lack of family?” Clark persisted. His voice was tight and I wondered about his own lack of family.

“We’re talking about Niven’s family?” I asked.

“His lack of family,” Clark said.
"I never said I lacked family," Niven chided. "I said I had a cell mate who did. I wasn’t using him as a surrogate for myself. I have plenty of family – those I have chosen, most importantly. I have a brother in Boston who is said to be a great doctor. Supposedly, I have a father in Vancouver. And I have a lovely mother who lives in nearby Lake Forest. I even sent her flowers on her birthday. Don’t tell me that that’s not as much family as you yourself have."

Clark ground his teeth. "Plus," he snarled, "I’m sure you have plenty of lady friends."

“What you’re implying with that remark is in very bad taste," Niven said simply, sipping his coffee.

“All I asked was if you had lady friends.”

“That’s what you said. But behind it you were asking if I run around with scores of flashy women and then treat them shabbily the way men do in gangster movies.”

They held eye contact for a while. The tension was enough to make Jimmy slurp his coffee and burn himself on it anyway. His yelp startled everyone.

“Can we please move on?” I asked. My mouth was dry.

“Move on to what? I think we’ve moving on nicely. We’re finding more about the man behind the mob, aren’t we?” Clark snapped.

“No,” Niven said.

“Why not tell us about how you found Metropolis when you got out of prison?” ventured Jimmy. His freckles jumped out against his blanched face, but he was managing to keep his voice steady. If Clark were always so confrontational, neither one of us would have been bothered. But to see him like this –
“All right,” he said. “Tell us about yourself.”

Niven took his time taking out and lighting a cigarette. His eyes wandered to the window and his face grew tired and he seemed to age ten years. He scratched his chin with the butt of his cigarette and sighed.

“There are very few things that are really important to me,” Niven began, addressing me more than Clark. “And those are things I would do anything to protect. I—”

“And, in your book, living like a criminal is protecting those things?” Clark interrupted.

“If you would let me finish—”

“You do realize that you’re not doing anyone any good by returning to a life of crime. And I don’t need to remind you that you’re going to answer to a higher authority.”

“Superman?” Niven asked coldly.

The color rose in Clark’s face and he sprung off the couch. I put down my coffee and stepped in front of Clark, straightening his already straight tie, as Niven rose casually.

Jimmy sloshed coffee on himself and on the couch.

“Let’s stay professionally civil,” I whispered and stepped aside.

“I think we can agree that this is the end of the interview,” Niven said, extending his hand to Clark. “I hope you got something that you can use.”

I took his hand, shook it, and walked with him to the door, the others following.

“Thank you for the coffee,” I said, “and for hosting us at your home. It’s lovely.”

“I’m always glad to have you,” he said, but I was the only one he said it to.

We were halfway down the abbreviated hall when Clark stopped and turned on Niven, who still stood in his doorway.
“Leave her alone,” Clark said. It was the most non-sequitur remark I had ever heard.

Niven and I exchanged an it’s-worse-than-I- thought look.

“Is that what this is about?” Niven asked. His mouth twitched as if he was about to laugh. “You shouldn’t bring your newspaper into a personal matter like that. Call again sometime and we can discuss it, alone, over a drink. That would be much more effective than talking about it in front of the lady and an unconcerned party.”

“She’s too good for you,” Clark said.

I was glad to see that Jimmy had had the foresight to summon the elevator, as its door opened at exactly the right moment for Clark to storm through.

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“I’m sorry,” Clark said when we were back at our desks. “But I can’t let you get involved with that man.”

I sensed desperation in him, but I didn’t have a response.

“We’re not involved,” I said, hoping that he wouldn’t know I was lying. I added, “It’s none of your business, anyway.”

“I think that it is my business if you’re in trouble.”

“I’m not in trouble.”

“Any kind of involvement with him is trouble.”

“It’s not up to you to protect me anyway.”

I smiled at one of the copyeditors, who was passing by on the way to somewhere. I showed her all of my teeth. Clark abruptly turned to his typewriter and I pulled the unread letters out of my purse. I didn’t feel like reading them now. Clark had been rude and proprietary, and he had frightened me at Niven’s. He didn’t do anything, I told myself. And
it was true. But he had been so— I didn’t have a word for it. I glared at him. He didn’t have any right to act like an over-protective older brother. Or a boyfriend.

I needed to finish my column. I had left my notes on *The Uninvited* in my apartment. It was a good excuse to leave. A hangnail would have been a good excuse to leave. I decided to respond to Dr. Roberts before going home. I liked Dr. Roberts. I didn’t know him.

I thought about leaving my letter with one of the secretaries to mail, and then I decided to take a walk and mail it myself.

It was blindingly bright outside after all of the dull days we had been having. I blinked for a couple of moments on the steps, tucking my envelope under my arm and digging cigarettes out of my pocket. I should stop smoking, I thought. I smelled the river through the tobacco smoke and the burnt match. I thought I could smell the lake, too. It smelled like the river, only with an undercurrent of dead fish instead of sewage. I missed the smell of the ocean. I promised myself that I would go back to it soon.

I scuffed the toe of my shoe while crossing the bridge and lost my cigarette over the railing. If I had been walking with Niven, he would have steadied me and probably caught my cigarette in time. He was like that. Competent, elegant, and tough. I wished that Clark had let him talk about himself during the interview. I wanted to hear what he had to say, and I got the feeling that he wasn’t a man who liked to talk. About himself, anyway. I walked past a legless man slumped in an office doorway. He didn’t even ask me for spare change.

The post office I went to was on Randolph. I crossed under the El and it was at the end of the block. It was less crowded than it usually was when I went, probably because I
was there before most people were out of work. I dropped my envelope into a freestanding mailbox, went inside to buy stamps, and squinted again when I came back out.

“Can you spare some change?” a gruff and familiar voice said.

I focused on the figure in front of me. His eyes were fixed on the ground, his hand out. One of the sores on his face had broken open. I wondered how sick he really was, but realized that I didn’t care.

“What happened to all the money Niven gave you?” I asked.

My father’s eyes shot up, embarrassed and almost frightened for a moment before hardening into their usual expression of hatred.

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you,” he spat.

“I thought you would be locked up for life,” I said. I turned and walked away.

“You’re going to pay!” he shouted after me, shaking his fist in a caricature of rage.

I was enraged, too. I wanted to run home and cry like a little girl about how unfair life was. I wanted to make an early appointment with Dr. Van DerMeer and beg him to make everything all right. I wanted to be six years old, by the ocean in New York, and have mom tell me she wasn’t ever going to leave.

“Lovely Irene,” Niven said when I opened the door. He stood there with Slim on a leash and a bouquet of flowers wrapped in tissue. “May I come in?”

I stepped aside and closed the door behind him, locking it.

“What are the flowers for?” I asked, hoping they were for me.

“Two things. First, I thought you would like them.”
I took the parcel and the tissue crinkled pleasantly. The flowers smelled good, and they were pretty, but I didn’t know the proper etiquette for receiving flowers. Should I put them in water right away? Was I supposed to keep holding them? Was I supposed to throw myself on Niven in a girlish embrace?

“Two,” he said, “I have bad news and I thought that the flowers might soften it a bit.”

“Stan died,” I said immediately.

“No.”

“Can I put these in water?” I asked.

“Of course. The news is about your father. I saw him begging around Randolph.”

“Doesn’t he have a place to live? And a job?”

“He does now.” Niven was clearly uneasy. He sat on the sofa, unhooking Slim’s leash. She followed me into the kitchen and watched with lucid eyes while I filled a jar with water and unwrapped the flowers. I wasn’t going to waste time worrying about Niven’s news. Even if it was bad, he would take care of it. One of the first things I had noticed about him was that he was terribly competent. He wouldn’t cease to be just because something bad had happened.

“So does your bad news have to do with my father’s job?” I asked, sitting on the sofa next to him and crossing my legs.

“We had a meeting this afternoon to discuss some of the problems we’ve been running into. One of those is a dwindling staff. Most of the important board members are too old to serve in the war. Others of us, like me, have managed to get a medical excuse. But the younger men – a lot of them have gone. Some out of patriotic duty, no doubt. But
that leaves us short, and when a job needs to get done, we can’t take a chance being short a few key people. So I hired your father.”

That wasn’t a Niven-like thing to do. I would have thought he would know better than to put a gun in the hand of a man like my father.

“And what is he going to do for you?” I asked, trying to sound polite.

“He’s going to be a lackey. An unarmed lackey. We always need someone to run errands. Getting newspapers, doing simple, minor research, renting a car, and so on. He’s not going to have any special power or privilege, if you’re worried about that.”

“I don’t think he’s stable enough to be a part of your organization. Even if he doesn’t do anything important, just being involved may go to his head.”

“True, but I don’t want to see him beg. And who else would hire him?”

“Nobody. But maybe he deserves to be on the street. It’s his own fault. And if he escapes the consequences –”

“Honey, he’s a sick man,” Niven said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “He’s old and warped, yes, and his mind isn’t even what it used to be – not that I’m saying it ever used to be normal. He’s fed on his hate for, well, probably his entire life, but he’s in no position to harm you. He wants to make you suffer, but all he can do is threaten and threaten and threaten until you either crack under the strain or realize that he’s a sick and weak old man who can’t hurt you anymore. He’s hurt you enough. And it’s up to you whether he can keep on doing so.”

“You sound like my doctor,” I said.

Slim swaggered into the room and sat on the floor in the space between our legs. I scratched behind her ears.
"You’re strange," I told Niven. "You’re completely fine with being in the mob, but you won’t let a bum starve to death. Are you their new compassion director or something?"

"No," he said. "Where would you like to have dinner tonight?"

"What do you do in the mob?" I prodded, my eyes narrowing. For all I knew, really, Niven was just another cheap killer. But I reminded myself that the thought never would have occurred to me if he hadn’t have hired my father.

"I plan things," he said. "I keep people in line. I keep everything running smoothly."

"So you’re in charge?"

"I am in charge."

"So you shoot people?"

"No."

I didn’t want to ask him if he had ever killed anyone, or if he ordered people to be killed. So we fell silent and he took out his cigarette case, lit one for himself, and offered me one. I took it and lit it with a match from the box that was lying on my coffee table. I struck the match on the table itself and let it burn for a moment before lighting my cigarette.

"You know, almost everything we do in order to survive is nasty," Niven said. "In one way or another. You father has a bigger streak of that nastiness than most people."

"I wish you hadn’t."

"Hadn’t hired him, you mean?"

"I don’t know. Yes, of course I wish you hadn’t hired him. I also wish that you hadn’t brought him back into my life. You could have come to see me yourself, in your own capacity."
"I could have. I should have, and I know that now, but I made a promise to him before I knew the whole story. That was a stupid thing for me to do, but I couldn’t go back on it. And look at it this way. He doesn’t pose a threat to you anymore. You’re successful, you have your own life, and you just broke a coffeepot on Stan."

“So I’m not a kid anymore. But that doesn’t mean anything. Mom wasn’t a kid.”

“But your father had power over her.”

“And you’re telling me that he doesn’t have power over me.”

I inhaled on my cigarette to make the end glow red, then lit a match with it. Niven watched me through a cloud of bluish smoke. When the match had burned enough to make my fingers uncomfortably warm, I dropped it into the ashtray and it went out immediately.

“Dinner?” Niven asked.

“I was planning on catching a movie.”

“Would you mind some company?”

“I don’t want to go out now. I’m tired.” I was, suddenly. And I was starting to feel old.

Niven ground out his cigarette. I kicked off my shoes and put my feet on the coffee table. Slim whined. I looked down at my bare toes and felt indecent. Niven was watching the shadows on the wall. I had never figured out what cause them – it was probably pigeons or one of the trees outside. There had been shadows like that in the farmhouse, all through the bedrooms and the upstairs hall. I was sure they were still there. They had to be. And now I was willing to assume there was a mark on the place from mom. There was probably something to the notion that a place had a psychic element to it and everything that happened
there would alter it somehow. Niven would have something interesting to say about it. There wasn’t anything he didn’t know something about.

Instead of asking him, I wiggled my toes on the cold surface of the coffee table. I kicked my legs down and patted Slim on the head. She looked up at me and licked her nose. I remembered her laying by the windows during Clark’s distressing performance that afternoon. Things between us might never be the same, and the evening light outside was starting to darken into twilight.

“I’m sorry about Clark,” I said.

“He seems like he would be nice enough if you were on his good side.”

“I didn’t think he would go through all of that just to antagonize you.”

“Come on, now. You didn’t think that he’d fight for his girl? You read books. You go to the movies. Part of what makes a popular hero a hero is his willingness to risk life and limb for his ladylove.”

“That’s very romantic, I’m sure, but I’m not his girl.” I leaned forward with my elbows on my knees and studied Slim. She was nothing if not elegant, but she made my apartment seem small. So did Niven. He collapsed the entire city.

“He’s just trying to do what he thinks he has to in order to be the hero. You should be flattered, really. But it does put you into an awkward situation.”

“Because I don’t care for him?” That wasn’t true. I clenched my teeth. I cared for Clark in a rather big way. But not in any way that would justify him fighting with Niven over me.

“I may be out of line, but I would say there’s a possibility you have someone else.”

“I would say that’s a safe assumption,” I said, my stomach tightening.
“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Your voice isn’t.”

“I’m tired.”

Niven let his arm fall along the back of the couch. I put my feet back on the coffee table and hugged my knees to my chest. I wished Clark hadn’t come up in conversation. I wished that Clark had been more direct, sooner, about his feelings for me. It didn’t matter now, because I had Niven. Niven, who understood me.

We spent some more time being quiet and watching the shadows on the wall. Then the wall darkened too much to be able to see them anymore, and the streetlights came on. I rested my chin on my knees and felt Niven shift on the sofa. I closed my eyes and smelled the sulfur of a match being lit, then the soft smoke of Niven’s tobacco hit me.

“You can’t be too tired to eat, anyway,” he said, a little while after he finished his cigarette.

I kept my eyes closed and kept thinking unspecific thoughts.

“I think I’m hungry,” I said.

“Do you want me to bring back some Chinese food?”

“You don’t have to. I have peanut butter here.”

“Peanut butter?”

“For sandwiches.”

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, and he shook his head.

“I’ll see what else is in there,” I said, and got up, kicking Slim in the process. I flipped on a light. I caught my reflection in Eddy Robinson’s picture. The phone rang and
Niven politely went into the kitchen while I answered. Nobody was there. The empty buzzing on the line was unnerving and I replaced the receiver cautiously. I had nothing to be concerned about. I could take care of myself. And Niven could take care of me if I failed somehow. Maybe it was my father that I was afraid of. Maybe I was afraid Clark was going to start using his powers even more irrationally. Maybe what was really eating me was the revival of a past that I thought was safely buried.

Slim followed me into the kitchen and I found Niven with my big vegetable knife, chopping a bunch of spinach.

“You had eggs and vegetables,” he said. “I thought we could have omelets.”

“Wonderful,” I said, and sat at the table, watching him cook.

Chapter twelve.

I went down to archives because they had a folder I wanted. It had my name on it and it was nobody else’s business — in spite of the nature of murder. There’s no easier way for someone to become public property than to be murdered. I reached the door to my least favorite room in the entire city and opened it. Sam sat behind the desk with what was probably a crime novel.

“Miss Lane,” he said, in mild surprise. He kept a finger marking his place and shut the book. “Is there something I can get for you?”

“There’s a folder down here somewhere that I need,” I said. I turned my back to Sam and stared at the file cabinets that lined the wall facing his desk, trying to decide where to start looking. I opened a drawer marked “G” and started to dig through, sure that Sam was
watching me in absolute horror. He couldn’t stand people the make a mess in his corner of the world.

“I don’t know where it is,” I apologized.

“If you told me what you were looking for, I could find it for you,” Sam offered.

“It’s private.” I didn’t turn to face him. “I’d rather no one know what I’m working on right now.”

“If you say so, Miss Lane.”

I turned to smile at him and he went back to reading his book. I had read it, too. It was by Raymond Chandler. I went through three other file drawers trying to remember the plot – a rich man’s wife and a poor man’s wife had disappeared at the same time, but that was as far as I got when I found my folder. It was labeled ‘Goldman’, after all, but it was shoved in between ‘Kane, Citizen, the Film’ and ‘Kane, Marty’. The edges were crumpled and there was a black smear on the front of the folder, but it looked like it was intact. I slipped off my jacked and draped it over the file and my arm. I hid it with my back to Sam, hoping he wouldn’t notice. He was probably too engrossed in his book to notice anything.

“Thanks, Sam,” I said.

“Did you find what you wanted?”

“No,” I lied. “But it’s all right. I’ll come back later to look for it.”

He nodded at the jacket over my arm. “Is it too warm in here?”

“A little bit, maybe. Do you want me to ask the boss to turn down the heat?”

“I don’t mind it,” he said. But you’re right, it can tend to heat up. I think it’s because we’re so close to the boiler room.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s got to be it.”
I nodded to him and left. So far, so good. I sprinted up the stairs to the third floor and, panting, sat down at my desk. I put the jacket-wrapped file on my lap, slid the file out from under the jacket and into the briefcase I had brought. I put my jacket back on, smoothed my hair, and sat up straight to get some serious work done on my column. This one had to be good, as I had been spending too much time on other things lately. I hadn’t gone to see a new film the night before. That meant writing about something that had been around for a while, something I was familiar with – Casablanca was back in town, so I would write about that.

‘We’ll Always Have Paris’ I typed at the top of a sheet of paper. It would be a fine title; catchy, uncomplicated. Expected. Clark wasn’t at his desk. I had been too concerned with snatching the file all morning to notice whether he was there or not. I assumed he was out covering a story. It wasn’t until I left that I realized he hadn’t been in at all.

I walked down the block, away from the river, to the Hotel Metropolis. I snuck into the cool marble lobby and walked out again. I let the doorman call me a cab. I didn’t want to take the El or the bus while I had the file on me. There was a slim chance that it would get lost, but it was a chance I didn’t want to take.

I gave the driver my address, and as he dodged the buses and other cabs on Michigan, I found myself wondering what kind of assignments my father would be given. Niven had been right about my father being ideal for mob work – if he had been involved in organized crime from the beginning, I wondered if he would have been a better person. If he could have left his anger at the office, so to speak. Niven didn’t seem to have a problem with anger. But with him, it probably wasn’t a result of his involvement in the mob. It was stupid
to think that a change in occupation for my father might change him as a person. If he was a bad farmer, he would be a bad counterfeiter or a bad banker or cab driver.

The cab smelled like bacon and the soot of the city. I rolled my window down a bit, enough to let a gust of wind ruffle my hair. I decided that when I talked to Niven next, I would tell him that I appreciated the smell of the Daimler. Niven was essentially a good person. What he didn’t for a living didn’t alter who he was, really. We all came with criminal instincts, and he just acted on his. Whether that was right or wrong wasn’t for me to decide. But still, I was spending time and energy, right now, out of a clear blue sky, justifying his actions. I wouldn’t be if I really wasn’t concerned about them.

I dropped the file on my kitchen table and watched it to make sure it didn’t get up and attack me. Then I thought of a metaphor: my life was like Frankenstein’s monster. It was pieced together out of dead things and brought into the land of the living without invitation or introduction. I unbuttoned my coat.

“That’s a terrible analogy,” I said out loud. “It doesn’t even make sense.” I wished I had a cat, at least, to hear my declaration.

I made a pot of coffee and poured some into mom’s cup, stirred in sugar, and sat down in front of the file. I closed my eyes and flipped the folder open, but couldn’t look at what was inside. Inside that folder was my entire life, the one thing that had defined me since I was seventeen years old – everything I was hiding from, trying to change, trying to forget. Irene Ruth Goldman was in that folder, black haired, Jewish, angry. She was waiting for me, to remind me of the real part of Lois Lane. If I looked in this folder, I reasoned, the last eight years of my life could have been for nothing.
And I wasn’t the only one in the folder. I knew my father was in there, too. So was mom. And all of the things the press said about us, about me, all of the excuses they made for me and all of the assumptions and lies. There would be a headline story with front-page pictures of my father and I – of me screaming, the whites of my eyes crazed and large. My father, in his picture, was getting ready to spit. His face would be twisted and ugly, and, if I remembered right, the story mentioned that he had hit his mark: the DA who was prosecuting him. There had to be pictures I had never seen in that file, too. Unused photos of the crime scene, police photos of mom, of me handcuffed and covered in my father’s blood, of my father looking pathetic during his stay in the hospital. There would be pages of notes, speculation – I didn’t need to know any of it. I closed the file again, went to the phone, and dialed Dr. Van DerMeer’s office number. He would tell me to go ahead and read it, that it would be an emotionally cleansing experience, that it would help me to get in touch with who I really am. But maybe, if he told me again, it would give me courage –

His answering service answered. I told the woman there was no message. I hung up the phone. It didn’t matter. I remembered everything anyway. I called Niven.

“Do you know what I have in front of me?” I asked him when his valet had put him on the line. “My file.”

“You stole it from the Daily Planet, didn’t you?” he asked cheerfully.

“I remember exactly how I felt when my father was sentenced. I almost fainted. I was completely relieved.” I sat down on the floor next to the phone table, with my back against the wall. “But as soon as I looked over at him, the relief was gone. It was like and iron band was tightening around my lungs. And then I was surrounded by reporters taking pictures. The DA had to hold me up when we walked into the judge’s quarters.”
“You didn’t – just leave the courtroom?” Niven asked.

I leaned my head against the wall and pulled on the phone cord so that I could hold the receiver against my other ear. I knocked over the picture of Eddy Robinson in the process. It smacked down onto the table, but I didn’t hear the glass break.

“The judge wanted to talk with me in private. He had decided to send me to Elgin for a few weeks.”

“It was nice that he didn’t make the press privy to that. What was your judge’s name?”

I pictured Niven with a cigarette and tall drink, lounging on his sofa, making a note to himself to get the Honorable J.M. Nelson appointed to the Supreme Court. And, ironically, I realized that I felt safe whenever I thought of Niven.

“J. M. Nelson,” I said. “He was sympathetic to me the whole time. I think he had seen a lot of these cases – domestic disputes that ended in death. He made a comment during the proceedings that it was unjust of the police to write these cases off as manslaughter and file them away. Then, at the sentencing, he thanked me for coming forward to prosecute. He said he knew it had to be hard for me. And he refused to comment on anything to the press. They kept hounding him about the part where I tried to kill my father.”

“In defense of your mother. And yourself.”

“You don’t need to remind my why I did it.”

“We haven’t talked about this much,” Niven said, gently. “But the times you have mentioned shooting your father, you get nervous. Your voice shakes. It sounds like something that – I hesitate to say this, but it sounds like you hate yourself for it.”
“I hate Irene for it,” I said, too quickly. I paused and caught my breath. I hadn’t realized that I was having trouble breathing. “Look,” I said. “I was too late. I knew I was too late when I pulled the trigger. I don’t know how I knew – instinct, I suppose. But I did it anyway and, to this day, I wish I hadn’t missed his heart. But that makes me a killer. And that makes me no better than he is.”

There was a drawn-out, charged silence. That was it, the thing I most feared. I had told Niven that I was like my father. How much like him, I couldn’t know. I didn’t want to know. And I was terrified that I would find out. I was, after all, his daughter. I could feel the blood rushing through the veins in my neck.

“Irene.” Niven’s voice was sharp. “You have to listen to me.”

“I always listen to you.”

“That’s good. But this time you have to believe me, too.”

“I can try.”

“You’re not your father. You’re not even like him. He attacked regularly, out of cruelty. You attacked when provoked, to save what was most important to you – the lives of you and your mother.”

“But even now –”

“So even now you want him dead. You haven’t stuck and ice pick in the back of his neck. You’re dealing with your anger constructively, and that’s the best anyone can do.”

“I’m not, though.” I righted the picture of Eddy Robinson, and continued in Dr. Van DerMeer’s words: “I’m not dealing with anything. I’m running away from it.”

There was another one of those long silences. I heard Niven moving around. It sounded like he was pacing the floor. I wished I had asked him to come over so that we
could talk in person. I wanted him to put his arms around me and tell me, again, that I was all right. That everything was all right, now. That he wasn’t going to leave me to deal with this alone.

“I haven’t even looked in the file,” I told him.

“Do you want to?”

“No.”

“Then burn it. Cut it into pieces. Throw it into the lake. It’s yours, and you don’t have to look at it if you don’t want to.”

I had always imagined the bottom of the lake as being littered with the detritus of the city, from the people who had gone sailing and never returned, to the unwanted babies of frightened young women, to gangsters full of bullet holes; murder weapons, illicit love letters, unimaginable souvenirs of destruction. It was cold at the bottom of the lake, and cruel, and would be the perfect resting place for the Goldman file.

“You know, the other papers in town probably have a similar file,” Niven said. “And those are yours, too. I’m going to get them for you.”

I gripped the phone too tightly. I smiled, lips too tight over my teeth. I was thrilled, I was happy, I wanted to curl up like a cat on a windowsill and go to sleep and have nothing but pleasant dreams about tomorrow.

“I would like that,” I said. *Good night, Irene*, I thought, but even as I did, I knew that I couldn’t possibly be anyone else.

I needed to call Carmen. I was responsible for what had happened to Stan, and I needed to be available to her if she needed anything. Like mom, Carmen needed to be taken
care of. Mom had been, of course, capable enough to keep the farm running, and decisive enough to leave my father once, but she would never have been able to survive on her own, without the intense emotional support of, in her case, family. I sensed the same thing in Carmen. Only she didn’t have a mother and then a daughter to give her that support. She had me. She had Stan. And there were a few other people she knew, but they were good-time friends, people to have around for a drink and a few laughs.

Of course, there was the possibility that Carmen wouldn’t want to talk to me. She probably wouldn’t, since I was responsible. She hadn’t been thrilled to see me the last time. But I was the only one she had right now, and we would have to stick together like we always had.

I dialed. Carmen was in. She invited me over.

When I knocked on her door, she told me to come in. She was just sitting there, in an armchair, in her satin dressing gown, with her knees drawn up and no makeup. Without makeup, she usually looked vulnerable. Now all I noticed were the lines around her mouth and in her forehead, lines that I would probably develop in a few years.

“I haven’t seen you at the office lately,” I said, by way of greeting.

“I’ve been there. You haven’t.”

“Yes, I have. Usually.”

“Well, I haven’t been feeling very social. I do what the boss tells me to do, nothing more. And when I’ve had spare time, I’ve stayed at my desk to read instead of visiting people.”

“You’re reading?” I asked. It was kind of a rude question, but I had never, as long as I had known her, heard her mention reading anything.
“Yes, I’m reading,” she snapped. “That book you gave me. I actually find it quite interesting. I didn’t think I’d like it very much, at first.”

It took me a moment to remember what book I had given her. It was *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. And I had given it to her years ago, before I figured out that a book wasn’t the best gift for Carmen.

“It makes me think of my mother,” I said.

“I had to read *Jane Eyre* in high school. I didn’t know that Charlotte Brontë had sisters.”

“One of my professors gave me my copy of that book when I left school.”

“As a graduation present?”

“No. There was no occasion for it.” Especially not graduation. Not after a semester and a half.

“Would you like some coffee?” she asked, her mouth twisting into something that wasn’t quite a smile.

I almost made a crack about breaking another coffee pot, but decided that it would be tasteless. So I shrugged and went into the kitchen.

The coffee pot hadn’t been replaced yet, so I went through the cabinets and came up with a box of Lipton teabags. Lipton tea had never been one of my favorite things. It was our ubiquitous summer drink, iced with lemon, because my father would drink it. Mom had read somewhere that iced tea with lemon was good for people who were giving up alcohol. I don’t know why that would be, but she believed it, and hoped that she could get my father more interested in tea than beer. Mom hoped for a lot of things. I watched the flame under the teakettle. I wanted mom there with me. I wanted her to talk me into hoping, too.
“I thought going out would make me feel better, but it isn’t,” Carmen enunciated, fishing the cherry out of her third Manhattan.

“Maybe it’s just Gilly’s,” I suggested, knowing that wasn’t the case.

“Before you hit him, Stan said that man you’re seeing is a gangster,” she stated.

It wasn’t as though I hadn’t expected her to catch on at some point. There were probably a lot of people talking about it already. My reputation as Superman’s fine, upstanding girlfriend was tarnished. I cared less that I should have.

“That’s nice of Stan.”

“He is, isn’t he?”

“Sure.”

“He looked like one, but he didn’t talk like it. He talks like he was born with money.”

“Why shouldn’t he have been? He’s got the education, too.” I was proud of him, really, even though I had no right to be.

“So who do you like better, Superman or your mobster?” Her voice was monotone. She looked everywhere except at me and I assumed that she was bored already.

There was an easy answer to that question, but it wasn’t a real answer. It was impossible to compare them. Clark had always seemed a bit inhuman, and when put beside Niven – it wasn’t hard to say which one I preferred. I felt a twinge of guilt when I thought that, but I shouldn’t let myself feel guilty about Clark. He was an adult and I didn’t owe him anything.
"You're stalling," Carmen said. She took a gulp of her drink and I lit a cigarette.

"That means you like the mobster better. I don't care. He's handsome and rich and he seems to like you a lot. I guess that's all that matters. But you can't leave Superman for him. That wouldn't do at all."

"It's nice to have you not care about what happens to me," I said. "It makes your advice so much more efficient."

She shrugged.

I had the urge to put out my cigarette in my mashed potatoes and leave. Instead of doing that, I watched Carmen finish her drink and place the glass back on the table too carefully. She tossed her head awkwardly to get a curl out of her eye and took her cigarettes from her purse. Her movements were slow and precise. She lit her cigarette, burned her thumb on the match, let out a small squeak, and dropped the match onto her plate, where it burned out in a pool of gravy.

"Get me another drink," she said.

"You've had enough, Carmen." Mom had never drunk herself into oblivion. Neither had I. It was an impulse that I didn't understand very well.

She let out a short, incredulous snort. "That's not up to you. I don't know how solid your advice would be anyway. You solve problems by attacking people with coffee pots."

"I suppose you wanted me to let him kill you?" I snapped.

Carmen was startled. Her glassy eyes went big for a second. The waiter came back to the table and, controlling the anger in my voice, I ordered black coffee for both of us.

"No," Carmen said. "I want another one of these." She thrust her glass at the boy.

"Bring coffee to my friend."
Before the waiter came back with our drinks, Carmen stood up. “There’s a man at the bar I want to talk to,” she said. She collected her purse and walked off.

There was nothing I could do except follow her. I counted out money for the bill and left it on the table. She was easy to spot in the bar. She was on a stool next to a man in a navy blue suit, and he was lighting her cigarette. I heard her sharp giggle over the din of the lounge. The Carmen that I had seen in the hospital and in her hotel was gone.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” a voice at my elbow asked.

I turned to see a sailor. I remembered the boy from the zoo and smiled. I realized my mistake right away. This one was no boy.

“I don’t know you,” I said, and started toward the bar. The sailor grabbed my arm.

“You’re headed to the bar? Me too. Maybe we can get to know each other over a drink. How about it?”

“Let go of my arm,” I said through my teeth.

I yanked my arm out of his grip and made it to the bar, but he was still right behind me.

“You want that I should buy you a drink somewhere else?” he persisted.

I called the bartender and he personally came out from behind the bar to escort the sailor out. I bumped into Carmen while I was watching the performance. I got the idea that this wasn’t the first time he had thrown this one into the street, and that he was trying very hard to make it the last.

“There you are, darling,” Carmen said. “I’d like you to meet my new friend, James Stroud. He works at the Stock Exchange.”
“That’s lovely, darling,” I said. “I think I’m going to be going home, though, and you might want to consider coming with me.”

“I’m staying out,” she replied.

“Your friend here says that you’re Lois Lane,” James Stroud said.

“I am on a good day.”

“What are you on a bad day?” he asked.

“On a bad day, I turn into Lana Turner.” I turned to Carmen. “I really think you should come with me, darling.”

“But darling, I’m having such a fabulous time.”

She was an adult. An adult about to fall off of a bar stool, but an adult all the same, and I couldn’t make her leave her new friend if she didn’t want to. I shrugged into my tattered coat, remembering that I was getting a new one soon.

“Call me if you need anything,” I said.

The mission across the street from Gilly’s was empty again. The door was propped open and a woman in a red suit sat at a desk with her face in her hands. She looked up at me when I paused in the doorway and smiled shyly. I wished that I could stay.

I picked up a copy of *The Daily Planet* and skimmed over my column. It gave me a sense of purpose, sometimes, to see my work in print. I had made the big time. I was important, and that was one of the greatest ironies of the modern world.

I was waiting for Niven in the Broadway Diner, which was on Clark Street, not Broadway. It was tiled in red and white, and I sat on a red vinyl stool at the counter with burnt coffee and a greasy Danish in front of me. I should have had breakfast in my own
apartment. But it didn’t matter. Niven would be there shortly and take me to get my new raincoat.

He came into the diner at exactly nine forty-five. He had on a brown hat and leather gloves with his tan raincoat. Everybody stopped what they were doing and looked at him. When he sat down next to me, they looked at me, too.

“It’s a little bit late for breakfast, isn’t it?” he asked, taking off his hat and smoothing his hair.

“You said you would pick me up at nine forty-five, so I waited. Having breakfast out seemed like a good idea.”

“It doesn’t look like it worked out so well for you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I did some thinking about my column for today. I’m doing a short series on *Casablanca*. It’s popular enough, and I didn’t say much about it when it came through here last time.”

“I haven’t seen that since it was first released. Would you like to see it together tonight?”

“It wouldn’t hurt.”

I paid for my uneaten breakfast and put on my coat and hat. Niven lead the way through the onlookers and out of the diner.

“You’re going to develop quite a reputation if you’re seen in public with me too often,” he said, opening the door of the Daimler for me.

He got in behind the wheel and started the engine. More people watched us as we pulled away from the curb. If I had a white handkerchief, I might have waved at them. So people would gossip about Niven and I, the way they had about Superman and I. Only this
time, they wouldn't be saying anything even remotely nice. And Clark would have to listen
to what the people were saying about me, and him, and why I had chosen a gangster over the
most remarkable hero in the city.

“Well,” I said, to make myself feel better, “the publicity couldn't hurt. No one at the
Planet would write about it because it might be too risky. The Times wouldn't, just because
they have better things to do than report on society gossip. The only ones who would touch
it would be the Register and Seeker, and who reads those? That is, who reads those whose
opinion matters? And if you happened to hear that a certain film critic had mob connections,
wouldn't you be interested in seeing what she had to say about herself?"

“Absolutely,” Niven said, taking his eyes off the road for a moment. “Especially if
she had the most remarkable insights into film.”

“You think so?”

“That's why I fell in love with your writing. It made me think.”

Niven’s tailor was on State Street, right between the theatre district and Marshall
Field’s. It was a quiet brown building with a sign on the front that said Bentley and Son.
Bentley had been the one to make my coat. Apparently Son was in Europe somewhere
buying the latest fabrics for winter. Niven parked in an empty lot across from Field’s that
was slated to become a park. No one else was parked there, but nobody was going to tow the
Daimler. Niven wouldn't allow it.

We went inside and a bell over the door jingled. The tailor, and old Englishman with
white hair and a brown mustache, was showing a book of swatches to another old man with
white hair and a young man who was obviously his son. Niven squeezed my arm and joined
the group. I wasn't sure if I was invited, so I drifted over to the wall to peruse the
photographs that plastered it. Men and women in impeccable clothing looked vacantly back at me. I scanned the clothes. I scanned the faces. I found one I recognized and it made the world feel like a very small place indeed.

Before I had really reacted to the picture on the wall, Niven was behind me with the customer and his son in tow. He put a hand on the small of my back and introduced me, very properly, as Miss Lois Lane.

I realized how much I disliked hearing him call me that.

“The film critic, of course.” The old man brightened like a marquee. “You know, you kept him alive while he was away. Every time we went to visit he would talk about you. Every day we had to send him your column. He would re-read his favorites on the weekends, you know. I don’t know how to thank you for this. He even said once –”

“All right, Gino, you’re making me blush,” Niven said, even though he wasn’t blushing at all. He was as composed as ever. “This is Gino,” he said. “He’s retired now, and lives with his wife and Jimmy here in Lake Forest. They’re neighbors of my mother’s, actually.”

Of course Niven had a mother, but to hear him mention her was unnerving. I tried to imagine her, and came up with a mental picture of Queen Victoria with a twenties bob serving me tea out of a silver pot while we sat on a veranda with Niven and a couple of bulldogs nearby. I didn’t know whether to laugh or run home crying.

“We’re here to get a suit for the wedding,” the boy told Niven. He was tall and blonde and not that much of a boy – we were probably the same age – but he was standing next to Niven.

“How are those plans going?” Niven asked. “It’s coming up, isn’t it?”
“In three months,” Gino said. “Are you still planning to attend?”

I got the impression somehow that Gino’s son wasn’t involved in the Family Business. Of course, I wouldn’t have thought it of Niven, either, but that’s what Hollywood had done to me.

“Of course I’ll be there,” Niven said.

I glanced back at the wall, and, inappropriate to the conversation as it was, I had to comment on it.

“I didn’t know your tailor made suits for Eddy Robinson,” I said to no one in particular.

Gino’s son, who had also started to say something, shut his mouth and looked hurt. Niven’s face went blank and he came to look at the picture I was pointing to. He didn’t know, either. It was the same eight-by-ten that Niven had in his car, the same one that sat on my kitchen table.

“I don’t know how I missed that,” Niven said quietly. “He can’t have made that suit. If he had tailored for Edward G. Robinson, I would have known. I would have had to know.”

Gino clapped Niven on the shoulder and they shook hands in parting. The bell over the door tinkled, and the tailor entered the scene and led us over to a counter with a garment laid out on it. Niven helped me out of my old coat and into the new one. I buttoned it up, fastened the belt, and stood in front of a three-way mirror, admiring myself in my custom made, muted red tweed classic trench coat. I looked like Rita Hayworth. I looked like Lauren Bacall.

“You look marvelous,” the tailor said.

“You always do,” was Niven’s comment.
The two men went up front to settle the bill, leaving me to preen in front of the mirror. We only had one mirror in the farmhouse, and it wasn’t used very often. I was afraid to be caught in front of it and mom, although she was incredibly beautiful, seemed to hate seeing her reflection. I remembered how short she kept her hair, just long enough to be tucked behind her ears and how she never, ever wore lipstick.

I joined Niven, tucking my hand around his arm and feeling bright and secure. He and the tailor shook hands and, on the way out, Niven asked,

“Did you really make that suit for Edward G. Robinson?”

Mr. Bentley the tailor was taken aback, in a dignified way. “I make all his suits,” he said. “He comes into town once a season and I make his clothes and send them to him.”

Niven and I left the shop, respectfully silent.

The lake wasn’t murky, but it was dark, a clear, almost black blue that didn’t reflect the meager sunlight, my face, or the wide white sail that was over my shoulder. I stared into it, tried to star through it, and swallowed every few seconds, trying to stay calm. It was going to be all right. The swell of the waves was hardly noticeable, I told myself, and there was no way the whitecaps farther out would approach Niven’s boat. The wind alternately blew the hair in and out of my eyes, and tore through my coat, and I wished that I had stayed on lane. The sail cracked, like a whip, and then Niven appeared in front of me, standing steadily, holding out a cup of coffee.

“It’s a lot nicer in the summer,” he said. “The spray isn’t so cold, the water isn’t so dark, and you don’t have to constantly be worrying about the rain.” He handed me the steaming cup. “It’s not the best, but it’s the best I could do. I hope it’s sweet enough.”
He sat down on the deck next to me. I was sitting against the railing with my knees drawn up. I had never been on the water before and I was sure I would fall if I tried standing. I burned myself on the coffee, which was sweet enough.

“You can see a nice view of the Planetarium from here if you want to stand up and look at it.” Niven was teasing me. He knew I would rather be in the Daimler. “You can see everything from the lake. It’s the side of Metropolis that you’ve never seen before, and you’re letting it just slip by.”

“The last thing I want to do is fall in. I would, too.”

“I haven’t, and I’m out here every weekend when the weather is compatible. You’ll really like it in the summer. We can drop anchor and go swimming. Or sit and watch the sunset.” A swell caught the sailboat and tossed us enough that my coffee spilled on the deck. From nowhere, Niven produced a towel and handed it to me to clean up. “You’re not getting seasick on me, are you?” he asked, concern wrinkling his forehead.

“This isn’t the sea,” I said. “But I feel queasy.” It might have just been nerves. A flock of gulls shrieked overhead, circling like white vultures. I squinted up at them, spray from the lake getting in my eyes. I wiped my face on the damp coffee towel.

“I love being out here.” Niven took a drink of his coffee and stood up to look out over the city. “I should have waited until summer to bring you.”

I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but that was all right with me. Everything was all right, and would be better when we got back to shore. This was, I realized, the first time I was really nervous with Niven. If the lake were to get mean, there would be nothing he could do about it.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.
“Off the boat? I can turn her around.”


Niven watched me for a moment and then nodded slowly, understanding. “Can you hold my coffee for a minute? I’ll re set the sail.”

He disappeared and I sat on the deck, damp and cold and miserable. No, I didn’t really hate Metropolis. We both knew that. But, especially at the moment, I hated a lot of things about it.

Niven came back with a blanket slung over my shoulder. He helped me to my feet and, without a word, wrapped it around me, close.

“You don’t have to worry about reporters of the Goldman file or any of that,” he said, rubbing my shoulders and upper arms. “I won’t let them do anything to you.”

When I was seventeen, there wasn’t anyone there to take my side, to shield me from the nastiness of the things people say on paper. If I had known Niven then, maybe things would be different now. If I had known Clark at seventeen, things would have stayed the same. The sail snapped over my head and made me jump. It sounded like my father’s belt when it struck mom or me. The scar on my back ached; a dull fire went from my shoulder to waist. I huddled closer to Niven, and he put his arms around me, resting his face against the top of my head. I was still damp but not as cold. I could feel the lake moving under my feet, but I was steadier. I ventured a glance at it over Niven’s shoulder, and there it was, dark and cold, and stretching all the way to the sky.
“I don’t want to sour the mood,” Niven said, “but you may have noticed that we’re spending a lot of time together.”

“And you brought me out here to tell me you’re tired of me? It’s an appropriate place to throw someone over.”

“I brought you here because I thought you would like it. I’m sorry.”

“I think it would be nicer in the summer.” I could feel the boat drift, curving away from the shore, back towards the marina.

“It is. But it means a lot to me that you came now. That you’re here. I mean, still here.” His arms tightened around me, and I almost lost my balance as we hit a wave. “That you didn’t run away as soon as you knew who I was. The whole time I’ve known you, I’ve been waiting for you to go, and I’ve been trying to prepare myself for how that’s going to feel. But it seems like the more I’m with you, the more – stable I feel.”

I looked up at him. His thunder gray eyes caught me and pinned me. That was fine with me. I didn’t have anywhere else to be.

“I’m not expressing myself very well,” he said carefully. “I could go the easy route, imitate Hollywood. I could – ” He stopped and stepped away from me, keeping his hands on my shoulders and staring at me like I was the most important thing in the world. “But when I look at you, it’s not that easy. You’re not something I can learn and master and conquer and keep with me in my vest pocket. You’re not going to ever love me like Slim, hopelessly devoted as long as I feed you and show you some affection. I’m glad of that. That seems to be how most people love. That’s what it’s come to mean. An attachment to someone because of how they make you feel. Or what they do for you. So it’s not a word I can use with you.”
A foghorn sounded, but I didn’t see any fog. We were alone in the middle of Lake Michigan, but I could see myself in the British Museum, on an ocean liner, on the Marrakech Express, surrounded by crowds of people who would never touch me because Niven was there.

"Language is clumsy," I said.

"And sometimes, I’m clumsier." He burst out laughing. It was a wonderful thing to hear. He pulled me close again, and I looked towards the city, tall and gray and unmoving.

"You smell good," I said. "But you probably know that."

Niven stiffened. "Look at that," he said, pointing to the skyline.

Smoke poured out of the window of one of the skyscrapers. We were too far away for me to be able to tell exactly which one. The wind carried the smoke and dispersed it out over Navy Pier. A tiny black spot, a black spot that could have been a man in a cape, drifted aimlessly towards the fire and disappeared into it.

"It took him a long time to get there," Niven observed.

Carmen sprawled on my couch with her skirt hiked up and a bottle in her hand. She had forgotten it, so I pried it from her limp fingers. She let me. Her eyes were open and staring at the ceiling.

"I think I’ve had enough," she said.

"Then you won’t mind me pouring this down the sink." I was on my way into the kitchen.

"Don’t. I might need it for later."
"You don’t need it for anything." I stopped and wiped the top of my wireless with my finger. It was dusty. Everything on that table was except for the phone and my picture of Eddy Robinson.

"I’m not coping with this very well, am I?" she asked. I thought I heard her move, but the back of the sofa blocked her from view.

"I don’t know how most people would cope with this situation, so I can’t tell you. I would guess that you’re handling it as well as anyone would."

Speaking of handling things, I wasn’t sure if canceling tomorrow’s appointment with Dr. Van DerMeer had been such a good idea. I ran my fingertip over the table.

"I don’t really care. Ha!" She sat up. "I don’t care about anything. I don’t feel anything." She had a silly grin on her face. "Hit me, Lois. I won’t feel it. Come on."

"Let me get you some coffee, instead," I said.

I made it into the kitchen and poured bonded bourbon down my sink. At least, I told myself, she was here in my apartment, where I could keep an eye on her. Not that I was much good at that, with her nearly unconscious on my sofa. But still, Carmen was here and not out with some shady new friend. There had to be something to be glad for. The doctors said it looked bad for Stan. And I didn’t want to even think about the ramifications of his possible death. Impulsively, I took the phone off of the phone table and stretched the cord so that it was in the kitchen with me. I dialed Niven.

"What if I killed him?" I said as soon as he was on the line.

"Stan died?"

"What if he does? Will I be up for manslaughter? Can you imagine, me serving time for the same thing my father did?"
“So what if he dies? He isn’t dead yet. I don’t she would press charges even then if she hasn’t already. It would be almost impossible to make them stick, anyway.”

“Carmen’s here. And she’s drunk.”

“Do you want me to come over?”

“I do, but I don’t think it would be such a good idea. She probably wouldn’t react very well to it.”

We said good-bye. I wished he could come over. I could use the company. If only he wasn’t on the other side of the law, Carmen wouldn’t mind – not that it mattered. He was what he was, and it wasn’t a problem if Carmen didn’t like it. I didn’t like anything about Stan.

I actually started Carmen’s coffee, and as I was measuring out the grounds, I heard her run into the bathroom, and then I heard her gagging. It occurred to me to go shut the door for her, but she would probably want to be ignored. Coffee wouldn’t be good for her if she was sick. Again, on impulse, I picked up the phone, but this time I dialed Clark. He answered and his voice sounded distant.

“Hi, Clark,” I said. “This is – Lois.”

There was a long enough pause that I wondered if we had lost connection.

“I wasn’t expecting you to call me,” he said tightly. “How are you?”

“I’m all right, but Carmen is here and she’s sick. I don’t want to leave her alone and I was wondering if you could bring over some ginger ale for her?”

“So you called me to ask me to run an errand for you.” The statement was matter-of-fact, but his voice let it be known that he was sorely disappointed. “I’m not an errand boy,” he said.
“I know. And I wasn’t implying that.”

“You could have called someone else.”

“I didn’t want to.” I twisted the phone cord around my wrist. I could have called the pharmacy and had something delivered for Carmen, sure. But I had been worried about Clark. That I knew. But I realized that I had also missed him.

“Is ginger ale all you want?”

“If you could bring over some bicarbonate of soda as well, that would be good. I don’t know if she likes ginger.” A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth.

“I’ll be over as soon as I can. I’m going to have to go to the store like everyone else for this.” He laughed hollowly. “I mean, instead of flying. I might be a little while.”

The smile tugged harder. “I’m looking forward to seeing Clark Kent,” I said.

I hung up the phone and leaned in the kitchen doorway to see Carmen stumble out of the bathroom, pale and scraggly with a film of sweat over her face. She collapsed onto the sofa and I went and sat on the coffee table opposite her.

“Clark is bringing over some things to help settle your stomach,” I told her. “Are you feeling any better?”

“I feel slightly more sober. But I’m still not thinking about Stan or any of the things I’ve done in the past ten days, so that’s good. Maybe instead of drinking I should arrange to be constantly nauseous.”

“Nauseated,” I corrected automatically. “Nauseous is when you make other people sick.”

“Listen, honey, I’m just a secretary. I’m so sorry if my vocabulary isn’t up to your college standards. You and your Harvard man.”
“I told you Niven went to Harvard?” I didn’t remember doing that. I usually kept close track of the things I said to people.

“As if that made everything about him okay. As if going to Harvard made him superior to everyone else you know.”

“I wasn’t trying to act superior.” I watched her expression closely, but it didn’t change. Only a slight flush began to spread over her forehead.

“Of course you weren’t trying to. You don’t do things wrong.” She raised her hands and let them drop to her sides. “You’re Lois Lane, Superman’s girlfriend who doesn’t care about him because – you would never believe it – she doesn’t have to. Lois Lane, the woman who has it all and can afford to pick and choose exactly what she wants when she wants it. Lois Lane, the film critic, of all things, who has the rapt attention of Hollywood. Oh, sure, you’re a lot of things. Soon you’ll be married Lois Lane, or rich Lois Lane, or Lois Lane in Hollywood – and sometimes I hate you.”

Her voice was slurred and lacked the dynamism that a speech like that should have. But I was sufficiently wounded by it. My first impulse was to get up and go to the kitchen. Then I told myself that she was just drunk.

“I don’t think that you can make adequate statements about who I do and do not care about,” was all I had to say in my defense. I did care about Clark, but that was about my only redeeming quality, and in her eyes, just caring about him wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t be, especially if she knew the whole story. Of course, I wasn’t qualified to decide what would and would not make her hate me all of the time. She might like Irene a whole lot better than she liked Lois. She might be able to find common ground with Irene.
“Look, I’m sorry,” Carmen said. “It’s been really hard lately. Sometimes you make me mad, but you’re all I’ve got.”

“It’s nice to be needed,” I said. “Now, why don’t you go lie down until Clark gets here?”

I guided her down the hall and into the spare room, and onto the twin bed that stood in it. Nobody had ever used it before. But Carmen didn’t know that. She probably thought I had a lot of guests.

I sat on the couch, pulling up my knees and taking the new *Atlantic Monthly* off of the floor next to the coffee table where it had fallen. I opened it up to the second page of an article about the history of Jews in Spain. Mom would have wanted to read it. Even after returning to my father, she was proud of who she was. But her pride was secret, and it wasn’t something that she had been able to pass on to me. I flipped to the beginning of the article and started to read, but I kept replaying my parents’ weekly argument about the Shabbat candles. It was the only one I could remember never getting involved in.

There was a knock at the door that I assumed was Clark. I put my magazine aside and took off the chain and unfastened the deadbolt. As I opened the door, I realized how much less cautious I had become since being with Niven. And, in this case, a little bit of that caution would have paid off. My father stood in the doorway. My heart jumped into my throat and I prayed that Carmen was fast asleep and would stay that way. I pushed the door shut as much as I could, but my father shoved his foot into the opening.

“I know you want something,” I told him, repeating to myself that he couldn’t hurt me now. “So tell me what it is and then get going.”
“I want you to pay for what you did to me,” he snarled. “And you will. I can’t take it from you like I should, and eye for an eye, but you’ll make it right.”

“So you came here to threaten me?” My brain was panicking, but my body was still cooperating with it. I managed to shove the door closed just a little bit more.

“I had to deliver something. Freder is waiting in the car and is instructed to come in here if I’m gone too long, so here.” He shoved a white envelope that was made of thick, matte paper at me. There was a grease stain across one corner that probably hadn’t been there until my father had gotten a hold of it. He pried his foot loose from the door and walked down the hall, moving more stiffly than he had the last time I saw him.

I slammed the door and locked it, relieved that he was gone. Carmen wouldn’t ask any questions. She wouldn’t recognize him from the diner. I didn’t think I’d ever breathe normally again as I collapsed onto the couch and tore open the envelope.

Inside was a precisely folded eight by ten glossy of Eddy Robinson. On the back was a note:

I re-read some Whitman this morning and thought of you because you make poetry out of the (usual) mess that is Hollywood. I should come up with a better complement than that, but a better complement would not be what I was thinking while I was reading Whitman this morning. You do realize that nature lends itself to poetry. Hollywood doesn’t. You, my dear, amaze me.

It was signed, of course, by Niven. I threw away the dirty envelope and refolded the picture/note. I wanted to put it somewhere special, but there wasn’t anywhere in my apartment that really met that qualification, except for the table with Eddy Robinson’s
picture. I had to put the phone back anyway, so I did, with the note folded under it for safekeeping.

There was a knock at the door that had to be Clark. There was still no sound from the room Carmen was in. She had probably fallen asleep and wouldn’t stir again until morning, and Clark’s entire trip to the drugstore and here was unnecessary.

“‘I brought the things you asked for,’” he said when I opened the door. He had a small paper bag in hand and followed me into the kitchen, where he unpacked a bottle of ginger ale and a box of bicarbonate. He crumpled the bag and looked around for my trash basket.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this,” I said. “But I think that Carmen is down for the night and you made the trip for nothing.”

“I suppose I did,” he said, putting his hat back on and turning to leave the kitchen.

“As far as Carmen is concerned, maybe.” Thunder rolled outside my window. “It’s raining. Or will, soon. It would be nice if you stayed and had some coffee.” It would be. I didn’t want to be alone. I picked up the pot to show him that I had some coffee already made. Very little heat came from it. “Lukewarm coffee,” I corrected myself.

“Do you really want me to stay?” He reached up for his hat, but didn’t actually take it off. “Considering how things with us have been lately.”

“You mean that interview with Niven? Why don’t we pretend that never happened. You’re not going to actually write it up, are you? And if there’s no proof of it, who’s going to remember it five years from now?” I grinned, baring all of my teeth at him. I would make an effort to forget. I would be nice and give him some slack, for a change. I must have been rattled.
"I should have been more in control of myself when I went to talk to him. I also
should have gone alone."

"Take off your hat and stay a while."

He took off his hat and sat at the table, in his usual seat. I had been spending too
much time with Niven to really notice, but I had missed Clark. I had only known him about
a year, but he was, in a quiet and disturbing way, inseparable from my identity now, as much
as my job or this apartment, or Gilly's. Seeing him back in my kitchen, where he belonged
in the evenings, made me further realize that I couldn't count on him being there forever.
Especially if I stayed with Niven.

"Well," I said. "It's good to see you again."

"You see me at work."

"It's good to have you back here. Seeing you at work isn't the same."

There was a quick gleam of hope in his eye, but it didn't stay long. "It's nice to see
you too, he said. "If not a little bit awkward."

"All right. I know you're upset about Niven. You put him in jail, you think that's
where he belongs, you define him by what he does for a living. You haven't even tried to do
anything else. You probably couldn't see him from my perspective, even if you tried. He's
someone that I can talk to, about anything." Without knowing the 'anything' I had in mind,
Clark would think this was the silliest thing he had ever heard. But telling him about mom
and the farmhouse and Irene in order to get him to appreciate Niven would be stupid. "There
are some things about me that he's the only one who can understand," I said.

"I thought - " Clark got up and went to the window, pulling back the curtain. He
didn't finish his thought out loud.
I watched the line of his shoulders sag as if something very heavy had been placed there. My first impulse was to go stand by him and tell him that everything was going to be fine. I wanted to make things work for him; he was the last person in the world who should be sad. I had always thought that.

"I used to come and see you every night," he said quietly.

"I used to desperately want you to come and see me as Clark Kent."

"I thought that meant something," he said, ignoring my interruption. "I thought there was something more between us than --" he made a meaningless gesture. "It’s not just that you’re seeing someone. It’s Niven. I object to him in every way possible."

I sat down. I leaned my elbows on the table and studied Clark. He had the vertical lines of the philosopher-saint between his eyebrows. It would have made anyone else look severe. It gave Clark and air of quiet suffering, or martyrdom. Any possibility of things being normal between us was, most likely, gone. Even at the beginning, when I had hoped for great things with him, I had a good idea that we would end up like this. We were just different animals.

"You know Clark, we never really talked," I ventured. "Any time I tried to get closer to you, you shut me out. We always sat here, we always drank coffee, and we never made any progress towards anything. I’m sorry if you believed the publicity. But something isn’t so just because the papers say it. If you had cared about me -- you should have done something about it. For a long time, I wished you would. And then I stopped wishing, because I knew that it wasn’t profitable." It was too bad, I thought. Clark and I could have, maybe, been quite happy together.
He kept his back to me. He didn’t move. I wondered if his powers extended as far as giving him the ability to think something into happening. I was afraid of what he could do in his current, unfamiliar mood. I had to do something to lighten it.

“Do you remember your first week at the Planet? When I still had my car and I gave you a ride to the El station and tried so hard to get you to let me take you somewhere for dinner?”

He turned to me and relaxed his eyebrows, but didn’t quite smile. He crossed his arms across his chest.

“I didn’t think it would be a good idea. I thought you would figure out my secret identity.” His face said he was lighthearted, but his voice and eyes disagreed.

“I already had it figured out by then,” I said, in the same false-happy vein. “I did everything I could to get you to notice me, you know. But it’s better that things worked out the way that they did.”

Clark left his post by the window and poured some room temperature coffee into the white stoneware cup I had originally gotten out for Carmen. He joined me at the table. He took off his glasses and looked me in the eye.

“I object to Niven,” he said again, putting emphasis on each word. “He’s a murderer. He’s a thief. He’s no good, for you or anyone. He doesn’t contribute anything to society and makes it dangerous for other people to go on about their lives. I don’t think that you understand what you’re getting into.”

“I object to you calling him a murderer,” I said, as firmly as I could. There was an unfamiliar tightness in my throat and chest. “There wasn’t any evidence that he was involved in the slaughter. And you know it.” I got up and went after the ginger ale. I
popped the cap off and took a drink from the bottle. It was almost cold. “Besides,” I said, stifling a burp and sitting back down, “we weren’t talking about Niven. He doesn’t have anything to do with you and I.”

“He has a lot to do with it. You chose him over me.”

“You weren’t even an option. You had me so firmly convinced that I would never get close to you that I stopped trying. I’m trying to accept you as a friend. But obviously that’s not going to work anymore.” I took another drink of the ginger ale, glad I had it for myself. I was starting to feel queasy. “I want to find something that will work. For us. I’m not saying we can agree on something today, this moment, but we can start. We can actually talk about it.”

He turned his attention to his coffee cup. He turned it around in his hands, stared into it, took a drink out of it, and sighed.

“I haven’t meant to be distant,” he said. “I’ve tried to be exactly what you needed. But I guess I haven’t done very well. And I guess I can’t help it. It’s just how I am.” He said that – but he didn’t believe it any more than I did.

He continued, still focused on the mug in his hands. “I haven’t been able to be anything else – I haven’t been able to even learn to be close to anyone – because of what I have to do. I’ve wanted to. Every day I saw you sitting across from me at work – but I have this thing I have to do. And if I let my personal desires get in the way, it wouldn’t get done. I would let it go in order to be like everyone else.”

He raised his eyes to me just long enough for me to see the struggle in them. He shook his head and ran his thumb down the side of his cup. The air in the room was charged, as if a thunderstorm was about to break.
“Do you understand?” he asked softly, and the tension dispersed, uneasily, and waited in the corners of the room.

I didn’t know if I understood him or not. I understood his words. And I understood being aloof from people – I was and I had my reasons for it. But as far as understanding Clark Kent and what he was really telling me, I was lost at sea.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I understand that you’re unhappy right now. I can feel that. And I have a pretty thorough understanding of unhappiness. I also understand being trapped, being in a situation that’s – that no human being should ever have to endure. That’s why I – ” I could tell him. I could tell him everything, have it out in the open for him to either accept or, as was more likely, run from. But if he was making himself vulnerable, it wasn’t the time to smash all of his ideas about me. But, if I were to be fair, I shouldn’t let him go on –

“That’s why you what?” he asked.

I had to tell him something, and I couldn’t lie. Not this time.

“There’s something about me that most people don’t know,” I said. I didn’t look at him. I looked at the bottle on the table in front of me, Glen Rock Ginger Ale. As a special treat, mom would buy me Glen Rock orange soda when I went to the city with her. I was definitely feeling sick and wished that I could throw myself into Clark’s arms and cry.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to look at him. “I changed my name a long time ago,” I said. “I didn’t want to be connected in any way to my childhood, so I started calling myself Lois Lane. No one I met had ever known me by my other name, so it stuck. And that’s what you know me by. But it’s not my real name.”

He stopped breathing and the clouds gathered again. “So you’re not really Lois Lane,” he thundered.
“Is my name really that important?” I asked, trying to shrink into my chair. It wasn’t that I changed my name. He knew that I wasn’t telling him the whole story. He knew that I had lied to him about something big.

“Is that all it is? You changed your name? Or is there something you’re hiding from?”

“I’m hiding from myself,” I said in a dry stage whisper. I heard tiny raindrops on the remaining leaves on the oak in the courtyard.

“If I could do that, all of my problems would be solved,” he said in a voice you could cut diamonds with.

“I’m not doing a very good job of it,” I said. I could taste bile in the back of my throat and I didn’t know if I was afraid of him or hurting for him.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” burst out of me. “I hate this. There’s no way out.”

The air cleared and we regarded each other cautiously, neither one quite sure of what I had meant.

“There has to be,” he said firmly. “Some way. Any way. I can’t be like this forever.”

“You don’t have to be. You can spend more time with people, and be — ”

“Lois. I’m telling you that I can’t be Superman forever. I wake up in the mornings wondering if it’s worth it. I’m — so alone. Unbearably alone. But I can’t be any other way. You don’t see. You can’t. I’m Superman. That’s what I am, when you take everything else away. That’s what I was born as. I can’t change it, and even if I could, changing it would destroy everything about me. But I can’t live with it forever. I think it’s going to kill me.”
He gave me a half-dead smile and the already thin veneer of cheerfulness he had been sporting crumpled away.

“And you make it worse,” he said. “But you were also the only thing that made it bearable. I would know that, every night, I could see you and be with you. That I was Superman for you. It would help me when I was tired. But as I started feeling closer to you, I realized that I couldn’t keep it up. I can’t change. And I would lose you. And I have.”

My legs started shaking violently and I pressed my feet to the floor to try and steady them. My lower lip twitched, too.

“No you haven’t,” I said. “I don’t know why you would even think that.”

“Don’t you?”

“Well, Niven isn’t – I mean he couldn’t – he’s not – ”

“Let’s not talk about it anymore if we don’t have to.” His voice was curiously tight.

In the heavy silence that followed, I heard Carmen run into the bathroom and slam the door. A flash of pain shot through my skull and the lights in the kitchen were suddenly blinding.

“I should go,” Clark said. “I really – ”

“We’re going to be all right,” I told him, and he knew that I didn’t believe it.

Chapter thirteen.

The phone on my desk rang and Carmen was on the other end.

“There’s a call for you on line two,” she said. “It’s a Mr. Chadwick.”

“I don’t know a Mr. Chadwick,” I said, amused by the name. “Did he say what he wanted?”
“He said it was important. I’m transferring you.”

I glanced across at Clark to see if he was paying attention, but he didn’t appear to be. His spit curl was back, but the lines between his eyes hadn’t gone anywhere. I was irritated with myself for having been so — open with him the night before. There was a click and I kicked my feet up onto my desk. I noticed the toes of my shoes were scuffed, and hoped that Niven hadn’t noticed, too. I would have to fix that.

“Miss Lane?” A deep male inquired.

I adjusted the phone so that I could hear better. “This is she.”

“I’m Fred Chadwick, and I’m with Paramount studios,” the male voice said. “How are you doing today?”

“I’m all right,” I said, growing cautious. I was probably in trouble about something I had said in one of my columns. I tried desperately to remember the last Paramount film I had written about.

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m sure you’re a very busy woman, so I’m going to get straight to the point. How happy are you with your current job?”

“I like it,” I said, then looked back at Clark. “Mostly.”

“At Paramount, we’re looking to add some new elements to our productions. One of the jobs we’re creating to help do that is that of production consultant. Somebody who looks over the script and cast lists and is around for the shootings, viewing, editing, all of that stuff — in order to give input and help catch mistakes and bad ideas early on. Are you with me so far?”

“So far,” I said, wondering why he was telling me all of this. Unless he was going to offer me the job, which seemed unlikely —
“We wanted to hire someone who has a different point of view about film – not someone who’s been in and around Hollywood for so long that everything is out of proportion for them. Someone who could be intelligent and objective about films. So we decided to hire a critic. Now the point of all of this, Miss Lane, is that Mr. Robinson suggested you for the job and, after reading your work we think that he’s right. You would be a good fit for us.”

I felt all of the blood rush to my head and somehow managed to jump out of my chair without dropping the phone or maiming myself.

“You’re asking me to come work for you?” I managed.

“That’s what I’m asking, yes.”

I looked over at Clark again. He was obviously listening now. We made eye contact and I smiled, but he didn’t.

“This Mr. Robinson – is that Eddy Robinson?”

“None other. He thinks very highly of your work.”

“And I would be living in LA?”

“We would take care of all the relocation. Find you a place to live and get you moved out here. We’ll have to talk about the details later, of course.”

“Salary?” I was almost afraid to ask. It was a good enough opportunity that they probably knew they could get away with paying next to nothing for it.

Mr. Chadwick quoted a figure that made my jaw drop. “But I want you to take a week or so to consider. Make that two weeks. We’re not in a rush, yet.”

I would have accepted right then, but I thought it was better to wait. I might, after all, feel differently about leaving Metropolis in the morning. I got Mr. Chadwick’s number and
typed it on my typewriter – right in the middle of my column about *Casablanca*. I hung up and pulled the paper out. I held it up to Clark.

“Edward G. Robinson recommended me for a job at Paramount where I would be having input into films and making money and living in Hollywood.” I reached for the phone to call Niven, but stopped in time. That wasn’t something I should do in front of Clark.


“Do you think I would succumb to its glamour and vices?” I teased.

“Are you sure you want to be that far from Metropolis?” He turned suddenly back to his work.

I picked up the phone and pushed the button that connected me with the switchboard. I was then connected to Carmen.

“Meet me for lunch,” I said. “I have big news.”

I hung up, thrilled with the new world that was opening up to me.

I had retyped and finished my column on *Casablanca* early and decided to leave the office. I jaywalked to the phone booth that stood across the street next to the river, watched a tour boat make its way away from the lake, left a message with Niven’s valet, and followed the sidewalk to State Street and then to the El. If I went to LA, my rides on the El would be limited. I tried to observe every detail as I got on – the cold, rough token between my fingers, the green steel turnstile that hit me at the top of the thighs as I went through. Old men in blue uniforms, perhaps wishing they were wearing uniforms overseas, sat patiently in straight chairs and watched us come and go. On the platform, the southbound train raced to a
stop and then flew away, blowing my hair and my coat around. There were pigeons, and pigeon dung, and a little girl was holding her mother’s hand, watching for the brown line north, biting her lower lip and keeping silent.

My train was stopped for twenty minutes because of a malfunction with the track ahead, and I spent that time studying a soot stained mural depicting an Indian warrior and a field of sunflowers. Whatever product had been advertised had worn off, or been blasted off by wind and dust. It didn’t matter. When the spring came, someone else would paint over it and wait for their work to get worn away. I wouldn’t be able to stand that. But columns for a newspaper didn’t last much longer. The difference was that I didn’t have to watch my work be destroyed. I wondered, for the first time, if mom would have been proud of me if she were still alive.

I took a long time walking to my apartment from the train, and a long time walking up the stairs. And when I started down my hallway I saw, leaning against my door, my father. It may have been the light, but his face was downright gray. He stood there, like a marionette at attention, and watched me approach. I had to push him out of the way so that I could unlock my door.

“Irene?” he gasped, squinting at me. A slick of sweat covered his face and neck. He followed me in and the door swung shut behind us.

“What do you want?” I asked, unbuttoning my raincoat. I could show it to Eddy Robinson and see if he recognized his tailor’s handiwork. I ran my hand over the fabric in order to soothe the prickling of the back of my neck.

“It’s dark in here,” my father said with a gulp. “Turn on a light so that I can see.”
I switched on a light, even though the curtains were open and it wasn’t unusually cloudy.

“It seems I’m having trouble seeing,” he said. It was clearly an effort for him to talk.

“So you want me to get you glasses?”

“I think it’s serious.”

His voice lacked the iron edge that it had always had. He was sick and he was going blind. It was pitiful. There was no other word for it. For the first time that I could remember, I actually looked at his face. In between the sores and discoloration, pain was etched into it. Enormous pain. The way he held himself said that his body hurt, too. This man, the man who had taken my mother away from me, who had destroyed my childhood and my hopes for a normal future, was dying. The man who was Jonathan Goldberg might already be dead. The humanity in me reached out in pity, but I slapped its hand away.

“I’m not a doctor,” I said quietly, not wanting to fight with him. “I don’t know if it’s serious or not. I think it might be. Go talk to a doctor and please, leave me alone. You’ve done enough damage.”

“It can’t be serious,” he said with a sneer that fell away with a sharp grunt. “But it’s not pleasant to have everything go dark on you. I’m going to stay here until it passes.” He sat down on the sofa, grasping to keep his bravado intact.

“You’re not going to stay here. You have the money for a hospital. Go there.”

“I’m not going to a doctor!” he roared, and then coughed deeply. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. “I don’t need a bunch of pretty boys in white coats prodding me with needles to make me feel better. I’m no stranger to pain.”
I was standing near the wall, near the phone and the door to the kitchen. I had the urge to run in there and hide, to call Niven or Dr. Van DerMeer and ask what to do now. I didn’t want to look at my father again – once had been enough. I stared at the ceiling fixture above his head.

“Then you don’t have to go to a doctor. Niven said you live in a hotel now. Go back there.” My voice was under control, and I didn’t even have to fight to keep it that way.

“I can’t see.” Something shrill and desperate crept into his voice. He composed himself.

The phone rang and I reached out for it, not taking my eyes off of my father’s profile.

“You have some big news for me?” Niven said when I answered.

“My father is here right now,” I said. “That’s not the big news. But he says that he can’t see and is going to come and live with me. I told him to go see a doctor. He wouldn’t do that. I told him to go home. He’s still on my sofa.”

I heard Slim whine near the phone. My father turned his entire body so that he was facing me.

“Get him to a doctor,” Niven said.

“I can’t make him go to a doctor if he doesn’t want to.”

“I know.” Niven’s sigh was frustrated. “And he doesn’t want to go. He probably never will. But he’s going to have to if he wants something done. If anything can be done at this point.”

“Tell him not to worry,” my father interrupted. “I’m staying here. Here with my Irene.”
Cold fingers dug themselves into my spine. Niven could probably hear my heart jump.

“Listen,” Niven said through clenched teeth. “I’ll be right over. Give him some coffee or something. But here’s something important.”

“I’m listening.”

“Don’t let your guard down. This blindness—seems kind of sudden.” There was hesitation in his voice. “Just be careful, all right?”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. I was always saying that.

I hung up the phone and turned to my father. He wore a new off-the-rack suit, double breasted with knife lapels, in muted canary yellow. It was close to the color of his skin. His tie was green and his shirt was striped. It was the sort of thing he would have worn for a fancy occasion when I was a child. The cheapness, the garishness, the—desperation of it all fit him now perfectly.

“I’ll make you some coffee,” I offered.

“I don’t drink coffee.”

I edged into the kitchen, aware that he couldn’t see me. Whether he could or not, it didn’t matter. Niven didn’t have to worry. My father wouldn’t be able to lift a glass, let alone harm me. And Dr. Van DerMeer would have less to worry about. The last thing I was feeling was terror, and this was the moment I had been dreading for eight years. Eight years was a long time and a lot had changed. I took out my tin of coffee and measured it, seeing myself in mom’s place, in her green apron with my hair bobbed off. Niven said I looked like her. I held the tin up to my face. I had her almond eyes and long nose and almost too-wide mouth. I missed her.
The coffee was dripping when I heard somebody come into my apartment.

“Hello, Jack,” Niven said.

I went to the doorway of the kitchen. Niven stood with his back to the window, facing my father.

“I thought you promised not to bother her, Jack. That was one of the conditions of your employment. And that means coming here. Uninvited. No matter what. If you have a problem, you let Freder know. You don’t try and make Irene solve it. Understand?”

“I remember you promised to help me find her,” my father rasped.

“And I did. But I’m not going to let you punish her.” He took out a cigarette and lit it, holding to case out to my father.

“I don’t want your tobacco,” he spat.

Niven shrugged. “All right. You probably don’t need it anyway. I have the Daimler out front – why don’t I take you to Dr. Pirsig and we can see if he can do anything about your eyes?”

“I’m not going to let the doctors see me like this.”

“Then I won’t take you to get your eyes checked. It’s time for you to go, though. Do you want a ride somewhere or are you going to walk?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You don’t have that choice to make,” I said from my spot. I picked up the telephone. “There’s a police station just down the street. They break up fights after ballgames and escort people out of places they’re not wanted. Niven told you to leave. Now I’m telling you. And if you don’t listen to me, you will listen to my friends in blue.”
It took my father a long time to stand up. He straightened his tie and adjusted his jacket with the same puppety stiffness that I had noticed when he was in the hallway. Staring straight ahead, he walked up to me. Niven’s pose tensed and he took a step closer to my father and I, but hesitated. My father squinted and pulled his arm back to strike me. And then he froze, turned, and left the apartment, letting the door slam behind him.

My knees felt weak as I stumbled over and collapsed onto the sofa.

“That was strange,” was all I could think of to say.

“He’s probably going to get stranger before the end,” Niven said, sitting down next to me and passing me his cigarette.

I took it, but didn’t want any. I was cold. I wanted a blanket and a cup of coffee.

“I don’t enjoy seeing him like this,” I said. “It’s pitiful. But I’m also glad I’m seeing it, because I know that he’s gotten a punishment he deserves.” It was more just, I thought, than if he had been cleanly executed in prison. It occurred to me that if Superman could see what happened when actions were punished by their consequences, he might be able to hang up his cape with a sigh of relief.

“We all get what we deserve. Sooner or later.”

“Some of us get things we don’t deserve. I got offered a job in Hollywood.”

I was more surprised than Niven at the sudden shift in the conversation. But I didn’t want to talk about Superman or my father, and the job offer had been on my mind all day.

Niven’s face lit up. “But that’s extraordinary, Irene. Tell me about it.” He took the cigarette from me and put it out.
“I would be a production assistant.” I paused. That wasn’t right. The details were already a little hazy in my mind. “I mean a production consultant. They would find me a place to live and move me and everything.”

“What does a production consultant do?”

“Gives input. It sounds like I would do exactly what I do now, only instead of writing about a film that’s already in theatres, I would be talking about it and giving ideas about it while it’s being produced.”

“I think you deserve it.”

I expected him to be joking, but he wasn’t. He was as serious as I had seen him. I was glad he was serious. I wanted to deserve the job, to take it, and have everything in my life work out perfectly.

“Edward G. Robinson thinks I deserve it, too.” I watched Niven’s reaction and was gratified. After being sufficiently impressed, he leaned over and kissed me on the forehead.

“Well, that settles it. When do you leave?”

“I haven’t accepted it. Mr. Chadwick – the man who called me – wants me to take some time to decide. I do have some things to consider. There are some things I would miss about the city.” I couldn’t hold back a smile. “I would be by the ocean, though. Have you ever sailed on the ocean?”

“That’s where I learned. All of the Hyannis boys do. It’s one of the longest standing social rules.” He slipped into a Massachusetts accent that I had never heard him use before.

“Am I correct to read your last question as an invitation to the City of Angels?”

“I had assumed you would come.”

“And you would be correct to do so. And if I like it, I might just stay.”
We avoided eye contact. I was hoping to hear him say that, but part of me said that it would be better for him to stay in Metropolis where he belonged.

"How about if I take you somewhere to celebrate the new job," Niven said.

"There's nothing to celebrate yet. I haven't taken it."

"You still need to eat. And you're tense. Going out will be good for you."

I hadn't noticed until he pointed it out, but I was. My jaw was clenched so tightly that my molars ached. Niven was good at reading me. He was probably good at everything.


She sat in an armchair by Stan's hospital bed, and I perched on a stool hear her. I was trying to sit up straight, but I kept relaxing and losing my balance. The stool was high and narrow and I could only guess what they used it for.

"I haven't really decided yet," I told her, even though I really had. "It's a big step and there are things to consider. I can't just get up and leave, you know."

"I don't see anything stopping you. I've got Stan. But you don't have anybody." I thought she said that nastily.

"Just because I'm not getting married doesn't mean I don't have anybody," I shot back. But the list of people I did have was rather sad. I could count them all on one hand: Niven, Clark, Carmen, and, in spite of my occasional dislike of him and neglect of our last session, Dr. Van DerMeer. And the only reason the good doctor was on the list was because he had known me longer than anybody.

"Oh, I forgot about Niven. I'm sure he would always fly out to see you. He's got some plans along those lines, I'm sure. He did arrange the job, didn't he?"
“He didn’t even know about it until I told him.”

“I suppose he would have been more inclined to try and make you into a starlet anyway.”

I didn’t want to talk about Niven. The night before, when he dropped me off after dinner, I didn’t want to go inside. I didn’t want to have to wait until it fit into both of our schedules to see him again. And I certainly didn’t want him to be living halfway across the country from me. I was too attached to him, and that was going to have to change fast.

“Every man wants to date a starlet,” Carmen persisted.

“He’s not like that,” I snapped. “He’s more interested in theory.”

She took her eyes off of Stan long enough to give me a funny look, and I realized that I had said something stupid that didn’t make sense to anyone but me.

“I mean that brains are more important to him than looks. He’s not a Hollywood gangster.”

“I know. He went to Harvard, and that makes everything all right. If I never remember anything else about him, I’ll remember that he went to Harvard and ended up as the head of the mob. What does that say about him?”

“Why do we have to talk about Niven?”

“What do you want to talk about? I don’t want to talk about Stan. You don’t want to talk about what’s on sale on Michigan. Neither of us wants to talk about Superman. What is there left? Want me to tell you how I survived the depression? Or about the man I thought I was going to marry when I was seventeen? How about if you tell me what you were doing twelve years ago while I was having my heart broken for the first time?” A corner of her mouth twitched violently.
There was no way I was going to talk about what I was doing twelve years ago. So I opened my mouth and said, “I’m doing a series on Casablanca. Today’s column was about how honor comes before love. I think it’s an interesting observation to make, and probably true, and probably wouldn’t hold any water with the public outside of wartime. I looked at the love story aspect of the film more in context of when it was released, not the story itself. For today. If everything were peaceful right now, I mean, if all we had to worry about were the mundane things, no one would care about honor. It’s only because, at this point, our social consciousness is so wrapped around the idea of world war, that a film like Casablanca could succeed.”

Carmen turned to stare at me. She stared at me as if I were something revolting.

“Nobody cares, Lois,” she said. “It’s a movie. That’s it. It’s got nothing to do with anything. You keep thinking that these things matter, but they don’t. To anyone. You need to realize that and move on with your life.”

I let myself slide off the stool. I wanted to slap her, across her pretty face, to make her hurt. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jacket.

“I have a bus to catch,” I said, and got out of the hospital as quickly as I could.

I was on my second poppy seed pastry before Clark had finished his first cup of coffee. I was eating so fast because I was nervous having coffee with him. Clark was even less safe to talk to than Carmen, now. The worst I could expect from Carmen were pointed jabs aimed at things I cared about. Talking to Clark could do anything from opening up fresh wounds to digging out old ones. And we were on the brink of not being friends anymore. We weren’t ever going to be friends, and we hadn’t ever been, really. At least, that’s how I
felt. I didn’t want to make the wrong move and have those feelings validated. So I wouldn’t bring up Hollywood, or Niven, or anything that might lead to one of those topics.

I chewed my pastry and felt my teeth grind. Clark sat there, completely exhausted and, seemingly, benign. Not long ago, I would have said that he was completely benign unless you happened to be a ‘bad guy’. But if that were true, I wouldn’t be nervous now, watching my verbal step with him. I told myself that I was just being careful of his feelings. I forced a smile at him and hoped that it wouldn’t seem forced.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Do you want some more coffee?” I asked.

“I still have some.” He tilted his cup towards me so that I could see it was almost full.

“Isn’t it cold?” I shoved the last bite of pastry in my mouth and realized that I couldn’t chew it comfortably.

“How about if we get you some lunch?” he offered, leaning back in his seat and resting a palm on the table.

I swallowed. Neither of us wanted to be there. I could be at the Pump Room with Niven, and Clark could be doing whatever it was that he did when he was alone.

“I don’t want any lunch,” I said. “I would like another pastry, though.”

He drained his cup without comment and went to the counter. I saw him talking to the woman behind it, and then waiting, and he returned to the table with a white ceramic coffee pot, which he sat down in front of me. He had a capable way of doing things. At first, I had assumed that his capability extended to human interaction. That seemed like years ago.
“She’ll bring out another pastry for you,” he said. “There’s coffee in the pot.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You’re very capable.”

“You give strange compliments.”

“It’s not that strange. It’s better than my saying, arbitrarily, that I like your suit or the way you smell.”

“Thank you, then.” He poured coffee for both of us. “I bet you’ll miss this place when you go to Los Angeles.”

It bothered me that he had brought it up. I had been avoiding it for his sake.

“I haven’t taken the job,” I said.

“Well, it sounds interesting.” Jealousy crept into his eyes. “But do you think it’s really for you?”

“Why wouldn’t it be for me?”

“I just thought –”

“You don’t think I could do it.” The waitress deposited another pastry on the table in front of me. I didn’t want it anymore. My stomach was tightening and I was disappointed with Clark. He didn’t have any confidence in me. To do a job, to take care of myself, to choose the people I wanted to spend my time with.

“No. I think you’d be excellent at it. But – wouldn’t you miss your old job?”

“I doubt it. I don’t like working for a paper. I love what I do for it – if that makes any sense – and I would be doing the same thing in an environment more suited to that kind of work.”

His mouth drooped and he looked out the window. I sighed inwardly. I always said the wrong things.
“I would miss you and Carmen, though. I’d miss Wrigley Field and the planetarium. And the El. I think everyone uses buses in LA.”

Whether he believed me or not, that made him brighten. I tore off a piece of my pastry, hating myself. I might miss him, I might not. Guilt was making itself comfortable inside my skull. Of course it was. I knew Clark was miserable and I wasn’t even going to try to do anything about it.

“Well, I’m sure it’s a perfect job for you,” he said blandly, pouring a lot of sugar into his coffee.

“Why do you care if I go or not?” He wouldn’t tell me. I didn’t know why I bothered to ask. He played his feelings even closer to the vest than I did.

“I don’t think you shouldn’t go.” He sipped his coffee and made a face. It had to be too sweet for him. “But either way, I don’t have much of a say in it.”

“I want to know if you’re really happy for me, though. Or if you object to my going, and why. I’m not saying that I’d stay if you asked me to, but I do care about your opinion. And you may have something to add that I never would have thought of.”

“I can tell you what I think, sure. I can object to something. But what good does that do me if I can’t do anything about it?” he flexed his hands, looking down at them helplessly.

“If by doing something, you mean fixing the situation, of course you can’t. Most things don’t need to be fixed, anyway. But you can do plenty. You may not be able to change someone or a situation – people aren’t as simple as a broken bridge or a speeding train – but you can do plenty.”
"You tell me that, but when it comes down to it – if I can’t change anything, what can I do to make a situation better? In order for an objectionable situation to become non-objectionable – ”

"Things have to change that are out of your control. Some things do fall into that category. Quite a few, even for you. And that’s something that you have to learn to live with."

I finished my pastry in silence. I wouldn’t be wanting dinner. Niven would be concerned that I wasn’t eating and he would ask me what was wrong, and I wouldn’t know what to tell him. I glanced at my watch. I had an hour before I was supposed to meet him. I got an idea.

"Clark," I said.

"Lois?"

"Do you want to come see The Scarlet Claw with Niven and me tonight?" I didn’t have to wait for Clark’s reaction to know that it wasn’t the brightest idea I had ever had. But Niven wouldn’t mind, and it might be good for Clark.

"I don’t think so," he said, when he had recovered from the impropriety of my suggestion.

"You might like him once you talked with him for a bit. He’s not at all how you might think."

"How do you know what I think he is?"

"It’s pretty obvious from the way you talk about him. He’s a ‘what’, not a ‘who’. And you’re waiting around for him to do something that will let you throw him in prison again. If you took some time to consider him as a person – ”"
"I have. And I’ve found him lacking. You might think that you can’t judge a person by their actions, but I know better. I have to be more aware of things like that since - ”

"He didn’t kill any of those people."

We both held our breath for a moment and then I shrugged. It was better to let it go.

"If you decide to come, the movie starts at eight at the Tivoli."

"I suppose I don’t have to go," he said.

A woman in a purple hat stopped across Broadway to look at a pair of shoes in The Slipper Box. There was a clap of thunder and a steady, heavy rain began to fall. The woman struggled with her bags and managed to open an umbrella without dropping anything. Clark’s face was expressionless as he stared at her.

Niven didn’t comment on my lack of appetite until after he had eaten and the waiter had taken away my full plate of spinach salad.

"Are you all right?" Niven asked, taking a sip of whatever it was he had been drinking.

"I don’t know if I like Clark very much," I said. "And I don’t feel comfortable disliking him, in spite of the fact that I do it fairly frequently. I don’t mind disliking Carmen now and then, because she definitely deserves it. But Clark hasn’t done anything, really. He pulled that stunt with the interview, but if you’re not upset about it, I don’t have any reason to be. And Clark doesn’t have that many people who like him. So if I don’t, he’s in big trouble."

"I take it things didn’t go very well with him today? Or with Carmen last night? You haven’t said anything about that."
I flinched. I hadn’t told him about Carmen’s criticism of my work. He would take it as hard as I did.

“Carmen is upset. She said some very hurtful things to me. I don’t know if it’s because she’s frustrated that I’m going to Hollywood and she feels that she’s stuck here, or if she’s coping with the loss of Stan. But either way, she’s not happy. Neither is Clark. And I think that both of their unhappiness is somehow the result of my actions.”

“Do you really need someone to tell you that that isn’t true, or do you know it?”

Niven’s eyes dug into me. “Because I think you’re smart enough that you realize that people are responsible for their reactions to the circumstances around them. If Carmen is jealous of you, it’s because she is, not because you’re taking a job somewhere. And if Clark doesn’t like you and I seeing each other, that’s because he has unresolved feelings for you, not because you are doing anything wrong.”

“You sound like my doctor.”

“Well, then. He and I are probably the people you can trust the most to have your well-being as our motivation.”

“Except that Dr. Van DerMeer would lose a good sum of money if I were to stop seeing him.”

“There are other people with problems. Don’t flatter yourself by thinking you’re his only source of income.” A smile creased his eyes just for a moment.

“I’m being serious. As much as I know it’s not my fault, really, I know that I could be – taking better care of them. Like I should have of mom.”
"I think that you took fine care of your mom. You loved her. It sounds like your protected her, as much as you could have. I don’t know what you think you could have done differently."

"I could have saved her."

"If you could have saved her, you would have. Don’t punish yourself for her death by sacrificing yourself to Carmen and Clark. You’ll be miserable in LA if you go thinking you should have stayed. And I know that you aren’t planning on staying."

"I haven’t decided to go." My stomach felt worse than it had when I was talking to Clark. I wanted to leave Metropolis. If I could get away from the place of my problems, maybe the problems themselves would fade. Clark would stop being a part of my life. Carmen would forget how much she didn’t like me. I wouldn’t ever see my father again. And no one in LA had heard of Irene Goldman, so I could even stop lying about my name.

"Irene."

He reached across and put a hand over mine, pinning it to the table. He wanted to be sure I didn’t miss whatever was coming next.

"If you don’t take this job, you’re going to regret it for the rest of your life. Even if you don’t want to take it now, if it seems like too much hassle or seems too selfish, you know that it’s what you should do. It’s what you want. If you don’t go, you’ll hate yourself for it. And if you go and it doesn’t work out, you can go back to being a film critic. You’re not risking anything. And you don’t have anything to tie you down to Metropolis."

"I’m not so sure about that," I said, surprised at the intensity with which I said it.

"May I take that personally?" Niven asked, matching my intensity.
I was afraid of the ramifications of answering him, but he knew how I felt whether I told him or not. Still, I lowered my eyes and kept my mouth shut.

“I want you to take it,” he said slowly. “But I don’t want you to go to LA by yourself. It’s no problem to get a second flat out west. I was planning on it, anyway.”

I nodded. I was relieved, because Niven was the one part of Metropolis that I couldn’t leave behind.

Niven and I walked toward the theatre. It was dark for a city at night. Metropolis was always dark at night, which made it seem run down and desolate. A gust of wind kicked up the dust in the street and I thought of all of the western gunfights I had seen in the movies. If Niven had been wearing a gun around his hips, it would have been perfect. The wind cut through my raincoat and I walked closer to Niven. I stayed as close to him as I could.

Niven bought our tickets to the movie and the girl selling them snapped her gum and didn’t react to him at all. Maybe it wasn’t such a stretch, after all, to believe that people didn’t see Superman through Clark Kent. So people were unobservant. And forgetful. The Goldman case wouldn’t mean anything to anyone anymore. Ten years from now, nothing that mattered today would mean anything. People would forget about Hitler and about Pearl Harbor, Edward G. Robinson and Superman.

“Lois?” said a voice behind me and I turned to see Clark. And a very confused Niven.

“You came,” was all I could muster.

“You invited me.”
Niven, who always knew the appropriate thing to do, wandered over to look at the posters for coming attractions.

"I thought you were going to have things to do," I said.

"I do need to keep an ear out for people in distress."

I would have thought he was deadpanning, if there had been any spark of humor in that statement. But he was completely serious and sincere. That was why I was having such a hard time disliking him. Ironically, it was also why liking him wasn’t so easy. One of the reasons.

"You’re going to be nice to Niven," I told him, taking him by the elbow and steering him over to where Niven was lighting a cigarette in front of the Lady in the Death House poster. I wished I had a camera. The flame of the lighter reflected in Niven’s eyes for a second before he snapped it out. He dropped the lighter back into his pocket and extended a hand to Clark.

"I look forward to meeting you on a personal basis rather than professionally," he said. "I have heard good things about you."

Clark hesitated, started to shake hands, hesitated again, gave Niven a smile that was more of a grimace, and put his hands safely in his pockets. Niven clasped his hands behind him.

"Lois and I are colleagues," Clark said unnecessarily. "And I’ve heard things about you, too."

"Everyone has," I said, hoping Clark hadn’t come just to pick a fight. I stood next to Niven, and he handed me his cigarette case before I asked for it.
“I know that you two work at the same paper,” Niven said, passing over his lighter.

“I remember seeing your name in connection with the Sup-”

“And I remember that you spent eighteen months in Joliet.”

I extinguished the lighter and cleared my throat. Niven took his smoking paraphernalia back and took me gently by the arm.

“Let’s go get seats,” he said. “The theatre is probably crowded and we don’t want to be stuck in the back because we were out here gabbing.”

Niven ushered me into the darkness of the theatre and an usher showed the three of us to seats that were reasonably in the middle of a row, not too near the front, and not too close to the high school students in the back. Niven and I switched seats so that I was in the middle; no small feat, and one that put me right in the center of the tension. Niven wasn’t thrilled that Clark was there. Clark hated Niven. I was afraid that Clark was going to do something stupid and ruin the evening for all of us. And I was concerned that Niven would let his good graces drop and give Clark a personal reason to dislike him. I took a puff of the cigarette that was still burning in my fingers, then dropped it and ground it out. Clark’s attitude towards Niven might be more bearable if I believed that he was concerned for my well-being. As it was, I thought it was either plain jealousy or the need to have what he considered justice done. Coming from anyone else, that would have been somewhat acceptable. Coming from Clark, it was unbelievable. Clark was supposed to be good. He had to be. He couldn’t be any other way.

I tried to focus on the picture, but I was aware of Niven quietly smoking next to me and Clark’s nervous energy on my other side. When the lights in the theatre came back up, I had trouble prying my fingers loose from the arms of my seat. Niven helped me on with my
raincoat and then suggested that we stop at Karl’s before calling it an evening. Clark agreed, which added to my uneasiness. Niven led the way out of the theatre and down Randolph past Wells to the lounge. It was owned by Karl, who was from Berlin but had patterned his place after a bistro he had visited in Paris. Niven went there a lot. He took me there a lot. I liked it there, I liked mingling with the European expatriates and I liked the soothing ambience. Maybe it would do something to lessen the hostility in the air. I should never have invited Clark. I would have to apologize to Niven for it later.

“Ah, your usual table is open,” Cecil the waiter said when Niven and I walked into Karl’s. Cecil took all of our coats, handed them off to Yvonne, and led us to a rounded booth that faced the tiny stage. “I can bring an extra chair for your friend. I think it might be a tight fit for the three of you.”

“That’s very considerate,” Niven told him. “Do you know if Karl is going to be here tonight?”

“You just missed him, I’m afraid.”

“Tell him hello for me,” I said, and Cecil said that he would.

The three of us stood by the booth, waiting to see who would sit down and who would wait for the chair. A couple pushed past us on the way to the dance floor, the man casting a dirty look at Clark. He was the most in the way of the three of us.

“Why don’t you two sit down,” Niven suggested. “I can order drinks for us and see how Cecil is coming with the chair.”

I slid into the booth, pulling my skirt aside so that Clark could sit. Even with ample room between us, there was a spot for Niven. “I don’t think we need a chair,” I said.
“What would you like from the bar?” Niven was hazy from all of the smoke in the room. Karl’s was small, but it seemed like it held more people than Gilly’s. The crowds and haze were different, here. They were calming, surreal, and elegant.

“I don’t drink,” snapped Clark.

“I don’t, either. I usually get tonic or coffee. I think they have cola, too, and I know that Karl keeps tea on hand,” I said. I reached out to Niven for his cigarette case, and he extracted it from his coat and handed it to me without even stopping to watch what he was doing.

“All right, then I’ll have coffee.” Clark wasn’t any happier with coffee than he would have been with champagne, but Niven pretended not to notice and disappeared. I heard Cecil laugh and assumed that Niven had put a stop to the extra chair business.

I chose a brown cigarette that I knew contained Egyptian tobacco and held the case out to Clark. He shook his head. I put the cigarette between my lips and took my time lighting it with the candle that was on the table. I wanted to ask Clark to leave, to apologize for ever thinking that it was a good idea to have him and Niven together, and, by doing that, hopefully nip whatever was brewing in the bud. Clark tugged on his tie. I had never seen this one on Niven, but it was the kind he would wear. If Clark left, I could have an evening alone with Niven, and we could listen to the singer and discuss Los Angeles and relax.

“Why did you really come?” I asked Clark.

“I came to be with you.” He avoided eye contact.

I blew what was almost a smoke ring in his direction. “You’re antagonizing Niven.”

“He’s not being very polite to me.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t be polite to him. You could at least try, for tonight.”
“I didn’t come to be polite to him. I came to see you.”

“Then why aren’t you considering my feelings? I obviously care about the man. Do you think I enjoy seeing you treating him like he’s so far below you?”

When Clark frowned this time, he looked like a spoiled child. I couldn’t tell what was Clark Kent and what was Superman, and what was real. I didn’t care, anymore, tonight. Maybe he was putting on an act with Niven. Maybe he was so negative towards him because there was a part of Clark that was willing to accept the good that was in Niven, and that threatened the black and white worldview that he had clung to for so long. It would be wrong of me not to at least try and give him the benefit of the doubt.

“I can’t act like everything is normal and okay,” Clark said. “If something is wrong, I have to act on it.”

“And being rude to Niven is acting on it?”

Before he replied, Niven came back to the table with two glasses and a book of matches. He fit himself into the empty space beside me and put my tonic and lime on the table in front of me.

“The bartender is having them make some fresh coffee for you,” Niven said. “Cecil or somebody will bring it out when it’s finished.”

Clark didn’t reply. I took the matches from Niven and the house lights dimmed even more. A white spotlight glared on the stage as the blonde singer shimmered out and began to sing a German song.

“Did you know that’s Karl’s niece?” Niven asked me. “He got her out of Germany just in time.”

“I thought his family was all dead.”
“Apparently not.” Niven took a cigarette out of the case that I had left on the table and I struck a match for him. I put it out in the ashtray, where my cigarette lay smoking down.

“Would you like a cigarette?” Niven asked Clark.

“I don’t smoke.”

I lit another match and watched it burn until Niven blew it out.

“Did you like the movie?” I asked no one in particular as I watched the smoke rise from my cigarette. It rose too steadily, so I jiggled the ashtray.

“It was all right,” Clark said.

“What kinds of movies do you normally see?” Niven asked.

“I don’t usually see movies.”

“What have you seen that you liked?”

“I saw Casablanca. I liked that.”

“What did you like about it?” I asked.

“I liked it because everybody did the right thing in the end.” He gave me a pained, pointed look.

“Noble self-sacrifice? The redemption of questionable men?” Niven prompted, blowing a perfect smoke ring.

“Yes.”

“It’s an interesting question,” I said, the words stumbling over each other. “I should write my next column about that. The question really is, though, what is it that makes the men in that movie questionable and what makes them good and what redeems them? Does anyone really change in the end, or do they just do something different than they did before?”
Is Rick really any different as a person whether he’s running a club or fighting for the underground?"

Niven nodded. He took a sip of his drink and a waiter that was not Cecil brought Clark his coffee and exchanged the usual pleasantries with us.

“I think that what made Rick ‘questionable’ in the movie was how people perceived him. He wasn’t doing anything wrong in his café. He didn’t do anything wrong when he joined the resistance. One action is seen, by the audience as being superior to the other, and by doing that better thing, he has redeemed himself in their eyes.” Niven tapped the ashes off of his cigarette and ground mine out.

“But if he had been doing the right thing in the first place, he wouldn’t have needed to redeem himself,” Clark said stiffly. “Instead of using movies to glorify bad people who have turned good, they should focus on how much better it is to be good from the beginning.”

“All right,” Niven said. “Define ‘good’.”

I gulped my tonic and the bubbles burned my nose. I sneezed and put the glass down. I couldn’t tell if Niven was baiting Clark, or if he was interested in discussing the nature of good and evil.

“It’s whatever is good, helpful, and keeps evil in check.”

“All right,” Niven said again. He leaned back in the booth and his shoulder pressed against mine. He put his cigarette out before continuing. “I have a question for you, then. Is it acceptable to kill innocent people?”

Clark hadn’t touched his coffee. His fingers tapped the table, but not in rhythm to “Starlit Skies”.

“No,” he pronounced. “Not ever.”
“That’s what I thought. Now. Would you consider our boys overseas to be heroes?”

Niven knew what he was doing, and I felt bad for Clark because it looked like he was about to be blindsided by logic. I started to say something, but decided it was better to let the two of them handle their own problems. I relaxed against Niven and took another drink of my tonic.

“Of course I would. Who wouldn’t?”

“Why?”

“Because they’re risking their lives to save other people.”

“At what expense? Do you really think that the so-called guilty are the only ones that are being killed day after day? Have you ever thought that maybe, out on the battlefield, Mr. Joe Douglas of Smallville who has a nice mother and a pretty girlfriend back home might actually enjoy killing? Do you know how many killers there are out there and how many are really, at heart, innocent?”

The consternation in Clark’s face was too much. I couldn’t stand to see him like that.

“I think this is a very simplistic way of looking at the issue,” I said. As much as I wanted to see where this conversation was going, and as much as I had wanted to have it myself, I couldn’t leave Clark at Niven’s mercy.

“But it’s a simple example,” Niven countered. “If we were to use something more esoteric, we would risk obscuring the issue by arguing about the meaning of things. If we used a local example, like Superman and the way he’s set himself up as a moral judge — ” here he paused to stare at Clark — “we risk letting personal feelings into an intellectual discussion.”
“Is that all it is to you?” Clark exclaimed, pushing his chair back, as if he was going
to leap up. But he stayed sitting.

Niven shifted and put his arm across the back of the booth. I took the matches off the
table in order to have something to fidget with.

“Clark,” I said, cautiously and as gently as possible, “it is an intellectual problem. If
we didn’t think about it – apart from emotion – how would we be prepared to make decisions
about right and wrong when we really need to?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Clark said flatly, staring at a spot between the end of our booth
and the singer. “I can tell the two apart without turning it into some kind of intellectual
problem. It’s like day and night.”

“I suppose it might be, in your world,” Niven mused. “But it isn’t like that here. I’m
just trying to make a point.”

“And what is your point?” Clark demanded, his hands clenching into fists. His body
seemed angry, but there was a great emptiness in his eyes.

“That you shouldn’t be so quick to punish people who aren’t like you,” Niven said,
quietly and evenly.

In the ensuing silence, I finished my tonic and lime and watched Clark’s knuckles
whiten. Niven dropped his arm around my shoulders and I tried to relax, but as I shifted the
ice in the bottom of my glass, I grew more and more uncomfortable. If we didn’t get out of
here, the storm that Clark had been gathering around himself was going to explode.

“I need some fresh air,” I told Niven. “Can we go? Do you want to walk down State
and look at the marquee lights? Or watch the jets over the pier?”
"I'll get our coats," Niven said, and removed himself from the booth. I didn’t want him to go. I didn’t want to be left alone with Clark.

"Of course you’re welcome to join us," I offered, not really meaning it.

Clark didn’t respond. We sat in silence, listening to Karl’s niece sing "Ich Will Allein Sein." Niven returned with our coats and Cecil, who was doing his Winston Churchill impression. I remembered when Niven told me about meeting Churchill, and then when I first met Niven, and I was shocked to be there, in a European café, with him.

"You’ll be here next week for Karl’s birthday celebration, right?" Cecil asked me.

"We’re already planning on it," I said, letting Niven help me on with my coat. I noticed that Clark had already grabbed his and was standing with it draped rigidly over his arm. He looked like he was made out of stone. Cecil wished us a good night and left. Niven put his coat on, buttoned it, and then buttoned up the top two buttons of mine.

"It’s chilly outside," he said. "And don’t forget your gloves."

I pulled mine out of my pocket and tugged them on as we left the club, Clark, me, and Niven. Niven put his hat on once we were on the sidewalk and stopped to light a cigarette.

"Do you want to go for a walk with us, Clark?" he asked, putting his lighter and cigarette case away. He took my hand and we started walking.

Clark walked along behind us, so I assumed he was along for the duration of the evening, whether he was motivated by loneliness or jealousy or wanting to get back at Niven for making him seem naive.

"The Mikado is going to be here next week," Niven said, passing me his cigarette.

"Would you like to get tickets for it?"
“Do you know if it will be playing Monday? I’ll be at the movies all the other nights this week.”

We turned left onto State. I handed Niven his cigarette back. He pointed to the Metropolis Theatre.

“We can go check. That’s where it’s playing."

We were approaching a narrow alley and I turned to ask Clark if he liked opera. But as I did so, Niven’s hand was jerked from my grasp and I saw Clark pull him into the alley.

“Listen to me,” he said, standing too close to Niven. “I’m not going to keep standing by watching you ruin her life. I can’t believe that you’ve pursued this as long as you have. You have no – decency. If you’re going to be loose in the city, you should at least have the common, everyday decency to stay away from people like Lois, good people, who don’t need or want someone like you – ”

“At the risk of sounding rude,” Niven said calmly, tossing his cigarette into a puddle, “what do you propose to do about it?”

I moved closer to Niven, feeling the blood drain out of my face. Clark wouldn’t do anything stupid. He couldn’t. Niven smiled at me.

“You know,” he said, “I hate to have to be the one to tell you this, but it’s up to her, not you, what she does and who she does it with. And it should be apparent to you by now that she doesn’t need anyone to protect her.”

Niven turned his back to Clark and ushered me out of the alley, still cool but obviously wary. He had taken two steps when Clark gripped him by the arm, swung him around, and landed his fist on Niven’s jaw. Visions of Superman leaping over buildings and stopping a runaway bus with his bare hands blinded me. Niven fell against a pile of boxes
and I rushed forward to help him up. I didn’t have a coffeepot this time. I didn’t know what
I could do against Clark, and I realized that Clark might be trying to kill him.

I pulled Niven to his feet, and he spit out two molars. Then he took a handkerchief
out of his pocket and wiped the blood off of his mouth and chin. He looked at the red stain
on the white linen and tossed it to the ground.

“Well, sir, you have made your point,” he said. He pushed me out of Clark’s reach
and put his hand in his overcoat pocket. “May we go home now, or would you like to hit me
again?”

I bit my lip. I tasted blood and started forward again, but Niven stopped me with a
frown. Did Clark know his own strength? Had he been planning this? Was he really going
to attack Niven while I was standing right there?

“Niven, let’s go,” I said. “I would really like to go.”

“You heard her,” Niven said. “We would really like to go.”

He took a step back but Clark grabbed him by the lapels with one hand and
backhanded him with the other. Niven reeled from the blow, but before a second had passed,
his hand was out of his pocket and the barrel of a big automatic was digging into Clark’s
stomach.

“You’re holding back, aren’t you,” Niven said, in an odd, raspy voice. “You could
kill me with your bare hands. And I could kill you with this. I could kill you quicker. And
more easily.” He removed the safety with a click, the same sound his lighter made when he
put it out. “I don’t want to shoot you.”

He jabbed Clark with the gun until he had his back against a brick wall. His face was
in a streak of light from a streetlamp. He was neither sweating nor breathing heavily. Niven
squared at him and tugged off Clark’s glasses with his free hand. He lowered the gun a
fraction of an inch as recognition flashed across his face.

“You don’t want to kill me,” he said quietly. “We’re going to go now.”

Clark knocked the gun away and the two of them blurred together and back into the
shadows deeper into the alley. The gun slid to a stop near my feet and I picked it up out of
instinct. I stared at the fight without really seeing it, praying that Clark was holding himself
back, that someone would come this way and lend me a hand, that Niven was all right. I
fired a bullet into the side of the building.

Clark stopped long enough to stare at me, shocked. Niven collapsed onto the ground
and didn’t move any more. Clark looked down at him, pulled his foot back for a kick, and
then noticed that the gun in my hands was aimed at him. I saw mom’s body falling, I felt a
scream tear out of me, I felt my father’s blood splatter on me, I felt the shock of seeing
something I loved broken. But I didn’t fire the gun. I was shaking too hard. I fell to my
knees and vomited into a crate of empty cans, Niven’s gun clenched in my hand, digging into
my chest, the safety off.

I waited until I could breathe and had stopped gagging to look at Clark. He was
sagging against the wall of the alley, rubbing his bloody hands furiously, unaware of
anything else.

“Get out,” I spat. There was no way for me to express my rage. I aimed the gun
again and cocked it. “Now.”

Clark didn’t look at anything. Still rubbing his hands, he stumbled out of the alley. I
stumbled over to where Niven lay and put my ear against his chest. I found the vein in his
neck. He was still alive. I took a few deep, jagged breaths and loosened his tie and
unfastened his collar. I took off my coat and folded it under his head. I put the safety back on his gun and tucked it back into his coat. I was unwilling to leave him, but I had to find the nearest phone, I had to call – which hospital had he told me he used? Metropolis Masonic. I had to call Dr. Pirsig. I needed an ambulance.

There was a phone booth almost right outside the alley. I dropped my coins into the slot and told the operator what I needed. I went back to sit with Niven until the lights from the ambulance glowed outside the alley, and I let one of the nice men in white sponge Niven’s blood off of my face while I sat at the head of his stretcher, begging Jehovah to, for the sake of my mother’s piety, spare Niven’s life.

Chapter fourteen.

“I’ll match their offer,” the boss said. “You’re very good for circulation.”

I wasn’t listening to him. I was staring out the pane of glass that separated his office from the rest of us on the floor. I didn’t want to see the lake. Clark wasn’t at his desk, which was a huge relief for me.

“Lois?” the boss was showing me all of his teeth in a wide grin. “What do you think about that, honey?”

“It’s not about the money,” I said. “I don’t care about that. I need to go somewhere else.”

“If that’s the case, I could make you a reporter. I’ll do what I have not to lose Superman’s –”

“I’m not Superman’s girlfriend. And I want to go to Hollywood.”
He raised his eyebrows and hands helplessly. “Well, I’ll always have a place for you to come back to,” he said.

“That’s nice of you.” I knew that Clark’s desk wouldn’t stay empty forever. I had to get out of there. “I’d like to work from home for my last two weeks,” I told the boss.

“If you think you need to,” he said, and dismissed me with a wave of his cigar.

I went back to my desk. I had a few things to clean out, and those fit easily into the oversized purse I had brought for that purpose. I sat down at my desk one last time and picked up the phone, asking the switchboard to connect me to Mr. Chadwick at Paramount Studios. I needed to accept the job before I started packing up my apartment and terminated my lease. Someone’s typing pounded in my head while I waited for my call to be put through. I blocked it out and scribbled a note to go check on Niven after I left the office. How silly. I wasn’t going to forget. I wadded up the note with one hand and tossed it into the garbage.

I liked the dark glasses that Niven wore. They made him look dangerous and mysterious, like a secret agent. James, ever the perfect valet, brought me a chair and a cup of tea.

“How’s your head?” I asked. Niven’s room was dark. He was propped up on some pillows, his left arm in a sling.

“My head is all right,” he said. “It’s my ribs that hurt.”

“He shouldn’t have done that.”

“There are a lot of things we shouldn’t do. But are you surprised? He’s a jealous man. And, judging from his reaction to it, I don’t think it’s an emotion he’s ever felt before.”
“Are you excusing him?”

He took my hand in his unbroken one. “I’m merely saying that I should have expected his reaction and been more prepared for it. Although – ” he stopped and tapped my knuckles with his thumb.

“It sounds like you’re saying that it’s okay that he almost killed you. You’ve never posed a threat to him.”

“But I do. Where it hurts him the most. I have you.”

“He doesn’t care about me that much.”

“You might be surprised.” Niven shifted painfully so that he was facing me a little bit more. “I don’t know the man. But from what I’ve observed, and from what you’ve said, you’re the most important thing in the world to him. Add to that his hatred of me. Because he cares about you so much and sees me as so wholly unsuitable, he would do whatever he felt was necessary to eliminate me from the picture.”

“If that’s the case, though, he really doesn’t care about me that much because if he did, he would want me to be happy, and he would know that attacking you wasn’t going to make that happen. Especially since now, every time I see him, I think of my father.”

Niven leaned his head back against the wall and nodded. I knew that his glasses covered a black eye and four stitches in his eyelid, there were seven more stitches along the side of his jaw facing away from me, his mouth was still swollen and he had a concussion. A broken arm, broken ribs, internal bruising. But he was alive, and I was alive, and I hadn’t shot Clark – there wasn’t going to be a trial and I wouldn’t have to cope with the pain of loss. But I felt cold. My lips felt cold, my body temperature seemed to have dropped, and I was
emotionally flat. The thoughts that rolled around in my head didn’t have any feelings attached to them.

“Why would he think that almost killing you would be the best thing for me?” I wondered out loud. “Especially since I was there the whole time? Didn’t he realize that that’s the exact reason I hate my father?”

“I don’t think he intended to kill me. He’s probably read too many pulp novels and thought that fighting over you in front of you would prove both his affection and worthiness. And he doesn’t know about your father. Does he?”

“No. He doesn’t. You know what I kept thinking in the ambulance?”

Niven raised his glasses so that I could see his eyes. Then he took my hand again and held it securely.

“I thought you were going to die. And I didn’t do anything. I just stood there while he beat you – I pointed the gun at him, I would have shot him, I think, if I had thought it would do any good. But no matter what, it wouldn’t have. He stopped then – he left – but it was too late. And even if I had have done something sooner – ” I shrugged. I had promised Clark I wouldn’t betray his identity, so I wouldn’t. But he had broken his word to do no harm.

“You couldn’t have done anything differently,” Niven said. “I don’t blame you. And I’m glad you didn’t shoot him.”

“I ruined the raincoat you had made for me. I put it under your head and I don’t think the bloodstains will come out. They used it as your pillow on the ambulance, too. They made me leave when we got to the hospital. They didn’t know if you were going to come out
of it and I guess they didn’t want a hysterical woman on their hands. And I’m not family, there’s that, too. One of the nurses drove me home. He didn’t even ask what happened.”

“Are you all right?” Niven asked, genuinely concerned.

“I should be asking you that,” I said, and started to cry. I made a pillow with my arms and put my head down on the bed. Niven rubbed my head with his good hand, like mom used to when I was upset. I wasn’t really surprised when my father killed mom. It was natural for him. I never would have thought it of Clark.

“Irene,” Niven said softly.

I looked up.

“There are tissues on the table behind you.”

I got one and blew my nose. I felt terrible.

“What did you do at work today?”

“I quit.” I sniffed. “I packed up my desk and called Mr. Chadwick. I have two weeks to put my affairs in order, but he said that I could take a little bit more time if I needed. I told him — about you. That you had been in an accident.”

“Dr. Pirsig said I’ll be on my feet in no time.” He wiped the tears off of my face.

“I’m on bed rest for four days, and then it will be a while before I can drive or do anything active, but I’ll be fine. I’m healthy, and I’ve been patched up by the best.”

The phone on his bedside table rang once. It reminded me of the tea that James had brought me, so I took a sip of it. It was barely lukewarm.

“You know how I love your company, Irene,” Niven said, “but I need some sleep. According to the doctor, I’ll be sleeping a lot the next few days.”

I took another sip of tea, but didn’t get up.
“You should get some sleep too,” he said. “You’ll feel much better for it.”

“If you were in the hospital, I would stay with you,” I protested.

“I have a spare room, if that would make you feel any better. James keeps the sheets changed.”

Niven handed his glasses to me and I put them on the table next to the phone. He looked exhausted, and I felt tired, too. I didn’t want to go back to my apartment to be worried and alone. But I still had a column to write and deliver to the Daily Planet.

“I’ll sleep after my work is done,” I said, and kissed him on the forehead. “I promise.”

“And do you promise to come and see me tomorrow?”

“Call me whenever you’re awake.” I edged out of the room, afraid that if I let him out of my sight he would die.

I needed to tell Carmen I was leaving, and I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to see her, I didn’t want to have to look at the lines in her face and know they were from worrying about Stan, I didn’t want the tension that had been building between us to erupt. I didn’t think I could handle it. It would be preferable to send her a postcard from Hollywood inviting her to visit when she wanted to, knowing full well that she wouldn’t be able to afford it.

But still, I was sitting across the table from her at Gilly’s, wondering how to bring it up. Her face was blank, and had been from the time I picked her up at her hotel. If I knew how she would react, it would make it easier on me. I told myself that there wasn’t anything to worry about. I was leaving for LA soon. I had just talked to Mr. Chadwick and convinced
him to give me a little bit more time, so I only had three weeks of needing to avoid Carmen if she was unreasonably upset about it. And then I would be on the other side of the country.

"Do you remember that job offer I got?" I asked.

"You're taking it, aren't you."

"I am. I'll be out there in about three weeks." It was easy, so far.

"I didn't think you would take it."

"I don't see why I shouldn't."

"I didn't say I didn't think you shouldn't take it. I thought you wouldn't."

"I don't know why you would think I wouldn't take it."

"It doesn't matter why. When Stan gets better, we'll come out and visit. You can introduce us to all of the movie stars you know."

"You don't have to wait for Stan to come and visit. Getting away from here might do you some good." But if I was unwilling to leave Niven — if I had asked for an extension on my time in Metropolis to see him get better — I should know better than to expect Carmen to leave Stan.

"It might be nice to change scenery. All I do here is go to work and come to hospital and go get drunk. I've read at least one book a week sitting with Stan and I have a constant alcohol aftertaste in my mouth. In Hollywood, there would at least be things for me to see."

"There are things to see here. I'll have a week or so between my last day at work and when my plane leaves. I can take you to the planetarium. Or out on Niven's boat. The city actually looks beautiful from the lake."

"Is he coming with you?"
“He talked about getting another flat out there.”

“Are you going to marry him?”

“I don’t know.” I had never thought about it. If he asked me, I would probably say yes. There was no reason not to.

“You would actually marry into the mob? Dating him is one thing, but to marry him — well, I don’t know how your mother raised you, but —”

“My mother raised me fine.” My voice rose, and then I took a deep breath. She wasn’t attacking mom. “If you think I’m wayward, don’t blame my mother. Blame me.”

Of course, I had forgotten about Niven’s crime connections. What had once been a tugging at my conscience had become nothing more than a fact I had heard once. I tossed it off. I knew him well enough to not be bothered by what he did for a living.

I was sitting in my apartment with a cup of coffee and the lights off when the image of my father coming here, half blind and half dead, came to mind. Then it morphed into my father eight years ago, still strong, standing at the head of the stairs, shouting at mom. And then that picture turned into one of Clark standing over a bloody and still Niven in an alley, staring at the body tight-lipped, rubbing his hands together as if to stay warm. I hated them both. My father, because he was an evil man. Clark, because he was good, he had to be good, the best man in the city — and yet he was capable of killing a man. He would have killed Niven. If I hadn’t been there.

I wanted to be with Niven now, but he was asleep. He was walking around his flat, which was a good sign. He was going to be all right, I told myself. And I was going to be all right. And Clark - he was just trying to protect you, I could hear mom say. He thought he
was doing the right thing. He didn't know his own strength. You know he's not a bad man, so stop judging him like one. Mom gave everyone the benefit of the doubt, she loved everyone, she helped everyone. And she was dead. When I first met Clark, I thought that mom would have liked him. I wished that they could meet each other.

There was a knock at my door, so I got up and put on a light. I opened the door as far as the chain would allow and saw Clark in the hallway. At least, I thought it was Clark. His hair was hanging loose and uncombed in his face, he was unshaven, his eyes were panicked and black underneath, and his hands were raw.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"No," I said. But I didn’t shut the door. His appearance alarmed me.

"I don’t know what I did," he said brokenly. "I don’t know why. I’ve never done that. Never even kicked a dog. I killed him. I – please tell me I didn’t kill him."

"He’s going to be all right," I said.

"You should have shot me."

"I don’t think I could have shot Superman."

"I’m not Superman anymore. I can’t be. Not now." He rubbed his hands together.

"I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t think that I was so much stronger than him."

He shuddered. He raised his eyes to my face. His conscience had been eating him alive over this. I could believe that he didn’t realize his own strength, and that he was truly sorry – but I didn’t have any absolution to give him. I wasn’t ready for reconciliation.

"I’m sorry, Clark," I said. "But I can’t talk to you right now."
I closed the door firmly and locked it, my heart sinking. Mom wouldn’t have turned her back. I didn’t even feel angry with him. I just felt – sad. Intensely, overwhelmingly, sad.

I went back into the kitchen and turned on the light. There was the chair where Clark used to sit, when things were different. I missed that. And I knew that, even if I could forgive him, we probably wouldn’t be friends again. I didn’t know if I would be able to trust him anymore.

The sun in Elgin was blinding. I scrunched down in the back of the cab as much as I could to avoid it. We climbed up State Street, behind a Borden truck. When I had been staying at the sanitarium, one of the orderlies had taken some of us for a drive around the city and pointed out the Borden mansion, the Gifford house, and we had gotten Coca-Cola at the restaurant that Al Capone was often seen at. It had been nice, from what I remembered. Quiet and shady and full of beautiful houses. I should have married a nice man and stayed here.

The cabby didn’t say anything to me when we stopped at the sanitarium, and he didn’t look at me when I gave him his fare. I went inside and was led urgently to Dr. Van DerMeer. He sat at his desk behind a medical journal, which he put down as I took a seat.

“It’s been a little while since I saw you last,” he said. “How have things been?”

“Superman almost killed Niven, and I almost shot him. Niven has a concussion and internal injuries. I took a job with Paramount in Hollywood. My father is going blind. I think I hate Superman, but I’m not sure. I feel guilty when I think about it. I can’t wait to leave Metropolis.”
The glasses came off of Dr. Van DerMeer’s nose and he nodded, not sure where to begin.

“You think you hate Superman?” he asked.

“When he comes to mind, it’s the most immediate feeling. Well, I feel angry. At him for what he did to Niven, and because it wasn’t something he should have done. I – well, I suppose I don’t hate him. I’m angry. Enraged. He’s no better than any of us, and he always thought he was – that he could look down on me for whatever I did that he didn’t approve of. Except that he didn’t really look down on me. On other people, but not me so much. He said he wishes I had killed him. I aimed a gun at him – like at my father. But I couldn’t fire it.”

“Would you have?”

“I might have. At the moment, I might have. I was scared, but then I thought Niven was dead. And shooting Clar – Superman wouldn’t have done anything.”

Dr. Van DerMeer put his glasses aside, linked his fingers together, and rested his elbows on the table. He concentrated on a spot between my eyes, as if he were reading my thoughts. I was thinking that he was, by the end of the session, going to tell me that what I needed to do was forgive Clark because I wouldn’t be happy until I did so. If he said that, he would be right. I was angry with myself for feeling the way I did about Clark. It didn’t seem right. Especially since Niven was okay and didn’t seem to have any hard feelings on his end.

“So you’re going to Los Angeles,” is what he said.

“I’m going to Los Angeles.”

“And did you decide this after the fight, or before?”

“It doesn’t matter when I decided it.”
“I’m merely pointing out that you ran away after your mother was killed. You didn’t physically go anywhere – not to speak of, anyway – but you did all you could to become someone else. And now that you are someone else, you’re going out to the West Coast. There are other ways of dealing with unfortunate events.”

“I’m not leaving because of Clark. That’s not a fair assumption for you to make.”

“Maybe not, but you can’t argue against the fact that your past history leads to that. I don’t know how much progress you’ve really made. And it’s my job to see that you don’t end up making the same mistakes over and over.”

“This time I’m making new mistakes. I have Niven.”

“I have neglected talking about him, haven’t I.”

“I don’t want to bring him up, either.”

We sat and stared at each other. We had a silent understanding that I would sit there and put up as much resistance as possible, while absorbing as much of his wisdom as possible; and, like an indulgent father, he would let my attitude go unchecked, knowing that I would do the right thing in the end.

“If it makes you feel any better,” I said, taking out a cigarette, “I’m going to start calling myself Irene in Hollywood. I’m tired of keeping up Lois Lane. Nobody out there knew me as her, other than in print. People use professional names all the time. Like Edward G. Robinson is Emmanuel something-or-other. And I didn’t shoot Clark. I didn’t spiral into panic after he attacked Niven. Niven’s still alive. I think it’s going to be all right, really.”

“You’re the best judge of that,” he said. “We’ll see. How have you been sleeping lately?”
Chapter fifteen.

The keys to the Daimler were heavy and tagged with a shiny black leather fob. I weighed them in my hand, looking suspiciously from Niven to Slim. She thumped her tail and minced up closer to me, tossing her head back and licking her nose.

“You look like you’re going to be sick,” Niven said. He stretched his legs out in front of him, kicking the coffee table, and crossed his ankles. “It’s all right. I mean it. I don’t say things that I don’t mean.”

“I know that. I believe that you meant it. But I can’t.” I held the keys out to him.

“No. I haven’t driven in a couple of years, and I don’t want to take a chance on scratching it.”

“I can’t drive. Look at me. I just started walking again.”

“So we call a cab.” I got up and went to the phone table. There was a manila envelope next to the phone, big enough to hold something eight-by-ten and glossy. “Or James can drive.”

“James and my mother’s butler don’t get along,” Niven said wryly. “And I would rather have you drive than call a cab. You’re going to have to get used to driving the Daimler sooner or later.”

I liked hearing him say that, even if it did give me a split-second feeling of speeding towards the edge of a cliff. I resumed my seat next to him and lifted his glasses to peer underneath.

“Your eye looks much better,” I said.

“You do realize that the Daimler was built to be driven, don’t you?”
"But not by me."

I lowered his glasses back into place, careful not to jostle his arm. Slim put her head on my knee, begging for attention.

"While I’m sure you’ll have your own car in Hollywood, I do want you to get used to driving the Daimler. You never know when you might have to. Or want to."

"And you know exactly where we’re going and the best way to get there?"

"Of course."

"And you really want me to drive?"

"I do really want you to drive. You’ll enjoy it. It will take your breath away."

I shifted the keys from palm to palm. I wanted to. I really, really wanted to. I always had. I smiled.

"If you insist," I said.

"You wanted to all along. My insisting had nothing to do with it."

He managed to lever himself off the couch, and James appeared out of nowhere with our coats. I had purchased a new one at Field’s yesterday, but it was nowhere near as nice as the one that had been bloodstained beyond recognition. James held it for me while I helped Niven into his coat, heavy gray wool. James helped me with my coat. Niven looked it over and shrugged.

"I’ll have another one made for you when I’m back on my feet," he said.

"I won’t need a coat in Los Angeles."

"I hear it gets chilly at night."

James summoned Niven’s elevator for us and Niven pushed the button for the garage.
"There’s a key for the ignition and one for the doors, right?" I asked, jingling the keys in my hand. "Which is which?"

"The big one is for the doors. The smaller one is for the ignition. It starts right away, so don’t turn the key too far and don’t do more than tap the gas pedal or you might flood it. When you start to drive – well, you’ll see. I can’t describe how it feels."

We walked out into the cool cement garage, and I took a deep breath of rubber and motor oil. Niven led the way down a row of shiny American cars to the Daimler, which was backed into its own walled space, perfectly straight and perfectly centered. I unlocked Niven’s door, opened it for him, and stood by in case he needed a hand getting in.

"I’ll need some help getting out," he said, adjusting his hat. "And it would be nice if you could shut the door."

I got into the driver’s side, felt under the seat for the seat lever, adjusted it to my liking, and inserted the key. When I turned it, it felt like I had unleashed something big and powerful – not the horses we had had on the farm, not one of the Arlington horses, either –

"You know how to get to Michigan from here, right?" Niven asked, bringing me back to reality.

"I was going to take Clark and cut over farther north. There’s an exit for the highway off Clark, isn’t there?"

"You’re right. I usually cut through town, but if you’re worried about the Daimler – ”

"I’m more familiar with the highway, anyway. I used to drive myself out to Elgin."

"Lake Forest is in the opposite direction."

"But I’m still more familiar with the highway."
I slipped the Daimler into gear and flew out of the city, pulse racing, too enthralled with the simple act of driving to talk to Niven.

"A few words of warning," he said, once we had passed an ornate wooden sign welcoming us to Lake Forest. The naked trees cast shadows across the road, and I had the feeling that I was as far away from Metropolis as if I had been in England.

"Warning?" I vaguely remembered him saying that his mother was strange, but I didn’t realize she came with a warning.

"My mother is socially ambitious, lives off of me, and refuses to acknowledge that I’m, well, what I am. She’s convinced that I’m in ‘business’, whatever that means to her. She wants me to marry some little blonde twit that lives down the street and comes from a good family, she’s ever so proud of my doctor brother and his seven children that he can’t even take the time for, she hates my father, and she will be very nice to you, I believe cloying is the word, but she’s insincere."

I braked at a stop sign. "So I should be polite to her and not be offended, no matter what she says? And remember that you are not your family?"

"Just as you are not yours. I love my mother, I protect her, but I’m not proud of her."

A Rolls made up its mind to cross the intersection in front of me and then I continued on my merry way. Niven pointed to a wrought iron gate that was three wrought iron gates away from us.

"It’s that one. And I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to ring the bell."

"How are you going to explain the shape you’re in, if she thinks you’re a business man?"
He shrugged his good shoulder. "She won't ask. And if she does, I'll tell her that I got into a fight with —" he stopped and gave me what I assumed was a sidelong and curious look. I was already tired of the glasses.

"Well, don't tell her you got into a fight over me," I said. I stopped at the gate, the initials "RS" wrought into it. Niven was able to pull the parking brake, and I got out, found a bell cord, and pulled it. Within moments, a man in a tuxedo — it was unbelievable — came and opened the gate for us. I resumed the driver's seat and followed a meandering driveway to a loop with a fountain spurting in the middle and a house around the outside. I stopped and killed the engine.

"It's —" I tried. "Did you really—"

"It's a bit much," Niven said. "But I was young at the time, and I wanted mother to be happy. It's the kind of place she's always wanted."

"Where did you get the money?" I took the keys and pocketed them, fully aware that my question was in bad taste.

"This and that. I have a lot of pots on the stove. Some, even legitimate. There's more money in this business than you might realize."

"You didn't kill anyone to get it, did you?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

When I rushed to get out of the car, I found another tuxedoed man standing large outside the window of the Daimler. He opened the door and gave me his hand to help me out. I beat him to the passenger's side and helped Niven out myself.

The man in black started when he saw Niven’s sling, but didn’t allow himself to react any further. He escorted us up white marble steps and through a wooden door and down a
parquet hallway to a conservatory, where a slightly corpulent woman with dyed brunette hair, severe eyebrows, and ropes of pearls sat with a poodle at her side and a book in her hand.

The second Niven crossed the threshold into the room, she leapt up, letting the book fall open on the tiled floor, and made her way, as elegantly as she could, up to him.

“Niven, my darling!” she exclaimed with an East Coast money accent. “Whatever happened to you?” She pecked him on the cheek and, ignoring me, led him over to a padded wicker chair and hovered while he painfully sat down.

“Mother, I’d like to introduce you to Irene Goldman,” he said proudly, holding his hand out to me and motioning me over. He took my hand in his and smiled up at me, proudly. “This is the exceptional young lady I was telling you about.”

“Goldman?” his mother asked, scrutinizing me from head to toe. Her eyes, gray but without the depth of Niven’s, were almost hostile but her red, red lips curled into a polite smile. She pulled on a bell cord that I hadn’t noticed before and continued to stare and smile at me until the butler answered.

“Bradley, take Miss Goldman’s coat,” she said, her accent sharpening.

I handed it over. As soon as I had done so, Niven’s mother took my free hand in both of hers, beaming insincerely.

“Well, welcome to my humble home, Miss – may I call you Irene?”

“I don’t see why not,” I said. I freed both of my hands and sat down in a chair to the right of Niven. She resumed her seat with a flourish. The poodle still hadn’t moved.

“You know what’s funny,” Mrs. Sterling said to Niven, as she examined me some more, “she doesn’t even look Jewish. She’s a lovely young lady.”
“Well, yes, I always thought so,” was his reply. His voice was as apologetic as I had ever heard it.

“She looks like that little girl, oh, what was her name, that was in that movie with Humphrey Bogart? The one with the boats?”

“To Have and Have Not”, I said.

“Yes, that’s the one! However did you know?” She radiated cheerfulness to an uncomfortable degree. She even clapped her hands together. I wasn’t sure if I trusted Niven’s mother.

“Irene is a film critic for The Daily Planet, Mother,” Niven said. “She’s been offered a job in Hollywood because of it.”

“I did think that girl was awfully pretty,” Mrs. Sterling continued. “Niven, what was her name?”

“Lauren Bacall,” he said.

“Why don’t you take those glasses off? And your coat, too? I’ll ring for Bradley again.”

Niven stood and I helped him off with his coat, sure that his mother was watching, disapproving behind her red-lipped politeness. I took his hat, too, and handed both garments to the butler.

“Bradley, bring some tea and the picture album,” she demanded. “And the picture of Niven on the mantel. I want his friend to see them.” She turned back to Niven. “You have such lovely eyes, dear, you know, and I can’t tell if you’re listening to me with those terrible glasses. Please?” She held her hand out for the glasses.
“My eyes don’t look lovely right now,” he responded, the soul of patience. “And the doctor said I need to keep them on.”

“Were you in an accident?”

“Of sorts.”

“Why? What happened? Were you driving too fast?”

“If you must know, I was attacked on the street.”

Mrs. Sterling rolled her eyes to the ceiling. The dog still didn’t move. It didn’t lick its nose or wag its tail or gambol in the background like Slim would have done. I wondered if it was made out of marble.

“Have you talked to Struan lately?” she asked Niven.

“I don’t usually. I got a Christmas card from him last year. Maryann was expecting again. Irene and I might go out there and see them this year.”

That was the first I had heard of that. I assumed that Struan was his brother. Niven, however, talked about his family even less than I did, so for all I knew Struan was a cousin or an uncle or a childhood friend.

“Is this true, Irene?” Mrs. Sterling asked as Bradley came in wheeling a silver tea caddy. “Is he taking you to meet his brother? Already?”

“Well, I have family out East too, and I—” I looked to Niven to help, but the glasses were, again, in the way.

“Tea,” Bradley said, stopping the cart right in the middle of the awkwardness. He poured sugar and cream and enough tea to give it some color for Niven’s mother. She held the cup by the handle with her pinky extended. She took a tiny, ladylike sip and put the cup back on its saucer while the butler poured tea for Niven and me. I was waiting for him to ask
if I took one lump or two, but he didn’t. He simply held out the sugar bowl for me to refuse.

Niven’s mother patted her hair, even though there wasn’t a strand out of place, and tried to check her reflection in the silver top of the tea cart.

“You brought the pictures, didn’t you, Bradley? I want to show Irene where Niven grew up. Bradley, look at her. Doesn’t she look like Lauren Bacall to you? Would you believe she’s Jewish?”

It was obvious that Bradley wasn’t sure that he knew who Lauren Bacall was and whether it was her or me that didn’t look Jewish to Mrs. Sterling. He grunted in agreement and took a heavy album off of the bottom of the tea cart, which he handed to me.

“Go ahead and open it,” Mrs. Sterling said. “The first page is Niven and Struan on Niven’s tenth birthday. That’s the little boat that we bought for him to play on.” She pointed with a sharp, manicured finger.

Niven was wearing a striped shirt and knickers. The picture looked old – like it was taken long before the depression. It had never occurred to me to wonder how old Niven was. It wasn’t easy to tell, with him.

“Is Struan older than Niven?” I asked. I was having a hard time balancing the album on my knees and balancing my teacup in its saucer. I was afraid of what would be done to me if I spilled tea or broke something. I had already made a bad impression by not being rich and Aryan.

“He’s a year younger. Most of the other boys in the neighborhood were younger, though. He’s the one that liked that little Kennedy boy, wasn’t he?” She sipped her tea in Niven’s direction.
“The older one, you mean? Who used to follow me around?” Niven started to remove his glasses, but thought better of it. His mother would probably have a heart attack if she saw the stitches and bruises around his lovely eyes.

“Yes, that’s the one. I think he and Struan were friends. I think Struan had a good influence on him, you know. I always told Niven that he could be a good influence on the neighbor children, but he never wanted to play with them. He wasn’t like his brother. He was always reading or going out in the boat or doing some strange thing or another. You know, I was so surprised when he went to college.”

“No, you weren’t,” Niven said. “You weren’t surprised at all. You made me go, remember?”

“I didn’t make you go. Your principal said you were ready for college so I went ahead and enrolled you. You could have finished at the Academy.”

“But you weren’t surprised,” Niven said.

Mrs. Sterling turned back to me and fluttered her eyelashes helplessly.

“Most of the pictures in there are of Struan,” she said. “Niven didn’t photograph well when he was younger.”

“I photographed fine, Mother.”

I looked back down at the picture of him at ten, in knickers, squinting into the camera. He wasn’t smiling, really, but there was a shy tilt to one corner of his mouth and I could just see the dimple in his left cheek. But as a child he had been round, and his features were all too large for his face, and everything about him was awkward.

“Niven’s a good boy,” his mother said emphatically. “He works hard and he’s smart. I always wanted to see him settle down and raise a family, though. Like his brother. I don’t
know if he’s told you this, Irene, but he always makes the excuse that he can’t get married because his work is too important. Would you believe that? And Struan has a family and still works at his job. I don’t see why —”

“How are your orchids doing, Mother?” Niven interrupted. “It doesn’t look like any of them are blooming right now.”

“I gave them to Bradley to take to that girl with the funny name. Rona Jones, you remember her. She usually comes here to take care of them, but last time she came over, she said that the big orange one had gotten some disease from the palms and wanted to take all the orchids for a week or so to decontaminate them. That’s what she said, anyway, I don’t know about her sometimes. The way she walks around like she owns the world and wears pants, like — some actress or something. I suppose she’s good with the orchids, but if I had any children still living at home —” She shuddered, pulling her round shoulders in towards her chest. “Oh well. I hired her to look after the orchids, and that’s what she does. One thing I will say for her, though, she hasn’t asked for any more than I offered as far as salary. And she’s not like that girl who took care of the drapes, who would come in and sneak around, looking for whatever she could steal and then claiming she heard a ‘noise’ in the other room. I don’t know why I put up with these girls. No breeding at all. And all for orchids.” She sighed, a sigh that was to communicate to me all of the hardships she had to endure.

“They’re awfully pretty, though,” I said. I closed the album, hoping that she wouldn’t tell me to open it again and look at Niven in his baseball uniform. If east coast rich kids played baseball. I had a feeling that hearing Niven’s mother talk about his childhood would
be depressing, and since he had never talked about it himself, I knew it was a painful subject. After half an hour with his mother, I could see why.


“He told me,” I said. “It’s funny that he and the Prime Minister have the same car.”

“I don’t see what’s funny about it,” she snapped. “Because he’s my son, is that why it’s funny?”

“No, I didn’t mean that it was funny; it doesn’t make me want to laugh, it’s just — “ I gave up under her cold eyes. I held my saucer flat on my palm, giving up the idea of drinking tea. Niven’s mother wasn’t anything like I had thought she would be. I thought she would adore her son, and be warm and generous, and be slightly frail and shy. I didn’t like her very much.

“Mother, I think that Irene and I are going to need to leave soon,” Niven said. “We have to go see a couple of movies this evening and it takes a while to drive back to the city.”

“Why do you have to see movies tonight? You came to visit me,” she demanded.

“Irene’s a film critic. I told you. She needs to see the new films in town in order to write about them. Besides, we want to get back before it’s too late. So that we can have a leisurely drive and dinner.”

“You could have dinner here.”

“Thank you, but no. We’ll have dinner with you next weekend.”

“You’re bringing her next weekend?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“But Niven, next weekend Becky and her mother — ”
Niven stood up as gracefully as he could, placed his cup and saucer firmly on the tea cart, and kissed his mother on the forehead.

"I’m sorry, Mother, but I have to go. Irene and I have things that we need to do. I’ll call you tomorrow or the next day."

She gave me a sidelong glance, sizing me up again, and walked over to the bell pull.

"I’ll have Bradley fetch your coats," she said, icy.

I didn’t feel that it was safe to say anything until I had guided the Daimler along the driveway and out the ostentatious front gate. When it clanged behind us, I realized that I had been holding my breath.

"I thought she was going to be nicer to you," Niven said quietly, truly surprised. "I’m sorry she was so rude. It’s inexcusable. Of course, it’s not uncharacteristic, but she usually puts on a good face for company. My brother’s company, at least. I never had very much. Not that I would let her know about, at least."

"It’s all right," I said, and ran a stop sign.

"I should have known better. I should have waited to introduce you until — " he stopped and took his glasses off long enough to wipe them on his shirt.

"Is she always like that with you?"

"You mean is she always talking and comparing me with my brother? Yes. You would think from hearing her that he supports her. You know, though, he’s never come out to visit her. Not for her birthday, holidays, nothing. She doesn’t mention him at her soirees because she doesn’t want the neighbors to ask about her other son. Then I’m the Perfect
Child, her golden boy. Sometimes I wish I had left her Out East. But I couldn’t. You should have seen her when my father left.”

“Your father left you?”

There was a long silence, and I strained to listen to the Daimler’s engine. It wasn’t more than a whisper, but it had a perfect, steady rhythm. I tried to will my heart to beat in time with it.

“The real reason there aren’t many pictures of me in her album is because most of them had my father in them. And I look like him. He came from old money somewhere, moved to Boston, started playing the stock market. He would be gone all day and come home in the evening and lock himself in his study. When I got older – when I turned ten, I was allowed in the study with him. Most of the time we would sit and read. He read. All of the time. You would have liked him. He would have liked you.”

Niven’s voice took on the same strain it had held when we were on the sailboat. I reached across and took his hand. He laced his fingers in with mine and leaned his head back on the seat. The white lines in the middle of the road blurred together.

“Mom would have liked you,” I told him.

She would have. But she would have liked Clark more. I had an image of Clark and mom standing by the side of the road, watching me drive by – both of them crying, Clark with a protective arm around her. Protective. It shocked me that I could imagine him that way after seeing him standing over Niven.

“Do you know what would be nice?” Niven asked, returning my hand. “If I had a normal mother and if my father were still around, and if your mom were here. We could show our families around Los Angeles and live like normal people.”
“But then we would have to be normal people.”

He sighed. “There’s always a flaw somewhere,” he said.

Even in the safety of the Daimler, a shudder climbed down my spine.

I had to write another column about *Double Indemnity*. I had to pack up my apartment. And I had to – in spite of how I felt – tell Clark I was leaving. I couldn’t cut him out of my life without one last word, even though he didn’t deserve it. And even though, a whisper inside of my head told me, I couldn’t cut him out of my life forever.

I was sitting at my kitchen table in front of my typewriter, but Clark and Niven and vague hopes for a safe future were getting in the way of my column. I would go out on a high note. Another *Double Indemnity* series. Of course. So I typed at the top of the page: *Double Indemnity: A Dream Gone Wrong*. I wasn’t sure what I meant by it, but it would be a good start. I had to start somewhere.

I took a drink of cold coffee, hoping it would clear my head. I banished Niven and Clark to another part of my mind and began to type. It was easy. *Double Indemnity* was essentially the story of the breakdown of two people and their dreams and goals. It was the story of the internal struggle between good and evil. It was about familial love and failure, about cold-bloodedness – all things I was familiar with. My audience wouldn’t be very happy reading what I had written, angry letters would be forwarded to me in Los Angeles, but it would be good for them. Let them sweat. It will do them some good, get some of the fat off them.

The knock at my door made me jump in my seat, and I hadn’t felt jumpy. It could be my father, I thought, blind and enraged, coming to punish me. It could be Niven, with Slim
on a leash, on his way home from somewhere, it could be anybody, really. I crept to the door and opened it the tiniest amount I could.

It was Clark, pale and unsmiling.

“Lois, please, I need to talk to you,” he said.

I needed to talk to him, too. Just for a minute, to say good-bye. I wasn’t going to see him anymore, and that filled me with satisfaction.

“You’re taking the job in Hollywood,” he said, eyeing me through the crack in the door.

“I am. I’m leaving soon and I won’t be seeing you again.”

“Because of what I did to him?”

“Of course.”

“I was protecting you.”

“I don’t care what you were doing. Okay? Don’t try and justify it.”

“I don’t know what I can say to make you see – ”

“Nothing. Don’t try. I’m working.”

“So this is it, then?”

“You thought it could be different? That I would be grateful to you for delivering me from my scary gangster boyfriend and you could fly a grateful Lois Lane over the city? Like we were in a movie?”

“I always wanted to take you flying with me.” His voice was wistful.

I pulled the door open another inch and his face was blank. There was nothing for me to see there anymore.
“Good-bye, Clark Kent,” I said, and shut the door, locked the deadbolt, and wished that he really had been meek and dopey Clark Kent, and that we had been the best of friends.

Niven’s flat was safe, and Niven himself was mixing tonic and Rose’s lime for me, over at the mini bar by the piano. There was white tape covering the stitches on his face, but it didn’t need to be there; the stitches would be out soon. He only moved a little bit stiffly and didn’t complain about headaches. He was whole again.

I watched him drop a cube of ice into my drink. I lounged on the sofa, enjoying the smell of the leather, drowsily thinking of the gentle rhythm of riding in the Daimler. Niven moved accurately and gracefully, if not quickly; Slim watched him with the attentiveness of adoration.

“I hate to intrude, but you seem worried,” Niven said, handing my drink to me and pushing my legs aside to make room for himself on the sofa. “Are you thinking about the City of Angels?”

“That’s a strange thing to call it,” I said. I took a sip of my drink, enjoying the tartness, the coldness, and the carbonation. I swallowed and stifled a cough. The first sip was always a little hard to get down.

“I suppose the origin of the name is lost in antiquity. But it will be more appropriate once you’re there.”

“I’m not an angel. Mom was. You know what? As much as she suffered, she always found somebody else to help. I don’t know how she did it. But at school I would hear things about how she would walk into town and bring vegetables to make soup for the soup lines. She was always hiring people to help on the farm – during the Depression, I mean – for a day
or so, and I don’t know where the money came from to pay them. She always had enough.
Even if she went without.”

“I think she sounds wonderful.”

I managed to slip off my shoes and kicked them to the floor. Condensation was gathering on my glass and would, soon, drip down and onto my hand. There was nothing I could do to stop it.

“I saw Clark today,” I said.

“And that’s what’s bothering you?”

“Of course it bothers me.”

“It’s a shame he wasn’t different. He seemed to be really nice. In some ways.”

Niven absently patted my knee, which Slim took as a sign that she was invited to join the conversation. She sauntered over to us and put her head over the arm of the sofa, staring at Niven and wagging her tail.

“He just dropped by my flat. I told him to leave. I said good-bye to him. I didn’t want to – but I had to. You understand?”

His forehead creased momentarily, but other than that, his expression didn’t change. Niven wasn’t jealous. I liked that about him.

“And I’m sure he wanted to see you again. He was trying to convince you that he was acting in your best interest?” He scratched Slim’s ears, and she opened her mouth and panted happily.

“Yes.” I thought. “No. Maybe. But that’s not the point. He should have had the decency to leave me alone. He had to know that I didn’t want to see him. I went out of my way to avoid him,” I added. “I even worked from home.”
“He struck me as the hopeful type,” Niven said acidly. “There’s a funny thing about the hopeful types. They don’t stop hoping.”

“Mom never did.”

“But it seems as though your mother hoped for things that should come to pass,” Niven said. He cleared his throat and shifted on the sofa.

“I don’t want to talk about Clark anymore,” I said. “I finally got a hold of Goodwill to come and get my furniture.”

“Did you finish your column for today?”

“It’s not one of my best. But you’ll probably read it anyway.”

“I wouldn’t miss it. Actually, I will miss it when you change jobs.” The corners of his eyes creased and he stood up. “Would you like more ice in that?” he asked, pointing at my drink. “Or more lime? More tonic?”

“It’s perfect, thank you,” I said.

“Perfect,” he repeated. He looked through me and his lips formed a tight, straight line.

If mom could have seen me, she would have wept. I tried to put my perfect drink on the floor, but I didn’t want the condensation to mess up the carpet. There were no coasters on the table. I sat up and held the glass in my hand.

“I would like it better if you could fly out to California with me,” I told Niven. I sat close to him and put my head on his shoulder, curling up like a child. “It’s going to be hard for me to go alone.”
He took my glass and put it on the floor. My eyes were just level with the scar that was forming along his jaw. It was shiny and pink, and didn’t belong there. I ran my finger along it.

“You’re always going to have that,” I said.

“It’s only fitting.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“No. I suppose not.”

Slim walked away from us, down the unlit hallway, wagging her tail in rhythm to her steps. I would miss her; I hadn’t asked if Niven was bringing her to Los Angeles. I didn’t know if he would bring James, or the Daimler, or his scrapbook of my columns. Columns that I had forgotten ever writing. He would leave all of that here, because this was his home, and he would want it intact to come back to.

“If I come back, I want it to feel like home,” I said. I mumbled. I was tired.

If I came back. Of course I would. I would have to come home with him to visit his mother and to visit all of the places he loved here. It was his city, really – the way that Los Angeles would be mine, hot and dusty, terrible, and altogether suited for the rebirth of Irene Goldman.